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**Founding Aswalos House: Separate and Powerful;  
The YWCA in Roxbury, Massachusetts, 1968-1988**

**By**

**Sharlene Voogd Cochrane**

The Boston YWCA established Aswalos House in the predominantly black neighborhood of Roxbury in 1968. Fifty years earlier, many so-called “black branches” were organized throughout the country, as a strategy to keep black and white women separate and white women in control of the city, or central YWCA. Aswalos House was a different kind of branch. Black women active in school desegregation efforts and community building decided the YWCA could serve their needs, if done on their terms; that is, with a separate branch, located in their community, with authority over their own hiring, programming and finances.

This is the story of Aswalos House, based on the interviews of nine women who were leaders in advocating for this separate and powerful branch. It details the experiences and processes that led to establishing the branch, and considers the particular concerns and strategies of the women involved; the structure of the YWCA, which both encouraged and confounded their efforts; and the changing social discourse about race and power in the United States. The narrative suggests the role separate and powerful institutions established by women of color can

play in meeting community needs and in shaping the dialogue between white women and women of color.<sup>1</sup>

Black women had a long tradition of organizing in Boston. One of the earliest of black women's benevolent organizations was the African-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston, established in 1832. Women's clubs emerged in the late 19th century; black women found that white organizations had no intention of providing services to communities of color, and they stepped in to fill that void. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin formed The Woman's Era Club in 1892, and published the widely-circulated *Woman's Era*. Ruffin was instrumental in bringing the many local black women's clubs across the country into one new national organization, the National Association of Colored Women, established in 1895. Their motto, "Lifting as We Climb," captured their goal of serving their community as they enhanced the image of all black women.<sup>2</sup>

Another local organization for black women, the League of Women for Community Service, Inc., claimed to embody the "commitment of black women to civic and social responsibility." Following their efforts to provide an equivalent to the USO Club for black soldiers during World War I, a group of Boston's black women continued their work together, undertaking civic, social, educational and charitable work, and purchasing a home for their activities at 558 Massachusetts Avenue, in Chester Square. The president of the organization was Maria Baldwin, first black principal of a Cambridge elementary school. The stately home continued to house this organization as it worked "for the benefit of this community."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aswalos is an acronym for All Sisters With A Lot Of Soul. I am grateful to Val Davis, who in the fall of 1990, collaborated in the series of interviews which form the core of this study.

<sup>2</sup> Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 437-58. Also Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), 95-117 and Deborah Cray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: WW Norton, 1999), 39-56.

<sup>3</sup> League brochure, "The League of Women for Community Service, Inc." Graphic Arts Unlimited, 1988, Boston YWCA Collection (Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA).

The YWCA was established in Boston in 1866. The first Annual Report described the mission as providing for the “physical, moral and spiritual welfare of young women in Boston.” From the beginning, the leaders stated their mission more broadly than they implemented it. Not all young women were welcome. The house-mother for the first residence, distressed that so many Roman Catholic girls wanted to stay, reminded the board about her understanding of their goals: “...the object of this organization being to benefit principally our New England girls over whom we can exert a lasting influence.” This tension was even more marked in terms of providing residential and employment support to women of color, who were generally urged to find a family in the black community with whom to board.<sup>4</sup>

In some ways, the act of establishing a women-led, women-serving organization was a radical act. It challenged the boundaries of traditional, Victorian-era gender roles. As Glendora Putnam, past President of the National YWCA (and active in Aswalos House), explained, “These were Christian women, and they were living out their Christianity...the YWCA was founded by a group of Christian women whose husbands did not want them to do this...these women formed this organization; they went out and did it...they talk about being compelled. They stated that ‘our Christianity compels us to do certain kinds of things, and that if we are true Christians then we are compelled to take action.’ They were compelled not only to believe, but were compelled to take action.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Boston YWCA Annual Report*, 1867, 1880-90, Boston YWCA Collection (Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA). Sharlene Voogd Cochrane, “Compelled to Speak: Women Confronting Institutional Racism, 1910-1950,” *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 7 (Fall/Winter 1991), 47-59.

<sup>5</sup> Glendora Putnam interview by Sharlene Voogd Cochrane, October 6, 1990, transcript, 28-9 (in Sharlene Voogd Cochrane’s possession). The importance of religion as a motivator for social change is also suggested by Scott, writing about women’s associations: “...modern historians are apt to underestimate the reality of religious motivation...It is important to remember that the earliest white efforts to cross the racial barrier came from women in religion-based associations...we are in danger of failing to understand just how strong-minded many of these women were.” Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History*, (Urbana, IL: Illini Books, 1993), 182.

Their action, however, still stood within a cultural framework of race and difference. Although this Christian belief was expressed as “action and assistance for all women,” it did not compel white women to assist women of color. The discourse these white women were embedded within is characterized by Ruth Frankenberg as “essential racism,” the claim that race is biological, an absolute marker of difference.<sup>6</sup> The difference was complete, limiting the exchange between white women and women of color in every forum. Within this framework, the language of their Christian faith led them to challenge gender limitations; it did not often lead them to challenge race.

As the YWCA grew, both city associations and college student groups moved toward a national identity, culminating in a combined organization in 1906. Within a few years, this group had moved from the earlier associations run by wealthy women for younger working women, into a membership organization, in which local women paid minimal dues. The members then helped establish the programs and participated in leadership training workshops and national initiatives.

Becoming a membership organization marked an important shift in emphasis. In YWCA literature, “empowering women” became a goal, not in the sense, “We are empowering you;” rather, “we are becoming empowered by each other.” As Putnam explained, “They began to bring in the concept ‘membership’ that we are all members of the organization, and therefore we all own the organization as members, and we all have a right to say what this organization will be. Not us, not you, we together as members and as peers will do it...it was a powerful, powerful concept that these women had.”<sup>7</sup>

At the same time as the membership concept grew, women of color in several large cities throughout the nation attempted to join the organization. These women were generally allowed, or limited, to setting up a branch for themselves, under the budgetary and program control of the city (white) YWCA. These early branches were still part of the essential racism discourse -- most white members saw the branches as a way of keeping the women separate and the white leadership in control. Several communities, such as Cleveland, Ohio,

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 138-39.

<sup>7</sup> Putnam interview, 29-30.

had black leadership who set up a YWCA-like organization yet kept separate from the YWCA. Most other large cities had a central (white) association with black women in a separate branch.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, the unique structure of the YWCA brought leaders of all branches into regular workshops and retreats. Eventually this led to their getting to know one another, with more joint activity and respect. Some white women in the association used the broadly stated mission of the YWCA to question attitudes toward people of color. They shifted toward the position that, in fact, we are all alike under the skin and these differences do not really matter-everyone should be treated the same. Naming the dissonance of mission and action, these women tried to push the organization to be more open and embracing of racial difference. The mainstream clung to the earlier position, and as women of color began to challenge the organization, most associations tried to keep black and white women separate.

In Boston, the city association maintained its nearly all-white character throughout this period of change. Local college YWCA organizations moved toward more racial awareness, through a cross-college inter-race committee. An attempt by a black social worker, Virginia Saunders, to found a separate branch was not successful. Small numbers of women of color did participate by the 1930s in the city association, but issues about use of the swimming pool, limitations in programs and general lack of racial understanding kept these numbers low. In a National YWCA report in 1936, 64 women of color were listed on the Boston roles, half under age 17, all active in the association clubs. That year, a total of 2230 girls and young women belonged to YWCA clubs in Boston. The report made several strong suggestions about further outreach, and recommended that the Boston association establish clear, more welcoming policies; however, no specific steps appear to have been taken at that time.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Lash Jones, "Struggle Among Saints: African American Women and the YWCA, 1870-1920," and Margaret Spratt, "To Be Separate or One: The Issue of Race in the History of the Pittsburgh and Cleveland YWCAs, 1920-1946," both in Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, ed., *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City*, (New York: NY University Press, 1997), 188-206 and 160-188; Lerner, 479-497.

<sup>9</sup> "Summary of Chronological History of Interracial Practices of the Boston YWCA, 1918-1944," 8, Boston YWCA Collection (Schlesinger Library,

By 1944, as more white women and women of color worked together across YWCA leadership programs, the National YWCA again urged local member organizations to explore and develop better programs across racial barriers. Again the Boston report responding to this initiative showed that while a few women of color were active in the programs of the YWCA, Boston's organization had not effectively addressed the prodding of the National YWCA to move further.

The National Board, through its passage in 1946 of the Interracial Charter, called for all YWCAs to develop integrated organizations, and to end the practice of having a city YWCA and a "black branch." The Charter stated, "Wherever there is injustice on the basis of race...our protest must be clear and our labor for its removal vigorous and steady." Cities across the country, particularly in the south and middle Atlantic, but as far west and north as Omaha and Minneapolis responded to this charter with workshops and studies. The push for integration met resistance in many black communities where the branch was providing activities and leadership, which members feared would be lost in the changes. Nonetheless, most branches were integrated by the mid-1960s.<sup>10</sup>

Dorothy Height, active in the national leadership from 1944 until the 1970s, began her career in the YWCA traveling across the country, with a mandate to help YWCA's respond to the Charter. She visited in Boston several times. In fact, Lucy Miller Mitchell, Boston's first black-board member, was invited to join the board in 1943, reflecting in part the effort of the local branch to respond to the national mandate. However, many in the black community agreed with Melnea Cass, the community activist who charged that the YWCA was "prejudiced and discriminatory." While more women of color attended programs, efforts to expand in the spirit of the Interracial Charter moved very slowly.<sup>11</sup>

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Cambridge, MA); Sharlene Voogd Cochrane, "'And the Pressure Never Let Up': Black Women, White Women and the Boston YWCA, 1918-1948," in *Black Women in United States History*, Darlene Clark Hine, ed., (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publications, 1990), 16; *Boston YWCA Annual Report*, Boston YWCA Collection (Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA).

<sup>10</sup> Carole Stanford Bucy, "Interracial Relations in the YWCA of Nashville: Limits and Dilemmas," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 61 (2002), 182-193.

<sup>11</sup> White, 176-191; Melnea Cass Interview, 1987, Black Women's Oral History Project, 87 (Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA).

Most board members felt that having a woman of color as a board member throughout much of the period from 1942 through 1962 was enough to meet any criticism.<sup>12</sup> Members were satisfied with the small number of women and children of color who used the mothers' programs, pool, and teen programs, and that one of the teen girls' clubs, the Ebonets, had been established especially for young African-American women. They admitted that the racial diversity of staff and membership was limited, and they had little sense of what it would mean to truly serve the needs of the African-American community.

Those white women who felt compelled by their religious understanding or social attitudes to open the YWCA to women of color challenged essentialist racism, while ignoring the realities color played in those women's lives, and the way in which power was still an unequal element in their relationships. This color-and-power-evasive stance often failed to surface, or validate the color-power issues and realities of life in Boston. This evasive discourse remained the main challenge to essential racism within the YWCA throughout the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

The women who demanded the founding of Aswalos House were, according to one of their colleagues, "the most powerful and intelligent women of that time who were consistent in addressing the issue of racism." They were about to "inundate" the YWCA, establishing a new discourse about race and power within the organization, and in doing so, open a new chapter in its history. They would create a branch for women of color and their families in Roxbury, and initiate major changes within the city association, as well.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lucy Miller Mitchell served from 1943 until 1950, and again from 1961 through 1963. Sue Bailey Thurman was on the board from 1953 until 1962.

<sup>13</sup> Frankenberg, 142-49. As Scott points out, black women and white women followed parallel but quite separate tracks in their organizing -- the few exceptions were almost always members of organizations with a strongly religious orientation, the main ones being the home missionary societies, the WCTU and the YWCA. Scott, 178-182.

<sup>14</sup> Thelma Moss to Sharlene Voogd Cochrane, March 13, 1991, 4 (in author's possession).



Several of these dynamic women had been part of the fight in Boston for school desegregation and political voice, the “first front” of black women organizing. These women had families; they had worked in community organizing efforts through their churches and their children’s schools. They represented the strength and political know-how of black women, and they were dedicated to establishing institutions within their midst that would be truly representative and responsive. They were able to formulate their needs and insisted on their right to participate fully in the process.<sup>15</sup>

What the YWCA could offer as a fresh possibility at this time was the structure of the organization itself. Black women had to deal with institutionalized racism of the YWCA — but were supported in developing a gendered leadership. The ability of women within the YWCA to set their own agenda and learn leadership skills had been important historically for both white and black women. Especially in the black colleges, YWCA activity had long been a path to leadership development for black women. For many years the dynamic of gender and race replicated the larger picture; still women learned skills and drew on their own strengths in ways that challenged that dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

Women of color in the Boston community had the history of black women’s organizations to draw from, and had learned practical lessons in the civil rights and education battles. They were eager, as one writer says, to both create black female spheres of influence within existing structures of oppression -- the struggle for group survival, and change existing structures of oppression -- institutional transformation.<sup>17</sup> They would do both within the framework of the Boston YWCA.

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<sup>15</sup> Polly Welts Kaufman, “Building a Constituency for School Desegregation: African-American Women in Boston, 1962-1972,” *Teachers College Record*, 92 (Summer 1991); Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 297-98.

<sup>16</sup> Lucy Miller Mitchell interview, 1987, Black Women’s Oral History Project, 48-50, (Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA); and Lucy Miller Mitchell interview by Sharlene Voogd Cochrane, 1988 audiotape (in author’s possession); Putnam interview, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (Boston: Routledge, 1990), 141-145.

While their efforts in schools often called for integration, black women's efforts at the YWCA focused on establishing a separate branch, based on the increasing call in the late 1960s and early 1970s for black control of the organizations, institutions and resources of the black community. Some black leaders urged creation of parallel or independent power blocs, such as black political parties and black unions, outside existing structures. Despite different emphases and different strategies, "most members of the new movement stressed black pride, black dignity and black self-determination....Leaders of the new movement said a new strategy based on the massed power of the black community was essential for the liberation of black Americans."<sup>18</sup>

Black women in the late 1960s looked at the YWCA and considered that their needs could be met by a branch organized in their community. At the same time, given the civil rights efforts and, especially Martin Luther King's death in April of 1968, some white women were able to listen and were more open, more ready to admit dissonance of mission and reality within the organization, than at other times. Part of their shock and outrage and sadness was channeled into an initiative to better address the needs and interests of women and girls within the black community. As one early black board member, Sheila Austin, remembered, "The sixties was a time of the movement, the whole social movement, so people were really attentive to our needs because they wanted to address them and they wanted to be a part of history."<sup>19</sup> This was a time when steps could be taken, and African-American women in Boston took full advantage and pushed the limits.

Thelma Moss was one of these women. She participated, with her two young sons, in the "Mother's Swim" program at the Boston YWCA. Following the death of King, a group of the mothers in the Swim program talked seriously about what the YWCA could do in response to that tragedy. Their discussion focused on three ideas that would build stronger links between the YWCA and the black community: bus women from Roxbury to the YWCA to participate in activities; hold a

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<sup>18</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 377-442.

<sup>19</sup> Sheila Austin interview by Val Davis, September 28, 1990, transcript, 16 (in author's possession).

special program in honor of Dr. King; or, Moss's suggestion, establish a branch of the YWCA in Roxbury.<sup>20</sup>

The more they talked, the more the mothers agreed the branch that would truly serve young people and women in Roxbury was the only sound choice. Moss was invited to present this proposal to the main YWCA board, where she felt it met "great hostility." White Board member and past Association President, Virginia Erlich was the most vocal against the idea, saying the YWCA should not start segregated programs. In fact, she was speaking in consonance with the National YWCA Board efforts urging integrated programs, assuming segregated programs as a step backward for the YWCA. Erlich's concern that the demand for the branch "implied separatism and inter-racial hostility," reflected a fear that does develop when "integration" is the dominant theme in the politics of race. While her stance challenged the overt racism of previous decades, she did not yet acknowledge the power issues surrounding race and the need for some organizations to be focused on black community needs. As the effort to establish the branch grew and black women increasingly supported it, Ehrlich came to appreciate this need and also became more supportive of this new branch.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of having a Roxbury branch was, according to Putnam, "behind the times, but within the context of the new YWCA." It was behind the times since most large cities had branches starting in the 1920s, which were now moving to end that separation. But the effort to respond to the needs of the Roxbury community with a specific, separate branch met the spirit of the new efforts, in supporting women of color to determine how best to meet their own needs. With this paradox as part of the founding, the board told Moss that if she could find the interest, "we'll do something." At the same time, the board invited Moss to

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<sup>20</sup> Thelma Moss interview by Sharlene Voogd Cochrane, December 14, 1990, transcript, 1 (in author's possession); Roxbury was the Boston neighborhood with the largest African-American population.

<sup>21</sup> Moss interview, 1-2; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "If It Wasn't for the Women...": African-American Women, Community Work, and Social Change," in *Women of Color in U.S. Society*, Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) 236-7.

become a board member, a move Moss experienced as a strategy to win her over, and “quiet my organizing.”<sup>22</sup>

Moss found it was also important to establish from the beginning, in Roxbury, the sense that the branch was coming from the community and not being forced on the community by the downtown YWCA. A newspaper article published in *The Leader*, November 16, 1969, inviting women in Roxbury to come to an open house, made that clear: “It is important for the community to know that the Boston YWCA is not bringing a YWCA to Roxbury, but that the black women of the community are bringing a YWCA out of Roxbury. We invite the public, especially the black women of the community, to come and be a part of our program.”

Slowly, over the next year, several women took steps to establish the program in Roxbury. The YWCA Board invited Ruth Batson, a dynamic community organizer and leader, to join the Board in 1969. Batson was known for her community efforts to end segregation in the Boston Public School system, including founding and directing METCO, a program to bus children from Boston’s inner city to suburban school systems. The stated desire of the board to “do something,” was a strategy Batson, in her role as a new member of that board, was able to use to keep the proposal alive.

According to Batson, her experience in the civil rights movement working with many white women had not prepared her for the women she sat with on the board: “These were a different kind of women from what I knew.” The board women she dubbed “very la-di-da,” suggesting their lack of touch with the realities of life, and her constant feeling that they were talking different languages. She had problems communicating with the board members over issues of money. She wanted the board to use endowment funds to achieve some of their goals, and was impatient with the attitude that these funds could not be touched. “I couldn’t understand how there was a need and there was money and we couldn’t

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<sup>22</sup> Putnam interview, 17; Moss interview, 1. Many African-American women saw their role as “building ‘Black-oriented’ institutions,” ones that responded to needs of individuals and groups within the black community. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Building in Many Places: Multiple Commitments and Ideologies in Black Women’s Community Work,” in *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen, ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 54.

touch it.” While a board member and vice-president for five years, she felt other members of the board often considered her a firebrand; according to Batson, one even called her “a bomb thrower.”<sup>23</sup>

Even though Batson came out of what she termed the “integrationist mode,” she understood that this effort was not a return to the segregated, powerless branches of the 1920s. Rather it was a move by a strong group of women to establish yet another way of powerfully directing and supporting the community. Batson was impressed with Moss’s commitment to having services people could use right where people could get them. So Batson told her of other influential women she could talk to, including women with some connection to the YWCA. Two of these women were Joyce King and Amanda Houston. King, an activist and educator, participated in the “Mothers Without Apron-strings” program; Houston, who would eventually direct the Black Studies Program at Boston College, had two young daughters who belonged to the Ebonets.

Moss talked to the women Batson recommended, and developed a body of supporters. These supporters came from the ranks of women church-goers and community leaders, though not always the political leaders she had expected. A key spokeswoman and community activist within Roxbury, Melnea Cass, had such a negative perception of the YWCA as a white upper and middle class group of women, that she wanted nothing to do with the organization. Others, like Houston, felt that if any program was to survive in the community long-term, it needed the connection with a solid, financially strong organization. The YWCA could offer that stability. Those who were active in the community varied in religious identity and class, and Moss went to Protestant churches to organize, despite her own Muslim background. Describing herself at the time as being quite young and naive, she approached this work with an expectation that all the women would want the same things. She did not understand how complicated these efforts could become, and this would eventually cause her great frustration and difficulty.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Batson interview, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Cass interview; Amanda Houston interview by Sharlene Voogd Cochrane, October 5, 1990, transcript, 1 (in author’s possession); Moss to Cochrane, 2-3.

A set of pressures was building, and as a YWCA Board member, Batson was in the middle. On the one hand, she was dealing with people in the black community who wanted the branch established quickly, for the YWCA board to move faster. On the other hand, she would be in YWCA board meetings with women who could not understand why the women of color wanted a separate YWCA; women who could not respond to the change that was going on in the community. "It was a very tense, a very difficult time, because you'd go to (Roxbury) to have these meetings and you would get yelled at by the people there," Batson said. "And then you'd go downtown, those people downtown didn't yell, but it was the same thing. And it was just a tumultuous time."<sup>25</sup>

Through this tumult, several vital steps were taken, the result of the tenaciousness of the women involved, and the structure of the YWCA itself. A board made up of local community people and leaders governed each local YWCA. The day-to-day management was the charge of the Executive Director, working with a number of committees. Branches that were established had a Committee on Administration that assisted the Branch Director. Members of the Committee on Administration often served on the larger organization Board. The national organization sponsored various conferences and workshops across the country where board, management and members learned leadership skills and management techniques. National assemblies were held every three years, with regional meetings in between.

Because of the membership and training structure of the YWCA, once black women came into the organization as members, they began to influence the agenda. Even though they were in a separate branch, they were at conventions and meetings with other YWCA leaders, both white and of color. Putnam explained, "There were no separate training sessions...if it was program directors it was all program directors. And if it was executive directors it was all executive directors, and if it was volunteers it was all volunteers."<sup>26</sup>

The structure of the YWCA, especially the gender-specific opportunities for leadership development, offered certain elements to these Roxbury women that were consonant with what one writer terms "black feminist knowing." The emphasis on committees, rather than

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<sup>25</sup> Batson interview, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Putnam interview, 34.

hierarchy, for policy making and implementation, was part of that knowing. That the purpose of leadership was to build leadership, and to teach those engaged to be self-reliant, were also factors that black women valued within their tradition of community organizing. These elements, along with traditions of speaking out and linking beliefs to action (additional concepts of feminist knowing) made the processes of the organization welcome to black women. As King remembered, "Pearl Shelton (an early Aswalos House supporter) always said, and many other women felt, that the YWCA...organizational structure was one of the best, particularly very good for women....They felt that within that...it was possible to develop an arm of the Boston YWCA that would serve the black community, black women and that's why they joined in."<sup>27</sup>

Moss and the Committee on Administration realized that the branch needed both a site and a name that marked it as belonging to the community. They initiated a contest to give the Roxbury Branch a unique, community-based name. They put the word out and received numerous suggestions.

The name that won was Aswalos House, which stood for All Sisters With A Lot Of Soul. The award ceremony establishing the name presented the board with a surprise. As Amanda Houston retells the story:

All of us big time black women got ourselves together to give this award to the child who had named this house. When the name was called, a white child came up. This white child had named this house, and everyone thinks it's an African name. It isn't. The child who made it was as white as the driven snow, red hair, glasses! We couldn't not use the name, it was too good. We looked at each other, sucked our teeth, you know, and we couldn't even say we could have found a better name. The name was perfect, so we were stuck....But that's something that shouldn't be lost in the telling...that this

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<sup>27</sup> Hine and Thompson, 157; King interview, 4. This ability of black women to use the structure of the YWCA to pursue their own goals was a critical element in the Harlem YWCA development as well. Judith Weisenfeld, "The Harlem YWCA and the Secular City, 1904-1945," *Journal of Women's History*, 6 (Fall, 1994), 62-78.

was a little white child. And the thing that amazes me about this kid, she wasn't even self-conscious, she was just as happy in the middle of all these black folks, she thought it was a great idea. She was not intimidated, she didn't think she was in the middle of black power.

Ruth Batson confirmed that, "There was a lot of talk about maybe we shouldn't do this. But truth and integrity prevailed, and Aswalos became the name."<sup>28</sup>

Establishing a site for Aswalos House was more complicated than naming the branch. Although initially opposed to establishing a segregated, separate branch, Virginia Erhlich became an invaluable ally in finding a property for Aswalos House. Once she was convinced of the need, she spear-headed efforts to purchase a house. Moss found a 13-room Victorian house at 246 Seaver Street, in very poor condition. Erhlich saw it and the Board made money available; the property was purchased for \$75,000. The board also provided funds for a program director and offered the position to Moss. She and the Committee on Administration established to assist her, set about implementing their immediate goals. Each goal -- funding, decision-making, program direction -- required that they negotiate issues of power with the city association.

According to Houston, Aswalos House had been able to "work out its independence and yet remain loyal and a part of the structure, with shared overall goals." It remained important to them, therefore, that structures within the YWCA be used to establish internal autonomy from the main or "downtown" board.<sup>29</sup> The key changes Aswalos House supporters wanted in their relationship with the YWCA board involved control over decision-making and finances. They insisted that they approve the hiring of their branch director, and, equally important, they wanted the branch to submit a budget and have some say about spending the money.

Batson, on the YWCA board from 1969 until 1973, worked to find a way within the organization's structures and by-laws to give the Roxbury branch the autonomy these women knew was critical for its success. She

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<sup>28</sup> Houston interview, 8; Batson interview, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Houston interview, 15.



asked her friend, Glendora Putnam, to help her in finding ways to give Aswalos House that autonomy. In 1970, Putnam was chair-person of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination. She grew up in Lawrence, MA, and had been very active in the YWCA there, especially after the establishment of the Interracial Charter in 1946. After moving to Boston, she joined the YWCA, but had been only minimally active until Batson asked for her help.

Putnam attended several board meetings with Batson. At first she was met with distrust, in part because members knew of her Commission identity. "The (board) women wanted this new branch to work," Putnam said, "...Some of them had raised quite a bit of money in order to have this happen, so they wanted it to work. But they didn't want to work outside of the constitutional protections of the YWCA." They set up a committee including the legal counsel to the YWCA, who admitted Putnam would know more about this situation than he did.<sup>30</sup>

The changes Aswalos House leaders wanted were implemented by applying the long-standing rule within the YWCA that a change could be made so long as it was not inconsistent with YWCA bylaws. Putnam kept emphasizing this rule in the negotiations, saying "What we want may be different from, but is not inconsistent with, the constitution." She continued, "We worked within that framework, tried to find ways to give autonomy that were not inconsistent with the constitution." They achieved the autonomy they sought: committee members had a say in the hiring of the branch director, could develop their own programs, and, in fact, were making a mark on the composition and attitudes of the downtown board.<sup>31</sup>

Through this effort, the Boston YWCA board members learned about the energy and ability Putnam brought to their efforts, and invited her to join the board. As a board member, she continued to advocate for Aswalos House. Eventually she moved from active work in Boston to the national organization, where she was elected National President. "Aswalos House was responsible for my being president of the YWCA of the USA," she said, "Aswalos House brought me back into the YWCA. And then of course I just continued doing what I had been

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<sup>30</sup> Putnam interview, 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

doing in Lawrence, which was spending my life at the YWCA.”<sup>32</sup> Putnam was elected to the National Board in 1973. She served as President for the National YWCA from 1985 until 1991.

Efforts to convince the main board to spend the necessary funds continued, amidst larger YWCA financial problems and continued resistance by some board members to making further commitments to the Roxbury program. While progress was made, it was never easy. As Batson described, “It was the constant struggle....There was constantly this demanding and reaction and reaction and demanding and trying. It was a fight for control....The women at the (downtown) YWCA did not understand what was going on with this sixties stuff...I used to get very angry with them, but now that I reflect, they just didn’t understand. And I don’t think that sometimes...I was as patient. You get tired of teaching people.”<sup>33</sup>

Although the purchase of the house had gone smoothly, and cemented the relationship of Moss and Erlich, the renovation process threatened the whole operation. The contractor hired to do the renovations failed to meet deadlines and did not do acceptable work. This focused a great deal of hard feelings on Moss, who had lined up the contractor. The YWCA sued the contractor, and then paid to repair his work and continue with another contractor for the remainder of the renovations. As Putnam remembered, “All these problems could have happened any place, but it so happened that they happened there,” and so the step of supporting and giving autonomy to this branch was more difficult and gave those who did not want to see such a branch fodder for their discontent. King reported that in the issue of money for the house, it was always difficult to sort out how much was resistance to race.<sup>34</sup>

The problems with the house overwhelmed Moss, and the divisions within the community and within the board left her without support. This was a troubling time for the new organization, and for Moss, who admitted she thought of the branch as “my baby.” She had, in the earliest days of the effort, wondered whether her identity as a Muslim would be a hindrance. She found that her religious identity was not a detriment;

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>33</sup> Batson interview, 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> Putnam interview, 9; Joyce King interview by Sharlene Voogd Cochrane, October 11, 1990, transcript, 7 (in author’s possession).

however, as the financial problems continued, other kinds of conflicts seemed irresolvable.<sup>35</sup>

A series of power conflicts erupted between the downtown board and Moss as director. Some people felt she needed to do more, that she was working more for her own personal needs than the community's development. While many found her inflexible, she had also shown great energy and commitment. The women at Aswalos House were faced with wanting to support her, while recognizing that in order to move further, a different director would be needed. As King said, speaking in terms of the experience of committee members, "They were not lightweights, and they were not young women in terms of...right out of college, coming to say let's start this great thing. These were women who had worked in the community and they had gone up against...this whole issue of de-facto segregation. So this was serious business right from the beginning."<sup>36</sup>

As the financial costs of the renovations rose, and the conflicts continued, the board of Aswalos House used their newly-established power to change directors. In King's words, "It was really a very difficult time because we were black women who were developing this organization as a part of the whole organization, very aware of what was happening in the rest of the country around civil rights and issues of race and society," she continued. "And the people who were on the board of Aswalos House were really very aware,...it was a very difficult decision to let her go."<sup>37</sup>

As these issues of authority and power faced the fledgling branch, Putnam and other Boston women of color moved quickly from leadership at Aswalos House to participation in the National YWCA conventions and organization. These Aswalos House women were integral to efforts to move the national organization to further confront racism. Their efforts reflected a rethinking about race, and the continual linking of racial pride and identity to expressions of power. A power discourse meant a move from color-and-power-evasiveness to race-cognizance, the recognition that color does matter in this society, and

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<sup>35</sup> Moss to Cochrane, 1.

<sup>36</sup> King interview, 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

that power relationships in the culture often depend on race definitions.<sup>38</sup> Some whites involved in the civil rights struggle had begun to understand this concept. Black women in Boston had affected the attitudes of women like Erlich who did not want segregation, but came to understand that the efforts at integration often denied the power relationships within racial designations. Now these women were part of a larger institution in which they had power and could affect change.

The YWCA on a national level had used its Interracial Charter to encourage local associations in efforts to fight racism, with the goal of integrating associations. Most cities with branches within the African-American community in the 1920s and 1930s had integrated city branches by the 1960s. The structure of the YWCA, which included recruiting and training leaders from within the membership, assured that women of color from the branches would take part in national and local conventions, and take part in discussions, and eventually advocate throughout the national and local organizations. As this process worked out on a national level, very few women of color had been involved from Boston. Now however, as the efforts for the Roxbury branch began, those African-American women involved also participated in the national conventions and became active in the national effort to confront racism.

At the National Convention in 1970 in Houston, a black women's caucus (YWCA women from across the country) met and focused their discussion on eight imperatives the YWCA had established for its four-year plan. Participants concluded that one basic imperative was key: the elimination of racism. The discussion identified racism as the issue apparent in all the others, and the most critical to confront. Moss attended the conference as a Boston representative, and joined the effort to include in its "One Imperative" the words of Malcolm X, "by any means necessary."<sup>39</sup>

The National Convention, after long and strong debate, voted to adopt the "One Imperative: To eliminate racism wherever it exists, by any means necessary." The Imperative would serve, in conjunction with

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<sup>38</sup> Frankenberg, 157-60.

<sup>39</sup> Moss interview, 3. For a discussion of the background of this effort, see Adrienne Lash Jones, "Young Women's Christian Association," in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Darlene Clark Hine, et al. ed., (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1299-303.

the organization's statement of purpose, as the mission statement for the YWCA for the next three years. At home, Boston's annual report captured the intensity and tension of the time: "Our Program is important, but program is no longer enough. Racism, poverty, war and women's rights -- these are the issues. These issues became woven into every page of the history of the Boston YWCA in 1970. If it sometimes produced anxiety and discomfort; it was a small price for constructive change."<sup>40</sup>

The National YWCA reaffirmed the One Imperative at three successive national conventions, confronting efforts of some members to repeal the language or weaken the effect. Bostonians continued to be active in supporting the Imperative through these challenges. At the 1973 convention, a large number of teens and young adult women were in attendance, and people knew the Imperative would be tested. However, after the vote, these young people all let hundreds of balloons go up in the auditorium, with the logo "Imperative As Is" on them. So there was a strong support for this statement. Glendora Putnam, who claimed Aswalos House brought her back to the YWCA, was elected to the National Board at that same convention.

YWCA board member Verdaya Mitchell Brown continued the Boston presence at the national conferences, and was active in the challenges to the Imperative in 1976. According to Brown, who also served on the Aswalos House Committee on Administration, "a lot of people (in the YWCA) were moving on old agendas that should have been dead and forgotten." Amendments were submitted from several YWCA associations to strike out the phrase "by any means necessary" from the Imperative, claiming, as in the past, that it sounded too militant.<sup>41</sup> Brown said:

I was so moved by the discussion, angered by the discussion to eliminate this, that I looked up and I was on the floor at a microphone. There were at least 2,000 delegates there, with me waiting for my time to speak,

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<sup>40</sup> *Boston YWCA Annual Report*, 1970, Boston YWCA Collection (Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA).

<sup>41</sup> Verdaya Mitchell Brown interview by Val Davis, 30, 1990, transcript, 14 (in author's possession).

saying to myself, “Why are you at this microphone?” But I knew I wanted to say something that would make a difference....So I did speak to the issues, saying something about the fact that while we may all be here hoping for a better world for women and for all people, that in fact we can’t sit there in the ivory towers, (we were at Notre Dame for this convention), and act like the world has changed, because it has not. And I pointed to the fact that in Boston we had just started busing and people were brutalizing our kids because we were trying to desegregate the school system, that housing was still not there in Boston, nor was it in any urban city I knew of in the country....and to say that it was too militant was a cop out,...and that if the YWCA wanted to stand for “the elimination of racism” then they should stand up for “by any means necessary” because it was going to take “by any means necessary” to move the agenda. After I spoke I never felt so cold, I got such a deep chill, but I was never so unafraid in my entire life. I mean, once I spoke I felt relief, I said, this is what you call freedom. You can stand in front of the world and not be afraid. I mean, they applauded like you wouldn’t believe.<sup>42</sup>

Brown described the next morning, after further discussion with Dorothy Height, “To risk my embarrassment or whatever we think we risk when we have to stand for what we believe, that really did a lot for the Boston YWCA. I mean, the Boston YWCA’s name was on the list of people at that convention as a result of that whole action. They would say, ‘Oh yeah, the Boston people.’ We all became ‘the Boston people.’ So that did a lot for us as a total association and then for the Aswalos House,...people looked at the women with a little more respect, all of us.”<sup>43</sup>

The response to the One Imperative and the continued call to face racism within the YWCA varied widely from city to city. In Portland Oregon, for example, efforts to change led to a racial discrimination

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 15, 24.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

lawsuit and a flurry of charges and countercharges. In Boston, the efforts to support a stronger race-specific branch continued.<sup>44</sup>

Following the dismissal of Moss, the branch leadership spent six months consolidating the advisory board and searching for another director. They chose Gloria Nelms, whose dynamic and fiery manner, especially coming into the tense territory of the downtown YWCA, ruffled many feathers. According to her successor, Nelms was motivated in large part by a desire to “fulfill the One Imperative and was not easily swayed.”<sup>45</sup> Board members found that Nelms was neither a negotiator nor an easy advocate. Often the efforts of board and branch to work out differences resulted in shouting matches, and hard feelings all around. The earlier tumult, described by Batson, was repeated in even more strident tones. The branch continued, but failed to thrive.

During Nelms’ tenure, Joyce King was on both the downtown board and chair of the Aswalos House Committee on Administration. Her experience with the board mirrored Batson’s of a few years earlier, in feeling the priorities of the board’s white members were different from hers. “It was very obvious that in my early days on the board, although we lived in Boston, we lived in different worlds. Once two women came in (to a Board meeting) and said something about the agenda, and they talked about when the next meeting was to be, and one woman said, ‘Oh, I won’t be here, I will be in Greece.’ The other one said, ‘When will you be in Greece, because I’m going to be there too.’ And they were on both sides of me. I’m thinking, ‘Oh, Joyce, when are you going to Greece?’”<sup>46</sup>

Both Nelms and the board director used King as a negotiator. “It was always,” she said, “this difficult thing.” Nelms was independent,

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<sup>44</sup> “The “Women and Social Movements in the United States Document Project” has a large collection of materials from the Portland, Oregon YWCA. For a description of a curriculum project using the documents that has resulted in several articles about the Portland YWCA, see Patricia A. Schechter, “In the Classroom -- A World of Difference: Portland Women of the YWCA, 1901-2000 -- an Undergraduate Capstone Experience,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 15 (Autumn 2003), 166-76.

<sup>45</sup> Patricia Bonner-Turner interview by Sharlene Voogd Cochrane and Val Davis, August 7, 1990, transcript, 1 (in author’s possession).

<sup>46</sup> King interview, 18-19.

and according to King, never liked that she had to report to the executive director downtown. She dealt with the community and was in touch with many organizations, which was a plus. But she had to get another contractor, and deal with the board, which had spent a lot of money already and now had to spend more. As a branch director, she attended board meetings, and was expected to sit and listen to board members while they spoke out. When Nelms went through this scene, King reported, “you could see steam coming out of her.” This conflict with the executive director was never settled, but Nelms did get the building rehabbed.<sup>47</sup>

After three years, and many harsh discussions, the Administrative Committee began a search for a new leader for the still-fragile branch. The arrival of Pat Bonner-Turner as the third director of Aswalos House was greeted “like rain from heaven,” according to Houston. Well-connected in the community, with an ability to speak in clear, forceful ways, twenty-five year old Bonner-Turner could both negotiate and talk tough. Having run and almost won a seat on the highly-charged Boston School Committee, Bonner-Turner had strong community appeal. Under her direction, the branch came to have, finally, a firm financial footing, solid programs and a growing connection to the parent organization.<sup>48</sup>

Issues of authority and funding continued. As Director, Bonner-Turner pioneered many innovative programs, which came out of the demand of the Committee that programs meet real needs, not always in consonance with the practices or perceived needs of the downtown unit. Bonner-Turner described herself and the women around her as “very Afro-centric” while the main unit of the YWCA was “very mainstream.” The YWCA downtown “was still doing ceramics, pottery, sewing and some other things which the women who appointed me as Director basically said to forget,” said Bonner-Turner. “This is not what the women in this community need. If we’re going to do anything like that, we really need to have [a class in] African Dance.”<sup>49</sup>

The goals for Aswalos House included addressing employment opportunities, education, and day care needs, all of which were often in

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>48</sup> Houston interview, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Bonner-Turner interview, 3, 7.



conflict with programs the central office wanted. According to Sheila Austin, then a member of the Committee on Administration, "When they opened branches in the suburban areas..., they were accustomed to certain programs operating and functioning....They had no idea what the black community needed, so it was our responsibility to articulate our own needs. And sometimes it was a conflict, it wasn't well received. And we knew what was best for ourselves, we knew what we wanted for our children, for our teens, for our women, and sometimes that became a struggle, it became a conflict. And it just involved educating people to what it was that we wanted."<sup>50</sup>

The tension between Aswalos House and downtown most often focused on funds -- who would pay for special programs run at only one branch? Bonner-Turner explained her funding strategy: "I went out and looked for the money....That created problems because what would happen in many instances is that the Executive Director of the entire YWCA would be going to a State or City agency looking for money and I had already been there and they had already approved a grant for the YWCA." In one instance, Bonner-Turner went to the City of Boston to negotiate a contract and a few hours later the Executive Director went there trying to find out why she had not received any response on a major contract that she had submitted. Only then did she learn that a major grant had been approved directly for Aswalos House. After the initial fireworks, the Executive Director said, "We like that kind of initiative but from now on any grant that you intend to submit will come through this office, first."<sup>51</sup>

By 1980, Aswalos House was well-established, the facility was in excellent, if crowded, use, seen by members of the community as a place for information about community activities and resources for women and children. It was a place to network with black women who were involved in struggle, in Roxbury, greater Boston, internationally. Women at Aswalos House were seen as then branch director Juanita Wade said, as "women who were activists, women who knew about their community, knew about themselves, knew about the connection between black people here in this city, black people here in this country, and our

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<sup>50</sup> Austin interview, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Bonner-Turner interview, 8-10.

relationship with Africa, the continent of Africa.”<sup>52</sup> Since its founding in 1968, Aswalos House had become a vital, race-specific entity developing out of a combination of capable, effective women working in a gender-based, membership organization that was poised to respond to changing dialogues about race.

As had happened earlier through the national organization, the leadership that had been evolving in the branch gradually became intertwined with the overall leadership of the city YWCA. The downtown office of the YWCA continued to have women of color on their board, and began hiring women of color for positions within the city association. Barbara Burke-Tatum became the first black director of the main branch, and the two branch directors that followed Bonner-Turner, Helen Cheeks and Juanita Wade, took on the role of building further connection between Aswalos House and the downtown organization. Bonner-Turner left Aswalos House and returned to college. After graduating, she came back as director of development for the city YWCA. As she said, “It was a win, win, win situation.”<sup>53</sup>

This was, in many ways, a different kind of coming together than the earlier YWCA reports had envisioned; it was based on a recognition of, rather than a denial of, race. The collaboration came from women of color having the power to direct their own branch, for their own needs, and coming together with the central, white association from a position of authority. According to Brown, “That commitment (to collaboration) was really borne out....Because we started having black people on the board. I ended up being on the board, and a couple other women. Joyce King was downtown at that time. That kept the dream alive because you really needed somebody on the board to respond....So by being on the

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<sup>52</sup> Juanita Wade interview by Val Davis, December 3, 1990, transcript, 1 (in author’s possession).

<sup>53</sup> Bonner-Turner interview, 29. The coming together of the branches was the stated goal of the National organization; however this experience was often mired in the racism of white women and the loss of power by black leaders, exemplified in the Charlotte, NC experience. Michelle Busby, “‘The Price of Integration’: The Story of the Charlotte YWCA in the 1960s,” in Mjagkij and Spratt, 206-231.

board you were in the club, which allowed them to listen a little more carefully.”<sup>54</sup>

The Black women working for their community had struggled to create a black female sphere of influence within the structures of Boston; in the process and because of what they created, they were able to instigate institutional transformation, so that black women throughout the YWCA could make “principled coalitions” for the good of a diverse and powerful group of women. The American mainstream myth praises rugged individualism and self-reliance. “But among black women, strength comes from being part of a community, and service to the community is the act not of a do-gooder, but of a leader. Difficult as it may be, service is not sacrifice, but part of the fullness of life.”<sup>55</sup>

The story of the founding and success of Aswalos House reinforces the truth that women who confront inconsistency between vision and reality can be powerful in raising issues and making change. In establishing this institution in Boston, YWCA women, both African-American and white, confronted the dissonance of that organization’s mission and action. The leadership ability and commitment of the women of color who led this movement were crucial to its success, as was the structure of the YWCA, which allowed women with new or challenging points of view to be heard and to effect change. Embedded in this change was a shifting conversation about race, and a growing appreciation of the need for people of color to establish their own separate and powerful institutions.

The YWCA, while moving slowly, was still better at confronting racism than many other organizations. In part the structure of its board and membership, and the process of developing leadership from within, allowed change to happen. Also, those women involved in the YWCA, on the board and establishing programs, as Houston recalls, “had that commitment to being ‘of service.’ They were women that went into that because they believed in being ‘of service,’ so they were not committed

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<sup>54</sup> Brown interview, 13-14. As the Boston YWCA began to hire women of color in various positions, the leadership also became more diverse. The downtown unit became a more fully integrated unit, with Barbara Burke-Tatum became the first black administrator of the Clarendon Street branch, followed by Cheri Tucker-Brown.

<sup>55</sup> Collins, 145; Hine and Thompson, 308.

to 500% profit...I did not find when I was there that women were interested in short meetings. They really sat there and they worked, and they went into committee. I worked as hard for the YWCA as I did for (my job), and enjoyed every bit of it because you really felt you were learning and you saw the results and you thought that you were being part of service.”<sup>56</sup>

For Batson, the recognition of racism was critical:

There aren't many institutions that have withstood all of that kind of process and all of that kind of turmoil...the YWCA then started working on this imperative to eliminate racism. And I really think that there was a new thinking, that we have to work on racism...and even though there are people that say the YWCA hasn't done anything, they have constantly kept that imperative out front, and never wavered on it. And I think it's very important when an organization of that size and that reputation keeps that imperative out in front of people....They have recognized that racism exists. You know, people like to talk about economic problems, this kind of problem, it's not racism anymore. But they have kept that imperative alive and I think that's what melded those two groups together.<sup>57</sup>

King added, “I think we did have in the YWCA women who understood oppression of women, oppression of people of color, and I think there were enough black women in the organization who understood that it's possible to work within that, there was a possibility of movement, black women who wanted to deal with the issue in whatever way was necessary and cut across those lines.”<sup>58</sup>

In the same way, the race-specific nature of Aswalos House gave black women the opportunity to develop leadership in an organization, in which they determined the program, funding and director for the branch.

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<sup>56</sup> Houston interview, 19-20.

<sup>57</sup> Batson interview, 12.

<sup>58</sup> King interview, 6.

Their goal was not the “separatism of hostility, but of building internal community.” In Wade’s words, “Aswalos House was not about separation for the sake of separation, but rather about affirmation -- affirming oneself and one’s community.”<sup>59</sup> In so doing, they also developed a leadership voice in the National YWCA, and were instrumental in helping to pass the One Imperative. Aswalos House is part of the history of women confronting racism in the United States. Its story suggests the significant role separate and powerful institutions established by people of color can play in making genuine collaboration and principled coalitions between black women and white women possible.

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<sup>59</sup> Gilkes, 240; Wade interview, 2-3.