

Resisting Jim Crow: In-Depth Essay

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Protesting seating segregation at the Melba Theater, Dallas 1955.
Photo courtesy of the R. C. Hickman Photograph Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

Untold numbers of black men, women, and children valiantly resisted white supremacy in the South during the Jim Crow era, often risking their very lives. It is impossible to know how many of the African Americans lynched by white mobs were men and women who had challenged Jim Crow by some overt act of defiance, such as walking proudly down the street or talking back to whites rather than stepping aside. Most of the victims the lynch mobs were murdered, however, for accidentally stepping out of line or due to trumped up charges, as depicted in the novel **To Kill A Mockingbird**.

Sometimes, the victims were successful blacks who had aroused the hatred of jealous whites in the community, as was the case with **Ida B. Wells-Barnett's** Memphis friend and neighbor, Thomas Moss. His only crime lay in owning a prosperous grocery store that competed with a white-owned store in the same neighborhood. His murder by lynching launched Wells-Barnett on a lifelong crusade against the epidemic of mob murder that targeted blacks, especially men, in the Jim Crow era. Most of the time, the victims of mob rage were just men and women, boys and girls, who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time--innocent victims of Jim Crow America.

Southern whites commonly but mistakenly believed that the lynched and murdered men had violated southern white women. In fact, according to historian Robert Zangrando, only 25 percent of the mob-murdered men were even accused of rape or attempted rape in the period from 1882 to 1968--and, almost all of these charges were trumped up. Anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett put the figure even lower, based upon her studies of southern lynchings from 1882 to 1900. Because no systematic investigations ever occurred before the lynchings, this common notion that all the lynched men had assaulted white women was seldom challenged after the fact. Thus, the allegation stood as fact and became part of the racist political rhetoric white supremacists used in campaigns almost everywhere in the South and in much of the Midwest.

Nor were innocent blacks victims of a lynch mob always picked at random--although many certainly were. Instead, white rage frequently focused on individuals who had crossed the boundaries (the invisible color lines) separating the races or had allegedly committed petty crimes against whites in the community. Some of the victims were men and women who had reputations for being trouble makers; some ran afoul of whites in their work or in business; others had affronted the supremacy of the white social order just because they were strangers or not properly submissive. For example, according to records, over 45 percent of the men and women lynched by white mobs were accused of killing or assaulting a white person.

The rest were murdered for a variety of reasons that ranged from insulting a white person to robbery and theft (usually of white property), from speaking out in public to just being "uppity." Some of the victims accused of rape were men who had actually defied the most taboo of all strictures in the Jim Crow South: having social and even intimate relations with white women whom they loved and were loved by in return. The fictional character of Joe Christmas in **William Faulkner's** stunning novel, **A Light in August**, is but one example of such a case. Taken together, the victims of lynching had in common their blackness and their defiance, both conscious and unconscious, of the arbitrary rules governing the dictates of white supremacy.

Washington v. Du Bois

By 1903, the issue of how to most effectively deal with Jim Crow came to a head in the debate between the followers of Booker T. Washington and **W.E.B. Du Bois**. Washington, who was born in slavery, believed that by accepting segregation for the time being and working hard at farming and in community-based support groups, southern blacks would best be able to avoid the violence and terror around them. He supported and helped found schools and colleges (**Tuskegee Institute**), often funded by white philanthropists, which prepared blacks to be teachers or educated them in the so-called agriculture and the industrial arts. Such tactics, Washington argued, would in time bring a measure of economic security and an eventual middle-class basis for challenging disfranchisement and the terror of Jim Crow.

Du Bois, on the other hand, a New-England-born, Harvard-educated intellectual, had little tolerance for blacks who accepted segregation, the gradualist approach to regaining civil rights, or any form of white appeasement, although he understood that there were limits on what could be accomplished. He believed African Americans should insist on the right to vote while denouncing color discrimination as "barbarism." He also vigorously argued in favor of educating a talented elite of black Americans who would lead the masses in the resistance to Jim Crow. Du Bois broke openly with Washington in 1903, with the publication of his book, ***The Souls of Black Folk***, which included an essay critical of the Tuskegee president.

The Rise of the NAACP

The split became irreparable in 1905 when Du Bois founded, with William Monroe Trotter who was a long-time critic of Washington, the all-black **Niagara Movement** (named because of its organizational meeting site at Niagara Falls, in Canada). Advocating vigilant protest in place of gradualism, the Movement was no match, however, for Washington's well-financed "Tuskegee Machine," and it floundered in 1908. But, its message of opposition to Washington's style of appeasing whites was clear, and its existence helped set the stage for the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**. The NAACP was an integrated organization founded in 1909 by Du Bois and a coalition of like-minded white and black supporters of civil rights for African Americans, including **Oswald Garrison Villard** (editor of the *New York Evening Post* and the grandson of the abolitionist **William Lloyd Garrison**), **Mary Church Terrell**, **Clarence Darrow**, **Moorfield Storey**, **Joel E. Spingarn**, **Lillian Weld**, **Jane Addams**, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

The NAACP became the primary vehicle for the legal resistance to Jim Crow. Its forceful and persistent litigation and civil rights activism resulted in the Supreme Court's overthrowing the "separate but equal" doctrine in education through **Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education**. This 1954 ruling opened the door for other Court rulings, Federal legislation, and the popular agitation that together are known as the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s or the **Second Reconstruction**.

At first, the NAACP concentrated its attention on the lynching epidemic sweeping the nation in the first two decades of the new century. The Association launched a massive campaign of exposure, running accounts in the Association's newspaper, ***The Crisis*** edited by Du Bois, and preparing detailed reports for the public to read. Building upon this momentum, the Association organized and pushed for a Federal anti-lynching law. However, although the House of Representatives passed three anti-lynching bills (1922, 1937, and 1940), the measures always died in the Senate, killed by **filibuster** (or the threat of filibuster). No Federal anti-lynching law was ever achieved, although legislation did emerge in the 1960s that empowered the Federal Government to prosecute anyone hurting or killing a person exercising federally protected civil rights.

While the struggle to pass a Federal anti-lynching bill consumed much of the Association's energy, it also mounted scores of investigations and court actions dealing with issues, such as blacks being barred from juries, Jim Crow segregated cars on railroads and street railways, residential segregation by white property holders using racial **covenants**, disfranchisement, denial of civil liberties for blacks, and school segregation. From 1909 to 1936, most of its work centered on protecting civil liberties for blacks, representing alleged black criminals, and challenging the exclusion of blacks from juries. It also opposed vigorously the unequal salaries paid to black public school teachers. Although it won few of these cases--some did constitute important successes in the courts--the Association's unrelenting efforts kept the issues before the public eye.

In 1919 in Elaine, Arkansas, the savage attack on black farmers, who had attempted to organize a farmers' union, was one such case. As payback, a white mob murdered over 200 black men, women, and children; local authorities did nothing to prosecute the white killers but arrested 79 black sharecroppers for the murder of a white man. In a sham trial, black witnesses were whipped to induce testimony favorable to the prosecution, while the defense neither called witnesses nor put any of the defendants on the stand. An angry mob of whites threatened to lynch the prisoners unless they were convicted. After deliberating one hour, an all-white jury found 12 of the accused guilty of murder and sentenced them to death. The other men were given long prison terms. After four years of constant litigation, the NAACP managed to bring the case before the U.S. Supreme Court, where the convictions were overturned (*Moore v. Dempsey*, 1923).

The Association also achieved a major victory in 1915, when the Court overturned Oklahoma's grandfather clause, which restricted black voters to a handful of descendants of ante-bellum free blacks (*Guinn v. United States*). Other momentous Court victories resulting from NAACP efforts were those striking down municipal housing covenants that segregated blacks in residential districts (*Buchanan v. Warley* 1917), all-white primaries (*Smith v. Alright* 1945), all-white juries, and public facility segregation.

In its defense of civil liberties for blacks, the Association counted among its allies members of the **American Civil Liberties Union**, such as **Roger Baldwin**, and an array of black intellectuals, including historian **Carter G. Woodson**, founder of the **Association for the Study of Negro Life and History** in 1915. Another important supporter was **John Hope**, founder and president of the Atlanta University system, which consisted of five historically black colleges: **Morehouse**, **Spelman**, **Clark**, **Morris Brown**, and Gammon Theological Seminary. Also among the more important activists in the Association was the young **Ralph Bunche**, head of the political science department at Howard University.

In the 1930s, the NAACP began to focus more of its energies on Federal court litigation and the issue of segregated schools. This change in strategy caused W.E.B Du Bois to resign his membership and editorship of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*. Du Bois believed that segregation itself was not the essential problem facing blacks. Instead, he wanted the Association to concentrate on defending civil liberties and building an economic alliance with the nation's working class. His position was supported by a young Ralph Bunche, who wrote a penetrating essay in a 1935 issue of the *Journal of Negro Education*. In his essay, Bunche spelled out the conflict between the legalist approach--"autonomous legalism"--to defeating Jim Crow and the approach known as "economic instrumentalism."

For Bunche, the legalist approach failed to understand that the courts "are merely the reflections of the political and economic ideology of the dominant group." For intellectuals like Du Bois and Bunche, the NAACP should work to reform if not change the basic class order (economic instrumentalism) of America by concentrating on the exploitation of all workers--exploitation, in their opinion, that was the root cause of the Jim Crowism and discrimination suffered by African Americans. It was this belief that led Bunche to organize the National Negro Congress in 1936, an organization dedicated to uniting all existing political, fraternal, and religious organizations to

achieve full economic justice for African Americans. The group included nearly 600 organizations, and it elected **A. Philip Randolph**, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porter's Union, as its first president.

With Du Bois out of the picture, the NAACP moved aggressively to attack the constitutional basis of segregation. Under the presidential leadership of **Walter White** and the head of its legal department, **Charles Houston** ("The First Mr. Civil Rights") and his associate, **Thurgood Marshall** (future Supreme Court Justice), the Association focused on what it considered the three major evils of discrimination against blacks--school segregation, lynching, and Jim Crow laws. Over the next 20 years, the NAACP staged a coordinated strategy of legal battles, taking states and counties to court to enforce the key notion that segregation was permissible if the separate facilities for blacks were equal to those for whites. This legal strategy forced states, counties, and municipalities either to abandon segregation or to incur the costs of providing truly equal facilities--an impossibility in most cases, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association: "Up You Mighty Race."

While the NAACP was battling for full integration of blacks into American society and their Civil Rights in the courts, press and legislature, a flamboyant black leader created a two million follower-strong movement committed to pride in race and black history. Marcus Garvey, born in Jamaica and profoundly influenced by Booker T. Washington's self-help philosophy, urged his followers to look to their glorious African past: "Africa was peopled with a race of cultured black men, who were masters in art, science, and literature; men who were cultured and refined men, who, it was said, were like the Gods..." His organization, formed in Jamaica and brought to the United States with his arrival in 1916, was centered in Harlem. But, it also had followers in most black communities in the nation--indeed, it was the largest mass movement of African Americans in U.S. history.

Part of Garvey's appeal was the pageantry and spectacle that surrounded his organization. Garvey adopted many of the ceremonial tactics of the Catholic Church, Mormons and Masons, couching his message in religious terms and creating much pomp and ceremony. The uniformed and splendidly dressed African Legionnaires and Black Cross Nurses frequently paraded through Harlem, met in conventions, and openly preached their message of black pride and self-help. His UNIA businesses employed hundreds of members who worked in the Negro Factories Corporation, grocery stores, restaurants, a printing plant, and a steam laundry. Garvey's newspaper, the Negro World, presented his message in readable and interesting stories of black pride and individual achievement; it especially publicized his proposal to gather several million American blacks in a "Back to Africa" movement aimed at the liberating Africa from European colonial rule. To that end, Garvey founded the Black Star Line, a steamship company in which he sold stock for five dollars a share. The three ships in the company would be the first in a fleet of ships transporting blacks to settlements in southern Liberia and present-day Tanzania, which had been a German colony in East Africa.

But almost from the beginning, Garvey's Back to Africa vision met with stiff opposition. The League of Nations, the U.S. government, and several black leaders within the NAACP opposed his dream of a land base in Africa controlled by immigrants from America. Garvey had enraged many black leaders by his disdain and mockery of the NAACP for its elitism and of W.E.B. Du Bois as a hypocritical and "dependent mulatto." In return, Du Bois called Garvey the "most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America." For Garvey, the notion that black Americans could ever obtain justice within the system of a white, racist America was simply absurd. He once met with leaders of the Ku Klux Klan and announced that he fully understood their position and appreciated their honesty. He preached that all whites were Klansmen in their hearts and that it was foolish to try to work within the system.

In 1922, Garvey was arrested on the charge of having fraudulently used the U.S. mail to sell stock in the Black Star Line. He then was convicted and jailed (1925) in the Federal penitentiary in Atlanta. Most historians believe that the charges amounted to little more than a set-up against Garvey. Eight black leaders, for example, sent a letter to the U.S. Attorney General urging swift action against Garvey. Although Garvey's sentence was commuted in 1927, he was deported and never permitted to return to the United States. He died in London in 1940.

With Garvey out of the picture, his movement floundered and disappeared from the scene in a few years. But, his message of black pride lived on in the minds and hearts of the millions of African Americans inspired by his message. The father of Malcolm X had been a member of the UNIA. His son, a later champion of black pride in the 1960s, remembered how the meetings his father led always ended with his father proclaiming in unison with his fellow "Garvey-ites:" "Up, you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will!"

Cultural Resistance

With the organized challenges by groups like the NAACP and UNIA and their personal defiance of Jim Crow in their daily lives, African Americans embraced a rich cultural life of, basically, non-political protest against white supremacy that permeated all parts of black life. This cultural defiance manifested itself in African-American musical forms, such as ragtime, the rural-based blues, black gospel music, and urban-based jazz. Together, these black musical expressions constituted a veritable revolution in American music, especially once the recording industry began to market black music to white consumers.

Black audiences had always avoided the demeaning minstrel shows and their so-called "coon songs" that appealed to whites in the years after the Civil War. Instead, blacks expressed themselves musically in their church spirituals and hymns, as well as folk music and small group performances at picnics and in music halls in black neighborhoods. This tradition of African-American spirituals reached a national and international audience with the renowned Fisk University Jubilee Singers, who performed spirituals and slave songs for audiences of both races in Europe and the United States beginning in 1871. Towards the end of the century, black music began to take on a more popular form rooted in music halls frequented by white and black patrons in New Orleans and other towns along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Out of this background emerged a unique form of music called **ragtime**, which was popularized by the black musician **Scott Joplin** and based on banjo-syncopations transferred to the piano, thus blending African rhythms to European harmonies. Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," named after a brothel in a small Missouri town, sold over one million copies as sheet music at the turn of the century.

By 1920, **jazz** had replaced ragtime in popularity, especially among urban audiences. Unlike ragtime, which was confined to the piano, jazz drew upon plantation band music, minstrel shows, riverboat performers, and folk tunes of Irish and Scottish origins. Far less composed than ragtime, this new African-American music used brass, reeds, and drums instead of banjos, pipes, fifes, and violins. It was a new kind of music, originating in New Orleans and then traveling up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, Kansas City, and Chicago. Its most famous early practitioner was Ferdinand Pechet, who later changed his name to **Jelly Roll Morton**. Although it was not music with a message of protest as such, jazz reflected the unique experiences of African Americans, presenting energy and exuberance that defied white expectations and preference for simpler black musical fare. Jazz was an in-your-face type of music that burst onto the public scene in parades, funerals, outdoor concerts, and social clubs. The fact that jazz first appeared in the "red-light" New Orleans district of Storyville, the site of Congo Square in slave times (where enslaved and free blacks were allowed to congregate on Sundays to play their music and sing) is indicative of its roots in a black culture untouched by white standards or Jim Crow.

The most defiant form of African-American musical expression came from the rural bottomlands and delta regions of Mississippi and Texas. It was a genuine folk music in which a black

proletariat or working class of desperately impoverished sharecroppers and agricultural workers sang about the pain and desperation of their lives. Accompanied by a guitar, harmonica or washboard, the singers expressed feelings and emotions that spoke of resolution, fatalism, fortitude, and escape. By 1920, a handful of blues singers, such as **W. C. Handy** (the father of the blues), Gertrude Pridget (**Ma Rainey**), and Bill Johnson had become household names in the "juke joints" of Mississippi and the rural South. It was not the music of the black middle class; nor do any of its songs speak directly of Jim Crow, poll taxes, segregation, or protest. Rather, the blues speak of coping with a life made miserable by the cult of whiteness and the impoverishment of living as penniless sharecroppers or down-and-out black migrants to northern and southern cities. A typical lyric expresses desperation, anguish, and the hope for change, such as the following:

*"I've got the blues before sunrise, with the tears standing in my eyes,
It's such a miserable feelin', a feelin' I do despise."*

*"The blues is a lowdown achin' heart disease,
It's like consumption, killin you by degrees"*

*"The sun's gonna shine in my back-door some day
My back-door some day ... mmm,
The sun's gonna shine in my back-door some day,
And the wind's gonna change, gonn' blow my blues away"*

Blacks also found great pride and a sense of collective, non-political action in the achievements of black sports figures (**Jack Johnson**, **Jesse Owens**, **Joe Louis**, and **Jackie Robinson**) and black entertainers and performing artists (**Billie Holiday** and **Paul Robeson**) who stood proud and often defiant in the face of Jim Crow discrimination. The sultry Holiday gained international celebrity when she put a haunting poem about lynching to song. The Lyrics of "Strange Fruit," first performed in an integrated jazz club, captured the numbing horror that every black American understood all too well:

*"Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth.
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.*

*Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter cry."*

Like Holiday, Paul Robeson, the great athlete, singer and Shakespearean actor, used his art and celebrity to challenge Jim Crow at every opportunity. His stage debut in 1924 outraged white audiences when he appeared along with a white actress as an interracial couple in a Eugene O'Neill play. And, his 1928 rendition of "Ol' Man River" in the London production of the musical Show Boat, and a series of concerts in which he sang black spirituals, enabled him to speak his mind about Jim Crowism on stages all over American and Europe. By 1935, he was urging black Americans to turn to Africa for their spiritual identity. His concluding words in his 1935 essay, "What I want from Life," linked his personal dignity to his African heritage: "Meanwhile, in my

music, my plays, my films, I want to carry always this central idea--to be African. Multitudes of men have died for less worthy ideals; it is even more eminently worth living for."

In 1910, when Jack Johnson knocked out the white boxer Jim Jeffries, a former champion who had come out of retirement as the "Great White Hope" to beat the undefeated and arrogant black champion, black Americans savored the victory. They did the same in 1938, when Joe Louis beat the German Max Schmeling at Yankee Stadium in New York. A blues composer sang these words in homage to Louis:

*"It was only two minutes and four seconds poor Schmeling was
down on his knees.*

*He looked like he was praying to the Good Lord to have 'Mercy
on me please.'*

*If I'd had a million dollars I'd've bet
every dime on Joe,*

*I'd've been a rich man this very day and I wouldn't have to worry
no more."*

Holiday, Robeson, and countless blues musicians and jazz artists complemented, were nurtured by, and participated in a burst of African-American literary creativity in the 1920s known as the **Harlem Renaissance**. Based in Harlem, New York, which was the new world for thousands of black migrants from the South, the movement produced what its exponents called a New Negro poetry and literature that emphasized self-respect and defiance. This Harlem literature rejected sentimentality, romanticism, escapism, dialect, and caricature. It used ordinary but standard American speech to expose black feelings about racism, segregation, and discrimination. The words of **Claude McKay**'s poem, "If We Must Die," written shortly after WWI, set the tone for what followed:

*"If we must die--let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot*

*Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly
Pack.
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back."*

--Claude McKay (1919)

McKay's poem was only the beginning of hundreds of poems, novels, short stories, and essays that established black Americans as authentic literary and artistic voices during the 1920s. The level of originality and sophistication presented by these writers, artists, and musicians empowered all blacks and allowed them to stand tall and proud in the face of ongoing white resentment and repression. These achievements also took on a life of their own, apart from the larger white community, even as they became popular within the white community. Black intellectuals and artists began to debate the purpose of black art, music, and literature as a means of challenging Jim Crow. For many, the goal of defiance should be the goal of all black artistic expression. Others, however, began to see black creativity as being timeless, above the struggle with white supremacy and beyond the control of outside forces.

By 1930, although black cultural life involved much more than protest and defiance, its major thrust shouted out the rage African Americans felt about the injustices they daily suffered in a Jim Crow America. And yet, there is a sweetness and optimism that comes through much of the literature and the poetry, that speaks of great humanity. Much of the appeal of the blues to

blacks, for example, is its optimistic "looking up on down" that enabled blacks everywhere to take hope in the struggle itself. A poem by black poet Langston Hughes is a good example:

"I, Too, Sing America

*I am the darker brother
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong,
Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes,
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.*

*Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--*

I, too, am America"

--Langston Hughes (1926)

Black Women and the Resistance to Jim Crow

The role of African-American women deserves special note because of the position they occupied in the struggle against Jim Crow. Black women emerged from slavery determined to live and work as mothers and wives within a traditional household modeled largely on those of white society. They had high hopes, as did black men, to live on family farms and to avoid working in the fields so that they could care for their families in their homes. That is what most freedwomen wanted in coming out of slavery. This hope was soon dashed on the rocks of sharecropping and the economic tragedy that engulfed the South almost immediately after the Civil War. By 1900, most black women worked from daybreak to sunset in the fields alongside their family, and then, at home in the evening and through the night, cleaning, cooking, washing, and sewing in abject poverty. A significant number of these women began moving to southern cities in the 1880s, usually widows or married women who moved to town to work as domestics to help make ends meet at home. And, when the opportunity came to escape the South by moving to northern cities and towns after WWI, tens of thousands of women led the way. In fact, black women outnumbered black men in urban America in the 1920s almost three to one.

As the Jim Crow era terrorized black men with mob violence, deprived them of their political voice with disfranchisement, and shut them out of jobs in American industry in favor of white immigrants, it often fell upon black women to hold the black family together--both in the rural South and in the urban North. They did this by working as domestics in the homes of white people, by creating networks of kin and female friends to support one another as they eked out a livelihood, and by participating in their churches and mutual aid groups. This cooperation among black women produced a sense of pride that came not from their social status or from their work but rather from their families, neighborhood, and church.

Surprisingly, far more black women were educated by 1900 compared to black men, probably because daughters were encouraged to finish grade school while sons were forced to work in the

fields or left home at an early age to find work. For whatever reason, black women, often better educated than their white counterparts, became a major component in the battle against Jim Crow. Usually, their efforts were led by the wives and daughters of middle-class black men who had achieved some success in business (funeral homes, churches, insurance providers, barber shops, etc.). Yet, the rank and file of the membership in black women's clubs and self-help organizations came from working women in the black community. In every town and city in the nation, black women's clubs sprang up—usually rooted in local church meeting groups. They usually adopted a reform agenda, pushing especially hard for temperance, anti-lynching legislation, suffrage for women, and the availability of higher education for both sexes.

The Black Women's Club Movement, which pre-dated the NAACP, emerged as a means of battling Jim Crow. It was also a means of fighting for equal rights for black women, principally because middle-class and educated black women were excluded from the white women's club movement everywhere in America. When Ida B. Wells-Barnett was criticized by white women for pushing too hard for anti-lynching rather than suffrage during her speaking tours in England and Europe, American blacks responded by rising to her defense and forming the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). The energetic Mary Church Terrell, a highly educated black woman born to the daughter of slaves, became the organization's first president in 1896. Soon, chapters existed in most communities, and, by 1914, the NACW claimed 50,000 members in 1,000 clubs nationwide. Its self-help motto of "Lifting as We Climb" inspired the organization to focus on forming kindergartens and day nurseries, homes and orphanages for delinquent and abandoned girls, and settlement houses in black neighborhoods.

Other women-led companion groups also emerged: the Black Parent Teachers Association; the White Rose Industrial Mission, dedicated to helping black females who had migrated to New York from the South; the National Association of Wage Earners, devoted to defending the rights of domestic workers; Phillis Wheatley clubs, which provided living accommodations for single, black working women refused admission to YWCA facilities; the Working Girls' Home Association for cleaning women, laundresses, and nurses; and the Woman's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, the largest membership organization of black women in the nation.

The efforts by largely middle-class black females to "demand justice, simple justice, as the right of every race" by associating together and demanding reforms gave them a special power, rooted in their gender, during the Jim Crow era. Black men dared not speak so openly or defiantly about the brutalities of Jim Crow or else they might be lynched as would-be molesters of white women. The inability of white supremacists to attack black women in this way enabled them to speak defiantly in places and in ways that no black man ever could. In time, the black female voice of protest even won over many white club-women who joined with them in the 1920s to campaign against lynching.

Moreover, their position was further strengthened by the fact that the vast majority of black teachers in the nation were women, as was becoming the case among whites as well. Ninety percent of black teachers in the rural South by 1910 were women who usually had attained some years of college education at historically black colleges. This meant that a cadre of well-educated black women found themselves in strong positions of leadership because of their immunity to the most violent forms of anti-black violence and because of their education. Equally important, there emerged an attitude, or ethos, among educated black women in America by the end of the century that promoted a sense of obligation towards their race. These women were expected by the community to do well for themselves, not in the sense of material success but in the sense of personal achievement. And, they were also expected to do well for the black community. Their status and sense of self-worth was based on a creed of serving the black community and helping to uplift it in the face of Jim Crow. This attitude was instilled in African-American women by parents, church leaders and teachers, and they carried it with them in their work as nurses, teachers, mothers, and wives.

In Conclusion

Because black men could neither vote nor speak their minds without being lynched, the resistance of black Americans to Jim Crow operated largely outside the political arena. Instead, African Americans turned to publicity, legal challenges, bearing witness, self-help and advocacy groups, music, literature, and religion as the cornerstones of their battle against Jim Crow. These expressions of resistance flowed into a river of protest that engulfed the nation and transformed American society. In this sense, the resistance of African Americans to Jim Crow became an American saga: an incredible journey in which oppressed people empowered themselves and enriched the nation by their conduct.

Questions to Ponder

1. Investigate the strategies and tactics used by Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, the NAACP, and Marcus Garvey's "Black Nationalist" movement. How exactly did they differ from one another? Which of these movements or organizations would you have joined? Why?
2. Select three of the individuals in this essay and create a dialogue of them discussing their opinions with each other on the following issue: "How best to stop the lynching that plagues the South and is moving into the rest of the nation." Create a time and place in which this conversation takes place.
3. Compare the reaction of whites to Jack Johnson, Joe Lewis, and Jessie Owens. How do you explain the difference in the way the public responded to these three athletes? Does the time in which they lived and participated in sports play a role in the public's response? Which one of the athletes do you most admire and why?
4. African-American leaders as diverse as Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Dubois, and Paul Robeson shared an abiding interest in Africa. What did they commonly believe, and how did they demonstrate their ideas. Read some of Garvey's writings in comparison to those by Paul Robeson. How do they compare or differ on the subject of Africa. Do you think that looking to Africa as a common homeland and heritage would have been useful to them in dealing with white supremacy. In what way(s)?
5. Although the creative expressions of blacks during the Harlem Renaissance represented a high point of black literary and artistic achievements, not everyone within the movement agreed about the purpose of black literature. Some intellectuals like Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois urged black writers to promote positive images of blacks and black life in their poetry, essays, and literature. Others like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston believed that the real lives of black people should be the subject of their art. What do you think? Can art and literature reduce racism? How would you respond to the position taken by Langston Hughes in sarcastically dismissing the idea that writers could reduce racial tensions? He once said, "Art would break down color lines, art would save the race and prevent lynching! Bunk!" What kinds of poems would you write as a black person in the 1920s in America to confront racism? What kinds of songs? What kinds of paintings? Short stories? Plays? Try creating one of these for your fellow students and then explain your thinking and purpose. Are your fellow students convinced?
6. Research the life of Bessie Smith, the great blues singer, who is said to have personified the blues. "She knew the blues. She sang the blues. She lived the blues." During the 1920s, no singer in America was more popular than she was. How do you explain this? What about her style and her music made her so popular? Do you like or dislike her music? Explain your answer and your feelings.

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