

Chapter 1



THE FIRST STEP  
IN NATION-MAKING

That organization is the first step in nation-making, and that a nation can rise in the scale no higher than its womanhood, are principles which have come to be looked upon by sociologist and all students of the development of humanity as self-evident truth. . . .

—JOSEPHINE SILONE YATES

On a sticky hot night in 1916, Charleston's black women met at Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church to hear Mary Church Terrell speak on "The Modern Woman." As recalled by Mamie Garvin Fields, perspiration dripped from the women, and in the sweltering heat, their dresses clung to them. So many packed the sultry chapel that their hats touched and they were unable to move their pasteboard fans any further than a few inches from side to side without elbowing each other. It mattered little, for all were eager to hear what this preeminent educator and first president of the National Association of Colored Women had to say.

Terrell did not disappoint them. According to Fields, Terrell spoke not only about the modern woman, but in her pink evening dress and long white gloves, with her hair beautifully done, "she was that Modern Woman." Fields marveled at Terrell's graceful walk to the platform and the way she projected her voice out across the huge crowd. "We have our own lives to lead," she told them. "We are

an insulting letter written by James Jacks, the white president of the Missouri Press Association. She told them how Jacks had attempted to silence the effective antilynching campaign of club leader Ida B. Wells by labeling all black women prostitutes and thieves, and she asked them to turn their numbers "to face that white man and call him a liar." At the word "LIAR," Terrell's voice resonated so wonderfully that Fields all but felt it on her skin. In fact, everything Terrell did that night made an indelible impression. As Terrell spoke, she paced back and forth across the podium, extending her gloved hand, so regal, intelligent, and powerful, that to Fields's mind, Terrell did not walk, "she *strode*." And when she asked them "and who were the Negro women who knew how to carry their burden in the heat of the day?" they sat riveted, without flicking a fan. By the time she finished heralding Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and so many other women who had worked for the race, all in the audience were ready to rise and follow in the footsteps of their great foremothers. Before she ended, she asked, "WHO OF YOU KNOW HOW TO CARRY YOUR BURDEN IN THE HEAT OF THE DAY?" Giving Fields, and every woman present, a chance to ask themselves "Do I?" she paused, and then said a quiet "Good evening."<sup>1</sup>

This speech, and many others delivered by Terrell and club leaders across the country, had the desired effect. Fields, a South Carolina teacher already active in community work, could hardly wait until morning to get going. As she put it, "everywhere you might look, there was something to do." She joined the Charleston City Federation of Women's Clubs, and with twenty other women established the Modern Priscilla Club, which specialized in homemaking, making clothes for the disadvantaged, and raising funds to support the Wilkinson Home, a refuge for wayward black girls. With other women, Fields worked tirelessly to get the city to fill a dangerous ditch that more than one black child had died in. The Priscilla Club surveyed the most impoverished black areas and urged the city to erect new housing. With the outbreak of World War I they helped set up a United Service Organization for black soldiers, and when the



MARY CHURCH TERRELL. Photo courtesy of Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives. We must care for ourselves and rear our families, like all women." Going on, she spoke of the special mission of the educated black woman. "We have to do more than other women. Those of us fortunate enough to have education must share it with the less fortunate of our race. We must go into our communities and improve them; we must go out into the nation and change it. Above all, we must organize ourselves as Negro women and work together." Terrell went on to tell them about how representatives of different clubs had organized the National Association of Colored Women in 1896 when they met to formally protest

war ended they worked with the NAACP, pushing city officials to hire black teachers in black schools.<sup>2</sup>

This was what Terrell had meant, what it meant to carry one's burden in the heat of the day. All over the country, especially in urban areas, black women took up their burdens. They were doing it before James Jacks's letter, but by tying the progress of the race to the morality of its women, Jacks's insulting letter ignited a new fire under them.<sup>3</sup> Race work became the means wherein black women could change their image, and from their point of view, the uplift of women was the means of uplifting the race. This was the call to arms of the National Association of Colored Women. As put by one of its most articulate members, Anna J. Cooper, it was time for action, a time for women, in particular, to step forth to "help shape, mold, and direct the thought" of their age, a time for organized female resistance.<sup>4</sup>

In short, the National Association of Colored Women became the black woman's primary vehicle for race leadership. Its members saw a set of interlocking problems involving race, gender, and poverty, no one of which could be dealt with independently. They believed that if they worked for the poor, they worked for black women, and if they worked for black women they worked for the race. Since, in their minds, "a race could rise no higher than its women," they felt that when they improved the condition of black women, they necessarily improved the condition of the race. When they spoke in defense of black women, they automatically spoke in defense of all black people. They talked about their work as "race work," and their problem as the "race problem." In their minds, though, the problems of the race revolved around the problems of its women.<sup>5</sup>

A STORY IN the *Richmond Daily Enquirer*, reported sixteen years before Terrell made her rousing Charleston speech, illustrates why this period in African-American history is known as the nadir. The

story told of a twelve-year-old black boy who, in March 1890, narrowly escaped being lynched by a mob of white youths, none older than thirteen years. Richmond's newspapers, both black and white, lamented the sad state of affairs that had children attempting to lynch other children. But as the editor of the *Richmond Planet*, a black weekly, courageously noted, children learned by example, and as long as white adults did such dastardly deeds, their children would do the same. "Lynching," the editor concluded, "was demoralizing to young and old."<sup>6</sup>

No doubt the temper of the times prevented the *Richmond Planet* editor from being more critical, for his comment was surely an understatement. As the centerpiece in the South's post-Civil War reign of terror on black people, lynching and mob violence was more than demoralizing, it was the most savage and barbaric manifestation of white on black violence since slavery. Between 1880 and 1930 there were at least 2,018 separate incidents of lynching, in which some 2,362 African-American men, women, and children were murdered.<sup>7</sup> These lynchings often became ritualistic affairs, where victims were mutilated and burned at the stake in a carnival-like atmosphere. At the same time, the practice of whitecapping was spreading, wherein black landowners and sharecroppers were subjected to such prolonged intimidation and violence that they fled their land, making way for white tenants and owners.<sup>8</sup> Northern and Southern urban areas provided some refuge, but a series of riots—Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898, Atlanta in 1906, Springfield, Illinois in 1908, Chicago and East St. Louis in 1919—saw white rioters, with the sanction and even assistance of law enforcement officials, beat blacks indiscriminately, destroy their businesses, and force them to leave their homes and abandon their possessions.

Unprosecuted white lawlessness was but one manifestation of the African American's loss of civil liberties. Everywhere one turned black rights were trampled. Laws regarding vagrancy, work contracts, and crop liens were written so that black people were kept either tied to the land in perpetual debt or in prison. State after state

sand members in 1868 to over four hundred lodges and four hundred thousand members by 1904.<sup>9</sup> Like the Masons, the Order of the Eastern Star, and the Independent Order of Saint Luke, they offered members aid in times of illness, organized savings and burial associations, and became the vehicle whereby members gave help to the community's unemployed, orphaned, aged, or otherwise disabled.

The clubs of the National Association of Colored Women rose to prominence during this period of retrenchment. Well before any national organization existed, local groups had coalesced throughout the country. The Colored Women's League of Washington, D.C., was among the first of the clubs that would later form the NACW. Organized in 1892 by Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Jane Patterson, the Colored Women's League called on a united black womanhood to solve the race's problems. The Women's League soon branched out into the South and as far west as Kansas City, Missouri. A few months after the founding of the League, the Woman's Loyal Union, under the leadership of journalist Victoria Matthews, brought together seventy women from Brooklyn and Manhattan in support of Wells's antilynching crusade. The New York-based Union formed sister clubs in Charleston, Memphis, and Philadelphia. Not long afterward, community activist Josephine Ruffin founded the New Era Club in Boston, which provided the prototype for similar clubs in other areas of New England. In Illinois, the Chicago Women's Club organized in late 1893 after Wells appealed to black women to support suffrage and fight lynching. Thereafter, the number of clubs multiplied so rapidly that by the time the National Association of Colored Women pulled them together it was hard to keep count.<sup>10</sup>

While some regional peculiarities existed, the guiding principle behind all the clubs was racial uplift through self-help.<sup>11</sup> Black clubwomen believed they could help solve the race's problems through intensive social service focused on improving home life and educating mothers. Some programs aimed at increasing the skills and intel-

disfranchised blacks by use of poll taxes, literacy laws, property qualifications, and "grandfather clauses," which waived voting requirements for those whose fathers and grandfathers were qualified to vote in 1860 (thereby disqualifying most blacks from easy access to the polls). By 1880 blacks were separated on trains, in depots, and on wharves. After the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional in 1883, blacks were banned from public and private establishments, including hotels, restaurants, theaters, parks, and libraries. By 1885 most states required separate schools, and eleven years later, in its infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, the Supreme Court legalized Jim Crow, or racial separation, by declaring that states could use their police power to separate blacks from whites as long as facilities provided for the two races were equal.

Black people dealt with the assault by turning inward. Locked out of most arenas of American life, they accommodated racism by retreating to their own institutions. Before 1880 most black businesses catered to a white market. However, as racial exclusion forced black businesses out of the mainstream into a strictly African-American market, the number of black retail merchants, undertakers, bankers, newspaper owners, beauticians, and craftsmen increased. As blacks turned to use the products and services of their own businesses they also made black institutions central to their social, economic, and political life. The church, in particular, thrived. Outside of the family, it was the means by which communities were organized, and the channel through which members received fellowship and status. For men especially, the church became the political arena where they vied for leadership and exercised dominance.

Mutual aid, beneficial, and fraternal societies were sometimes connected with churches, and with the spread of Jim Crow, they too increased in importance as centers of black social, political, and economic life. For example, the Odd Fellows, the largest of the black male secret orders, grew from some eighty-nine lodges and four thou-

classes for black girls, and held regular mothers' meetings for the mothers of the kindergarten children.<sup>13</sup>

In both North and South, mothers' clubs were among the most popular type of club to affiliate with the National Association. Both the Tuskegee Woman's Club and the Woman's League held mothers' meetings at which community women discussed and received instruction in all subjects relating to the care and upbringing of children. The definition of "mother's" responsibilities was wide ranging. The Tuskegee club taught women how to buy land and build houses. In Savannah, members of a mothers' club set up a community watch program. They wore badges so they could be recognized by police and community residents. The black clubwomen of Kingsville, Texas, were likewise organized, and were successful at closing down a gambling house they thought was bad for their neighborhood.<sup>14</sup>

Patrolling their communities, teaching children to read, improving homemaking skills—there were few things that black women's clubs did not do. Everywhere the Phyllis [sic] Wheatley Club of Buffalo, New York, turned they found a task. Early in the century the club forced the Buffalo police to focus on crimes of vice in Buffalo's black neighborhoods. Mary Talbert, a future president of the NACW, and her club were so demanding that Talbert was invited to join the city-wide committee that monitored police enforcement. Through her, the club lobbied for police protection in black neighborhoods. Along with other women's clubs in the city, it established girls' clubs where delicate subjects like personal hygiene and moral improvement were addressed. In the 1920s the Phyllis Wheatley Club helped form a junior YWCA and a Buffalo chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They donated books by black authors to the city's public library, conducted community seminars on the power of the black female vote, and organized political clubs to get the vote out. Like clubs in other parts of the country, Buffalo women regularly visited jails, established kindergartens, and supported homes for aged adults or wayward girls.<sup>15</sup>

Activities like those in Buffalo occurred all over the country.

lectual ability of club members, while others sent members into local neighborhoods to assist poor blacks, particularly women and children. Most clubs did both.

The Colored Women's League of Washington, D.C., and the Tuskegee Woman's Club exemplified the spirit and work of black Women's clubs. With seventy-four members in 1905, the Tuskegee club was larger than average. It was also exclusive. Only female faculty members of Tuskegee College or wives or other female relatives of male faculty could join. Activity went forward on many fronts. In 1905 members made thirty visits to the black men and boys in the town jail, taking food and clean clothing on each visit. In the poor section of town called Thompson's Quarters the club members conducted a Sunday school, ran picnics and parties for the children, assisted in paying the funeral expenses of one child, and helped find new homes for four children. The club sponsored public and private lectures on the virtue of temperance, and organized the senior girls at Tuskegee into a club that taught them the necessity of community service and the basics of how to do it. Younger girls at Tuskegee were likewise organized, and in 1905 they "adopted" an elderly woman, helped her buy a Christmas dinner and basic necessities. Throughout the year the clubwomen assisted a community worker by conducting cooking and sewing classes at the E. A. Russell Settlement House, which club members founded and supported. By 1913, when the Tuskegee club had 102 members it assumed responsibility for a night school that was initially established by Tuskegee College. The club also established a reading room for young boys. Although woman's suffrage fell outside the rubric of community service, Tuskegee women stayed abreast of national developments on the issue and made literature on the subject available to interested members.<sup>12</sup>

The Colored Woman's League of Washington did similar kinds of service work. In 1898 it founded a Kindergarten Normal Training Class for young women, as well as a free kindergarten for some of the capital's black youth. The club held regular sewing and mending

Women's clubs that were part of the Texas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs bought land on which they erected parks and playgrounds. Similarly, the Woman's Musical and Literary Club in Springfield, Missouri, helped raise money for a hospital. The Semper Fidelis Club of Birmingham, Alabama, a literary society, gave out scholarships to local high-school students and donated money and clothing to the Old Folks and Orphan Home of the city.<sup>16</sup> While the Phyllis [sic] Wheatley Club of New Orleans established a nurse-training program and raised money to build a hospital, women in Vicksburg, Mississippi, bought a house and established it as a nursing home and orphanage. Following the example of their counterparts across the United States, black women in Indianapolis turned their club into a kind of employment agency, securing work for migrant black women in the canning factories of the city.

Helping rural black women establish themselves in urban areas had special significance for black women's clubs because so many members had made the lonely and dangerous migration themselves. Jane Edna Hunter, for example, was not prepared for the Northern brand of racism that she encountered when she reached Cleveland in 1905. Fresh from her nurse-training courses at Hampton Institute, she fully expected her skills to support her. She found, however, that unlike Southerners, who preferred blacks to take care of them, Northerners preferred white nurses. One doctor said as much to her face, advising her to go back to the South because "white doctors did not employ nigger nurses." Unable to secure work as a surgical nurse—her training—Hunter got work in private homes, but only after working at cleaning jobs in office buildings. Finding employment proved as hard as finding decent housing. When Hunter first arrived in Cleveland, she found a room in a boardinghouse that turned out to be a house of prostitution. She despaired as she fearfully walked "up one dingy street and down another." Alone in the city, Hunter had no place to turn. The YWCA residence accepted only white women, boardinghouses often charged extra for laundry, gas, and use of bathtubs, and their owners preferred male over

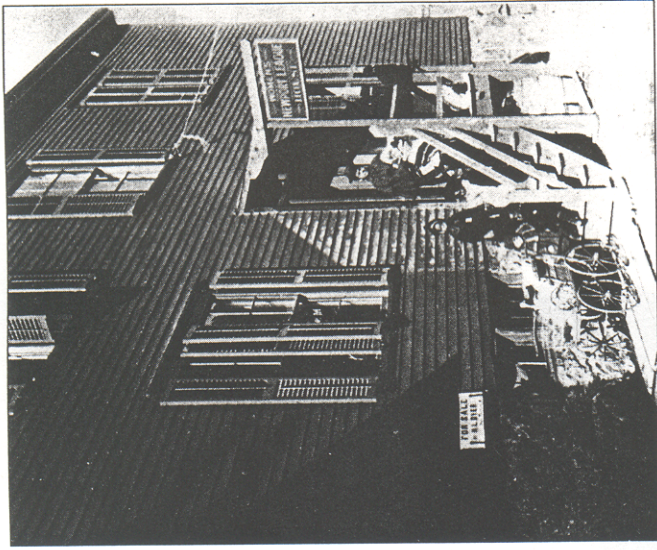
female boarders. Middle-class black families did not rent to strangers, and most women, even those who were professionals, were compelled to stay in districts filled with gambling houses, dives, and brothels. Forced to settle for the least desirable room, where she paid what was for that time a considerable amount of money, Hunter found the loneliness of the city unbearable. At one point she went looking for peer companionship only to inadvertently find herself in a club that was a recruiting ground for prostitutes.

After this thoroughly alienating and frightening experience, Hunter resolved to remedy the housing problem confronting black women. Six years after arriving in Cleveland she met with seven other black women and together they discussed the indignity of living in boardinghouses where they had to turn lights out at 10 P.M., had no place to entertain friends, and had no access to kitchen facilities. With no social agency to provide or refer services to black women, they resolved that they alone had to initiate the change. After electing Hunter president of the new Working Girls' Home Association, they each pledged to raise a nickel per week and to gather as many new members as they could to increase their funds. From this inauspicious beginning came the Phillis Wheatley Association, a settlement house that provided rooms, recreation, and employment referrals to black women.<sup>17</sup>

Similar stories could be told of other homes founded by black women. Both the Harriet Tubman Club of Boston and the New Century Club in Providence, Rhode Island, founded homes for working women. In New York, in 1897, Victoria Earle Matthews became the guiding spirit of the White Rose Mission Home, and in Buffalo, New York, clubwomen helped found the Friendship Home for Girls. Like the Phillis Wheatley Association, these homes provided affordable housing, social activities, and employment referrals. Some offered educational courses. The Friendship Home, for instance, offered enrichment classes in first aid, sewing, music, and English.<sup>18</sup>

As the clubs, and the institutions that they built, grew, so did local federations and the national body they affiliated with. Local federations encouraged coordinated service work and allowed clubs to undertake projects too expensive for a single organization. For example, the Tuskegee Woman's Club had persistently lobbied state officials to provide separate facilities for juvenile delinquents to keep them from coming under the influence of hard-core adult criminals. It was not, however, until the better-financed Alabama State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs took matters into its own hands—by establishing the Mt. Meigs Reformatory for Juvenile Negro Law-Breakers, and later the Mt. Meigs Rescue Home for Girls—that the Tuskegee club's aims were achieved. While the Meigs Reformatory eventually became a state institution, Alabama clubwomen

THE MT. MEIGS INSTITUTE WAS ESTABLISHED BY THE ALABAMA STATE FEDERATION OF COLORED WOMEN'S CLUBS. HERE THEY EXHIBIT CLOTHING AND LINEN MADE BY THE GIRLS IN THE HOME. *Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*



CLUBS OF THE NACW ESTABLISHED NURSERIES LIKE THIS ONE IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND. *Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

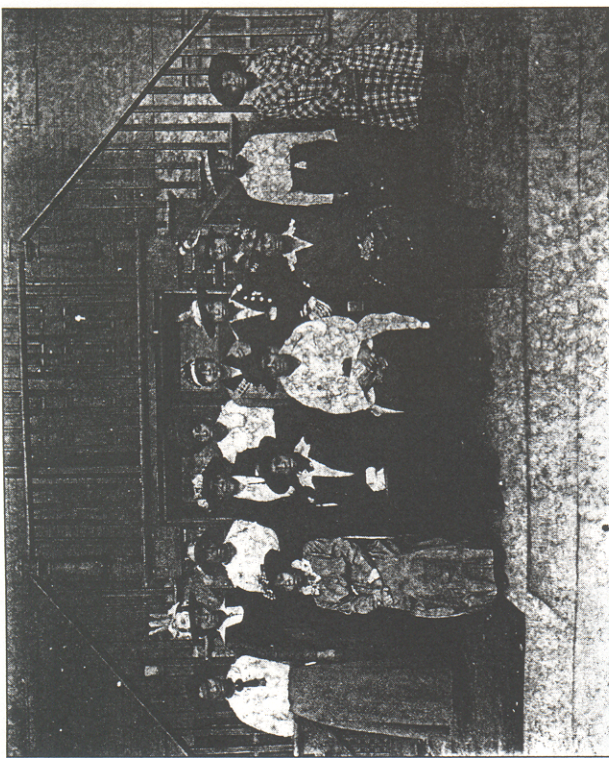
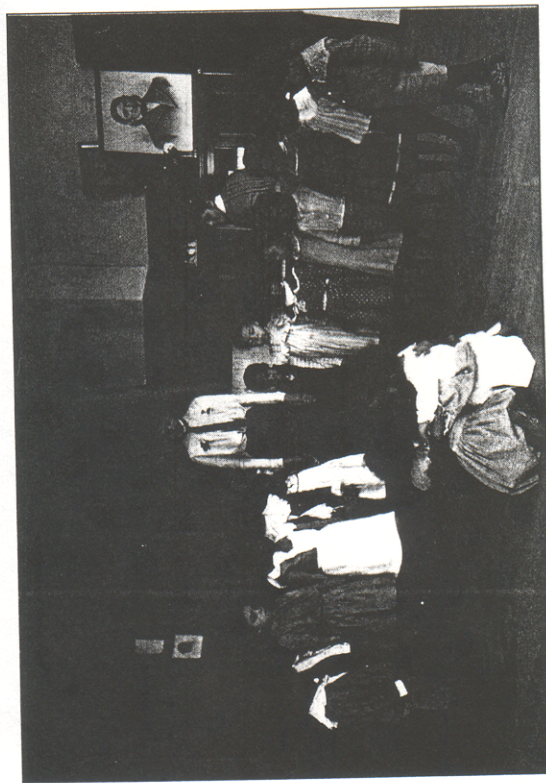
assumed financial responsibility for the Rescue Home. Similarly, the thirty clubs that composed the Empire State (New York) Federation of Women's Clubs adopted the financially troubled White Rose Mission Home in 1924.<sup>19</sup>

As time passed, and more and more clubs affiliated with the National Association of Colored Women, the structure of the organization became more complex, and the projects undertaken or supported by clubs more sophisticated. In 1896 the NACW reported a membership of two hundred clubs. By the 1916 national convention there were fifteen hundred affiliates. Over this period, the NACW structure changed to meet women's varied interests. In 1901 the departments of organizational work included kindergartens, mothers' meetings, domestic science, rescue work, religion, and temper-



THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF THE WOMAN'S LEAGUE OF NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND, SUPERVISED THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SEVERAL COMMUNITY SERVICE PROJECTS. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

THIS KINDERGARTEN CLASS AT TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE WAS TYPICAL OF THOSE ESTABLISHED BY CLUBS OF THE NACW. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.



THE BUFFALO WOMAN'S CLUB. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

ance. In 1904, five new departments were added, including art, literature, professional women, businesswomen, and social science. Business and the professions were combined into one department in 1908, the religion department was dissolved, and the departments of parliamentary law, forestry, and humane interest were added. Since the hands-on work of the NACW was done by local clubs, these departments helped the National Association of Colored Women define the needs, set the goals, and voice the concerns of black women. Coordinated activity also came through the process of city, state, and regional federations. By 1909, there were twenty state federations of black woman's clubs, including regional federations in the North, North Central, Northwest, and South.<sup>20</sup>

The philosophy of the black woman's clubs equalled in importance their specific projects. Philosophy, in fact, glued the disparate parts together and impelled the women to take action. Local clubs



had, of course, functioned before 1896 and could do so after 1896, effectively carrying forward their community based self-help, racial uplift programs. The NACW, however, was established to say to the nation what black women were saying to their communities. What it said, the philosophy it expounded, was unprecedentedly "feminist" in that NACW leaders insisted that only black women could save the black race.<sup>21</sup> To NACW women, the national organization was not just another narrowly focused woman's organization, but as one of its early presidents, Josephine Silone Yates, claimed, it was "the first step in nationmaking."<sup>22</sup>

Yates's sentiment was echoed by other club leaders. According to Gertrude Culvert, a president of the Iowa State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, "it is to the Afro-American women that the world looks for the solution of the race problem." The "first step has been the banding of ourselves together . . . putting our heads together, taking counsel of one another."<sup>23</sup> Culvert was joined by Fannie Williams of Chicago, and Virginia-born Addie Hunton. Williams, who belonged to both the white and black women's clubs in Chicago, was also the first black woman to serve on Chicago's Library Board. She believed that black women were showing the race the way to meet the challenges of the era. In Williams's words, "the Negro is learning that the things that our women are doing come first in the lessons of citizenship."<sup>24</sup> Hunton agreed. As the NACW national organizer from 1906 to 1910, she boasted that "the Negro woman has been the motive power in whatever has been accomplished by the race."<sup>25</sup>

At the heart of these feelings lay a sad loss of confidence in the ability of most black men to deal effectively with the race problem. Disfranchisement, Jim Crowism, lynching, and race riots seemed to be spreading unchecked. Clubwomen wanted something done, but black men had, as an editorial in the *Woman's Era* claimed, failed "to strengthen the belittling weaknesses which so hinder and retract us in the fight for existence." The editorial called for "timid men and ignorant men" to stand aside.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Williams ridiculed male

attempts to tackle the race problem when she quipped that the black male's "innumerable conventions, councils and conferences during the last twenty-five years have all begun with talk and ended with talk."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Anna Cooper thought black men were more a part of the problem than the solution. She claimed that Southern black men, in particular, had sold their vote "for a mess of pottage," something the black woman would never do, being ever "orthodox on questions affecting the well-being of her race."<sup>28</sup>

If black men could make little headway against the race problem, leaders like Cooper believed that black women would prevail. In this they had plenty of support. Like late-nineteenth-century white male and female reformers, Association leaders endorsed the popular belief that women were more nurturing, moral, and altruistic. Women were better suited than men for social welfare work because man's nature was belligerent, aggressive, and selfish. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a mid-nineteenth-century black suffragist, frequently lectured clubwomen on their duty to the race, and the advantages of womanhood. She insisted that women had to be "the companions of man, must be a sharer in the social and moral development of the human race." Yet she criticized men for their "greed for gold" and "lust for power," for being destructive warmongers. Woman's work she deemed "grandly constructive." Harper proclaimed the latter part of the nineteenth century to be the "woman's era," a sentiment endorsed by one of the earliest black clubwomen, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. Founder of the Boston-based New Era Club, and later a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women, Ruffin published the first black woman's newspaper and appropriately titled it *Woman's Era*.<sup>29</sup> Anna Julia Cooper also saw possibilities for women in the period. In 1892, she claimed it was up to women to mold "the strength, the wit, the statesmanship, the morality, all the psychic force, the social and economic intercourse" of the era. It was the "colored woman's office to stamp wear or woe on the history of her people."<sup>30</sup>

Cooper's confidence in her ability to tackle race problems was

nourished by her sense of equality with black men. Black women, like black men, had endured incredible hardships during slavery; neither sex had gained any advantage in the nearly two and a half centuries of enslavement. "In our development as a race," argued Fannie Williams, "the colored woman and the colored man started even." She continued:

The man cannot say that he is better educated and has had a wider sphere, for they both began school at the same time. They have suffered the same misfortunes. The limitations put upon their ambitions have been identical. The colored man can scarcely say to his wife "I am better and stronger than you are," and from the present outlook, I do not think there is any danger of the man getting very far ahead.<sup>31</sup>

Cooper sounded a similar chord when she argued that gender equality grew from the denial of the franchise to the race. Cooper observed that neither black men nor women had the vote. The black man had been driven from the polls by repression, and the black woman had never been given the franchise. Cooper was dismayed but not discouraged by the harsh and exclusionary politics of late-nineteenth-century white America. She thought it might be God's way of preparing the race for something nobler than what white Americans had wrought. Like Williams, she evoked the image of a new and equal beginning for men and women, declaring that "the race is young and full of elasticity and helpfulness of youth, all its achievements are before it."<sup>32</sup>

For Williams, Cooper, and the many women who proclaimed the "woman's era," the fact that black men functioned in a wider arena than black women was clearly inconsequential. Racism severely limited the life chances of black men, but some black men voted, particularly those in the North, and a few held political positions. Black men also dominated the black church, and most, although not all business people, were male.<sup>33</sup> Of course, clubwomen could have

pointed to their steadier employment, a few very successful businesswomen, and a host of school founders and educators.

Yet women like Cooper and Williams did not add and then compare the things that black men and women were doing. Their bottom line was the eradication of racism. The economic successes of individual black men, and/or the positions of power a few held in black and white society, mattered less than the ineffectiveness of black men as a group when it came to the race problem. If club leaders considered anything it was the endurance of black women during slavery, their belief in the more humane sensibilities of women, and their acknowledgment of the debilities of black men in white society. For the women who proclaimed the "woman's era," the sum of their equation was the superiority of women in matters concerning the moral welfare of black people, and the equality of black men and women in everything else.

This sense of real equality with black men made the black woman's club movement different from its white counterpart of the period. Some scholars have argued that, essentially, black clubwomen worked for their race, and white clubwomen worked primarily for improvement of the gender, and only occasionally for their communities.<sup>34</sup> Yet, white women's clubs created makeshift libraries, worked for better schools, and medical care of children, lobbied for improved streetcars, sewage, and garbage collection. They, too, argued that women brought a greater sense of humanity to the public sphere than did men, and they established a national organization—the General Federation of Women's Clubs—to coordinate their activities.<sup>35</sup> But because the context of black and white women's efforts was different, so were the implications of their respective movements, even when they pursued similar goals and used similar rhetoric. At the end of the nineteenth century black people were not only responding to the new industrial environment but to racial repression as well. The period was remarkable for black peonage, lynchings, disfranchisement, white primaries, race riots, and a white supremacist ideology, which on the national level sup-

ported imperialistic expansionist policies. The race was under assault from all sides. Black men were especially challenged because disfranchisement was aimed at them, and they were, by and large, the direct victims of the convict lease system and lynch mobs. It was during what has been called the nadir in the black experience that black clubwomen, with full knowledge of the ravages being wrought, proclaimed the advent of the "woman's era," and came forth with a plan that made black women the primary leaders of the race, a plan based on the premise of equality between black men and women. Clearly their burden was different—indeed many times heavier than that borne by white women.

In their view, too, white women, like black men, were part of the problem. Having been denigrated as immoral, black clubwomen now insisted that their white counterparts accept them as equals. White women, they thought, could play a pivotal role in ending lynching and racism, and reversing its effects. Black membership in national women's organizations would give black women recognition of their role in national progress and an institutional voice in affairs regarding all women.<sup>36</sup> They were bitterly disappointed, therefore, when so many white women's groups endorsed the same malicious stereotypes as their men. When white women set themselves apart, they became part of the burden black women had to carry.

Although a few white organizations, most notably the National Council of Women, made an effort to include black women, most of the major women's associations, especially those anchored in the South or with a large Southern membership, were openly antiblack. Thus, the only way many black women, including Adella Hunt Logan, an Alabama clubwoman, got to attend conventions of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was to pass for white. When black women were allowed to speak at conventions they repeatedly urged their white audiences to support black women. Michigan clubwoman Lottie Wilson Jackson asked the 1899 convention to publicly oppose the treatment of black women in Jim

Crow railway cars. In 1904, at the Washington, D.C., convention, Mary Church Terrell urged them to have the same concern for African Americans as they had for children and animals. Turning a deaf ear, NAWSA ignored these requests, and in 1903 it voted to fight for woman's suffrage, not so that all women could vote and use the ballot to express their individual and collective will, but as a "medium through which to retain supremacy of the white race over the African."<sup>37</sup>

The all-white General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) and its state federations were similarly hostile. In 1900, for example, the newsletter of the GFWC carried a mean-spirited story that spoke to the perceived danger of integration. The story, entitled "The Rushing in of Fools," told of a wealthy do-gooder white woman who invited her similarly wealthy, well-bred, and almost-white neighbor to join her club. As their friendship grew so did the relationship between their children. The light-skinned black woman's son was an educated and cultured physician, and like his mother had only an "invisible drop" of black blood. With the consent of their parents, and in spite of the social taboo against interracial marriages, the two children wed and set up housekeeping in another town. About a year later the white clubwoman's daughter died a sudden death. According to the story, the daughter gave birth but when the baby was presented to her, and she saw that it was jet black, she died of shock.<sup>38</sup>

This offensive story was more than a warning against admitting black women into white women's clubs.<sup>39</sup> It was a slap in the face of the mostly mulatto leaders of the black women's club movement. It was a way of bringing the likes of Mary Church Terrell, Anna J. Cooper, Fannie Barrier Williams, Josephine Ruffin, and many more, down a notch or two. Indirectly, it spoke to Terrell and the many others who spoke two and three languages and were educated at the best schools in America and Europe. It told them that even though they were well traveled, could play musical instruments, and were accomplished journalists, lawyers, artists, and lecturers, the "invisible drop" of black blood that coursed through their veins would

always be a mark of inferiority. It would always separate them from white women.

This message was apparent when Josephine Ruffin arrived at the GFWC fifth biennial convention in 1900. Ruffin was the lone black member of the New England Federation of Women's Clubs, but at this convention she was sent as a delegate of both the New England group and the New Era Club, a black club organized in Boston. When she arrived, turmoil erupted as the white women objected to seating a black woman. They realized too late that they had approved the application of the New Era Club without noting that it was a black club. To pacify the white delegates, some of whom threatened to resign if membership were not restricted to white women, Ruffin was seated, but only as a member of the New England club. That way, the convention circumvented recognition of the black club. It was able to keep the General Federation of Women's Clubs all white by subsequently instructing state federations not to approve applications from black clubs. Since application to the national body was made through state federations this policy proved an effective means of separation.

Black women did not let the actions of the white women's organizations deter them. Alone, they took on the burden of racial uplift. Behind Josephine Yates's insistence that the NACW was the first step in nation-making was the belief that the progress of women marked the progress of the race. According to Yates, "that a nation can rise in the scale no higher than its womanhood, are principles which have come to be looked upon by the sociologist and all students of the development of humanity as self-evident truth."<sup>40</sup> Anna Jones, a University of Michigan alumna, wrote the same thing: "the status of its womanhood is the measure of the progress of the race."<sup>41</sup>

The most eloquent explanation of this concept came from Oberlin graduate Anna Cooper. In *A Voice from the South*, she argued that "no man can represent the race." Even someone as great as the black nationalist Martin Delany could not, in Cooper's view, speak for black people, because he knew nothing about the lives of "the rank

and file of horny handed toiling men and women of the South. . . ." Women, however, were in a position to know because women were at the center, the heart of the family and the community. Black women were also doubly oppressed: as women and as blacks. Therefore, when black women spoke, they spoke for all the masses. Only when black women were totally free would the black race be free. This was the meaning behind one of the most memorable passages in *A Voice from the South*:

Only the Black Woman can say "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me."<sup>42</sup>

Not only black clubwomen but many black men also subscribed to the notion that "a race can rise no higher than its women." Dr. Monroe Majors, a Texas physician, made his feelings clear in the title page of his 1893 book on the achievements of black women:

A race, no less than a nation, is prosperous in proportion to the intelligence of its women.

The criterion for Negro civilization is the intelligence, purity and high motives of its women.

The highest mark of our prosperity, and the strongest proofs of Negro capacity to master the sciences and fine arts, are evinced by the advanced positions to which Negro women have attained.<sup>43</sup>

The book, *Noted Negro Women*, was written not only to put the accomplishments of black women before the world, but to demonstrate how far black people had progressed since slavery. Since the progress of the race was measured by the progress of its women, Majors's purpose in presenting almost four hundred pages of text

was to show how worthy of respect the race was. As Majors put it in his preface, the book was written as a "signification of Negro progress."

Of course, the issue of progress was not so clear cut. As the previous quotations from Majors and others suggest, progress, including the progress of women, meant different things to different people, and not all black women, let alone black men, measured it the same way. While most clubwomen and black men shared the idea that the race would rise as women did, and while most clubwomen believed that the torch of leadership had been passed to them, just how leadership should be exercised was a subject of debate. Not all believed that women ought to exercise leadership by speaking publicly for the race, or by bargaining and mediating with public officials. One of the most fundamental ideological discussions among clubwomen, and one that sometimes put them at odds with each other, was the way that women would lead the race.

Among the leaders it came down to a discussion of a woman's "place." Many believed that a woman exercised her greatest influence on behalf of the race in her role as wife, mother, and teacher. This did not imply notions of woman's inferiority to man. On the contrary, like Alice White, a clubwoman from Montgomery, Alabama, they agreed that "woman is man's equal intellectually." But inasmuch as they also believed in the superiority of women in the sphere of morality they insisted that women did their best work in the home, school, and church. For White, as long as the home was a place of peace, it was woman's source of power.<sup>44</sup> Ursula Wade of Mississippi envisioned pious and morally pure black women instilling confidence and strength in family members. She reasoned that "from pure womanhood must necessarily follow pure homes and from pure homes will spring a people strong in intellect, morals and religion."<sup>45</sup> It seemed crucial to women of this bent that blacks, who had for so long under slavery been denied the right and power to establish stable homes, should develop this foundation. They could agree with Yates that the National Association of Colored Women was the first step in

nation-making because the NACW did so much in the name of family and community. To build the black home was to build the black nation. At the center of it all was the woman. Because hers was the hand that rocked the cradle, she would mold the nation.<sup>46</sup> As Margaret Murray Washington, Booker T. Washington's third wife and a preeminent exponent of this position, believed, black women would be the "deliverer, for through her will come the earnest, faithful service for the highest development of home and family that will result in the solution of the so-called race problem."<sup>47</sup>

For others the solution to the race problem lay in black women assuming more wide-ranging roles. They had no quarrel with the argument that the home was the first battleground, or that the NACW did important work in making the home and community

FANNIE WILLIAMS. Photo courtesy of the Photographer, Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.





MARGARET MURRAY WASHINGTON. Photo courtesy of the Photographer, Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

believed that women reached their highest function as mother and director of the home. She believed that in "civilized" nations the home was the basis of the state. Without a stable home there could be no state, and consequently no foundation for "civilized" culture. Yet Dickerson also believed that women had to fight vigorously against Jim Crow and join with progressives of both races to improve the economic opportunities of black women who worked outside the home.<sup>50</sup>



ADDIE HUNTON. Photo courtesy of the Photographer, Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

strong. They just did not believe that a woman's work ended there, or that the Association's role should be confined to coordinating club activity to this end. Nellie Francis, for instance, wrote eloquently about the home as the central source of uplift. She agreed that "neither society nor state can exist without its well-being." She did not, however, believe that a woman's sphere should be confined to the home. Like many white female reformers she believed that the family was best served by women who were involved in politics and public lobbying efforts. Women, in her view, had a responsibility to help improve pure food laws, to shape laws that curbed the high cost of living, and to use the ballot as a way of improving society.<sup>48</sup> Fannie Williams agreed. Women, including black women, would be the corrective force in the public arena. Women should promote temperance, municipal reform, and better education.<sup>49</sup> Addie Dickerson, a Philadelphia clubwoman and leader in the Northeastern Federation, added her voice to those of Francis and Williams. Like her conservative counterparts, she



JOSEPHINE BRUCE. Photo courtesy of the Photographer, Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Clubwomen who wanted to expand the black woman's role beyond the traditional spheres were militant supporters of woman's suffrage. Unlike Margaret Murray Washington, who felt that suffrage did not warrant the full attention of black women, women like Francis, Williams, and Dickerson insisted that black women needed the vote to do the political work that would bring about reform. Speaking of the political rights that black people had lost as a result of widespread disfranchisement, Dickerson was certain that when women got the vote, black women "will have an opportunity to make right that wrong."<sup>51</sup> An anonymous editorial in the *Woman's Era* agreed. "A woman's place is where she is needed and where she fit in." One could no more return women to the confines of the

home and traditional "womanliness" than "turn back the hands of time."<sup>52</sup>

Once again, Anna Cooper's voice most fully expressed the sentiment of activist clubwomen. A supporter of woman's suffrage, Cooper at once believed that the family, with the woman as its guiding force, would be the salvation of the race, and that women had to have the same opportunities as men to develop intellectually in order to "help men tug at the great questions of the world." Intellectual development translated into self-reliance and the "capacity for earning a livelihood." It made women less likely "to look to sexual love as the one sensation capable of giving tone and relish, movement and vim to the life she leads." Education and intellectual development were necessary for all women but they were essential for black women. They could not afford to just "look pretty and appear well in society." Black girls had to learn that "there is a race with special needs which they and only they can help; that the world needs and is already asking for their trained and efficient forces." Like her conservative counterparts, Cooper argued that black women did essential race work in the home as wives and mothers, but she also insisted that the time had come for woman's "personal independence, for intellectual and moral development, for physical culture, for political activity, and for a voice in the arrangement of her own affairs, both domestic and national."<sup>53</sup>

These philosophical alliances mirrored those that formed around the philosophies of race leaders Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the debate between Washington and Du Bois influenced the ideological discussion taking place among club leaders. Washington, like conservative women, discouraged political activity and civil disobedience as a means of achieving civil rights. He argued that progress and uplift began in the home and community with the individual who was dedicated to hard work and economic success. All clubwomen subscribed to this agenda for all believed that women had to make their homes the foundation of race progress. But most of those who reached for

more, who endorsed suffrage and activism, were less comfortable with Washington, and naturally more in tune with Du Bois, who argued that black people had a duty to use all means to bring about political and civil equality, and that the most talented and fortunate blacks had to assume this responsibility. The divisive debate between Washington and Du Bois only intensified the differences that already existed among clubwomen.<sup>54</sup>

These differences were set forth in letters written to Margaret Washington by Josephine Silone Yates. Like her husband, Washington generally believed that quiet, persistent, and diligent work would accomplish self-help racial uplift. Since this work began in the home and community, and these were relatively private spheres, clubwomen did not have to issue public pronouncements or agitate in the political arena. Yates agreed. Writing to Margaret Washington she expressed her belief that the National Association had to create a positive image of black womanhood, but that it was counterproductive to "go into the market place crying out 'I am virtuous, I am virtuous.'" Clubs of the Association made their greatest contribution by finding ways to "work, work, work" for the race. Just as she urged black women to demonstrate their worthiness quietly, she urged all blacks to stop "continually clamoring for more and crying prejudice, discrimination." Sounding very much like Booker T. Washington, Yates wrote:

If colored people generally speaking were to live up to the opportunities we now have in place . . . we would soon be in a position where opportunity would seek us, but we want the automobile, before we have a wheelbarrow. . . .<sup>55</sup>

Of course, Cooper disagreed with Yates. She had made her feelings clear long before the public debate between Washington and Du Bois. Her activist feminism made her an unhesitant ally of Du Bois. In 1892, twelve years before the public debate between Du Bois and Washington, she penned this rather Du Boisian statement:

Nature has made up her mind that what cannot defend itself, shall not be defended. Complaining never so loud and with never so much reason, is of no use. What cannot stand must fall; and the measure of our sincerity and therefore of the respect of men is the amount of health and wealth we will hazard in the defense of our right.<sup>56</sup>

As different as were the opinions of Cooper and Yates, we must not infer that club leaders were hopelessly divided into ideological camps. They were divided, but they had every reason to hope that their common ground would make their differences insignificant. To begin with, they all suffered humiliating experiences under Jim Crow. They all resented the exclusionary membership policies of white women's clubs. Most were well educated, making their outcast status all the more difficult to accept. Moreover, all believed that it was the "woman's era," that black women could and would solve the race problem.

They thought this possible only if they avoided divisive issues as well as partisan politics. Yates warned the National Association to stick to the purposes for which it was founded. The "moment it goes after crosscuts and by-paths, it is doomed to the same death that has beset so many national bodies." One of those bypaths that Yates wanted the Association to have no part of was the contemporary debate over whether blacks should be called "Colored Americans" or "Afro-Americans." To her mind this issue—among others—served no purpose except to tear a national organization apart.<sup>57</sup>

The kind of politics that led to partisanship and bossism was also disruptive. Many club leaders felt that black men had been ineffective in dealing with race issues because they had been sidetracked by the activities of the Democratic and Republican parties. Black women would stay above party politics. "Must we begin our political duties with no better or higher conceptions of our citizenship than shown by our men when they were first enfranchised," asked Fannie Williams. "Are we to bring any refinement of individuality to the



ballot box? Shall we learn our politics from spoilsmen and bigoted partisans or shall we learn it from the school of patriotism and an enlightened self-interest?<sup>58</sup>

For Mary Church Terrell, the National Association's first president, the worst thing black women could do was to bring the practices of corrupt politicians into the Association. To be a "corrective force" in American society, black women had to religiously eschew party politics. Nonetheless, Terrell thought it essential that black women protest against the system that deprived them of their legal rights. Terrell admired clubwomen who had petitioned the legislatures of Louisiana and Tennessee to end segregation on railroad cars, and women who were waging what she called a ceaseless war against the convict labor system.<sup>59</sup> Yet, she and all clubwomen were suspicious of any sign of what they called "bossism." Equal to the meanness and the usurpation of other people's power that characterized the political "boss" would be a political "mistress in a woman's organization," wrote Williams.<sup>60</sup> One way to avoid the "mistress" was for clubs to have as few officers as possible. This was Margaret Murray Washington's advice in a lecture in 1910 on how to organize a woman's club. A club, she suggested, needed only a president and a secretary. Since communities generally united behind their teachers, and since unity made clubs effective, in Washington's view, teachers were the best organizers.<sup>61</sup>

As we will see, unity did not come naturally, but NACW women made their best effort when they stuck to issues on which they all agreed. The defense of black womanhood united them as did no other single cause. Both conservatives and activists believed that black women were beset with both a race problem and a woman problem. In their view, this made black women so unique among Americans that only they could voice their concerns and needs. No one else cared as much and no other group had so much at stake. What hurt most were the charges assailing black women's morals. To club leaders it seemed that all the shortcomings of the race were being traced to the black woman's alleged failures—failure to be pure, pious, sub-

missive, and domestic, the failure to raise future generations of blacks to be good citizens, and the failure marked by continued sexual connections with white men. Clubwomen wanted the world to know that all the allegations impugning the black woman's character were false, that black women had gone for hundreds of years able to "cry for protection to no living man."<sup>62</sup> They celebrated black mothers for their "painful, patient, and silent toil . . . to gain a fee simple title to the bodies of their daughters," their heroic struggles "against fearful and overwhelming odds that often ended in death." Through the travail of slavery, "the Afro-American woman," Cooper argued, "maintained the ideals of womanhood unshamed by any conceived."<sup>63</sup> She had subsequently made tremendous progress in education, and in homemaking. It was the black woman, clubwomen so often reiterated, who was responsible for all the forward strides taken by the race.

In making their case they realized differences. Not all black women could meet their standards. Such faults could be traced back to slavery when their natural ethics had been destroyed by whites who gave them backbreaking work, broke up black families, and rewarded black women for promiscuous behavior. If some black women needed lessons in homemaking, if some had not achieved the moral ideal, or had not taught their children to distinguish between right and wrong, it was only to be expected since the effects of over two centuries of slavery could not be wiped out overnight. Furthermore, club leaders argued, no race of people were all good or all bad. Whites had their immoral class, their criminals and prostitutes. Why, they asked, did whites insist on judging the black race by its bad element; why were all black women judged by the actions of the least cultured and educated?

Clubwomen wanted racial progress to be measured by their own success. In their estimation they were their own best argument against discrimination. Their temperance, intelligence, and moral rectitude reflected positively on the race and proved James Jacks's slander wrong. With the words, "now with an army of organized

women standing for purity and mental worth, we in ourselves deny the charges . . . not by noisy protestations of what we are not but by a dignified showing of what we are," they created the National Association of Colored Women.<sup>64</sup> The NACW motto, "Lifting As We Climb," meant that they pledged to help others as they helped themselves. Their very existence meant that black people had taken the first step in nation-making. It also meant that black women would always have a defender as well as a national voice. While they might dispute the usefulness of woman's suffrage, or argue over "a woman's place" or the best tactic to achieve equal rights, on this one point they agreed unanimously. The National Association of Colored Women was their watchdog, and their defender across the nation.<sup>65</sup>

In many ways, the clubwomen's record was impressive. At the turn of the century, the National Association of Colored Women presented an unprecedented and bold program. It integrated the unique concerns of black women into a program that addressed the problems of race and poverty. In a period when white women were often compelled to choose between a career and marriage, activist clubwomen insisted that black women could both save the race and build model homes; they could do all that a man could do and all that a woman should. Unlike future generations of black feminists they did not fear that their feminism would split the race movement into conflicting camps, nor did they feel torn between their race and gender identity. On the contrary, convinced that black female issues and race issues were identical, they spoke publicly in opposition to black men and openly revealed their disillusionment with black male leadership. In their minds it was not dirty laundry they were airing, it was just cold hard truth.

Just as they saw only congruity in their race and gender outlook, they saw only wisdom in their approach to black poverty. Both conservatives and activists embraced Du Bois's talented-tenth philosophy even before he penned the term. Clubwomen codified their duty by making "Lifting As We Climb" the Association motto. Again, unlike black women leaders of a more modern era, who were tenta-

tive about speaking for the lower classes, they did not hesitate to represent poor black women, few of whom belonged to their organization. Proud of their work on behalf of their less fortunate sisters, they felt it a duty to speak for them.

Yet, for all NACW women had to be proud of, and confident about, there was reason for apprehension. Ideological differences threatened their unity. They could not forever avoid issues that divided them, for some issues were obviously pivotal to the future of blacks and women. Moreover, for women who functioned in such a constricted public arena, the potential for "mistrissism" was ever present. So was the danger that black people, and especially black men, would see the female leadership that came with club activity as a usurpation of male roles and as inherently unfeminine. Clubwomen could not expect black men to silently accept their increasingly bitter characterizations, nor the black masses to always take marching orders from women who could at times appear obsessed with morality. There was always the danger that the clubwoman's zeal might undermine her goal to change the black woman's image.

Most dangerous of all was endorsement of the idea that a race could rise no higher than its women. It was risky business to buy into an ideology that had so much potential to be their own undoing. What would happen if the race did not rise, if whites rejected the Association's program, or if all the self-help projects sponsored by the clubs made no difference in the status of black women? This ideology could justify black female activism and equal educational opportunities, but it also left black women vulnerable to blame for the condition of the race, especially in 1896 when so much hardship beset blacks.

As the twentieth century progressed, the NACW would be challenged on many fronts. Some challenges it would successfully meet while others would prove its undoing. But in 1896 club leaders were sure that they could lead the race out of its nadir.

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