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“BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY”: THE LINCOLN, NEBRASKA, YWCA

CONFRONTS

RACISM, 1970-1984

By

Brianna Theobald

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: History

Under the Supervision of Professor Margaret D. Jacobs

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2010

“BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY”: THE LINCOLN, NEBRASKA, YWCA

CONFRONTS RACISM, 1970-1984

Brianna Jo Theobald, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2010

Adviser: Margaret D. Jacobs

This thesis documents the struggle of the Lincoln, Nebraska Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) to implement a national organizational policy that mandated an aggressive stand toward the elimination of racism within the organization and the larger community. The study reveals the limitations of the colorblind discourse espoused by YWCA women in the early 1970s and examines some key changes that were made in the following decade that allowed the Lincoln organization to join cause with national movements in the fight to eliminate racism. Thus, the study offers an analysis of efforts to undertake antiracist action in a predominantly white environment. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the relevance and significance of this study in the twenty-first century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work closely with my adviser, Dr. Margaret Jacobs, throughout my research and writing process. First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Jacobs for the time, attention, and energy she devoted to this project, as well as to the encouragement and insight from which the work enormously benefitted. In addition, I would like to thank Drs. Jeannette Jones and John Wunder for agreeing to serve on my committee and for offering valuable feedback throughout the process. The perspective of each committee member has enriched my work in significant ways.

This project would not have been possible without access to the rich archival materials that I utilized. I would like to thank the Nebraska State Historical Society and in particular Tom Mooney and Gayla Koerting for their assistance in ensuring the accessibility of their YWCA collection, during a period in which the building holding the archives was undergoing significant renovation. The staff at the Malone Community Center was helpful and encouraging and made my Tuesday morning visits enjoyable. At the center, I would specifically like to thank Director T.J. McDowell and Dr. Tekla Ali Johnson. Staff at the Lincoln YWCA was similarly helpful in providing me access to their rich collection of materials and even offering me an office to use while conducting my research. I would like to extend a huge thank you to YWCA Board Co-President Liz Ring and Mary Jacobsen for their tireless assistance and enthusiasm for this project.

Finally, this work has been immeasurably strengthened by the perspective of the participants themselves. I would like to thank the following former YWCA members and

leaders who generously allowed me to interview them, offering me their valuable time and insight: Jean Schafter Albers, Connie Benjamin, Leola Bullock, Liz Ring Carlson, Betty Dyer, Marie Fischer, Nan Graf, Ann Hopkins, Jeanne Lord, Nobuko Nyman, Lela Knox Shanks, and Susan Scott.

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Introduction

In March of 1986 local newspapers in Lincoln, Nebraska, celebrated the centennial anniversary of the Lincoln Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) with a surge of enthusiastic headlines: "Lincoln YWCA Marks 100 Years of Change," "YWCA Celebrates 100 Years Service to Women," and "YWCA Begins Second 100 Years with Jollification." While many of the articles focused on the organization's history, a *Lincoln Journal* article included Executive Director Elizabeth Meyer's perspective on the organization's current goals. Top priority, according to Meyer, was to make a greater effort to achieve a diverse representation within the organization. As she explained, "The board is trying conscientiously to recruit minority women to serve on the board, which has only two. . . In the meantime, the Y is working with a Women of Color Task Force to develop sensitivity workshops to help board members understand the issues of white supremacy." Meyer lamented the tendency of agencies to "become associated with one type of people or another," and asserted that the Board was explicitly working to throw off the organization's image as "a haven for white, middle-class women."¹ Within a year after Meyer's interview, the YWCA established the Committee Against Racism to more aggressively pursue the organization's mandate to eliminate racism within the community.²

The local organization Meyer described in 1986 was significantly different than that of two decades before. While the Lincoln YW had been predominantly white in 1966 (as it remained to a lesser extent in 1986), this was not seen as a liability. In fact, YW women scarcely questioned the issue. In her thesis on the general history of the

¹ Newspaper Clippings, Publicity Scrapbook, YWCA Papers, Young Women's Christian Association, Lincoln, Nebraska [Henceforth YWCA].

² Press Release, 25 April 1988, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

local organization completed in the mid 1980s, Katherine Jellison revealed that white, middle-class, Protestant women (the same demographic that had been responsible for the organization's founding almost a century before) continued to dominate all levels of the organization through at least 1967.³ Aside from declaring the organization "open" and taking a rather paternalistic approach to the organization of groups such as American Indians, the Lincoln YWCA did little to change the structure or membership of the organization. Throughout the 1960s, the local association remained a social organization primarily targeting middle-class white women and young housewives. The YWCA national convention in Houston, Texas, in 1970 challenged this status quo. With the adoption of the "One Main Imperative" to eliminate racism, the national YW mandated that all local associations dedicate themselves to an aggressive stand against racism in their organizations and their communities. Thus, in 1970 the Lincoln YW embarked on a long and sometimes painful struggle to determine the best way to implement the Imperative at the local level.

This thesis is a close examination of the first decade and a half of this struggle. I argue that despite an initial surge of discussion and some movement in the years immediately following the Houston convention, the local organization made little progress in terms of meaningful or lasting organizational changes. This lack of progress can be attributed not solely to hostility towards or disapproval of the national mandate (although this was sometimes present as well) but to an articulation of a discourse which, following scholar Ruth Frankenberg, I am calling "color- and power-evasive." According to Frankenberg, this discourse emerged in the U.S. as part of a conscious shift

³ Katherine Jellison, "The Lincoln Young Women's Christian Association: From Social Evangelism to Secular Activism" (M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1984), 63.

from “essentialist racism,” which had emphasized biological hierarchies. In its place, a color- and power-evasive discourse emerged, celebrating humanity’s “essential sameness” and arguing that all people had an equal opportunity within the United States. If all people are essentially the same, then, “seeing race,” in any context and for any purpose, is frowned upon.⁴ Situated within the Protestant, liberal tradition, YW women believed that their organization worked to serve “all people,” without recognizing the white-centered nature of their perspective. Enthusiasm for the feminist movement throughout the 1970s only strengthened this discourse, as the women eagerly adopted the universalist rhetoric that largely ignored the differing experiences of women of different classes and races. Further, despite a discussion of institutional racism taking place within the national organization, early efforts at Imperative implementation in Lincoln focused on racism as most of the white YW women would have defined it—instances of overt, individual expressions of racial prejudice. Such instances of racism in the area in the early 1970s were real, and they were unquestionably discriminatory. Thus, in 1973, the YW Imperative Committee (against the initial wishes of the Board) took a strong and admirable stand against private local organizations such as the Elks Club that continued to display evidence of discriminatory practices. Still, the energy some YW leaders spent lamenting the individual racism of some segments of the organization, most notably in the decentralized program in the Havelock and University Place communities, quite likely distracted the women from white-centered structural practices that excluded or discouraged the involvement of women of color, although increasing this involvement was an espoused goal.

⁴ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 14.

This thesis argues, then, that a color- and power-evasive discourse proved ineffective in the efforts of the Lincoln YW—an organization with an explicit objective to eliminate racism—to bring about real change. Although the Imperative was adopted nationally in 1970, it was almost a decade before the Lincoln YW made significant headway. Prodded by the rapidly changing national context of the feminist movement and an increasing number of women of color in the community willing to meet the YW part-way, and with the support of a Board self-described as “progressive,” the local organization began to consciously move away from the color-and power-evasive discourse to which it had traditionally clung. Evidence of a revised discourse can be found in Executive Director Elizabeth Meyer’s comments to the *Lincoln Journal* in 1986. Acknowledgment of the organization’s limitations is a top priority, as is an earnest effort to become better informed. In some sense, roles had changed, as the (white) YWCA was no longer embarking on interracial endeavors in an attempt to provide services perceived to be needed by local women of color; instead, the (white) YWCA specifically sought out a group of willing women of color to help the *organization* reach *its* goals. Finally, the Lincoln YW’s image as a “haven for white, middle-class women” is not only not perceived as a positive one, it is also not viewed as “natural,” or simply “the way things are.” Instead, Meyer suggests that both the image and the reality of the YW as an organization of and for middle-class whites is one that can and should be changed.

The implications of this study are relevant to the early twenty-first century, as a “colorblind” discourse (a form of color- and power-evasion) proliferates today. Like the YW women in the early 1970s, few today would argue that contemporary American society is entirely equitable, yet many are willing to present a discourse that implies that

it is so. For YW women, this discourse resulted in almost a decade of effective paralysis. What is needed, perhaps, is a discussion of basic goals. For the YWCA, an organization explicitly working toward the *elimination of racism*, the women eventually found that a color- and power-evasive discourse was not conducive to progress toward such a goal. Instead, progress first required an acknowledgement of racism, along with education and training, action steps for accountability, and the willingness to make structural changes. Further, a close study of the Lincoln YW is particularly significant as it examines an antiracist struggle within a predominantly white environment (both the organization and the community). Thus, the study reveals the ways in which racism manifests itself in such environments, as well as the set-backs, approaches, and successes in combating such racism.

The late twentieth century local organization examined here is significantly different than the one that had been established by a small group of middle and upper-class white men and women in a Lincoln home a century before; nevertheless, a basic understanding of the organization's history is useful. This small group of men and women, concerned about the potential negative effects of the Industrial Revolution on young women and determined to meet these challenges through Christian work, joined cause with a rapidly growing national movement. In 1866, less than a decade after the establishment of a similar group in New York City under a different name, a small group of women in Boston, Massachusetts, had gathered to create an organization to aid young women travelling alone to the city seeking work; the women called themselves the Young Women's Christian Association. Historian Anne Firor Scott has documented the quick spread of these ideas, revealing that by 1876, twenty-eight similar associations had

been created, mostly in big cities.⁵ The concept continued to travel west, reaching Lincoln, Nebraska, a decade later. In 1906, these community YWCAs officially merged with a group of similar student organizations that had emerged in the 1870s—thus, the Young Women’s Christian Association, in the basic structure it exists today, was born.⁶

Scott has shown that the women involved with these first organizations emphasized the importance of their Christian work of saving souls, but they went about this work in practical ways—they established inexpensive boardinghouses, served as job placement bureaus, held classes to improve job skills, offered gymnasium facilities for the development of strong bodies and minds, and strove to provide places of safe, social fellowship through planned activities.⁷ The Lincoln YWCA was no exception. The organization started quite informally, with pairs of women waiting at train stations to greet young women as they first arrived in Lincoln; YW women then worked to secure these single working women jobs and housing. When, by the 1930s, the organization had obtained a suitable facility for their growing efforts (after raising \$200,000 in the midst of the national depression for the building’s construction), the Lincoln women offered fitness, social, and professional classes. By the mid-1940s, the local association established a residence hall for young women and a cafeteria that served inexpensive meals to the community.⁸

With few exceptions, YWCA efforts both nationally and in Lincoln were largely a white affair—white middle-class women used their time, energy, and resources to offer

⁵ Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 104.

⁶ Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 20.

⁷ Scott, *Natural Allies*, 104.

⁸ “History in Print,” News Clipping Scrapbook, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

their assistance to young white single working women. In fact, Joanne Meyerowitz has shown that nonwhite groups conducted similar activities, particularly residence homes, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in part “as a response to the exclusivity of the YWCA.” According to Meyerowitz, in 1877 the Chicago YWCA voted to exclude black women from their residence home; eventually the women established a “colored branch,” but the branch consistently received insufficient funding.⁹ By the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, many in the national organization had extended their goal of “rescuing” young white working women to other groups. Mary Sims, in her 1935 published history of the organization, recounts early YW efforts with American Indian girls in government boarding schools, which they carried out in cooperation with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Young Men’s Christian Association, and other church groups and agencies “dealing with similar problems.” By establishing associations in boarding schools (by 1930, associations had been established in forty-one such schools), YW women embarked on an effort that resonates with a maternalist ideology that was prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹⁰ Historian Linda Gordon argues that maternalism can be defined by three general characteristics; maternalists definitively linked women’s interests with those of children, imagined themselves in the role of mothers to those less fortunate, and saw themselves as uniquely qualified to do such work as a result of their socialization as mothers.¹¹ In *Relations of Rescue*, historian Peggy Pascoe documents parallel efforts by Protestant female missionaries in the West

⁹ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 47.

¹⁰ Mary Sims, *A Natural History of a Social Institution—The Y.W.C.A.* (New York: Woman’s Press, 1935), 60.

¹¹ Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 55.

during the Victorian era who established rescue homes for American Indian women, Mormon women, Chinese prostitutes, and unwed mothers.¹²

Also beginning in the 1890s, African American women first became involved with the YWCA in some parts of the country. During this period, black women in Dayton, Ohio, Brooklyn, New York, and a few other cities established their own YWCAs. According to Sims, however, referring to the Dayton, Ohio, association, this group was “on friendly relations” with the local white YWCA but was “not organically a part of it.” It was not until the 1920s that YW women directly targeted African American women for YW services and programming; according to Sims, the year 1919 “marked the beginning of the effort to provide in those cities where the numbers of the Negro population warrant it, equipment equal in attractiveness and variety to that provided for white groups, and increased opportunities for colored women to develop leadership within their own ranks.” Thus, while the national YWCA was something of a leader in American society with regard to addressing crucial race questions, for the first half of its existence it did so within a strict segregationist structure. In Sims’ 1935 study, she acknowledges that some women, both black and white, had raised questions as to “whether the plan of developing branches for Negro women and girls in Negro communities is a policy of segregation,” but she quite easily dismisses such questions, arguing that there is no evidence this had been a “clear issue” in the organization and celebrating the increased participation of African American women and girls in the association.¹³

¹² Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹³ Sims, *A Natural History*, 67, 175.

Most likely due to the small percentage of women of color in Lincoln, Nebraska, the local YWCA did not establish an additional branch for African American women in the community, although Jellison has found that the Lincoln YW did maintain a separate small club within its organization for black women, which paralleled the functions of the larger body.¹⁴ The situation was a bit different in nearby Omaha, Nebraska, where a larger minority population necessitated the establishment of a separate branch for interested black women. African American Verneta Hill, executive director of this branch in the late 1940s, quickly came to realize the inequitable structure of the YWCA branch system. She discovered that her branch was consistently underfunded, so it was unable to operate within its budget. When the time came to prepare the budget for the following year, the white finance director informed Hill that she would write it for her. After much protest, Hill prevailed and was able to write the budget and present it to the Council of Social Agencies, which was the local YW's main funding source. As historian Susan Lynn describes, "Her white colleagues were aghast; the budget for the black branch had always been presented by a white woman."¹⁵ Hill's predicament was not unique (although her success in persuading white YW women to allow her control of the budget likely was). Nancy Robertson has documented the "tremendous power" (white) central associations wielded over (black) branches. The (white) Board of Directors had the authority to open or continue an African American branch. They were involved in all hiring decisions, "in some cases selecting white women to run the programs for African Americans." And it was the central association Board that chose

¹⁴ Jellison, "The Young Women's Christian Association," 25-26.

¹⁵ Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 51.

which women would represent their cities at national conventions.¹⁶ African American women involved in the organization, of course, were very aware of these realities. An anonymous document written in the 1920s entitled “What the Colored Women are Asking of the Y.W.C.A.” laments black women’s dependence on the will of white women: “And at present this means to the Colored womanhood of this country—you can have no Association but you may become a branch if the white women in your community will permit it.” As a result of this system, the document continues, African American women in Little Rock, Arkansas, were forced to sit around waiting for community white women “to have a change of heart.” The document’s writer(s) conclude, “Is this fair—is this Christian? Is this how Christ would have it?”¹⁷

The YWCA’s segregationist policies, whether they worked to exclude or marginalize women of color (as in Lincoln) or to ensure that women of color were placed in inequitable branches largely under white control (as in Omaha) were unquestionably discriminatory, despite Mary Sims’ assertions to the contrary. Still, recent scholarship has demonstrated that when the YWCA permitted involvement, such as in separate black branches, women of color often chose to make the best of such opportunities. Lillian Williams’ study of the creation of an African American community in Buffalo, New York, in the first half of the twentieth century specifically notes early YWCA efforts in the black community, although the local Urban League concluded that such efforts had “only scratched the surface of the problem,” and the association never established a separate branch to facilitate black involvement. However, in the early 1920s, the local YMCA established a black branch, and “Black Buffalonians took great pride in the Y

¹⁶ Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 39.

¹⁷ Gerda Lerner, ed. *Black Women in White America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 482.

because they collectively had worked to create it.” The black branch became a central force within the black community, and as there was no black YW branch, women and children enthusiastically embraced opportunities at the YM.¹⁸

In New York City, the YW *did* create a separate branch, and Judith Weisenfeld’s study of this branch in the first half of the twentieth century reveals a similar enthusiasm on the part of African American women to become involved in the association and to “make it their own.” As Weisenfeld explains, “Despite a history of racist policies and painful incidents of racism, African American women continued to build organizations on the model of the YWCA, and they continued to seek affiliation with the National Board.” She continues, “Weighing the YWCA’s record, it is difficult to understand the enduring presence of African American women from the late nineteenth century on.” Weisenfeld’s study, however, offers some reasons African American women chose to initiate and continue involvement with New York City’s black YWCA. Most significant, perhaps, is the women’s sympathy with the YW doctrine of Christian activism, as well as their “confidence in their ability to engage and transform the movement and its institutional structures in significant ways.”¹⁹ Similarly, Nancy Robertson’s study of the national YWCA in the first half of the twentieth century offers three possible reasons for African American participation despite the obvious limitations of black branches: a shared commitment to Protestantism, an ability to use the organization to promote

¹⁸ Lillian Williams, *Strangers in the Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African American Community, Buffalo, New York, 1900-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 104, 118-122.

¹⁹ Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York’s Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 12-13.

improvement in their communities, and the appeal of a national women's organization boasting at least some participation by black women.²⁰

It is likely that Verneta Hill of Omaha, Nebraska, would not have been successful in convincing her white colleagues to allow her the level of financial autonomy she obtained had she attempted to do so a decade earlier. However, as numerous scholars have argued, the postwar years witnessed a heightened emphasis on race within American society as a whole, and, once again, the national YWCA prided itself on leading the way, although not always without conflict. Pressure from students at the 1940 convention forced the national body to embark on a study of the organization's racial practices; the resulting 1944 report revealed that the YWCA's racially inclusive rhetoric was not being carried out in practice. A significant result of the report was that the organization could no longer pretend that racial tensions were only a problem for local associations in the South. The report led to the adoption of the 1946 Interracial Charter, which officially advocated *integration*, not just inclusion.²¹

Structurally, the YWCA was an organization of autonomous branches throughout the country, and in the mid-1940s, decisions made by the National Board could guide and encourage local associations, but there was no means of enforcement. Aware of this, and aware of the way some organizations were ignoring or only paying lip-service to the charter, the National Board sought to continue to apply pressure in the following decades. Historian Susan Lynn has found that despite historiographical emphasis on 1946 as a pivotal year in the organization's history, some local associations maintained separate

²⁰ Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 41-42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 157-164.

black branches into the 1960s.²² Vernetta Hill's experience with the African American branch in Omaha reveals that the local association retained its separate (and unequal) branches at least throughout the 1940s. Similarly, though the association in Lincoln, Nebraska, required less drastic changes in leadership or infrastructure, as it had always operated out of a single branch, evidence suggests that a strict segregationist policy remained in place into the 1950s.²³ Part of the explanation for these discrepancies can be found in the organization's continued hesitancy to push resistant associations too far. When delegates discussed the implications of the 1940 study at the national convention, a white woman from Richmond, Virginia, spoke up, explaining that southern women were agonizing over these issues, and that if they "did not live up to the ideal, but worked on interracial programs and common concerns," she asked that the organization acknowledge their efforts. Robertson asserts that the woman's concerns succinctly sums up the position of many southern (as well as some northern) women. White YW women at this time were "prepared to grant white sisters the benefit of the doubt," and a national staff member "clarified for the convention that 'nobody' thought that the recommendations would go into effect overnight."²⁴ Thus, the implementation of the 1946 Interracial Charter illustrates the complexity of the telling of a national organization's standard history. A more accurate historical treatment of true integration within the YWCA would perhaps begin in 1967—more than twenty years after the Interracial Charter had been passed—when, at a national convention, YW delegates

²² Lynn, *Progressive Women*, 56.

²³ Hugh and Leola Bullock, interview with Dr. Tekla Johnson, 21 June 2007, Malone Community Center History Project; Hazel Adams, interview with Dr. Tekla Johnson, 26 June 2007, Malone Community Center History Project.

²⁴ Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 156.

adopted an amendment that would disaffiliate local associations that were not “fully integrated in policy and practice.”²⁵

The standard organizational history of the YWCA is complicated even further in the years following 1970. At the organization’s triennial convention in Houston, Texas, YW women, under significant pressure from five hundred African American delegates, adopted what was to be the organization’s “One Imperative,” obligating YW women “to thrust our collective power toward the elimination of racism wherever it exists and by any means necessary.” To better understand the effect of this ambitious and aggressive goal, however, one must look beyond the enthusiasm at the convention and the more publicized actions of the National Board and consider the ways the mandate was implemented at the local level in the decades following its adoption. How does one reconcile the fact that while historians typically note the organization’s progressive efforts for racial justice (with particular attention to the Houston convention), in 1971—a year after the ground-breaking convention—half of the participants at the First National Chicana Conference walked out in protest of the use of the Houston YWCA as the conference venue? Not concerned with the reputation of the national organization as a whole, walkout participants focused on the actions of that particular local organization, charging it with racism that was manifested in “unresponsiveness to the local Chicano community” and “heavy-handed treatment of conference participants.”²⁶

In her comprehensive study of second-wave feminism, Flora Davis illustrates that in the 1980s, white feminists struggled to bridge the gulf between white women and women of color within the movement and to create multicultural organizations to work

²⁵Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 176-177.

²⁶Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 145.

towards the goals and needs of all women. According to Davis, “The YWCA, one of the oldest women’s organizations, provided a model to prove that diversity was possible,” and she specifically highlights the action taken at the 1970 convention as evidence.²⁷ Ironically, however, it appears that the situation was a bit reversed when looking specifically at the Lincoln, Nebraska, association. It is true that delegates from the local association had traveled to and been involved in the national convention in Houston (some of whom enthusiastically embraced Imperative efforts and worked to gain supporters back home), and the association had the benefit of the national organization as a model, a source of knowledge, and a guide. Yet despite these advantages, Imperative efforts made minimal headway in Lincoln in the 1970s. Rather than acting as a definitive leader, then, and model for others to follow on the “race question,” the Lincoln YW began to grapple seriously with tough race questions right alongside the white feminists at the national level in the early 1980s. In fact, the local association’s enthusiasm for the feminist agenda in the mid to late 1970s suggests that the thoughts, words, and ideas of white women and women of color engaged in the second-wave feminist movement potentially served as a model and guide for Lincoln YW women’s antiracist efforts in the early 1980s.

This thesis considers questions of gender and women’s organizations, and race and racism in the late twentieth century through a close study of the YWCA in Lincoln, Nebraska. It situates itself within a recent historiography that focuses on mid to late twentieth century national movements specifically in America’s “heartland.” Examples include Beth Bailey’s *Sex in the Heartland*, a study of the “sexual revolution” in

²⁷ Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women’s Movement in American Since 1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 380.

Lawrence, Kansas, Judith Ezekiel's *Feminism in the Heartland*, which looks at the women's movement in Dayton, Ohio, and Robbie Lieberman's *Prairie Power: Voices of 1960s Midwestern Student Protest*, which examines the 1960s student protest movement through the perspective of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) leaders and activists from the Midwest, specifically those who attended the University of Missouri, Southern Illinois University, and the University of Kansas.²⁸ These studies offer a much needed perspective on movements that have received much academic study, but primarily on the East and West Coasts. Scholars have found that while the organizations and individuals did not necessarily radically diverge from those in other parts of the country, they cannot be seen as mimicking them either. As movements developed in the "heartland," these authors suggest, they responded to the values, norms, and political situations of their local region, perhaps as much as they responded to national developments—the results of which were sometimes more and sometimes less successful than the movements on the national stage.

Similarly, while a few excellent studies of the YWCA have emerged in the last two decades,²⁹ most have focused on the activity of the National Board (headquartered in New York), and local studies have been based in New York, California, and the South. For a variety of reasons, many of which are similar to the purposes of the work of Bailey, Ezekiel, and Lieberman, a "heartland" study based in Lincoln, Nebraska, adds a

²⁸ Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002); Robbie Lieberman, *Prairie Power: Voices of 1960s Midwestern Student Protest* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004).

²⁹ See Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, ed., *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Nancy Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

necessary perspective to the historiographical treatment of the YWCA. First, as became evident with the adoption of the “One Imperative” at the national convention in 1970, the organization’s emphasis on local autonomy made it possible for the Lincoln YWCA to be a much different organization than the National Board or even many of the other local associations gathered at the convention. While the national organization had been gravitating toward social action, the Lincoln YW remained, going into the 1970s, a largely social organization. Prior to 1970, the national organization had generally not concerned itself with such variation, as is evident by the twenty-year lapse between the adoption of the Interracial Charter and the mandate that all affiliated organizations comply or be terminated. The organization’s more aggressive stand in 1970, followed by continuing pressure through personal visits and evaluations, illuminates the contrast that existed within the YWCA. The Lincoln YW began the 1970s far behind the National Board in terms of social action and seems to have stagnated in the early 1970s on racial issues, as National continued forward with its efforts. Thus, as was evident with the actual implementation of the 1946 Interracial Charter, the YW’s “One Imperative” demonstrates that historians must take caution in telling the history of a national organization, as national policy does not always resonate closely with the situation in local communities, especially in a membership and volunteer-based organization such as the YWCA. Katherine Jellison’s 1984 thesis of the YWCA’s transition from social action to secular activism in the mid-twentieth century is a valuable study of the Lincoln YW. Yet, Jellison’s emphasis on materials from National causes her to offer a fairly general treatment of this transition and to overlook the complexities I argue are crucial to the understanding of the local situation.

The Lincoln YWCA in the 1970s and early 1980s is an important subject of study for an additional reason as well, however. As previously mentioned, a close analysis of the organization's efforts to implement the Imperative in the decade and a half after the adoption of the national mandate offers a window through which to explore racial discourse within a predominantly white environment. When YW delegates traveled to Houston to attend the national convention in 1970, they traveled from local associations all across the country; when they returned following the convention, they returned to a wide variety of organizations, participants, and communities. The Lincoln delegates returned to a predominantly white organization, serving a predominantly white clientele, located in a predominantly white community. These realities shaped the ways white women at the local YW discussed and approached the Imperative. Utilizing the insight of critical race scholars and critical whiteness scholars of recent decades, I contend that within this predominantly white environment, whiteness was continually reconstructed to maintain a level of social distance between various groups. As a result of this distance, YW women repeatedly questioned the relevance of the problem of racism, expected the few women of color "recruited" to leadership throughout the 1970s to conform to certain standards, and set organizational priorities according to an agenda based on norms that were themselves socially constructed.

This study is organized chronologically in order to best track the development of local YW efforts. I have utilized Board and committee minutes, association reviews, and other organizational materials in constructing the organization's process. In order to better reconstruct the experience of the various participants, I have also conducted oral histories, and in doing so I made an attempt to include the voices of as representative a

group as was possible. In the end, this thesis utilizes oral interviews with five white women, as well as one Japanese American woman, and four African Americans; Dr. Tekla Ali Johnson had previously conducted two of these interviews as part of the Malone Community Center Historical Project.

Utilizing such materials, Chapter One analyzes the organization's first struggles with the Imperative, as the white women attempted to get a grasp on what the mandate meant to their organization and their community. The white women's responses to the Imperative were varied—the extremes being enthusiastic support versus racist comments and “disgust.” Overall, however, the response of the Lincoln YW from 1970-73, as Chapter One reveals, can be categorized as a “color- and power-evasive” discourse. While not entirely inactive, the women felt that by working for the good of “all people,” they were doing their part of the Imperative. As this chapter will argue, the articulation of this discourse caused the local organization to remain in a state of paralysis with regard to antiracist efforts both within the organization and the community.

Chapter Two begins in 1974, picking up after the organization chose to terminate the committee designated to focus on the Imperative, and examines the organization's efforts in the following decade. The chapter argues that the women's articulation of a color- and power-evasive discourse allowed any explicit Imperative efforts to essentially drop off the agenda throughout the mid to late 1970s, as the organization enthusiastically embraced a feminist agenda, complete with the universalist (evasive) discourse being expressed by white feminists. Then, beginning in 1978 and continuing through 1984, when the study ends, the Lincoln YWCA renewed its focus on the national Imperative and broke away from the discourse utilized throughout much of the 1970s. Through a

variety of new approaches, including, perhaps most importantly, an acknowledgement of the racism manifested in the organization and a willingness to make real structural changes to address this issue, the organization began to see real change in the early 1980s. While the Lincoln YWCA's struggle to determine how to go about the implementation of the Imperative did not end in the 1980s, the emergence of a new discourse in the very late 1970s and early 1980s—within a context of a similar dialogue taking place within the second-wave feminist movement nationally—allowed the organization to see some movement and action on goals that had received mostly talk in the preceding decade. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of this discourse, as well as an understanding of the limits of the earlier one, is critical for twenty-first century Americans pursuing an antiracist agenda.

Chapter One

“To Thrust Our Collective Power”: Implementing the Imperative, 1970-73

On April 15, 1970, five hundred African American women stood in a convention center in Houston, Texas, waiting anxiously as delegates to the 25th National Convention of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) considered the resolutions offered by the black delegates. These five hundred women had journeyed from 141 associations in thirty-eight states. They had come together for three intense days preceding the convention and established a list of demands that they shared with the integrated group a few days later. The African American women insisted that the time had come for the organization to fully come to grips with the realities of racism and throw its efforts wholeheartedly toward its elimination. To indicate the urgency of the situation, Mrs. Donald Dammond, who had chaired the pre-convention Black Women Conference stated, “We will no longer tolerate false liberalism. We have no alternative but to immediately make this convention responsible for the fulfillment of the YWCA purpose or to fulfill that purpose ourselves inside or outside of the YWCA.” With just a few minor changes, convention delegates adopted the “One Imperative” for the upcoming triennium and committed the organization to “thrust our collective power toward the elimination of racism wherever it exists and by any means necessary.”¹

One of the five hundred women at the National Conference of Black Women preceding the convention was Lucy Nevels, of Lincoln, Nebraska. Nevels was a YWCA member, a former Board of Directors volunteer, and a community service leader in the community. She attended the Houston convention at her own expense because she “had

¹ “An Historic Response: One Imperative for All,” *YWCA Magazine*, June 1970, 9-11.

heard everybody talking about how exciting a Y convention was.”² After working night and day in Houston to promote an aggressive organizational stance on racism, Nevels returned home to share such ideas with her local organization. Nevels’ enthusiasm likely waned, however, as the Lincoln YWCA struggled to implement the organization’s Imperative in the first few years after its acceptance. In Lincoln, the triennium saw the establishment and disestablishment of an Imperative Committee, harsh criticism from the National Board, and apathy among staff and membership, although the Imperative was not without its supporters. While the local branch had been integrated for over a decade, it faced real difficulty in its attempts to implement the National Board’s mandate for a more aggressive stand against racism. Such difficulties included a small minority population (which caused some to mistakenly believe that racism was irrelevant), community and organizational racism, and intense debates over conflicting priorities. The Lincoln, Nebraska, YWCA in the early 1970s thus provides an illuminating opportunity to explore tensions and discrepancies between a national organization’s official policy and the situation “on the ground.”

The response of local YW women to their new directive, as well as their initial efforts, took place within a specific demographic, historical, and geographical context, which resulted in the articulation of a racial discourse that could be labeled “color- and power-evasion.” Wanting to avoid appearing racist and the “bad feelings” that arise as a result of discussions of hatred and inequality, those articulating an evasive discourse “[attempt] to abolish race difference by means of evading the naming of differences of power organized by racial category and simultaneously evading acknowledgment of

² Theresa Ourada-Sieb, “Lucy Nevels: A Profile of Leadership” (PhD diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1997), 91.

individual complicity with those very same differences of power or privilege.”³ Such a discourse was not unique to the Lincoln YWCA in the early 1970s; Frankenberg has exposed its prevalence in the feminist movement, and she argues that it was “dominant in U.S. ‘public’ race discourse” through the mid-1980s when she conducted her research.⁴ As this chapter will demonstrate, the articulation of this discourse circumscribed the possibilities for Imperative implementation in Lincoln.

Nevels, along with the other Lincoln delegates, including Executive Director Dorothy Smith and Board President Thelma Miller, returned to an organization which had been, for many, a purely social institution. Evaluations completed by staff in 1971 listed “social activities” or “recreation” most often as the community need the Lincoln YWCA filled. In fact, a year prior to the convention, the Board of Directors made it clear that they did not feel entirely comfortable taking a firm stand for social justice. Likely sensing the changing sentiment within the national organization, Smith posed the question, “Are we a social action agency?” In the discussion that followed, it was “brought out that social action quite often brings criticism.”⁵

Like the community surrounding it, the Lincoln YWCA remained an overwhelmingly white organization. When recalling the late 1960s and early 1970s, both white and African American women remember Nevels as the only woman of color who was a part of YW leadership. According to Jeanne Lord, Northeast Area Director and delegate to the 1970 convention, “I don’t remember anybody else. Nobody on staff

³ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 189.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 142-143.

⁵ Board of Directors Minutes, 27 February 1969, Young Women’s Christian Association Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 2: Folder 22, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska [Hereafter NSHS].

either, as far as I remember. I mean, not when I was there. . .I didn't even think about that."⁶ Katherine Jellison seconds that "Dominance by white, middle-class Protestant women. . .continued not only on the leadership level, but in the general ranks of YW membership" at least throughout the period Jellison calls the "Social Crisis era," which extended through 1967.⁷

According to oral history interviews by people of color in the community, it was not until the 1950s that the local YWCA lifted its segregationist policy, although the National organization adopted a charter promoting organizational integration in 1946.⁸ After officially adopting the integrationist policy, the Lincoln YW, like many other local associations throughout the country, struggled to discern the implications of the organization's new inclusiveness; as Nancy Marie Robertson has argued, "Ultimately, YW women disagreed over what inclusion in the mainstream meant: one or two people of color? Representation in the association comparable to representation in the larger population? Fifty-fifty? Frequently the white leadership of local associations described activities with 'only one or two Negro girls' as interracial."⁹ Since the 1950s, the Lincoln YW had made some attempts at recruiting Board members (usually one at a time) from the Board of the Malone Community Center, the local African American community center, but for various reasons, many of these women stayed on the Board

⁶ Jeanne Lord, interview with author, November 6, 2009.

⁷ Katherine Jellison, "The Lincoln Young Women's Christian Association: From Social Evangelism to Secular Activism" (M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1984), 63.

⁸ Hugh and Leola Bullock, interview with Dr. Tekla Ali Johnson, 21 June 2007, Malone Community History Project.

⁹ Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 168.

only briefly if they agreed to serve at all. According to African American member Leola Bullock, some YW women became involved with civil rights activism in the late 1950s.¹⁰

However, efforts at addressing issues of diversity and racism throughout the 1960s were limited. Beginning in 1961, the YW coordinated with a group of students at the University of Nebraska- Lincoln on a program called “Project Friendship,” which was designed to serve American Indians in the community. YW cooperation for this program at this point largely entailed use of facilities, and the American Indian group was always segregated from the activities of white YW program participants. The organization’s approach to this group is evident in Board discussions in the mid 1960s. In December of 1964, the chair of the Social Group Work Committee briefly reported on the groups her committee “served”: “Indian teen-agers, Indian women, retarded group, and potential school drop-outs.”¹¹ Six months later, a member of this committee expressed surprise at an “interesting reaction” offered by some participants in a group for Indian women; the women “wanted to know ‘why do you have just the Indian women meeting together,’ as they ‘would like contacts with other women.’” The YW Board, apparently completely unprepared for this “new development,” agreed that this would “take some time.” Instead of encouraging interested American Indian women to take part in other programs and groups throughout the organization, or forming new groups designed to meet the needs of a broader clientele, the Board determined that the

¹⁰ Leola Bullock, interview with author, November 3, 2009.

¹¹ Board of Directors Minutes, 10 December 1964, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 3: Folder 21, NSHS.

Committee should “take applications and try to locate certain women who would like to be a part of this group.”¹²

Throughout the 1960s, the Public Affairs Committee stayed informed on current civil rights legislation and at times urged Board support of different bills. Towards the end of the decade, Board member Eleanor Peterson presented a series of resolutions which had been created by a summer steering committee and approved by the Program Planning Committee. The nature of the resolutions offers a significant contrast between the local stance in Lincoln and that of many of the other organizations meeting in Houston in 1970. While acknowledging the need for better race relations, the Lincoln women took a non-threatening, non-aggressive stance. The first resolution that addressed race stated, “We recommend that the YWCA initiate one or more specific programs for the purpose of giving community members and staff the opportunity of participating in creative learning situations about racial concerns, exhibitions of Negro art and drama, Negro history study groups, study of multiracial cultural achievements, etc.” The resolution that followed called attention to the section of the Lincoln YWCA constitution that makes the Board of Directors responsible for “seeing that the Association is fully integrated in policy and practices.” The Steering Committee felt that the Association could “be brought more closely in line” regarding this mandate, and “To help implement this suggestions [sic], we further recommend that the Public Affairs Committee secure literature and program resources about race relations and minority groups, and place this material in a central location where it will be readily accessible to interested person[s].”¹³

While allowing that this information should be available, the YW women were not

¹² Board Minutes, 10 June 1965, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, Young Women’s Christian Association, Lincoln, Nebraska [Hereafter YWCA].

¹³ Board Minutes, 10 October 1968, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

interested in forcing anyone (including themselves) to directly confront such issues. By the end of the decade, Lucy Nevels, at that time chairman of the Social Group Work Committee, was in charge of summer programs for a couple of integrated boys and girls groups.¹⁴ The fact that the integrated nature of these groups was highlighted in Board minutes indicates that all-white groups were the norm.

For the most part, however, the Lincoln YWCA did not regard race as a central issue throughout the 1960s.¹⁵ The attention of Board members was focused on the struggling cafeteria in the first half of the decade (which finally closed in 1964), and Board minutes were almost completely consumed by the joint YM-YW fundraising campaign in the mid to late '60s. From the perspective of much of the membership, the YWCA was a venue for social fellowship among white, middle-class women. Jean Schafer Albers, Northeast Area Director in the mid-1960s describes the membership of the decentralized programs at Havelock and University Place as white and elderly, and the activities she recalls centered on cards, cooking, and arts and crafts. Jeanne Lord took charge of the Northeast Decentralized Program in 1969, and she describes a similar membership: “pretty much like Congress: old, white, [and] silver-haired,” as well as similar activities. Lord recalls coffees, teas, and card games—bridge was played regularly—which “hundreds of women” would attend, “dressed-up, sometimes hats, sometimes nylons, that’s how it was back then.”¹⁶ The majority of these women had

¹⁴Board Minutes, 10 April 1969, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 2: Folder 22, NSHS.

¹⁵ While important scholarship in the past two decades illuminates the contested nature of whiteness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, by the 1960s, when YW women considered “race” it was a black and white (and almost always largely black) issue, which, as Matthew Frye Jacobson explains, was typical of the Cold War period: “A complex system of races had given way to a strict scheme of black and white” (Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, 111).

¹⁶ Jean Schafer Albers, interview with author, October 29, 2009; Lord, interview with author, November 6, 2009.

little interest in the shift to social action that was taking place at the organization's national level.

At the time she became a staff member at the YWCA in 1969, Lord and fellow Houston convention delegate Rhonda German were recent college graduates, heavily involved in protesting the Vietnam War and fighting injustices within the community's power structure. Prior to the convention, despite some reluctance on the part of the Board, German and Lord held a Young Adult Mini-Conference at the downtown YW. Among other resolutions, young adults (ages 17 to 35) expressed their support for the Black Manifesto, which had recently been presented by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) member James Forman at a conference in Detroit, Michigan. The Manifesto harshly criticized the current U.S. government as racist and imperialist and argued that churches specifically should be held accountable for their role in U.S. imperialism. In expressing their support for these ideas, the young adults further demanded that each local association actively support the Manifesto by April 1, 1970.¹⁷ Heading to Houston, then, "we thought we were pretty tough here, you know, raising issues. . .and talk[ing] about the Black Manifesto, so. . .we thought we were really out there." However, after interacting with young people from all over the country, their perspective changed: "We would go back to the hotel room crying, in tears, because you know the philosophy. . .a lot of consciousness raising groups, sort of pushing somebody down and building them back up." Lord describes African American women yelling at other delegates face-to-face, and "it was eye-opening for most of us who had never been out of our comfort level, which was Lincoln, Nebraska."¹⁸ Ann Hopkins, YW member

¹⁷ Board Minutes, 13 November 1969, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 2: Folder 22, NSHS.

¹⁸ Jeanne Lord, interview with author, November 6, 2009.

and convention attendee, concurs. She recalls that events at the convention “shocked us Caucasian women because black women were letting us know they didn’t need us at that point.” Hopkins left Houston feeling that Lincoln was not up-to-date on racial and social action issues.¹⁹

While Lord claims that delegates such as herself, German, and Executive Director Dorothy Smith were entirely behind the Imperative adopted at the National Convention, they knew that the tactics used by the black delegates in Houston would not be effective in their association. Lord recalls that when the convention delegates first made their reports to the Board, some members had some difficulty with it: “I would say anytime the word vigorous was used [in the minutes], then it was. . .there were people who didn’t believe we needed it, you know all those people, and then there were people who didn’t like the language—too threatening. I think you could probably just see in your mind the different groups of people. . .and it was all because of this fear of the unknown.” Due to such tensions, “we were sort of sent back. . .to discuss it and see if there was a way that we could sort of bring in everybody, or appease everybody.” While Lord recalls that Executive Director Smith’s constant refrain of “Don’t let them get you down,” was vital to the continuing efforts of Lord, German, and two or three others, the Executive Director also “had to answer to [the other Board members].”²⁰ When the delegates made reports to the various committees with which they were involved, it seems that many attempted to present the information in a non-threatening way. For example, the Decentralized Northeast Committee minutes from September of 1970 state, “Jeanne Lord gave an interesting report of the convention in Houston, Texas. The lighting of the candles for

¹⁹ Ann Hopkins, phone interview with author, December 5, 2009.

²⁰ Lord, interview with author, November 6, 2009.

the lights of peace, the small room conferences and the meeting of interracial groups were important events mentioned.”²¹

The following month, Board President Thelma Miller announced that she was establishing an ad hoc committee to work on ways of implementing the Imperative. Two months later, the committee was somewhat held up, as they had not yet received the guidelines that they had been expecting from National; Miller announced that “the Student Unit is going to work on guidelines for our use.” In July of 1971, the committee began working on an internal study encouraged by the National organization called the Action Audit for Change. The audit was part of the “national program to attack racism” developed by Dorothy Height, the African American director of the National YW’s Office of Racial Justice, after the Houston convention. In Heights’ recently published memoir, she explains, “I knew that people need a handle to take hold. They do best when there are activities that help them learn and act.”²² The local YW boasted of such efforts in the September issue of the Lincoln YW’s monthly newsletter, the “YW-Gram.” An article about the new Imperative states, “For many of us the first questions are ‘Where do we begin?’ ‘How do we start?’ We at the YWCA have started with ourselves.” The process described in the “YW-Gram” consisted of three phases, all carried out by the newly created Imperative Committee. In phase one, committee members went over committee and Board minutes from the past five years. Phase two consisted of meeting with the committees, “covering items not included in the minutes,” and the third phase entailed identifying goals and recommending policies as needed.²³

²¹ Northeast Committee Minutes, 21 September 1970, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

²² Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003), 129.

²³ Board Minutes, 26 October 1970, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA; Publicity Scrapbook, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

Ad Hoc Committee chairman Joanne Wheeler, along with other committee members, spent much of the fall completing phase two of the audit, attending YW committee meetings and interviewing the members. The committee asked questions that had been provided by National, and the dialogue at such meetings is revealing. It appears that some committees, such as Special Events, were quite uninformed about racial issues. In the interviewer's notes, all questions regarding racial justice or ethnic diversity are left blank. Similarly, when evaluating the Book Review Committee, the interviewer noted that the question about using program to "demonstrate concern with the issues of racial justice" and areas of social action were "eliminated," as she "felt that [the] committee wouldn't know what the interviewer was talking about." Such deliberate instances of evasion demonstrate the limits of the organization's initial efforts. When Imperative Committee member Penny Spano interviewed an unidentified committee, she encountered not just ignorance but prejudice. According to Spano's notes, "Two of the women. . . were quite vocal about the fact that the committee was not racist." However, Spano noted that from personal contact with one of the women, "I have heard quite direct statements against blacks." As Spano concluded, "In general the committee was quite defensive and uncooperative. They said they didn't have time for such a meeting and were openly rude."²⁴

Other committees admitted that they had made no efforts to contact or recruit people of color or of low income for YW membership or committee involvement. In addition, they had made no changes in meeting times or program agenda to encourage diverse attendance, although the national organization was quite vocal about the need for such changes in local associations. The Public Affairs Committee implied that the

²⁴ Evaluations for 1968-1971, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 8: Series 4: Folder 6, NSHS.

Board was at times a “block” to their efforts, and they wished “to know from [the] Board what issues can be pursued and to what extent.” Members of the Ad Hoc Committee interviewed the Board of Directors at this time as well. Board members acknowledged that in the year and a half since the adoption of the National Imperative, there had been few changes to “insure racial, age and economic diversity in attendance at Board meetings” and that its members were white, middle-aged or older, and of a similar economic class. While admitting that the YWCA could claim “no real black leadership” and only “a few black participants,” they expressed no desires, goals, or plans to address this.²⁵

The committee presented their conclusions at the Board meeting in December. According to the Imperative Committee, the Lincoln YW was doing fairly well in its efforts to deal with racism, but the group offered some mild criticisms. While commending the use of the Malone Center as a major channel of communication to minorities and those with a low income, the report acknowledged that “publicity about the Association’s goals and activities does not reach all members of this group,” and “no definite source” was “used to access the racial climate of the community.” Further, the report stated that while the Lincoln YW is “open to members of all races. . . most committee meetings and adult program activities have not been changed to accommodate members of the working community or ethnic groups.” Finally, while low-income and minority groups are participants in YW programs and activities, they “seldom serve on committees in leadership policy making capacity,” although the report stressed that “the Association had made an effort in this area.”²⁶

²⁵ Evaluations for 1968-1971, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 8: Series 4: Folder 6, NSHS.

²⁶ Board Minutes 9 December 1971, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

Along with institutional assessments, supporters of the Imperative encouraged self-reflection among individual leaders and members. Often, the same few women spearheaded such efforts, and they encountered conflict along the way. In the fall following the convention, Board members discussed the question, “What comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘racism?’” The following spring, the Executive Director distributed I.Q. (Imperative Quotient) tests developed by the National organization, and she instructed Board members to bring the questionnaires to the next meeting for discussion. Betty Dyer, a white woman on the Board for much of the 1970s, remembers Dorothy Smith handing out the tests. To Dyer, the questions seemed quite personal; they asked Board members to consider how they would feel in one situation or another. In terms of the actual discussion, she remembers, “I think we separated it from our lives. You know, while we were sitting there in the room was one thing. I don’t think that people felt as strong. . .there weren’t that many people that were willing to initiate or do things.”²⁷

In October of 1971, Jeanne Lord passed out a similar test during a meeting of the Havelock Council. According to Lord, she had to go over the questions with various people ahead of time before finally getting the go-ahead from the Executive Director. While she does not remember specifics, she recalls “they were sort of innocuous questions, probably at that time talking more about, you know, is there anybody that doesn’t look like you in your church, in your neighborhood?” However, the secretary does not record mention of this discussion in subsequent meeting minutes, and Lord remembers not being able to go over them, as they were “squashed somehow,” likely because “too many people were offended by it.” In particular, Lord mentioned a couple

²⁷ Betty Dyer, interview with author, November 12, 2009.

of women on the Board that were “very influential” and “very wealthy,” and who they always had to work to push things past.²⁸

As Lord mentioned, for a non-profit organization like the YWCA, money, of course, was vital to survival. Thus, as Lord points out, large donors, as well as the United Way, which she explains was right across the street, influenced the organization’s possible programming. On a yearly basis, the YW depended heavily on United Way funding, and throughout the 1970s, YW women struggled against conflicts between their priorities and those of the United Way. Jellison expands on this conflict in the early 1970s: “Ironically, unlike United Fund boards in many communities, the Lincoln United Way did not oppose funding of feminist-oriented programs as much as it did the financing of Lincoln association attempts to fulfill the YW’s One Imperative.” According to Jellison, United Way boards argued that “many programs recommended by the national YW were impractical for a city with a small Black population,” and “the Lincoln United Way did not approve support for some proposed projects.” As a result of this, “the YW abandoned some program plans.” The women’s willingness to abandon some plans likely stemmed in part from the fact that some YW women were expressing similar concerns regarding the relevance of such programs in Lincoln.²⁹

However, the arguments by some YW women and the United Way that racism was not relevant due to Lincoln’s small minority population do not hold up under examination. Frankenberg has argued that the “very existence” of a predominantly or all-white community “bespeaks a history of racist structuring of that community.”³⁰ Oral histories given by local African Americans reveal that this was in fact the case in Lincoln.

²⁸ Lord, interview with author, November 6, 2009.

²⁹ Jellison, “Young Women’s Christian Association,” 121.

³⁰ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women*, 47.

Interviewees recall being forced by realtors and community pressure to live in particular areas of town, most notably the area surrounding the Malone Community Center.

African Americans were acutely aware of areas in which they were especially unwelcome; as Hazel Adams explained when interviewed in 2007, “You couldn’t live in Havelock.” Half a century after the event, the memory of a black family “being burned out” of Havelock by members of the Ku Klux Klan remained fresh in the minds of Adams and other interviewees.³¹

Local African Americans similarly recall police harassment and job discrimination. It was not until the 1950s that blacks were hired as clerks at white-owned businesses or as teachers within the public school system. Hugh and Leola Bullock moved to Lincoln from Mississippi in 1950. While they were relieved to find no signs dictating where they could or could not be, they soon found that the result was still the same, as it was made clear to them the places they were and were not welcome. As Hugh observed, “This is not that far from Mississippi.” His wife agreed that “Nebraska is very racist.”³² Kim Grover’s oral interviews with members of the African American community in predominantly white Geneva, New York, reveal a similar sentiment. She quotes a former Florida resident at length: “In Florida you know what you can do and what you can’t do. . . But then you have say, well, up in the North it’s not prejudiced, you

³¹ Hazel Adams, interview with Dr. Tekla Ali Johnson, 26 June 2007, Malone Community History Project; Hugh and Leola Bullock, interview with Dr. Tekla Ali Johnson, 21 June 2007, Malone Community History Project.

³² Hugh and Leola Bullock, interview with Dr. Tekla Ali Johnson, 21 June 2007, Malone Community History Project.

know, it's OK, it's this and that and the other; but *they lie*. It is a lot of prejudice in the North; I mean a whole lot of it.”³³

Ann Hopkins, a white woman, moved to Lincoln from Omaha in the late 1960s with her African American husband and her children. Her experience reveals that discriminatory racial practices continued through the 1960s and further that this discrimination extended beyond people of color to those with whom people of color had close, according to some “inappropriate,” relationships. Hopkins moved from Omaha because she was supposed to have a job with the state but due to the economic situation at the time, there was a freeze on hiring, and this plan fell through. Finding herself back on the job market, Hopkins, a social worker, applied with the welfare department, Girl Scouts, and Lutheran Family Services. She soon found, however, that her interracial marriage made her an unattractive employee in these organizations. While interviewing with the welfare department, her interviewer noted her former residence in Omaha; he suggested that Omaha's diversity made it a poor place to live. When Hopkins explained that, as she herself was in an interracial marriage diversity did not bother her, the interviewer's disinterest was evident, and she did not get the job. Similarly, when interviewing with the Girl Scout organization, an interviewer noted Hopkins' address (in a predominantly black area of town) and expressed disparaging remarks about the community. Hopkins defended the neighborhood and explained her situation; she did not get the job. Finally, when those at the Lutheran Family Services learned of her interracial family, Hopkins claims that they wanted to give her psychological testing to find out why she had married a black man. Interestingly, Hopkins was eventually successful at

³³ Kimberly Grover, *Make a Way Somehow: African American Life in a Northern Community, 1760-1965* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 251.

finding work as a social worker at the Malone Community Center, the center in Lincoln's historically black community.³⁴ While Hopkins' experience may seem extreme, in fact disapproval of interracial marriage remained strong throughout the country well into the 1960s and beyond; it was not until 1963 that Nebraska overturned its miscegenation law, and it was not until 1967 that bans on interracial marriages were declared unconstitutional at the federal level.³⁵

In the early 1970s, at the time the Lincoln YWCA struggled to deal with its antiracist mandate, African Americans in the community were still dealing with the legacies (and to a lesser extent continuation) of discrimination in housing, jobs, and the criminal justice and legal system. In addition, people of color in the community continued to face racism in their everyday lives. Nobuko Nyman, a Japanese American woman who moved to Lincoln in the early 1970s and became active on the YW Board, remembers her daughter coming home from school asking why all the kids called her a "Jap." When Nyman went to the school to address the problem, she learned that "the teacher was the worst one that I've ever seen" in terms of her racist beliefs.³⁶ Similarly, Hugh and Leola Bullock recall racism in the community's schools, as classmates called their daughter "the N-word."³⁷ Despite the fact that Nobuko Nyman, Leola Bullock, and Ann Hopkins were involved with the YWCA in various capacities, it appears that the organization's discourse of evasion hindered many YW women from gaining a true understanding of experiences such as these at the time the association embarked on the

³⁴ Hopkins, phone interview with author, December 5, 2009.

³⁵ Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁶ Nobuko Nyman, interview with author, December 11, 2009.

³⁷ Hugh and Leola Bullock, interview with Dr. Tekla Ali Johnson, 21 June 2007, Malone Community History Project.

Action Audit for Change in 1971, as at least some YW women continued to debate the necessity of an aggressive mandate to eliminate racism in their city. Frankenberg has demonstrated that it was often the social distance, rather than a real physical distance, that encouraged white women to minimize the presence and experiences of people of color in their communities.³⁸

After the local association had completed its Action Audit, as well as its annual Association Review, the National Board sent a team to Lincoln. A visit from National was a new element of the Association Review process that had been added following the Houston convention. In late January, 1972, three women from the National Association arrived in Lincoln and embarked on a two-day study. The women studied the internal report, met with committee members, and interviewed members of the community. While aspects of the report echoed weaknesses already acknowledged in the association's Action Audit, the report's tone and the scope of its criticism was quite a departure. In the eyes of the National Team, Lincoln's early efforts were embarrassingly (and painfully) limited. To begin with, they explained, "There is no program directed to the members of the Association to help them understand the nature of the elimination of racism. It was difficult to determine any goals although the Action Audit for Change had been completed." Likewise, the National Team members were unimpressed with the YW's efforts in the community, which was a vital part of the new aggressive stance articulated in the Imperative. After speaking to sources throughout the community, the women asserted that "the YWCA does not identify with needs of minority groups such as housing. An in-house thrust was made but when the community needed support from the YWCA, it wasn't there." They learned that the YW had not publicly supported other

³⁸ Frankenberg, *White Women*, 49.

“black issues as identified by blacks” including education and unemployment. As a result, the women concluded, “We see no real evidence of the Association’s genuine understanding of the nature of racism and the deep maligning affect [sic] it has had on this community.”³⁹

Because such a small number of people of color resided in Lincoln, the organization was able to “integrate” quite easily, once sufficient pressure forced it to do so, allowing the few interested women of color to participate and attempting to recruit a few others from appropriate leadership positions throughout the community. As Lincoln had never had a large enough black population for a separate branch, integration required no major changes in leadership or structure. However, in his study of racism in Hawaii, Michael Haas argues that leaders accepting integration “could flatter themselves by appearing unprejudiced,” while at the same time “maintaining. . .artificial barriers to equal opportunity for out-groups.”⁴⁰ While the Lincoln YWCA prided itself on being “open” and “inclusive,” the discourse they used to assert their open status fit squarely within the organization’s larger color- and power-evasive discourse. Like Haas, Frankenberg, in her study of white feminists in the 1980s, argues that this discourse is critically limited as the espoused “color-blindness” effectively leaves hierarchies intact.⁴¹ The women conducting the National Review apparently concurred with Haas and Frankenberg’s assessments, as they argued that such minimal efforts were not enough in light of the recent Imperative: “Verbal statements that the Association is open to all regardless of race, creed, or color does not encourage or insure minorities’ participation. . . We do not share the concept that to open facilities and program to all automatically

³⁹ National Review 1972, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

⁴⁰ Michael Haas, *Institutional Racism: The Case of Hawaii* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 62.

⁴¹ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women*, 142-143, 188.

demonstrates an effort to implement the YWCA Purpose.”⁴² The National Review expressed frustration at the way in which the local association’s discursive approach to the Imperative coincided with an unwillingness to address the possibilities (and realities) of institutional racism within their organization. Such realities in the organization’s structure meant that despite rhetorical support for “diversity,” women of color in the community faced barriers, including cost, timing, and location, that discouraged involvement. Any comprehensive effort at “eliminating racism,” then, would eventually have to address these realities.

It would seem that at least some YW women were aware of some of the negative perceptions expressed by community members interviewed by the women from National. Found with materials from the early 1970s, an undated speech by the chair of the Publicity and Public Relations Committee to the Board describes a study of the committee’s function “in relationship to the YWCA as a whole.” However, what the study uncovered, according to the chair, was “a problem of which I am sure you are all aware—that of the YWCA’s public image.” The Public Relations Committee discovered that most of the community sees the YW as a place to take arts and crafts classes, attend teas and book reviews, and “a place where the children can go to learn to swim.” Community members do not, however, tend to see the YWCA as a “social action organization,” which, “supposedly [sic]. . .is our stated purpose.”

While the chair stated that the Board may see its actions as directed toward achieving social justice, “we are NOT getting our story to the public.” Committee members had interviewed people in the community associated with the news media and public relations and “were told that a black person charged in an open meeting that ‘even

⁴² National Review 1972, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

the Lincoln YWCA—a Christian organization—discriminates against our people.”

Furthermore, members “were told that many people feel that the YWCA utilizes public funds to perpetuate a program designed solely to serve white, middle-class women.” As a result of their findings, “the Publicity and Public Relations Committee. . .voted to undertake a year-long, coordinated public relations program to acquaint the public with the YWCA as a social action organization.”⁴³

Nevertheless, the National Review ruffled the feathers of many Board members. On March 9, 1972, the Board of Directors met to discuss reactions to the National Review (although they had not yet received their written review), as well as the local organization’s priorities. With the criticisms of the National Team fresh in their minds, Board members searched for a way to articulate their goals (as a women’s organization in the midst of an emerging feminist movement and as an association that had historically been concerned with the community’s youth) in a manner that was “in keeping with the over all imperative.” From the start, it was evident that the women hoped to make the YW program center on youth. After discussion, “Dorothy Matson moved that we accept the goal of serving youth using as our emphasis the priorities of the YW—racism, poverty, ecology, etc.” Likely realizing that the National Board expected efforts to eliminate racism to be the organization’s top priority, or perhaps as a result of protest from an Imperative supporter, Matson withdrew the motion after additional discussion. Eventually, “Cecily North moved that we establish as our major goal for 1972-73 the elimination of racism through service to youth,” and the motion carried unanimously. In the discussion that followed, however, race seems to have dropped off the agenda. The women decided that “the Public Affairs Committee will find out what other organizations

⁴³ Speech, Undated, YWCA Papers, Publicity Scrapbook, YWCA.

are doing to serve youth and what methods are being used to establish needs of all youth in community.” Furthermore, they mandated that “All organized programs will be geared to youth. Each committee must decide where they fit into the over all goal.”⁴⁴ Thus, Lincoln YW women found a way to incorporate the national organization’s Imperative into its local goals; yet by linking it directly to a goal with which many members felt more comfortable, they evaded a direct discussion of antiracist action.

At this same meeting, Board members first discussed their negative reaction to criticism expressed by the National Team during their stay in January. They addressed the issue again in May after receiving the written report and agreed that “a strong statement of our criticisms” should be sent to National. In June, the women approved the Lincoln YW’s “Comments on the Association Review of Lincoln Nebraska YWCA by National Team of Mrs. Marvin Anderson, Miss Jane Towater and Miss Carolyn McPherson,” which Executive Director Dorothy Smith and Board President Thelma Miller signed. The document is a detailed, point-by-point response to conclusions reached by the National Team. Often, the retorts take a decidedly defensive tone, such as when the women assert, “We feel there are more effective ways of showing our openness other than pictures of Malcolm X.”⁴⁵ In reality, however, this statement shows not only the frustrations of the local YW, but also their inability to really relate to the lives of women of color in the community. When recalling her hesitancy to become involved in leadership at the YWCA, Lela Knox Shanks, an African American woman who was taking swimming lessons and aerobics in the 1970s, explains that apart from being the only one or one of two African Americans in her classes, “there was nothing at the Y that

⁴⁴ Board Minutes, 9 March 1972, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

⁴⁵ Comments on National Review, YWCA Papers, 1972 Folder, YWCA.

looked like me. All of the paintings or posters they had were all of blonde, blue-eyed, white-skinned women. You know, there was nothing that looked like my children at the Y.” For Shanks, the lack of inclusivity found in YW advertisements, mailings, and building décor indicated the limitations of the rhetorical efforts of a few Board women to bring her further into the organization.⁴⁶ What Shanks is describing is the lack of appeal of involvement for people of color in what Paul Kivel has called “a white culture of power.” Those of color invited to be a part of that culture are required to do so on white terms, in a white environment, and at the discretion of white leaders.⁴⁷ As is evident in some of the women’s defensive comments to the National Board, the predominantly white local Board was so embedded in this culture that it was unable to recognize it.

The response to the National Team’s criticism is particularly telling in the way in which it combines many of the justifications used throughout the local YW’s first experiences with the Imperative—frustration at having to apply national directives to a situation of which National (allegedly) knows very little, Lincoln’s small minority population, and conflicting priorities: “The imperative is very important. [However,] in a city over 97% caucasion [sic] there would be no YWCA in Lincoln if we were *only* trying to Eliminate Racism, [yet] this has to permeate all program.” Much of the remainder of the response argues that the local branch is already doing much of what was recommended in the review, such as involvement in coalitions with other agencies and recruiting young and minority people. Regarding National’s demand for a leadership program for awareness, the Lincoln YW responded, “Weak but is being done.” With

⁴⁶ Lela Knox Shanks, interview with author, November 9, 2009.

⁴⁷ Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2002), 39.

regard to criticism of the association's lack of institutional change, the women replied, "We recognize this—Some things can not be changed overnight."⁴⁸

It is evident that the National Board and the leadership in Lincoln had very different expectations with regard to implementation of the Imperative. While the Lincoln women were offended that the National staff had not acknowledged their efforts, in the eyes of the National Board, the Lincoln YW likely appeared one of many local associations that claim to be "no problem" organizations, due in large part to the small number of people of color in their communities. According to Jewel Graham, National chair of the Racial Justice Task Force, such organizations forced "us to try to help [them] understand the depth of their involvement in institutional racism."⁴⁹ Up to this point, the Lincoln YWCA had spent some time talking about the personal racism of individual members, as well as the need to obtain more diversity, but the local organization had not genuinely considered the structure and policies of their local branch that ensured discrimination. In fact, their use of a color- and power-evasive discourse encouraged the women to view racism as acts of individual prejudice, thereby explicitly evading a discussion of racism that looks at larger institutional structures and power imbalances. It would take almost a decade for the Lincoln YWCA to begin to "catch up" to the National organization with regard to some of these issues.

Despite the spirited response to the National Board, it seems that Lincoln women did consider at least some of what was said. Later in the June meeting, after having approved the response, Eleanor Peterson, representing the Coordinating and Evaluating Committee, moved "that the YWCA Board establish an ad hoc imperative committee as

⁴⁸ Comments on National Review, YWCA Papers, 1972 Folder, YWCA.

⁴⁹ Jewel Graham, "One Imperative—To Eliminate Racism," *YWCA Magazine*, May-June 1973, 8.

per the suggestion of the National Association Review. This committee will explore curriculum and teaching in elementary schools as related to racism. They will report regularly to the Board and also keep C & E [the Coordinating and Evaluating Committee] informed.” As previously discussed, Board minutes note the establishment of a similar committee in October of 1970. It appears, however, that the association had disbanded the original committee following the completion of the Action Audit.⁵⁰

Jeanne Lord announced her resignation at the Board meeting in which the response to National was approved, as she and her husband would be moving to California, and Ruth Harper became the Director of the Northeast Decentralized Program shortly thereafter. While Lord recalls the struggles Imperative supporters faced in their interactions with certain Board members, the quarterly narrative reports submitted by Harper illuminate the difficulties staff members, even enthusiastic staff members, had in spreading the Imperative throughout the membership. Harper’s summer report laments the “lack of orientation to the central YW” found at both Havelock and Uni[versity] Place. Further, “They. . .disregard entirely the national priorities and express disgust at the Imperative.” Such disgust, of course, is not particularly surprising considering the recollections of African Americans recently interviewed as part of an oral history project that specifically mentioned Havelock as the area where blacks were most unwelcome in the decades leading up to the Imperative. Harper’s perspective resonates with those who came before her: “My main concern with this fact regards our community image, which at this moment has all the impact of a geriatrics ward.” The fall report expressed similar frustration: “There remain entirely too many petty personality conflicts within this group, aborting any efforts at open communication. They seem totally unconcerned about

⁵⁰ Board Minutes, 8 June 1972, YWCA Papers, 1972 Folder, YWCA.

budget, about enlarging program, and about the organizational stances of the YWCA on social issues.” Although Lord had encountered difficulties just a year before in her attempts to force the Havelock group to confront their own issues, Harper expressed a determination to renew these efforts: “January will be a month of an enforced examination of their own internal racism, and looks to be an unpleasant confrontation. (hopefully not unproductive!!).” Just as a policy adopted at the national level faced difficulties when applied in a local setting, the decentralized nature of the Lincoln YW meant that resolutions agreed upon by YW leadership (and fervently supported by some) did not easily translate into membership support and acceptance. Harper concluded that “there are some real problems to be resolved among the ‘leaders’ in the North Area before any real changes can sift through to program and the membership.”⁵¹

Meanwhile, the new Imperative Committee began (or renewed) its efforts in the fall with a public meeting to discuss racism and education. Dr. Jack Siegman, sociology professor from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was recruited to speak at the meeting; he discussed “the merits of employing minorities in the Lincoln public schools.” The meeting further addressed problems with curriculum, particularly “the lack of literature which give a good image of minority people.” It seems, however, as with many such efforts over the next year, the committee was working without the full support of the leadership. At the Board meeting the following month, Board President Eleanor Peterson expressed, along with committee chairman Penny Spano, “her disappointment in the number of people attending the meeting, especially the lack of Board people.” Following this meeting, the Coordinating and Evaluating Committee was unsure whether the

⁵¹ Northeast Area Narrative Report, Summer and Fall 1972, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

Imperative Committee would decide to continue working, although in the following month it was noted that they had decided to do so.⁵²

Likewise, in late November, the YWCA hosted a Cultural Awareness Workshop, which was to emphasize the experiences of African Americans and Chicanos in the area. At the November 9 Board meeting, it was reported that the “response of the school system. . .has been great—eleven have enrolled.” The president encouraged Board members to attend. The frustration of Executive Director Dorothy Smith following the workshop was evident as she made her closing remarks at the December meeting: She “questioned whether the Board really has a commitment to the Imperative. The Cultural Awareness sessions were attended by more staff than Board. The activities of the Imperative Committee have not had much visible support.” The Coordinating and Evaluating Committee offered similar conclusions in their annual reports. The report for 1971-1972 acknowledges that the Imperative Committee had taken the challenge of eliminating racism seriously. It continues, however, “We wonder if other committees were not content to let this ad hoc committee carry on this vital effort, with our approval but not our whole-hearted support.”⁵³ Some YW women, such as Jeanne Lord, felt that at least some members of the Board in fact neither approved nor supported Imperative efforts. Similarly, YW member and Houston delegate Ann Hopkins recalls that some of the older women were not thrilled with what they perceived as a “minority intrusion” as well as the organization’s turn toward social action more generally.⁵⁴

The mixed feelings of the Board were evident at a meeting in early February. In preparation for the national convention in San Diego, Board members discussed the

⁵² Board Minutes, 12 October 1972, YWCA Papers, 1972 Folder, YWCA.

⁵³ Board Minutes, 14 December 1972, YWCA Papers, 1972 Folder, YWCA.

⁵⁴ Hopkins, phone interview with author, December 5, 2009.

possibility of a change in the association's goals. In particular, members discussed a new Imperative that was developed by the Springfield, Massachusetts, YWCA, which some felt offered a more positive wording. The new resolution would mandate that the organization would "thrust our collective power, as committed women, towards eliminating injustices to all people by constructively building a united community where the dignity and full potential of each individual is recognized." Thus, any explicit mention of race or requirement to confront one's own racism would be left out. The proposed resolution sparked a debate among members of the Lincoln Board. While some members felt that the resolution was "watering down" the Imperative, others supported it because it did not create "the divisiveness of the present Imperative." Board member Elaine Usher moved that the Lincoln association adopt the resolution, and the motion received a second. In the end, however, the motion failed. The Lincoln YW's sympathy with a discourse of "eliminating injustices to all people" and "building a united community" resonates with the universalist (and thus evasive) discourse being articulated among white feminists at this time as well. According to Flora Davis, most white feminists "simply assumed they were building a movement that would serve women of all races and ethnic groups." Over time, however, women of color continued to fill only one or two leadership positions in feminist organizations, and the membership remained overwhelmingly white. As many of these feminist organizations as well as the Lincoln YW would find almost a decade later, a universalist, evasive discourse tends to perpetuate exclusion, as "members of an organization determined its priorities, and then those priorities determined who joined the organization, which meant that new members seldom changed old priorities."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

At the same meeting, Eleanor Peterson, a member of the Coordinating and Evaluating Committee, moved that the Imperative Committee become a standing committee with the chair a member of the Board. The women seconded and carried the motion, and Terry Jackson became the new chair.⁵⁶ This change was in part because the committee was struggling. At its January meeting, Chairman Penny Spano announced her resignation, and the group (once again) discussed its future. The women decided to continue but realized they needed a new structure.⁵⁷ Board status would be necessary for any real progress. Members quickly found, however, that its new status as a standing committee with Board representation did not solve the problem.

In March, the committee voted to oppose the renewal of a liquor license for the local Elks Club due to their discriminatory practices, including overtly racist “Whites only” clauses. Committee minutes state, “We. . .voted to insure that there be a public hearing by three members filing complaints to [the] city clerks’ office; and to ask the Y Board to support our efforts.” After attending the March Board meeting, Terry Jackson returned to her committee with the report that “the Y Board will not support our position and wishes the Imperative Committee would refrain from action.” The women boldly decided to “proceed with action” and added to their position paper that “we would have our stand applied to every discriminating organization as well as the Elks Club.”⁵⁸

Tensions with the Board continued. In May, the chairman announced that “The Mini-

⁵⁶ Board Minutes, 8 February 1973, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

⁵⁷ Imperative Committee Minutes, 16 January 1973, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 9: Series 7: Folder 8, NSHS.

⁵⁸ Imperative Committee Minutes, 22 March 1973, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 9: Series 7: Folder 8, NSHS.

Convention adopted all of our resolutions,” whereas the Board had only passed three.⁵⁹ At that month’s board meeting, Terry Jackson and her committee proposed a formal resolution to support legal action to rescind liquor licenses to all private clubs guilty of membership discrimination, despite their previous discouragement. The group also proposed a formal resolution to affirm its support of the United Farm Workers Union and to show its support by boycotting lettuce until an agreement had been worked out between the workers and the corporations. Since the mid-1960s, the UFW, led by Cesar Chavez, had organized California farmworkers, and through strikes and boycotts struggled to obtain the basic rights to organize in unions and bargain with employers. In the summer of 1970, Chavez called for a nationwide boycott of non-union lettuce, and by the spring of 1973, when the Imperative Committee presented its proposal, policemen met strikers with violence. The national YWCA had demonstrated its support of the UFW by inviting Chavez to speak at its 1973 national convention in San Diego. According to the Imperative Committee’s proposal, the organization’s Imperative definitively obligated the organization to take this stand. While the Board eventually conceded and adopted the former resolution pertaining to the Elks Club, members remained “deadlocked in a tie vote” on the latter resolution, and in the end chose not to endorse it.⁶⁰

According to the 1972-1973 report of the Coordinating and Evaluating Committee, the Board-recognized Imperative Committee set up some “fairly comprehensive” goals in March of 1973, particularly in the area of education in the

⁵⁹ Imperative Committee Minutes, 24 May 1973, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 9: Series 7: Folder 8, NSHS.

⁶⁰ Newspaper Clipping, “YW Board Deadlocked on Lettuce,” 8 June 1973, Publicity Scrapbook, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

public schools. However, it accomplished very few of them. In September, Jackson resigned from her post as committee chairman. Although a reason is not included in the minutes, her frustration with the Board was likely a factor. While discussing guidelines for filling the position, a Board member mentioned that the committee had begun as an ad hoc committee, which led to a motion that there no longer be an Imperative Committee. While the group seconded the motion, further discussion convinced the women to put the question to the Coordinating and Evaluating Committee.⁶¹ In October, the C & E Committee submitted a resolution which would ensure the continuation of the Imperative Committee. As was evident in the evaluating committee's past reports, many of its members felt that the Imperative Committee was absolutely necessary to pull along a reluctant Board. However, according to the meeting minutes, the Board "unanimously defeated"⁶² this motion, although November minutes add that "at least one" member abstained from the vote.⁶³

Three and a half years after Lincoln delegates had returned home from the Houston Convention, the local association still struggled to come to a coherent understanding of the implications of the organization's Imperative to eliminate racism. With the termination of the Imperative Committee in the final months of 1973, the Board found itself without the arm of the institution that had pulled the organization along on such issues in fits and starts since its original establishment in October of 1970. Its status as a committee with Board representation, of course, had only lasted seven months. Exactly why Board members unanimously (or nearly unanimously) voted to disband the committee is unknown. Perhaps some members felt that their efforts were complete, or

⁶¹ Board Minutes, 13 September 1973, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 2: Folder 23, NSHS.

⁶² Board Minutes, 11 October 1973, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 2: Folder 23, NSHS.

⁶³ Board Minutes, 8 November 1973, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 2: Folder 23, NSHS.

perhaps pressure from influential Board members or financial donors persuaded the group to focus their efforts in a way that was seen as “less divisive.” In many ways, however, the Imperative Committee had allowed the majority of YW staff and leadership to ignore problems of community, institutional, and individual racism, as it was expected that the Imperative Committee was handling such issues on the part of the whole organization, allowing the Imperative emphasis to scarcely reach some committees. Thus, ironically, the establishment of the Imperative Committee facilitated the discourse of evasion articulated by many YW women.

The case of the Lincoln YW in the first years of the 1970s indicates the care that must be taken in telling the history of national organizations. The majority of recent scholarship portrays the YWCA as a progressive institution. Perhaps most notably, Susan Lynn, in *Progressive Women in Conservative Times* argues that the post-war YWCA, in conjunction with some other women’s groups, was at the forefront of many progressive efforts with regard to racial justice and women’s rights, which is, of course, largely true. It must be acknowledged, however, that policies adopted and promoted at the national level did not always resonate closely with the situation “on the ground.” When delegates, whether enthusiastic or skeptical, returned home in April of 1970, they returned home to a variety of different communities, programs, and constituencies. The way these individual organizations chose to deal with this national Imperative, if at all, differed dramatically. In a speech delivered at the 1973 convention in San Diego, California, National Vice President and chair of the Racial Justice Task Force Jewel Graham reported on the mixed response of the local organizations. According to Graham, some associations blatantly ignored it, some made efforts but insisted they

didn't have a "real problem," and some embraced the Imperative and experienced a renewal of purpose.⁶⁴

Lincoln YW staff and Board members such as Executive Director Dorothy Smith, Lucy Nevels, Jeanne Lord, Rhonda German, Ruth Harper, and various members of the Imperative Committee would not allow the local association to ignore the organization's One Imperative and the realities that it challenged. However, at times, it must have seemed like they were on their own against the tide. Those who made attempts at bringing more women of color into the leadership of the organization faced hesitation due to the association's perceived history as a white, middle-class organization serving a similar clientele. The Board exhibited, at best, apathy towards efforts made at addressing racism within the community, such as the open meeting addressing problems in education. When asked specifically about the Imperative, a former Board member recalls that the Board discussed it at meetings, but the specific memories she is able to recall from the period center on the association's weaving center, the annual Hanging of the Greens festival, and hosting civic luncheons. The experiences of Harper and Lord with certain segments of the membership illustrate the difficulties of bringing about any major changes in program to a membership that was quite set in its ways. For many well-meaning YW leaders and members, living in a largely segregated, predominantly white community, the Imperative passed at the national convention did not seem to fit their lives; in short, it was not *their* imperative.⁶⁵

The relationship between the national YWCA and its local affiliated organizations in many ways encouraged the varying responses of its branches. Not only did the local

⁶⁴ Graham, "One Imperative," 8.

⁶⁵ Dyer, interview with author, November 12, 2009.

associations not receive any funding from National, each association sent money to the headquarters in New York each year to remain affiliated. For non-profit local organizations already at times feeling financial pressure, this sometimes felt like a burden, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Lincoln YW occasionally made the decision *not* to contribute their quota for the year, arguing that their local expenditures were more important. Thus, the Lincoln organization depended on membership dues, private donors, and, most significantly, apportionments from the United Way to stay afloat. Thus, the opinions of such groups, perhaps more so than National, influenced the local association's program planning. The situation was complicated by the fact that the relationship between the Lincoln organization and the National Board was at times strained. At various times throughout the early 1970s, and most vehemently in the response to the National Review in 1972, members of the Lincoln Board expressed frustration simultaneously at the lack of guidance from National and National's seemingly overbearing efforts to influence the local organization. In turn, the National Team that visited in early 1972 criticized the organization for its poor relationship with the national leadership. In addition, the fact that at the local level the YWCA relied on voluntary membership and the work of volunteers, which included, of course, the members of the Board, often limited possibilities of real change.

The continued articulation of a color- and power- evasive discourse in these early years ensured that racism would remain an issue of blatant, individual discrimination; as a result of this approach, the racial discourse of the emerging women's movement, which mistakenly asserted that the movement worked for the liberation of "all women," resonated more closely with Lincoln YW women than the discourse being articulated by

the national organization. Between 1970 and 1973, the *YWCA Magazine* offered a continuing dialogue on the organization's Imperative to eliminate racism. Articles discussed progress made by local organizations, program suggestions, and editorials exposing the realities of "white racism" and "institutional racism." It seems, however, that only the most fervent supporters in Lincoln, most notably Jeanne Lord and to a lesser extent Eleanor Peterson utilized these materials in Board and committee meetings. Lincoln YW staff and leadership, then, were largely on their own to confront obstacles presented by the community, the membership, and the Board. With a membership that sought social fellowship and a Board that was hesitant about social action, an outreach to people of color that went beyond tokenism, a willingness to prioritize racial justice, and a true understanding of the realities of institutional and individual racism were slow coming.

Chapter Two

“From Liberalism to Liberation”: Reactivating the Imperative, 1974-84

Despite the disbanding of the Lincoln YWCA’s Imperative Committee, African American Board member Lucy Nevels, daughter of Lucy Nevels, Sr., who had played an active role in the 1970 national convention at Houston, was determined to keep the Imperative on the agenda as the organization began a new year. On January 10, 1974, Board members listened as the secretary read a letter Nevels had sent for Board consideration. In the letter, Nevels requested a change in the time of Board meetings in order to make them more convenient for herself and others to attend. Nevels refers directly to the Imperative in framing her request: “I ask you this question because of the Imperative, ‘To Eliminate Racism by any Means Necessary’. The phrase ‘by any Means Necessary’, to me, right there seems to imply that we should all try our very hardest to eliminate racism—this means coming to meetings at night so everyone can make it.” Nevels understood, in a way that most of the Board members likely had not been able to, that morning Board meetings encouraged participation from a particular segment of the community’s women—largely white and middle-class homemakers. As she explained, “I want to be an equal member, so please treat me this way. I see alot [sic] of wrong doings going on and I’d like to see them changed. But as I have stated, I need you[r] help and support.”¹

To remedy this problem, Board members voted to alternate meeting times—a morning meeting one month and an evening meeting the next. Throughout the 1970s, the YWCA leadership—staff and volunteer—realized that if they were going to achieve

¹ Lucy Nevels to Lincoln YWCA Board of Directors, 10 January 1974, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 2: Folder 23, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska [Hereafter NSHS].

measurable success in the implementation of the national Imperative, they were going to need some help, just as historian Nancy Marie Robertson explains was the case at the national level in the early twentieth century, as, “black women struggled to force white women to recognize where their vision of common womanhood or Christian values fell short.” Women of color—members, staff, and volunteers—provided education and prodding in a number of ways, as did the Student YWCA, who, as the Board members admitted, led the way in Imperative efforts and attempted to push the organization to, as Robertson describes, “live up to the rhetoric of equality and reciprocity.”² Despite this, rather than continual progress in the development of an assertive anti-racist agenda, the local YWCA’s momentum slowed after its initial efforts before experiencing a renewed enthusiasm, at least on the part of some, almost a decade after the 1970 Houston convention. The local YWCA tried various approaches in its attempt to eliminate racism in the organization and the community in the decade and a half following the convention. When the Lincoln YWCA women “reentered” the Imperative discussion going into the 1980s after a brief lull, the conversation took place within a very different national context, and YW women experimented with new approaches being implemented in the women’s liberation and women’s rights movements, academic institutions, and a host of non-profit organizations throughout the country. A case study of the Lincoln YWCA in the 1970s and early 1980s, then, illuminates the ways racism manifests itself in a predominantly white environment, as well as, perhaps more importantly, the set-backs, stumbling blocks, and successes of a predominately white organization’s attempts to achieve meaningful diversity and antiracist activism.

² Nancy M. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 2, 12.

Two months after Nevels' somewhat successful effort to change a discriminatory policy of the YW Board in 1974, YW Youth Team advisers, led by Nevels, took the initiative in brainstorming approaches to implement the Imperative among the community's youth. After "a great deal of discussion about black/white relations," the group "developed some concrete strategies." In their effort to establish interracial groups among local teens, the youth advisers decided that Nevels would first meet with a group of interested black teenage girls, develop a foundation of communication, and then bring in interested white teens. The goal was to establish "open, honest communication" which would lead to group action on issues such as education and drugs. Further, the women agreed to develop a summer conference dealing with racism.³ The strategies spelled out by the Youth Team advisers were among the first concrete plans developed in the local organization, and it is not surprising that it would be the committee that focused on the community's youth that developed it. Women involved with YW programming in the late 1960s and early 1970s recalled that achieving more diverse participation was easier for programs involving youth, as their involvement with the local junior high and high schools gave them a target population that was already integrated and ready for recruitment.⁴ Still, the inclusion of integrated teenage groups in YW program was quite a departure from the situation Katherine Jellison describes a decade before: "a self-evaluation of the Lincoln YWCA conducted in the early 1960s, showed that YW

³ Youth Team Adviser Meeting Minutes, March 1974, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 2: Folder 25, NSHS.

⁴ Jean Schafer Albers, interview with author, October 29, 2009; Jeanne Lord, interview with author, November 6, 2009.

programs for young adult members, traditionally the backbone of association membership, included no involvement by Blacks, Hispanics, or the very poor.”⁵

The 1974 self-conducted program evaluations suggest, however, that other committees were at least talking about the elimination of racism at this time. In particular, the Program Evaluating Committee (formerly the Coordinating and Evaluating Committee) commended the Health, Physical Education, and Recreation Committee (H.P.E.&R.) for its diverse participants—the report notes whites, blacks, and Indians specifically. Other committees, such as Child Development and World Relations, expressed a desire to achieve more minority participation, while the Religious Emphasis Committee simply stated “Work on the Imperative” as one of its primary goals. For those committees that did not consider the Imperative when determining their goals, the Program Development Committee attempted to steer them in the right direction. The evaluation suggested ways committees that perhaps did not see the Imperative as relevant to their part of the YW program could take part in the effort. For example, the evaluating committee advised the Arts and Skills Committee to consider “using black, Chicano or others as teachers” and to develop “classes appealing to minorities.” Further, they instructed those on the Membership Committee to develop a “broader view of the Y—to understand the Imperative and the Purpose.”⁶

Program Development committee members placed particular emphasis on the Havelock and University Place committees (the communities that composed the YW’s decentralized program in northeast Lincoln), as both the leadership and the membership in these areas had been perhaps most resistant to a social action emphasis in YW

⁵ Katherine Jellison, “The Lincoln Young Women’s Christian Association: From Social Evangelism to Secular Activism” (M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1984), 63.

⁶ Association Review, 1974, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

programming. The Havelock Committee had listed “to stress the Imperative” as one of its three goals for the coming year and had specified that this emphasis would be through banners and discussion. In the committee’s evaluation, however, the Program Development Committee pushed the Havelock women to form a more concrete plan and to directly address social issues. The women involved at University Place did not address the Imperative or social action issues in their self-evaluation and discussion of goals. Realizing the problems the University Place membership was having with Imperative efforts, the Program Development Committee attempted to give them a gentle push by encouraging an awareness of how these women could find a place in such YW efforts.⁷

The frequency of references to the Imperative or women of color (referred to as “minorities” or “Third World persons”) suggests that the termination of the Imperative Committee the previous year forced a larger segment of the YWCA leadership to take responsibility for the implementation of the national directive. The 1974 Association Review gives credit to the Imperative Task Force for stimulating interest among many committees (although it does not mention the resistance the committee encountered within the agency) and asserts that “Now many people are concerned, and involved in implementing the Imperative.” Likely still reeling from their stand-off with the National Team two years before, the document expressed frustration that representatives from the National branch were not always “realistic” and that they fail “to consider the needs and values and desires of local Associations.”

Overall, the tone of the report remains consistent with the local organization’s approach in the first years after the adoption of the Imperative—the application of a “color- and power-evasive” discourse. Such a discourse, as explained in Chapter One,

⁷ Association Review, 1974, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

views racism as attention to race as a determining characteristic, often accompanied by discrimination. Thus, a color- and power-evasive discourse attempts to avoid or eliminate racism by emphasizing the universal and working to eradicate instances of blatant discrimination. According to Frankenberg, the discourse is limited because it is “structured so as to assert the idea of crossracial common humanity, albeit on white-centered terms, at the same time as it averts the white gaze from the harsh realities of power imbalance.”⁸ As demonstrated in Chapter One, the articulation of an evasive discourse circumscribed the potential for Imperative implementation at the Lincoln YW.

The 1974 Review acknowledged that “The Lincoln Association took quite a bit of time concentrat[ing] [sic] on the Imperative and having a lot of trouble getting a handle on how this could be implemented meaningfully.” The report continues, however, that the Lincoln women “finally realized that if we worked for the peace and justice, freedom and dignity for *all* people we would be implementing the Imperative.”⁹ The organization’s primary objective, then, resonates closely with the universalist discourse being espoused by middle-class white women within the feminist movement. As a result, the organization’s emphasis on the “universal” was only strengthened as Lincoln women increasingly embraced the feminist agenda throughout the decade. While an admirable and ambitious goal, it is also indicative of the Lincoln women’s continued reliance on the white, middle-class experience as their reference point; thus, their plan of action was inevitably limited. Historian Winifred Breines has documented a similar mindset among white socialist feminists during the 1970s. In her study *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*, Breines explains,

⁸ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 142.

⁹ Association Review, 1974, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

“The evidence makes abundantly clear that Bread and Roses members, like other socialist feminists, embraced antiracist politics. Yet their support, while genuine was abstract. It was not rooted in actual experiences with black women.”¹⁰ Similarly, the YWCA, particularly at the national level, advocated an aggressive antiracist position, yet at the local level, Lincoln YW women continued to leave the particular needs of women and children of color out of their agenda. By effectively removing race from their efforts to implement the Imperative, Lincoln women demonstrated their lack of understanding of the particular struggles women of color faced in Lincoln, despite the fact that a few women that regularly experienced these difficulties, as described in Chapter One, were involved with the organization in various ways.

Further, establishing themselves as supporters of peace and justice for all allowed the women to neglect the same realities that black feminists criticized white feminists for; specifically, as Breines explains, black feminists argued that white women “did not acknowledge their white skin privilege and racism.” This, of course, is a direct result of the utilization of a color- and power-evasive discourse, as the women could examine themselves for blatantly racist sentiments, work to address them as they existed, and avoid a more direct dialogue on racial and social hierarchies and structural power imbalances. The discourse can be characterized by, as Charles Mills explains in *The Racial Contract*, a failure to ask certain questions that would aggressively challenge the status quo.¹¹

In effect, the YWCA’s new direction expressed in the 1974 Review was not much of a departure. Furthermore, while Lucy Nevel’s letter to the Board at the beginning of

¹⁰ Winifred Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 114, 139.

¹¹ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 74.

the year indicated that there were ways in which the YWCA's very structure brought about inequitable participation opportunities and that there were, as she explains, many "wrong doings going on," the Association Review indicated that many YW women felt that no changes were needed. In the "Professional Staff Summary," the question "What changes are needed to support the Association's commitment to the elimination of institutional racism?" was answered with a list of criticisms directed at the National YWCA. The same question was answered in the "Employed Staff Summary" by assuring that "our staff members are committed to the purpose and the Imperative." Other sections of the report explicitly stated that no changes were needed, while the "Resource Leadership Summary" argued simply that "our Affirmative Action statement makes our position clear." The Program Committee member who completed her committee's section of the review similarly argued, "I don't believe any changes are needed to support the association's commitment to the elimination [sic] of institutional racism." Curiously, she later adds, "To have any heavier influx of blacks into our membership, the community population would have to increase its percentage."¹² Interestingly, women looking back on this period thirty years later remember minimal black participation. For example, Nobuko Nyman, a Japanese American woman who became involved with the YWCA in 1974 and remained until the early 1980s, remembers very few women of color on the Board, on the staff (none that she recalls), and in the membership. While she acknowledges that there must have been some diversity in the programs for children, she does not remember seeing children of color around the building.¹³

¹² Association Review, 1974, YWCA Papers, File Cabinet, YWCA.

¹³ Nobuko Nyman, interview with author, December 11, 2009.

As in 1972, the National Board sent a team to visit Lincoln and review the local association once the local women had completed their internal review. Overall, the National representatives concluded that “there is evidence in the Association of positive efforts to implement the Imperative and the Program for Action,” and the Lincoln Board was much happier with this team’s report. However, the National Team’s report reveals that the representatives were not convinced the local association had made as much progress as it implied in its self-evaluation. The form completed by the national representatives first looked at the operation of the local organization. Regarding membership policies and practices, the form asked the representatives to assess whether the Lincoln YW had “actively recruited from all racial and ethnic groups and from all geographic areas in the community.” The women responded in the affirmative by checking the “yes” box, but, revealingly, penciled a question mark next to the box. The women from national included question marks throughout the report, in response to questions regarding a diverse membership in proportion to the community population; membership activities to demonstrate the relationship between racism, poverty, and injustice; and active participation of “Third World women” in program and program leadership. Furthermore, other questions dealing with race have no box checked at all.¹⁴

The women from National acknowledged that “Board and staff consciously seek to create a climate which will attract and hold truly diverse leadership,” yet they emphasized that the organization still had much to do in this regard. Specifically, the local organization required a “continued seeking out of what empowerment of youth and third world women really means—and to put it into action.”¹⁵ Ironically, however, very

¹⁴ National Review, 1974, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

¹⁵ Ibid.

little discussion of this “continued seeking out” process can be found in Board and other committee minutes in the years following the 1974 Association Review. In fact, it seems that explicit efforts to implement the Imperative all but stopped in the mid-1970s. The Board generally held a retreat each summer that served in part as a brainstorming session for YW goals and program. At each retreat, the secretary took extensive notes on the discussion, and, significantly, the notes for 1975, 1976, and 1977 do not mention racial injustice or Imperative efforts. Further, while minutes from the Malone Community Center Board of Directors meetings in the early 1970s include references to collaborative efforts with the YWCA on swimming programs and summer camps (perhaps arising from the YW’s initial efforts after the 1970 national convention), such references all but disappear throughout the rest of the decade. At some point the Malone Community Center staff began holding its summer programs on the campus of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln instead of at the YWCA.¹⁶

The relatively positive 1974 report by the National Team, along with the evidence of some increase in the participation of women of color in various aspects of the organization could suggest that the silence in the mid 1970s regarding Imperative efforts indicates that the Lincoln YWCA had achieved success in implementing the national mandate, and the Imperative had been incorporated into the local YW program. However, records from the late 1970s and early 1980s reveal that this was not the case. A renewed emphasis by some YW women in the early 1980s made clear to Board and staff just how little they had accomplished and just how little understanding they had about the realities of racial injustice. When new Executive Director Sheryl Schrepf spoke

¹⁶ Board of Directors Minutes, Malone Community Center Papers, Malone Community Center, Lincoln, Nebraska.

to a local reporter in June of 1979, she lamented that the organizational objective to eliminate racism “hasn’t been maintained here.”¹⁷ The renewed emphasis brought about the experimentation and implementation of new approaches in pursuing the national organization’s on-going goal, which would steer them away from the “color- and power-evasive” discourse articulated in the Imperative’s early years.

The spark for the renewed emphasis seems to have come, not surprisingly, from the Student YWCA. In January of 1978, the Board discussed the goals for the year that had been prepared by the Program Planning Committee. The committee, chaired by Jody Schwindt, who just five years before had been brought into the organization as the “Imperative Facilitator,” presented three goals, with sub-goals, to the Board. Goals included the empowerment of women, strengthened communication within membership and community, and the empowerment of youth. Significantly, the committee did not list the Imperative as a top priority for the year, which perhaps should not be surprising as it does not appear to have been a major goal in the previous few years. During the discussion that followed, however, African American Board member Janice Harrington, the Student Y representative, called attention to this glaring omission. Harrington “asked for examples of how the local ‘Y’ has fought to eliminate racism.” Executive Director Dorothy Smith responded that the organization had made efforts, but she apparently was not able to be specific, and she acknowledged that the organization should probably do more. Harrington, who had experienced racism both in rural Alabama and in the northern city of Lincoln and went on to write a children’s book based on her experiences, pushed that the elimination of racism be established as a separate goal, and “after much discussion,” the women created a fourth goal—“Empowerment of Third World Persons.”

¹⁷ News Clipping, Publicity scrapbook, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

The Board adopted the goal along with sub-goals, the first of which being “to make concerted efforts to eliminate personal and institutional racism.”¹⁸ It seems, however, that at least some of the Board members felt that some YW members and participants still were not ready for any drastic changes to their agenda. When a Board member met with the University Place Steering Committee to present the organization’s overall goals a week after the Board meeting, the meeting minutes do not mention the fourth goal.¹⁹

Harrington’s insistence that Imperative efforts be explicitly listed as a top organizational priority triggered discussion and debate similar to that of a decade before. As the organization embarked on a new decade, however, the national context for such a discussion had changed significantly. While the YWCA is not typically considered a “feminist” organization (although historian Flora Davis argues that by the early 1990s it could be classified as one²⁰), over the course of the 1970s, the Lincoln association came to identify quite closely with the feminist agenda. Beginning in the mid-1970s the organization established rap groups for women with an explicit emphasis on “consciousness-raising” (a term prevalent in the feminist movement), held conferences on women’s changing roles, and gave free seminars on issues such as “Political Issues for Women” and “Feminism,” the latter being conducted by members of the National Organization for Women (NOW). The summer program for 1978 included courses such as “Empowering Women with Expanding Knowledge,” “Husbands and Wives Roles—The New House-Husband,” and “What’s the Revolution?—Women’s

¹⁸ Board Minutes, 24 January 1978, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

¹⁹ University Place Steering Committee Minutes, 30 January 1978, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

²⁰ Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women’s Movement in American Since 1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 492.

Changes/Demands,” along with its traditional classes in areas such as arts and crafts and cooking.

Such enthusiasm for the women’s movement was likely in part responsible for distracting Lincoln women from the Imperative. First, limits of time, resources, and energy made prioritizing of the utmost importance, and tensions between conflicting priorities were evident at both the local and national level throughout the 1970s. Already in 1973, at the national convention in San Diego, California, during a panel on using the YW’s collective power to eliminate racism, some panelists of color expressed their concern that the goals of the women’s liberation movement were taking precedence over the YW’s antiracist goals. After much discussion and debate, the panelists—both white and of color—seemed to conclude that “the actual sufferings from the effects of racism are deeper,” and efforts to eliminate racism thus must remain a top priority, although antiracist struggles are more powerful within a context of eradicating other power hierarchies.²¹ When the Lincoln organization encountered a similar conflict of priorities in the mid 1970s, however, the women allowed a feminist agenda to take precedence, likely due in part to their tendency to trivialize the issue of race in a city with Lincoln’s demographics.

Furthermore, the color- and power-evasive discourse articulated by Lincoln YW women in the early 1970s resonated closely with a similarly evasive universalist discourse articulated by many white feminists throughout the decade. Thus, as YW programming increasingly adopted elements of the feminist agenda, it was not a stretch for the women to enthusiastically espouse the feminist rhetoric of liberation for “all women” and the need for the organization to serve women as they dealt with changes in

²¹ News Clipping, *San Diego Tribune*, 28 March 1973, Publicity scrapbook, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

needs and status. However, as historian Ruth Rosen suggests, YW programming—with its emphasis on transitioning to the workforce and a revolution in gender roles within the home—in fact did *not* serve all women equally. Rosen notes that African American historian Paula Giddings has argued that the advice of liberal feminists such as Betty Freidan to find a meaningful career “seemed to come from another planet.”²² Similarly, Rosen reveals a similar sentiment among at least some African American women with regard to marriage; according to black feminist Maxine Williams, “For white feminists. . . marriage and the family are the roots of women’s oppression, while to black women of the middle class that thought is abhorrent and to black lower-class women their oppression is completely racial.”²³

On the other hand, the organization’s close ties with the larger women’s movement also kept the women informed on new developments in the movement at the national level. Thus, when the Lincoln YWCA renewed its discussion on racism and antiracist social action in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it benefitted from a larger dialogue in which white feminist women were engaging. Frankenberg’s study of white women and racism in part emerged from her observation that particularly in the 1980s, “work predominately by women of color has been transforming feminist analysis, drawing attention to the white-centeredness, and more generally the false universalizing claims, of much feminist discourse.”²⁴ The willingness of feminists of color such as bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and the writers in Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga’s edited

²² Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 277.

²³ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁴ Frankenberg, *White Women*, 8.

volume, *This Bridge Called My Back*, among many others, to engage in a dialogue challenged white feminists to address some of these women's genuine concerns.

When, in January of 1979, the Program Development Committee met to discuss committee evaluations, it was clear that at least some women once again saw Imperative efforts as "imperative." At a time when the women's movement faced criticism nationally for its racist theories and practices, the predominantly white, middle-class women of the Lincoln YWCA acknowledged that its first step would be to identify racism within the organization, both on an individual and an institutional level. The Program Development Committee focused its discussion on the four goals adopted by the Board the previous year; it seems that for many of the committees, the "Empowerment of Third World Persons" was the toughest goal to tackle, and many were still left with no clear idea of where to start. Thus, the committee recommended that the organization as a whole seek out training for present staff, as well as the hiring of additional staff with training or experience with African Americans and other groups.²⁵ The concept of antiracist training was not an entirely new approach for the organization, but in the early 1980s many YW women came to accept antiracist education and training as a necessary beginning to any Imperative effort, as the women began to move away from their evasive discourse.

While the Program Development Committee had recommended that all YW staff receive necessary training, some specifically sought such training themselves. In September of 1979, the Adult/Women's Committee, which was quickly becoming the backbone of YW Imperative efforts going into the 1980s, realized that before they could expect to influence the larger organization or the community, they first needed to

²⁵ Program Development Committee Minutes, 30 January 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

evaluate their own attitudes and beliefs, so they planned an in-service training session for their November meeting. Members further realized that the organization as a whole needed a complete self-assessment, and they determined that the Action Audit for Change, first carried out in 1971, needed to be repeated; they decided to take the lead on this by explaining the plan and its purpose to other committees. Finally, the women hoped to truly take their efforts into the community, as the language of the Imperative demanded, and they listed an investigation of the current situation in Lincoln as a top priority.²⁶ While many of these women had likely believed that Lincoln did not have a “race problem,” as many YW women had argued in the early 1970s, African American women in the community had challenged this assumption in the intervening decade, and women of color had challenged similar assumptions of groups, organizations, and communities at the national level.

As the local YWCA learned in the early 1970s, one committee cannot be responsible for the organization’s commitment to eliminate racism. In late September, the committee took their concerns to the Board. Eleanor Wilson, chair of the Adult/Women’s Committee, recommended that the Board “reaffirm the One Imperative of the YWCA” by taking a couple of “action steps.” First, Wilson requested that the Action Audit be implemented by January of 1980, and second, that *all* committees be instructed “to consider how a commitment to the Imperative could affect their direction and activities” and report back to the Board. The Board adopted Wilson’s motions, although there is no evidence that the Action Audit was conducted prior to 1982.²⁷ The 1979 Annual Report commended the Adult/Women’s Committee for “reactivating” the

²⁶ Adult/Women’s Committee Minutes, 12 September 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

²⁷ Board Minutes, 25 September 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

Lincoln YW's work on the Imperative, both within their committee and within the Board.²⁸

The need for assessment, education, and training of the various YW committees was evident when they met in October or November to discuss, among other things, the Board's directive, as it at times became clear just how far the Imperative had fallen from the agenda. For example, the November minutes of the Public Affairs Committee state, "The YWCA has had as its imperative since 1971 'The Elimination of Racism by any Means Necessary.'" It continues, somewhat ironically given the almost nine-year gap, "Each committee has been asked by the Board of Directors to consider how their committee and its function might be affected by the imperative."²⁹ The discussion at the November Board meeting, initiated by Wilson, was quite revealing of the progress of the individual committees in the preceding decade, as well as the attitudes of its individual members. While some committees, such as Building Management, Child Care, and Membership were beginning to formulate action plans, others were clearly caught off-guard by this new emphasis. In the report of the World Relations Committee, the minutes simply state "Raise consciousness about minorities," and the Religious Emphasis Committee, much as it did in the early 1970s, felt that "More education on this is needed" and suggested that it be kept an "ongoing issue."³⁰ The phrasing of the minutes indicates that this particular committee was perhaps not ready to accept an active role in eliminating racism, although the possibility was left open for the type of educational training being implemented in other sectors of the organization.

²⁸ Annual Report, 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

²⁹ Public Affairs Committee Minutes, 27 November 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

³⁰ Board Minutes, 27 November 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

Other committees showed further reluctance. The previously mentioned Public Affairs Committee briefly mentioned its support and continued monitoring of an Indian Affairs bill, but the remainder of the committee's ideas centered on senior citizens and the handicapped. While such goals were worthy in their own right, they did not necessarily contribute to efforts to eliminate racism. The Health, Physical Education, and Recreation Committee (H.P.E.&R.), which had been praised by the evaluating committee in 1974 for its comparably diverse membership, showed the most resistance. The committee's report began in a defensive manner. The representative first "challenged the Board to define *racism*," as they "felt *minority* is not the same as *racism*." Clearly, this is true; the words are not synonyms. The relevance, however, is unclear, and the sentiment seems to indicate an unwillingness to undergo the type of self-evaluation that the Adult/Women's Committee was undertaking. This is further demonstrated by the committee's request that "the Board. . .challenge the National YWCA as to what positive things have come out of this Imperative in the 9 years this has been in existence." It is not clear whether the committee representative wished to imply that the Imperative was not a worthy priority or to deflect blame from the Lincoln organization by pointing out that it was not the only branch that was struggling; regardless, the committee showed little motivation to address the issue directly. Instead of presenting ideas for an action plan to address racist concerns relevant to the committee, as many of the other committees did, and as they had been instructed, the H.P.E.&R. committee suggested that National be expected to provide them with steps for action.³¹

Despite such resistance, YW women, led by the Adult/Women's Committee, demonstrated an eagerness for renewed efforts. By the late 1970s, feminists of color, as

³¹ Board Minutes, 27 November 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

mentioned, had challenged the universalist rhetoric of the women's movement, and they had begun to articulate what would be needed from white feminists in order to forge any sort of meaningful alliance. Furthermore, the Lincoln YWCA had received its original challenge from a woman of color within the organization—Student Y representative Janice Harrington. Thus, an important component of the local YW's renewed Imperative efforts was a heightened effort to increase the numbers of women of color involved in the organization in a leadership capacity, whether staff or Board, as well as increase the numbers of people of color participating in the program.

In reality, this approach was not an entirely new one either, as the recruitment of women of color had been on the organization's agenda since the early 1970s. When Nobuko Nyman moved to Lincoln with her husband in 1974 from San Antonio, Texas, after having been active in the San Antonio YWCA, she received a phone call upon arriving in Lincoln from Executive Director Dorothy Smith who invited her to join the Lincoln Board.³² In October of 1976, Board members welcomed Carole Gourlay, an African American woman who had been hired as the director of the Student YWCA.³³ In 1977, the Program Development Committee decided that they needed minority representation on their committee; the committee discussed a couple of names, and it was decided that the committee would ask Helen Adams, an African American woman, to serve.³⁴ Both Gourlay and Adams had also been involved with the leadership of the Malone Community Center, a center located in Lincoln's historically black community.

³² Nobuko Nyman, interview with author, December 11, 2009.

³³ Board of Directors Minutes, 11 October 1976, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

³⁴ Program Development Committee Minutes, 17 November 1977, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

At least one white woman remembers of the late 1970s, “there were a lot of people, not just black, who we were trying to involve, and they became members of the Board.”³⁵

During the mid to late 1970s, YW women found, however, that not all women of color were interested in acting in a leadership capacity within the organization. African American Lela Shanks, who came to Lincoln with her husband and four children in 1965, resisted any YW efforts to give her a leadership position within the organization. In contrast to the white woman that enthusiastically recalled YW efforts to achieve a more diverse leadership, Shanks recalls that in the 1970s the YW was “reaching out for African Americans. . .slightly.” Although Shanks was a YW member and participated in swimming and aerobics classes, she had less interest in a larger commitment to the organization. As she explains, “I always felt I was just a token. It wasn’t that they actually wanted black people there, but they wanted select black people.” Shanks recalls one example in particular, in which an older woman on the Board heard her speaking on a panel and tried to get her to go to something (she doesn’t recall the specifics), and when Shanks told her she did not think she wanted to go, the woman responded, “Well, I have to have *one*.” Shanks explains, “Of course, that did it.”³⁶ Shanks acknowledges that she would not have the same response now, as she now has “great sympathy, really great empathy for people who are so limited,” but, at the time, she, like many other African Americans, had spent time working in the civil rights movement and “still [felt] hot about the way. . . my husband and I had been treated all our lives.”³⁷

Tokenism remained an obstacle for the Lincoln YW throughout the 1970s, and it was not really until the 1980s that the organization began to use new approaches in an

³⁵ Betty Dyer, interview with author, November 6, 2009.

³⁶ Lela Shanks, interview with author, November 9, 2009.

³⁷ Shanks, interview with author, November 9, 2009.

attempt to mitigate this concern. At least prior to the renewed Imperative emphasis, efforts at outreach had been relatively limited (as Shanks described, the organization had been reaching out “slightly”), and women of color in the community likely felt, as Latina feminist Cherríe Moraga describes in “La Güera,” that YW women had little real desire to change the situation, as they seemed to feel “no loss, no lack, no absence when women of color are not involved.”³⁸ In addition, when the Action Audit Committee presented its findings in 1982, it indicated that the Lincoln YWCA’s public image (which, the report stated, was not the image of “an organization with an Imperative”) likely deterred some women of color from seeking involvement.

The racist attitudes of individual women in the YWCA were not lost on African Americans and women of other races in the community. The committee member that Penny Spano, Imperative Committee chair for part of the group’s existence in the early 1970s, recorded as regularly expressing disparaging remarks about blacks and Native Americans represented the YWCA in the eyes of the public just as much as those YW women earnestly working towards a social action agenda. While the organization began in the 1980s to earnestly take measures to offer antiracist education and training to combat the presence of such blatant racism within the organization’s leadership, YW women did not feel that they could simply wait for such efforts to influence the organization’s public image for the better in the eyes of people of color.

Led by the Adult/Women’s Committee, the Lincoln YWCA implemented at least two new approaches in their efforts to achieve greater representation by women of color in the organization’s leadership. In early 1979, the committee determined that a major

³⁸ Cherríe Moraga, “La Güera,” in *This Bridge Called My Back* (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1981), 33.

concern was the lack of participation by women of color in their programming, and it was decided that in order to increase such participation, “the first step had to be involving them on our committee.” Still grasping, and likely wanting to avoid charges of tokenism being expressed by women of color both locally and nationally, the women realized they could best go about this endeavor by forming a subcommittee of willing women of color to help them. Each was to bring names of potential women to the next meeting.³⁹ By May, the committee organized a meeting of the “Minority Women’s Task Force” and invited thirteen women of color to attend. Unfortunately, subsequent Adult/Women’s Committee minutes are vague with regard to the specific findings and recommendations of the task force, although actions taken by the committee in the months following the task force meeting offer some insight in this regard. The Adult/Women’s Committee’s establishment of the Minority Task Force foreshadowed a similar approach expressed in the organization’s 1981 Association Review. After commending the strides made by the Adult/Women’s Committee (as well as the Youth Committee), the review acknowledged that “more effort needs to be put into the involvement of minorities in the work of the association and to assist us in specific work on the One Main Imperative.”⁴⁰ The latter admission significantly departed from the Association Review completed exactly a decade before, as those participating in the review had come to see the need for a more diverse organization as necessary to the success of the organization, rather than as a means of “uplifting” others or appeasing National.

The Adult/Women’s Committee soon demonstrated that they took the insight of the Minority Task Force seriously, as the women began to “follow-up” on the task force’s

³⁹ Adult/Women’s Committee Minutes, 21 March 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁴⁰ Association Review, 1981, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

recommendations in September of 1979. That fall, the committee began its second approach to achieving more diverse participation, when two committee members personally visited the Malone Center; the women learned that there were several programs that could probably be done in collaboration with the Malone Center, thus bringing in more participants of color, such as Malone's Women of the '80s program, and the YWCA's Single Parent Workshop.⁴¹ Once again, the 1981 review picked up on this approach; the report stressed the need to work closely with ethnic organizations and centers in the community and praised the early efforts of the Adult/Women's Committee, explaining that each committee volunteer had visited at least one such organization in hopes of beginning a dialogue to promote future collaboration.⁴² Both new approaches—the seeking out of a task force of willing women of color and the establishment of a cooperative dialogue with organizations focused on such groups—were significant in that they were sympathetic to complaints women of color were making about white organizations. For example, Cherríe Moraga titled the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back* “A Bridge Gets Walked Over”; in the essay, she expresses the sentiment she recently experienced at “another meeting,” another “room filled with white people,” and her realization that “I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection.”⁴³ As sociologist Becky Thompson explains, women of color were demanding, “White women need to be the bridge—a lot of the time.”⁴⁴

Effects of the involvement of women of color in various levels of the organization were far-reaching, as the new insight they offered led to new approaches for Imperative

⁴¹ Adult/Women's Committee Minutes, 12 September 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁴² Association Review, 1981, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁴³ Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*, xv.

⁴⁴ Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 28 (Summer 2002): 347.

implementation. As the organization first embarked on its renewed Imperative emphasis in early 1979, Donna Polk, a local African American activist (who two years later would publish a book entitled *Black Men and Women of Nebraska*) with the State Department of Labor Comprehensive Employment Training Act and soon-to-be-member of the Malone Community Center Board, was invited to a YWCA brown bag luncheon. As the *Lincoln Journal Star* summed up Polk's talk, "Polk says racism is alive, well in Lincoln and country." In no uncertain terms, Polk challenged some of the arguments made by YW women and others in the early years of the National Imperative. Most significantly, Polk explained that a community with a small minority population (such as Lincoln) did not mean that the community was free of racial conflict; in fact, she argued that Lincoln's large, relatively isolated white population only intensified racial injustice, as whites could avoid directly facing their prejudice.⁴⁵ Thus, Polk placed added pressure on the organization's early efforts to recognize and acknowledge racism.

African American YW member Lela Shanks also sometimes agreed to speak at the organization or to sit on panels about racism or African American history, and she recalls that when she did so, she made a point to speak "of the need to address problems that needed to be addressed."⁴⁶ One of the concerns Shanks frequently raised was that she, along with many other women of color, did not feel that the YWCA was a particularly welcoming place for them, as the organization's mailings, posters, and paintings depicted middle-class white women and children. Lucy Nevels, of course, had expressed concern years earlier about the way in which some organizational policies discouraged the participation of women of color. It seems that the findings of the

⁴⁵ News Clipping, Publicity scrapbook, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁴⁶ Shanks, interview with author, November 9, 2009.

Minority Task Force echoed the sentiments of Nevels and Shanks, as the goals established by the Adult/Women's Committee in the months following the task force meeting demonstrate a more comprehensive understanding of organizational practices hindering the participation of non-white or lower income members. At the national level, feminists of color were raising similar concerns: Chicana Cherríe Moraga lamented the unwillingness of white organizations to analyze the ways in which “the very nature and structure of the group itself may be founded on racist or classist assumptions,”⁴⁷ and African American bell hooks expressed her frustration with the white movement's lack of inclusion of the concerns of women of color in its agenda.⁴⁸ Thus, it took the time, energy, and insight of willing women of color to demonstrate to the Lincoln YWCA the importance of yet another approach to the elimination of racism within the organization—addressing the structural, or institutional, barriers to the involvement of women of color.

While the National organization had been engaged in a discussion of and battle against institutional racism since the days immediately following the 1970 convention, the concept did not gain a lot of traction within the Lincoln organization until they experienced prodding (and education) by women of color in the early 1980s. Michael Haas has defined institutional racism as existing when “an institution's policies, practices, and procedures” favor a particular ethnic group (typically whites) over others. He further divides such discrimination into two forms: race-conscious and race-neutral. According to this model, race-conscious policies are those that are specifically designed “to prevent subordinate groups from overcoming their lower status.” The local YW had

⁴⁷ Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 33.

⁴⁸ Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 188.

spent two decades—the early 1950s to the early 1970s—working to eradicate race-conscious practices within the organization and the community. Specifically, sometime in the 1950s, the local association had lifted its policy that explicitly segregated programming, which had prohibited black women and children in the community from participating in the same capacity as white community members. During the first years after the Houston convention, a major focus of the short-lived Imperative Committee had been addressing similar exclusionary practices in the community, such as the “Whites Only” signs still being displayed by the local Elks Club.

The task at hand in the early 1980s, however, was to specifically target the organization’s race-neutral “policies, practices, and procedures that adversely impact subordinate groups.” Institutional racism occurring in a race-neutral form is, as Haas has argued, a “more insidious [form] of racism,”⁴⁹ and was more difficult for white YW women, still largely immersed in what Paul Kivel has labeled a “white culture of power,” to discern.⁵⁰ Race neutral forms of institutional racism were largely invisible to YW women throughout the period in which they employed a color- and power-evasive discourse.

However, as historian Flora Davis has demonstrated, the context in which the YWCA was grappling with these issues had changed significantly since the early 1970s when the women’s movement was just getting off the ground. By the 1980s, feminists around the country were beginning to understand that gender-neutral laws and policies could be just as harmful to women as those that explicitly discriminated against them or those that singled them out for special privileges. In her analysis, Davis uses the example

⁴⁹ Michael Haas, *Institutional Racism: The Case of Hawaii* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 2.

⁵⁰ Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2002), 39.

of “regulations requiring that all prison guards meet minimum height and weight standards” which “eliminated many women without even mentioning sex.”⁵¹

Understanding the sexism inherent in gender-neutral regulations facilitated the efforts of white women and groups in beginning to see the ways in which racism manifests itself in race-neutral practices, and it is no surprise that “institutional racism” became a catchphrase among white feminists during this era, as it did in the self-evaluations of the local YWCA in the early 1980s. (The National YWCA had, in many ways, been ahead of the curve in this regard, as it had been in its mid-century endeavor to integrate its organization.)

The Program Development Committee kicked off efforts to understand institutional racism in its committee evaluations in early 1979. The women advised all committees to think about “procedures which allow more participation by third world persons,” as the YWCA slowly became aware that, for various reasons, people of color hesitated to take part in leadership and program activities at the YW. At this early point in the process, the Program Development Committee focused specifically on two factors—the need for a better informed staff and cost. While the committee praised the Child Care Committee for its efforts towards the goals of empowering women and youth, it acknowledged that the committee struggled with the organization’s goal to empower Third World persons, with no clear idea of where to start. The Program Development Committee felt that a significant barrier faced by women of color in participating in YW child care programs was likely cost; thus, they advised the Child Care Committee to develop a tuition waiver policy.⁵²

⁵¹ Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, 407.

⁵² Program Development Committee Minutes, 30 January 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

At a later date, the Child Care Committee would consider the need for “toys and books representing ‘other races,’” “films depicting minorities,” and attention to “language, songs, dancing, and [the] cooking of ethnic foods,”⁵³ all of which were a part of a larger YW effort to make the organization a more welcoming environment for people of color. African American member Lela Shanks consistently raised her concerns about the fact that “there was nothing at the Y that looked like me” or her children. While YW mailings, advertisements, and building décor regularly listed the organization’s “One Imperative” along with the YWCA Purpose, the message was not entirely convincing when white, middle-class women and children were the only people depicted in drawings or photographs. The Minority Task Force assembled by the Adult/Women’s Committee in 1979 apparently addressed similar concerns regarding the YW environment. When the committee met in September to discuss the task force’s recommendations, they spoke of the need to hold regular Open Houses to allow women of color to familiarize themselves with the building and program in a laid-back, open environment.⁵⁴

An additional approach the Adult/Women’s Committee realized would be necessary after hearing from the Minority Task Force was pushing themselves and the Board to consider women of color as potential instructors, so that interested women, like Lela Shanks, were not left feeling isolated. This idea was picked up more aggressively in the 1981 Association Review. Recognizing that a decade of efforts to recruit women of color for participation in leadership roles (as well as in all facets of the program) had been met with minimal success, the committee conducting the review asserted that this endeavor required extra effort on the part of the organization as a whole, and the women

⁵³ Board Minutes, 27 November 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁵⁴ Adult/Women’s Committee Minutes, 12 September 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

listed the development of plans to achieve more representation of women of color in leadership, staff, and program as one of the major organizational goals of the next three to five year period. A critical component of plans for a more diverse staff was the establishment of a firm and clear affirmative action policy. Expressions of a desire for a diverse staff would need to be coupled with an explicit policy to ensure it. In contrast to the confidence expressed by some YW women in the 1974 review in the ability of the organization's affirmative action policy to carry out the Imperative, the 1981 report expressed uncertainty that it had made progress in doing so; in fact, it is unclear from the report if committee members were aware of such a policy. The report recommended that the YW review current practices, develop a *specific* affirmative action plan, and *begin* implementation.⁵⁵

An additional component of the YW's first plans to transform the YW environment to one more welcoming to those that were not white and middle-class was attention to program content. Likely influenced by women such as Shanks who were willing to take the time and energy to vocalize their concerns regularly, the Adult/Women's Committee recognized their group's failure to develop programs "to meet the needs of Third World persons"; the women cited this failure as the committee's biggest weakness in the self-evaluation they submitted to the Program Development Committee at the start of 1979.⁵⁶ Sociologist Benita Roth has demonstrated that the "separate roads" apparently taken by white women and women of color in their feminist organizing in the 1970s and beyond were due in large part to the separate origins of each

⁵⁵ Association Review, 1981, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁵⁶ Program Development Committee Minutes, 30 January 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

group and therefore the distinct concerns each group was attempting to address.⁵⁷ Beginning in the mid-1970s and especially in the 1980s feminists of color spoke up, arguing that they were sympathetic to the goals of the feminist agenda but could not neglect other concerns that were absolutely pivotal to their daily lives. As black scholar bell hooks explains, “Those of us who were active in women’s groups found that white feminists lamented the absence of large numbers of non-white participants but were unwilling to change the movement’s focus so that it would better address the needs of women from all classes and races.”⁵⁸ Thus, Leola Bullock, an African American member of the Lincoln YWCA, served briefly on the Board in the early 1960s but soon after withdrew from leadership positions in the organization, as she turned her attention to organizations engaging in civil rights activism. Bullock’s decreased involvement was not due to a disapproval of YW goals (she remained a member), but throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, the organization was not actively involved in the concerns deemed most crucial to Bullock and other women of color in the community; with only so much time and energy to give, Bullock turned her attention to other organizations.⁵⁹ Thus, when the Adult/Women’s Committee met in September of 1979 (in a discussion which was intended to follow up on the recommendations of the Minority Task Force) the women emphasized the need to develop programs that specifically targeted the needs of women of color. At this point, exactly what such needs were or what such programs would entail is unclear.

⁵⁷ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁵⁸ hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman?*, 188.

⁵⁹ Leola Bullock, interview with author, November 3, 2009.

The recommendations of the Minority Task Force inspired the Adult/Women's Committee to consider another approach in its attempt to eliminate race-neutral policies that encouraged exclusion. At the September meeting, the committee discussed the possibility of offering a decentralized program at places such as the Malone Center that would be more likely to attract the participation of people of color. For years, the YWCA had emphasized that the organization was not the building, it was the program, and YW program activities had been decentralized throughout the community to facilitate participation (the original target had been young housewives unable to travel regularly to the downtown location); however, up to this point, decentralized programming had been located in predominantly white areas, such as Havelock and University Place in northeast Lincoln.⁶⁰ The organization made no immediate progress on this front, but when the Action Audit for Change was conducted in 1982, the committee reiterated the Adult/Women's Committee's concerns. The report recommended that the organizational leadership take "a serious look at decentralization," keeping two critical points in mind: 1) "If you choose a decentralized location, be sure to consider who is there?" and 2) "Does the choice of location help our work on the Imperative?"⁶¹ While YW women were aware that convenience was a factor influencing an individual's participation in the organization's activities, these concerns were not seriously addressed in the early years of Imperative implementation.

This time around, a significant part of the Action Audit was a close look at the everyday practices of the local organization, and the YWCA consciously sought help from women of color in carrying out this process. Essie Shelton Burton, an African

⁶⁰ Adult/Women's Committee Minutes, 12 September 1979, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁶¹ Action Audit for Change, 1982, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

American on the Board (and soon to become president of) the Malone Community Center, volunteered for the audit committee. In April of 1982, Burton, along with Executive Director Sheryl Schrepf, attended a Board of Trustees meeting to discuss the Trustees' role in carrying out the YW Imperative. It is likely that the members of the Board of Trustees had given little thought to the Imperative previously, as the group's role had traditionally been restricted to financial advice on YW property and other investments. However, Burton brought "the economic power of the YWCA" to the attention of the Trustees. The concept of institutional "economic power" was gaining traction in this era, as the United States witnessed a national movement to encourage the divestment of funds from South Africa. The national YWCA had taken an active stance against apartheid in South Africa since the early 1970s and had collaborated with other non-governmental organizations to pressure U.S. institutions to practice responsible investment.⁶² As Burton explained to the Trustees, an organization with a discursive emphasis on eliminating racism required an appraisal of the implications of *all* its regular business practices. Burton raised some pressing questions to the group; she asked, "To what extend [sic] does the YWCA monitor the investment practices of the institutions which handle YWCA money, property and investments?" The assertive language of the national Imperative demanded that the organization battle injustice "wherever it exists," which made the placement of YWCA funds a critical issue; Burton argued that it was irresponsible to place YWCA investments in businesses engaged in discrimination. She further pushed the Trustees on their lack of an ethics committee to monitor these issues, and the group agreed to establish such a committee. Finally, Burton asked the Board of Trustees about their progress recruiting people of color to serve. A Trustee

⁶² "Outlaw Apartheid," *YWCA Interchange* (November 1974), YWCA Papers, YWCA.

acknowledged that there was no one of color on the Board, and “that this was an issue that we should look to rectify in the future,” although the group had still not done so a year later.⁶³ Burton’s visit to the Board of Trustees is indicative of a significant departure from earlier efforts; first, those supportive of the Imperative recognized the need to pursue such efforts at every level of the organization, recognizing that racist practices can manifest themselves in the structure and everyday (seemingly unrelated) practices, and second, women such as Burton agreed to assist the YW in coming to understand some of these issues and then interpreting them to volunteers and members.

The local association’s renewed efforts at Imperative implementation in the early 1980s brought about a host of new approaches aimed at acknowledging and recognizing racism, increasing the representation of women of color, and eradicating structural barriers that discouraged the involvement of particular groups. A YW newsletter from the early 1980s is indicative of this new perspective. The newsletter celebrates the organization’s “new directions”: “from servicing to belonging, from liberalism to liberation.”⁶⁴ Following the 1981 review, the association began to pursue these broad objectives aggressively by emphasizing *measurable* annual goals—pushing committees to go beyond “work on the Imperative” or “reach out to minorities.” For example, “Program Growth and Development” goals for 1982 included the development of “at least 3-5 new quality programs/classes as determined by community needs and membership interests, by December, 1982,” which could include programs addressing “customs, language, racism, prejudice, [and/or] refugee needs.” The written objectives further recommend that the Program Committee “provide 5 inservice training programs

⁶³ Board of Trustees Minutes, 28 April 1982, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁶⁴ *Communicator*, Undated, Early 1980s Folder, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

for staff with an emphasis on diversity in 1982.” Similarly, a “Leadership Development” goal recommended that the Personnel Committee recruit ten “Third World women” to serve as a volunteer or on staff in the coming year.⁶⁵ Along with emphasizing specificity, annual objectives in the early 1980s sought to encourage the involvement of a wide proportion of YW leadership, as the organization had experienced the limitations of having one or a few committees pull the rest along. Additionally, emphasis on measurable goals held the women accountable for ensuring that such goals were met. Well-intentioned phrases expressed in the 1974 Association Review, such as “Nothing very overt has occurred, but this group is very open and accepting and would no doubt feel strengthened by a more diverse membership” and “I don’t believe any changes are needed to support the association’s commitment to the elimination [sic] of institutional racism. They are open toward all people and have an above percentage of third world members on their board” would no longer hold up.⁶⁶

As the Lincoln YWCA entered the 1980s, they faced many of the same difficulties they had faced at the turn of the previous decade. While a few individuals and committees were willing to lead the way in the organization’s social action endeavors, others were apathetic or resistant. Nobuko Nyman recalls that during her six years on the Board in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some of the Board members left the organization because they were discontented with the emphasis on social action and racial justice issues.⁶⁷

Clearly, the comments of the H.P.E.&R. Committee at the Board meeting in late 1979 challenging the progress of the Imperative nationally and demanding guidance

⁶⁵ “Goals and Objectives for 1982,” YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁶⁶ Association Review, 1974, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁶⁷ Nobuko Nyman, interview with author, December 11, 2009.

from National before renewing efforts indicates that tensions with National remained. Furthermore, it appears that tensions with the United Way, a major funding source, may have continued. In the late 1970s, a YW committee met with the Board of the United Way to express their concern that the United Way was trying to set YW program priorities, and when the Program Planning Committee ranked YW priorities for the United Way funding application in the early 1980s, they neglected to mention the Imperative efforts that were receiving a good deal of discussion within the organization.⁶⁸

Still, some key differences were at play in this second attempt at implementing the Imperative. First, the community YWCA benefitted from an active Student YWCA branch that was regularly engaging in Imperative workshops, Black History studies, antiracist education, and black/white discussion groups. In contrast, the Student YWCA had been struggling in the early 1970s. After popular director Twig Daniels was let go due to what some YW women saw as controversial programming, such as abortion counseling, the Student YW seemed to lose direction. When Jean Schafer Albers became the director in early 1973, the *Daily Nebraskan* wrote an article introducing the new director and explaining that she was brought in to lead an organization that at the time boasted zero members and zero funds.⁶⁹ Albers stayed on the job less than a year before the organization once again searched for new leadership. When the Lincoln association hired African American Carole Gourlay as director of the student branch in late 1976, she began to build up a strong organization that offered “flexible, ever-changing service” in response to problem situations arising on campus. One such situation, Gourlay explained to the Board in 1979, was the “need for communication and understanding between black

⁶⁸ Program Planning Committee Minutes, 20 March 1980, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁶⁹ News Clipping, Publicity Scrapbook, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

and white students.” Student YW approaches to meet this need served as a potential model for community YW efforts.

Additionally, the composition of the Board of Directors had changed since 1970. Women elected to the Board generally served a term of three years (although they could be and often were reelected to serve additional terms). Therefore, the turnover in a ten-year span was quite high. While Board resistance had been a major obstacle in the early 1970s, this doesn’t appear to have been as much of an issue in 1980, perhaps because, as former Board member Nobuko Nyman suggests, women that disapproved of a social action agenda had chosen to leave the organization in the intervening decade. In fact, it seems that once the Adult/Women’s Committee expressed their concerns in the fall of 1979, the Board was ready to support and even initiate such efforts. Beginning in 1980, and lasting at least through the mid-1980s, the Imperative was an integral component of annual Board orientation workshops, and a YW report in 1981 listed the organization’s “progressive BOD” as one of its major strengths.⁷⁰

The history of a national organization cannot be told—entirely—through changes in policy at the national level. After the Lincoln YWCA’s frustrating attempts to come to grips with the implications of the National Imperative at the local level, the association, for the most part, dropped these efforts for a period in the 1970s while the National organization and various local branches throughout the country continued forward.⁷¹ More favorable conditions at the very end of the decade, including an active and progressive Student YWCA, a comparably wider pool of women of color willing to serve

⁷⁰ Association Review, 1981, YWCA Papers, YWCA.

⁷¹ Tanya Pluth’s work on the Portland, Oregon, YWCA demonstrates, however, that the Lincoln YWCA was not alone in its struggle to discern a way to meaningfully implement the Imperative locally (Pluth, “The One Imperative and the Portland YWCA,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, 2003, 209-214).

as resources in various capacities, and a Board receptive to these ideas (as well as women, such as Eleanor Wilson, chair of the Adult/Women's Committee, who were willing and eager to lead, although the local YW had not been completely lacking in such individuals in the early 1970s) enabled Lincoln YW women to return to the Imperative as they entered the 1980s. The national context, of course, had changed significantly as well, as Lincoln YW women were now joining a dialogue between white women and women of color that was occurring on a national level. While these circumstances did not mean that Imperative implementation would be an easy process, as the organization entered a new decade, many YW women were willing to meet the challenge head-on.

Thus, a close study of the Lincoln YWCA's efforts to eliminate racism is useful in understanding what is needed for meaningful antiracist activism in a largely white environment. The local organization spent much of the 1970s engaging in a discourse that minimized explicit attention to race and relying on a universalist rhetoric to articulate the organization's goals. As a result, the organization remained in a state of paralysis in the Imperative's earliest years and the effort was all but dropped from the agenda for much of the mid to late 1970s. When YW women again addressed the Imperative at the end of the decade, then, acknowledgement of racism in its various forms within the organization was a critical first step. Despite assertions in the early 1970s to the contrary, the Lincoln YWCA in the early 1980s illustrates that the very existence of a predominantly white environment indicates exclusionary norms. Overcoming these norms, as the organization learned, required the insight that comes with diverse representation; diverse representation, the organization learned, at times required aggressive measures. Beginning in the early 1980s, then, the Lincoln organization began

to learn that their quest for “peace and justice for *all*” necessitated an acknowledgement of racism, aggressive measures to recruit women of color on an equitable basis, and the willingness to make changes to structural barriers discouraging involvement. The relevance of such lessons is not significantly diminished in many twenty-first century American organizations and institutions.

Conclusion

Forty years after Lincoln YWCA Board members expressed hesitancy over engaging in social action, as such efforts “quite often [bring] criticism,”¹ it appears that the local organization has almost entirely made the transition. Current Board President Liz Ring Carlson recently expressed surprise when she learned of YW middle-class women meeting weekly to play cards in the 1960s and 1970s,² as such programming differs quite drastically from the YW’s twenty-first century programs. Similarly, former Executive Director Elizabeth Meyer would likely feel that at least some of her major goals expressed in the mid-1980s have been achieved, as it is unlikely that anyone would currently label the local association as “a haven for white, middle-class women,”³ although the representation of women of color in leadership capacities has varied in the past two decades. When the organization made the tough decision to sell its historic building in September of 2009, much of what was at stake was a question of priorities; in the end, YW women concluded that since current YW programs do not require such space, the organization’s funds could be better spent on building up current programs in an effort to impact more women, children, and families. Similarly, twenty-first century YW programming has been significantly reduced, as the YW leadership has made a conscious effort to “really trim down what we are doing and really narrow our focus, so we could do fewer things, that no one else was doing, and do them better.”⁴

¹ Board of Directors Minutes, 27 February 1969, YWCA Papers, RG4108.AM, Box 5: Series 2: Folder 22, Nebraska State Historical Society Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska [Hereafter NSHS].

² Liz Ring Carlson, interview with author, January 27, 2010.

³ Newspaper Clippings, Publicity Scrapbook, YWCA Papers, Young Women’s Christian Association, Lincoln, Nebraska [Hereafter YWCA].

⁴ Carlson, interview with author, January 27, 2010.

Current program priorities, then, offer little by way of social fellowship for middle-class women, as in the past, and instead directly target young women, low-income women, and at-risk youth. Two programs, Job Outfitters and Take A Break, directly target low-income women, many of whom are women of color. The former offers women in need of work the business attire that they will need to embark on job interviews and dress professionally in the workplace; the latter provides child care Friday evenings to give low-income parents a necessary break, as studies have shown that such periods of respite are linked to a better home environment. Programs directed at youth, such as SMART and SOS (emphasizing math and science skills and life skills respectively) take place in neighborhoods that Lincoln Mayor Chris Beutler has labeled “core” neighborhoods for development, as they are low-income and prone to crime, violence, and drug abuse. Thus, the majority of the youth impacted by these programs come from families with a low income, and many are children of color.

In essence, this thesis tracks the path that led the Lincoln YWCA to its current state, and it is no coincidence that the organization first adopted many of its current programs in the mid-1980s, the period in which, as this thesis shows, the local association renewed its emphasis on goals adopted by the National YWCA in the early 1970s. As a result of funding and shifting priorities, the YWCA has cut various programming, yet core programs such as these have remained. Although very few twenty-first century YW women were involved with the organization in the 1970s and early 1980s, lessons learned during the struggle to implement the organization’s “One Imperative” to eliminate racism significantly changed the organization and its role in the community.

Nationally, the YWCA began in the late nineteenth century as an organization targeting working young (white) women struggling to earn a living in the city. In the 1920s, the organization expanded its efforts to reach women of color as well, and the national organization began making efforts to include women of color in various levels of organizational administration. In Lincoln, Nebraska, a small group of women established an organization with similar goals; in the 1920s and again in the 1940s, the Student YWCA worked to bring about integration in the city—first in segregated restaurants and later in on-campus housing. The central local association began noticing and following instances of housing and job discrimination in the city. For the most part, however, throughout these decades, and through the 1950s and beyond, Lincoln YW women focused their attention on (white) “business girls” and young (white) housewives. Nineteen forty-six stands out as a pivotal year for the national organization, as the national convention passed a resolution encouraging integration at all levels of the organization. As I have argued, it would take a significant amount of time before the Lincoln YWCA implemented this Interracial Charter in a meaningful way, as the organization continued to exclude people of color into the 1950s, programs for American Indians were segregated throughout the 1960s, and efforts to diversify YW leadership throughout these decades seem to have taken place on a “one at a time” basis.

Perhaps even more pivotal than 1946, however, in terms of organizational history, is 1970. In this year, the organizational priority to incorporate a more representative voice resulted in changes to the standard format of the national convention. For the first time in the national organization’s history, two groups of delegates—African Americans and women under the age of 35—convened separately in the days preceding the national

convention in Houston, Texas, for a pre-convention conference. The effects of the organization of these two groups would be long-lasting, beginning with the African American delegates' demands that the national organization adopt the elimination of racism as its "One Main Imperative" for the coming triennium. The adoption of this resolution in Houston in 1970 is indicative of two significant elements of the new YWCA agenda—first, basic attempts of local associations at "integration" while maintaining white-centered if not racist practices would no longer be sufficient, and second, the obligation of local YW women to eliminate racism extended beyond the organization itself. The Imperative demanded that the YWCA fight racism "wherever it exists," which meant that Imperative efforts would have to extend into local communities.

As I have demonstrated, the story of the implementation of the new organizational Imperative cannot be told simply by this highly publicized moment, as the perhaps more challenging task lay ahead—the implementation of the Imperative "on the ground" in local associations, some of which, like the Lincoln YWCA, were and always had been predominantly white and were uncomfortable with social action. This thesis documents this struggle—the struggle of a predominately white organization in a predominantly white community with an explicit purpose to "eliminate racism." As such, the implications of such a study extend beyond this single organization in this particular city; the study reveals a good deal about what is necessary to carry out antiracist activism in a primarily white environment.

In the past two decades, critical race scholars such as Ruth Frankenberg have persuasively demonstrated that race is not relevant only to people of color and racism is

not an issue that shapes only the lives of people of color.⁵ Initial discussions of priorities in the first years after the 1970 convention indicate that some YW women (as well as some of their sources of funding) did not view race in this way, and in some cases those opposed to the Imperative in general or specific Imperative efforts articulated their opposition by arguing that the Imperative to eliminate racism was irrelevant in Lincoln, a city in which people of color composed 2% of the population. However, as oral histories of people of color in the community have indicated (and as African American Donna Polk explicitly explained at a YWCA brown bag luncheon in the late 1970s), racism was in fact a reality in Lincoln. In some ways, the racism of a predominantly white environment such as Lincoln can seem more oppressive, as the community's white-centered norms are so entrenched, and the social distance between the races can allow local whites to dismiss the experiences if not the very presence of local people of color.

The efforts of some to minimize the local YW's obligation to aggressively combat racism due to Lincoln's demographics are a form of "evasion" that fits squarely into the discourse articulated by the local organization for much of the decade following the adoption of the Imperative. The color- and power-evasive discourse, which Frankenberg argues was dominant in American society through the mid-1980s when she conducted a series of interviews with white women, builds on assimilationist theories and essentially concludes that we are all the same "under the skin." As Frankenberg argues, and as the experience of the Lincoln YWCA demonstrates, the articulation of such a discourse does not demand that hierarchies already in effect or structural barriers already established are significantly challenged. Just as the local association was able to integrate in the 1950s

⁵ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 6.

without any major institutional changes, YW women were able to speak of their desire of “peace and justice for all” throughout much of the 1970s while making minimal real progress on meaningfully implementing the Imperative.

Tanya Pluth’s brief study of the initial Imperative efforts of the YWCA in Portland, Oregon, suggests that Portland YW women engaged in a similar discourse of evasion, even as they seem to have genuinely believed they were enthusiastically embarking on their new task. For the predominantly white YW Board, however, the racism issue was an individual one; as Pluth describes, a tension developed between “white women who had the privilege to approach racism as an internal demon defeated through love and dialogue and women of color who faced the everyday emotional and physical realities of racism.”⁶ The time and energy white YW women dedicated to dialogue and consciousness raising amongst themselves may in fact have raised individual consciences or strengthened the relationships between these women, as Pluth explains, but they did little to addressing the everyday realities of racism within the organization, let alone the community, and in 1975 this evasion came to a head with a very public racial discrimination suit by an African American employee.⁷

Although the Lincoln YWCA was encouraged to seek more aggressive ways of implementing the Imperative meaningfully by a team sent from National in 1974, it appears that the tendency to utilize a color- and power-evasive discourse if anything increased after the initial Imperative thrust in the early 1970s. I have argued that the local association’s enthusiasm for the feminist agenda in the mid to late 1970s played a role in continuing this discourse. As feminists nationally demanded gender equity,

⁶ Tanya Pluth, “The One Imperative and the Portland YWCA,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15 (2003), 210.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

reproductive rights, and a reassessment of social roles, the YWCA sought to address such issues in its programming and to help women adjust to their changing status and needs. Significantly, throughout this period direct references to the Imperative seem to have all but disappeared, as Lincoln YW women employed an evasive discourse that characterized the second wave women's movement nationally—a universalist demand for the rights of “all” women. Scholars such as Winifred Breines have explored the ways in which this discourse was unsatisfactory for African American women, as it seemed to ignore the particular experiences of those women that were not white and middle-class and it allowed feminist women, as those who were oppressed, to not consider how they acted as oppressors.⁸

Different strains of this color- and power-evasive discourse were articulated by the Lincoln YWCA throughout much of the 1970s, and, as this thesis reveals, use of the discourse hindered the women's ability to identify obstacles to the achievement of their task—eliminating racism—and to work to overcome such obstacles. However, their increasing sympathy for the tenets of the national women's movement and alliance with different feminists and feminist organizations may in fact have helped to provide the white women in the Lincoln YW with a basic jumping-off point from which to reassess Imperative efforts almost a decade after the resolution was initially passed in Houston. When African American Student Y representative Janice Harrington pressed the YW Board regarding Imperative progress and prodded the women to renew their commitment to eliminating racism through an explicit goal, the national context for the resulting dialogue was much different than that of eight years before.

⁸ Winifred Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

As the movement embarked on a new decade, white feminists began to question the movement's implicitly white-centered agenda. This shift would not have been possible without the willingness (and insistence) of feminists of color to engage in an ongoing and challenging dialogue with the movement's white women. A key example marking this shift is African American Audre Lorde's "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," first published in 1979 and later reprinted in collections of Lorde's work. The letter is addressed to white radical feminist Mary Daly, a friend of Lorde's who had recently sent Lorde her recent feminist publication, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. In the letter, Lorde first thanks Daly for the book and praises the book's insight; she goes on to question Daly's necessarily conscious decision to examine the historical power of white European women and neglect that of non-European women, acknowledging them only peripherally as victims. Daly's decision causes Lorde to question whether Daly—and other white feminists by extension—ever really reads the words of women of color or simply fingers through them without allowing them to challenge preconceived notions of the "myth of the white woman" as the "legitimate and sole herstory." According to Lorde, Daly's dismissal "stands as a real block to communication between us."⁹ Lorde's challenge to white feminists was followed by similar challenges by feminists of color in the early 1980s.

Thus, it became increasingly difficult for white feminists to frame their demands on the basis of a universalist discourse. First, they could no longer deny that the position was inaccurate, as their efforts did not, in fact, address the needs of all women equally, and second, they began to see that the perspective of feminists of color would only strengthen their movement. For example, as Ruth Frankenberg explains, the work of

⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 67-69.

women of color demonstrated that “ethnocentrism based on the racial specificity of white women’s lives. . . limits feminist analysis and strategy in relation to issues such as the family and reproductive rights.”¹⁰ Due in part to the ongoing dialogue within the national feminist movement and in part to the pressure, perspective, and insistence of women of color involved in some way with the local organization, the Lincoln YWCA developed a similar understanding in the very late 1970s and especially the early 1980s.

Although it was not evident or inevitable when Janice Harrington first insisted that Imperative efforts be reassessed, when the Lincoln YW embarked on a renewed effort to implement the Imperative, YW women set themselves on a path that, over time, steered them away from the color- and power-evasive discourse that had accompanied early Imperative efforts. YW women experimented with a variety of new approaches being implemented in different segments of society nationally—the women’s movement, academic institutions, and some non-profit organizations to name a few. A pivotal first step in this process was an unflinching acknowledgement of racism manifesting itself in individuals, in the organization, and in the community. As scholar Sara Ahmed has argued, “admitting” to racism is not itself an antiracist action, and it does not necessarily “commit a state, institution or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist.”¹¹ Still, the experience of the Lincoln YWCA demonstrates that such an acknowledgement *is* a necessary first step for desired progress. When the local organization first embarked on Imperative implementation in the early 1970s, some attempt was made, through Board questionnaires and discussions and I.Q. (Imperative Quotient) tests to encourage YW women to acknowledge their racism. However, the

¹⁰ Frankenberg, *White Women*, 8.

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,” *Borderlands* 3 (2004), 3.

overwhelming emphasis on the individual at this early date discouraged a larger discourse on racism (“If I have examined myself and know that *I* am not a racist, racism is a problem that is not relevant to me”). When racism was reassessed in the early 1980s, the organization’s desire to acknowledge and identify racism was coupled with in-service training and education at all levels of the organization to attempt to deal with these issues. As Ruth Frankenberg has argued, “knowledge about a situation is a critical tool in dismantling it.”¹²

Additionally, the larger context of the feminist movement indicated to YW women that the organization’s primarily white-centered perspective would limit antiracist efforts, and they consciously sought the perspective of various women of color in the community through more aggressive recruitment measures, the establishment of minority task forces, and the willingness to act as a bridge in reaching out for contact and collaboration with organizations predominantly composed of and in service to people of color. Closely related to and in large part resulting from this more aggressive approach to achieving more diverse voice within the organization was an increasing understanding of structural barriers discouraging the participation of women of color and a willingness to make real changes to eradicate such barriers. This important shift, of course, is also closely related to a shift evident in the nation at the time, among both those involved with antiracist work (who were exposing the role of “race-neutral” policies in perpetuating inequality) and those involved in the feminist movement (who exposed the similar effect of “gender-neutral” policies in subordinating women). When Lincoln YW women renewed their commitment to eliminating racism in the early 1980s, they benefitted from an increased societal understanding of institutional racism, which, though it had received

¹² Frankenberg, *White Women*, 10.

some attention from the national organization, had not gained traction in the national mainstream a decade before. Thus, the second time around Imperative implementation to a large extent meant a reevaluation of program cost, program location, advertisement strategies, and hiring policies. Significantly, while Lincoln YW women likely still desired “peace and justice, freedom and dignity for all,” they were no longer framing their Imperative efforts in this manner.

The Lincoln YW’s increasing understanding of meaningful Imperative implementation in the early 1980s did not mean that the organization had successfully overcome organizational problems with race or with racism or that it had found a no-fail way to address such issues in the community. Over a decade later, a racist incident within the organization once again called heightened attention to the issue,¹³ and throughout the 1990s and 2000s the organization has continued to experiment with different approaches to the organization’s mission. Nevertheless, this study of the Lincoln YWCA’s move away from a color- and power-evasive discourse in the late 1970s and early 1980s reveals much about the task of undertaking antiracist action, and the implications of such a study are directly relevant to the twenty-first century.

Numerous scholars have documented the prevalence of a “colorblind” discourse in American society of late,¹⁴ and a host of books published around the turn of the century articulated such a discourse.¹⁵ Such authors employ various forms of evasion:

¹³ Leola Bullock, interview with author, November 3, 2009.

¹⁴ See Michael Brown, et. al., *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Colorblind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003).

¹⁵ See Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1995); Tamar Jacoby, *Someone Else’s House: America’s Unfinished Struggle for Integration* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

some lament the negativity surrounding race and only want to celebrate progress, some emphasize individual attitudes (which, of course, can only be measured by what an individual tells a pollster) to indicate that problems of racism have been solved, and others imply that whites have done all they can and any remaining inequity must be blamed on people of color (generally African Americans), either because they do not want to be a part of American society or because of the “cultural pathologies” that inevitably lead to failure. As with the color- and power-evasive discourse Frankenberg analyzed in the mid-1980s, those articulating such ideas are sometimes “confusing desire with reality, ‘ought’ with ‘is,’” but Frankenberg argues that it is also possible to see this discourse as “intentional evasion or denial.”¹⁶

Regardless of intention, such rhetoric resonates with the discourse articulated by Lincoln YW women in the early 1970s, the first years in which the association was thrust into the realm of eliminating racism. Overall, the use of a color- and power-evasive discourse implicitly supported the status quo, and Imperative efforts centered on individual self-analysis, which, of course, did little to change the way the organization was run on a daily basis. As scholar Charles Mills would argue, the women essentially upheld the Racial Contract (which, as Mills explains, is the implicit agreement in American society about the racial hierarchy) by their unwillingness to ask certain questions.¹⁷ Prodded by women of color both nationally and within the organization, YW women began asking such questions, and at least some of the women quickly realized that an acknowledgment of the organization and community’s problems with racism (despite its small minority population) was a necessary first step to any real

¹⁶ Frankenberg, *White Women*, 148.

¹⁷ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 74.

movement. Further, in their pursuit of training and education on these issues, the women demonstrated that knowing *and* understanding a problem is a preliminary requirement to combating it. Thus, the experience of the Lincoln YWCA in the early 1970s demonstrates that a colorblind discourse (which, almost by definition, is color-evasive) places an organization (or an institution) in a state of paralysis. For an organization purportedly desiring the elimination of racism, as was the YWCA, this discourse acted as a hindrance to organizational goals. When the organization later reexamined the Imperative using a discourse that deliberately attempted to not evade the issues at hand, YW women began to rethink the need for and role of people of color within the organization and to consider new ways of achieving such diversity. Seeing that the status quo was inadequate, they demonstrated a willingness to make the types of changes that altered both the structure of the organization and its role in the community.

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