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Ryan Paige

Washington University in St. Louis

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ELEVATING SPACES, CHANGING COMMUNITIES: BLACK WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE METROPOLITAN CHICAGO YWCA, 1915-1925

Ryan Paige

Mentors: R. Marie Griffith, Lerone Martin, and Mary Ann Dzuback

Founded in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) has stood for many years as a premiere organization focused on social reform for the empowerment of women and girls. Today, the YWCA and its male-oriented counterpart (YMCA), are known for providing enrichment programming for marginalized youth, especially those of color. However, during World War I and the Roaring Twenties, the YWCA often excluded and discriminated against African-American women, with segregated branches of the organization receiving unequal resources from the National Board. This was especially the case in the city of Chicago, a destination for thousands of black migrant families seeking to escape the racial oppression occurring in the southern region of the United States during this time. This study is a part of a small but growing body of research on the involvement of black women in urban YWCAs during a period of legal segregation. Through examination of African-American publications and documents from the organization's governing board in Chicago during this time period, this research suggests that the participation of African-American women in predominately white organizations, such as the YWCA, was due, in part, to the limitations placed upon them by their intersectional identities. Not fully supported in neither black- nor woman-based spaces, African-American women had to rely upon the privileges of membership within the YWCA as a stepping stone toward having their voices heard and valued by society as a whole.