

# **interrupted labour by another name: resistance**

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We, African American Government Girls, interrupted the pre-determined destiny of becoming servants, maids, and cooks.

In High School we conjugated Latin roots, excelled in English, and learned math using second-hand books.

Government jobs and civil service exams advertised on post office walls  
No one expected us to answer Uncle Sam's calls.

Passing the exam made us eligible for a place at the table  
Despite the word 'Negro' on the application label.

Leaving behind families and early childhood schoolmates  
We arrived from adjacent northern cities and segregated southern states.

To the nation's capital by bus, train, or car  
A patriotic call to arms came from near and far

We came by choice, frustration, or obligation.  
Union Station became the destination.

We took Washington, DC by storm,  
Filling jobs at the Pentagon, Navy, Treasury Department, and other federal agencies, we resided in upscale segregated dorms.

Determined to make a difference despite the roadblocks  
We arrived early to punch in on time clocks.

Our early days on the job were not always easy,  
One could lose a position if accused of being lazy.

The National Council of Negro Women held Wartime Employment Clinic sessions  
To teach us essential job survival lessons.

We signed the Negro Workers Pledge to be poised, dependable, and healthy.  
Cooperative attitudes, excellent attendance, and buying savings bonds could make you wealthy.

Attending church became a way of life  
Biblical passages taught us how to deal with racism and office strife.

While 'good government jobs' elevated our social status and we dressed to the nines  
We still sat in isolated seats behind White passengers on bus lines.

World War II ended, and we chose to stay.  
Financial emancipation, monetary raises, and years of steady federal employment paved the way.

We now pass the torch to the next generation  
To tell this story to the entire nation.

### **the absent narrative of 'Government Girls'**

One of my most cherished childhood memories involves time spent turning the pages of the treasured family heirloom, *Whirl-I-Gig, A Pictorial Story of Midway Hall for Government Girls*, a yearbook chronicling the lives of young women working in Washington, DC during the Second World War (WWII). My mother appeared in the yearbook, serving as a 'Government Girl' during WWII. The term 'Government Girls' refers to women employed in white-collar positions by the federal government during WWII (Gueli, 2006). I spent long winter nights looking at the photos found in the maroon copy of her yearbook. I turned each page of the yearbook with cautious deliberation and wonderment, looking at a photograph of my mother, casually sitting on the floor in Midway Hall, a government-sponsored segregated dormitory in 1946 (see Figure 1).

The yearbook and photo captured my imagination at the tender age of 6 years old. Black girl magic ... this is what I wanted to be when I grew up. In the photo's background, my mother's friends relaxed in one of the wing parlours as they listened to sultry sounds of Duke Ellington's band. Their smiles and casual demeanor radiated pride, confidence and patriotism: I became curious about who these women were and how they came to Midway Hall. Unbeknownst to this 6-year-old girl of West Indian parents, my mother and the women featured in these archival photos represented a small but significant group of people who travelled north during the Great Migration (Hine and Thompson, 1998; Wilkerson, 2010; Wynn, 2010). The Great Migration, beginning in earnest in the 1920s, signalled the mass exodus of African Americans from the South to northern cities to find a better life.

At an early age, my mother's life as portrayed in the *Whirl-I-Gig, A Pictorial Story of Midway Hall for Government Girls* yearbook sparked my interest in exploring the experiences of African American women who secured employment in the federal government during WWII (see Figure 2). The copy of this archival yearbook and the sepia photo of my mother remain my most honoured and treasured memory

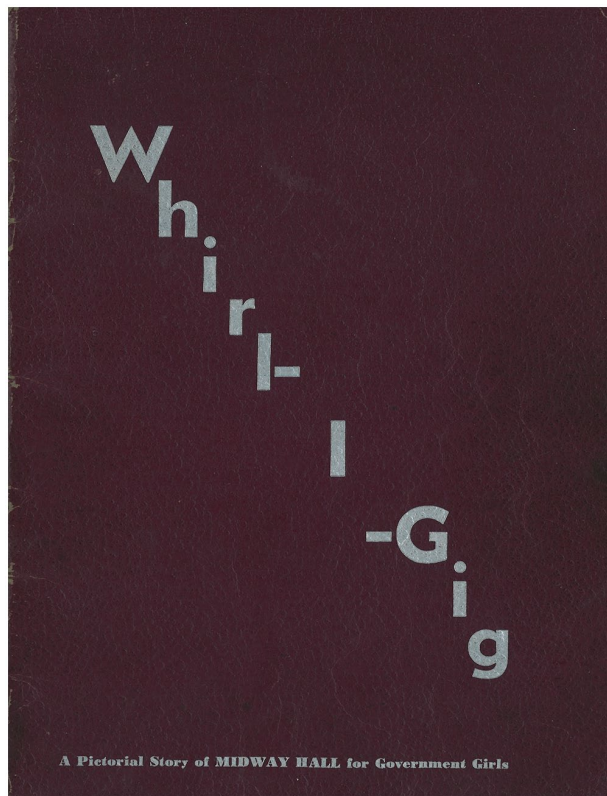


**Figure 1.** Edith Brinn sitting on the floor in Midway Hall  
*Source:* Archival photograph from the estate of Edith Brinn Wharton

of her. My intellectual curiosity intensified as our nation celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of WWII. I longed to learn more about the Government Girls and to add their seemingly absent narratives into United States history.

### **visual representation in the archive(s)**

The visual images and stories of single African American women, known as the Government Girls, appear lost in American history, with no representation on the pages of general American history textbooks or popular WWII memorabilia. Yet, the images of the Government Girls served as an indelible mark in my memory. Images in textbooks and WWII exhibits continue to be filled with images of blue-collar African American women workers, ignoring the contributions of white-collar African American workers to the war effort. Additional photos and images were retrieved from the Library of Congress, the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, the National Archives and the personal photos of the women featured in this



**Figure 2.** Cover of *Whirl-I-Gig, A Pictorial Story of Midway Hall for Government Girls*

Source: Archival photo from the estate of Edith Brinn Wharton

piece. Photographs of Black women engaged in the war effort largely focused on images of domestic or blue-collar workers; however, US Governmental publications, through the Library of Congress Photography Division and the research of visual images, clearly validate the presence of African American Government Girls (Orbach and Natanson, 1992). Barbara Orbach and Nicholas Natanson (*ibid.*) highlight two women who shared the bond of race but presented socioeconomically divergent images of Black women. Gordon Parks' iconic photograph of a government char woman, *American Gothic, 1942*, captured a different reality for the Black worker. Parks' stark image raised consciousness in terms of race relations. Ella Watson holds a mop and a broom as she stands solemnly in front of an American flag (see Figure 3).

The image of Ella Watson created a visual argument reinforcing the harsh reality of a segregated America and the employment opportunities for working-class Black women. 'When viewed as documentation, photography confounded present day racial stereotypes' (Kitch, 2001, p. 95). Conversely, Jewel Mazique's photographs, found in the files of the Library of Congress, offer an in-depth examination of the life of a middle-class Black Government Girl (see Figure 4). Orbach and Natanson's (1992) article chronicled Mazique's daily experiences as a federal employee at the Library of Congress, offering a counter-narrative of the domestic worker.

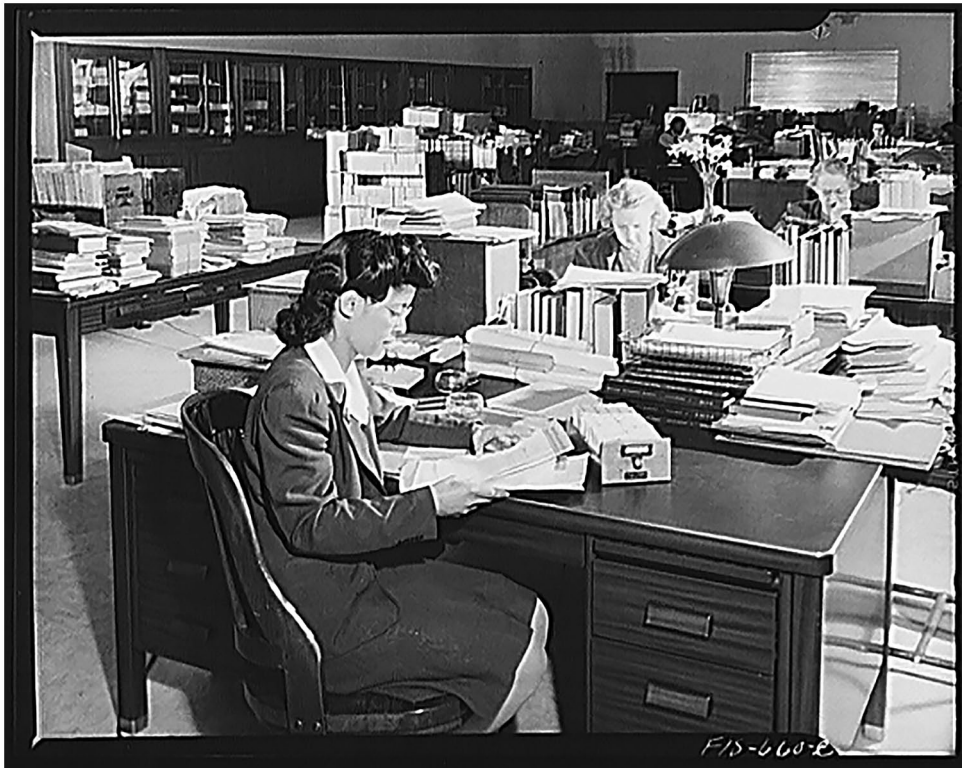


**Figure 3.** *American Gothic*, 1942

Source: Photograph by Gordon Parks, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC

Ironically, such images were not widely distributed to the public during or after the war. However, as Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (1988, p. 17) argue, 'Photographic images, like statistics, do not lie, but like statistics the truths they communicate are elusive and incomplete'. To support this claim, a picture of an ingénue African American graduate graced the cover of an African American magazine, *The Crisis*, in August 1922. Carolyn Kitch (2001, p. 95) agrees with this analysis, showing how a photograph on the magazine cover provided 'proof that African Americans attended major universities and succeeded there'. Therefore, *The Crisis'* use of photos on its covers can be seen as a form of documentation and serves as a counter-narrative to the images of Black women during the war years (*ibid.*).

According to Maureen Honey (1999), printed advertisements did not feature pictures of Black women during the war. Black women had been featured occasionally in pre-war advertisements as maids or mummies, but these images disappeared from any mainstream American magazines in the 1940s. During this period, likely workers may have wondered whether their contribution to the war effort mattered. The civic participation of African American women during the war years, chronicled in the *African American Women's Journal*, affirmed the role of African American women in promoting the Double V effort. The



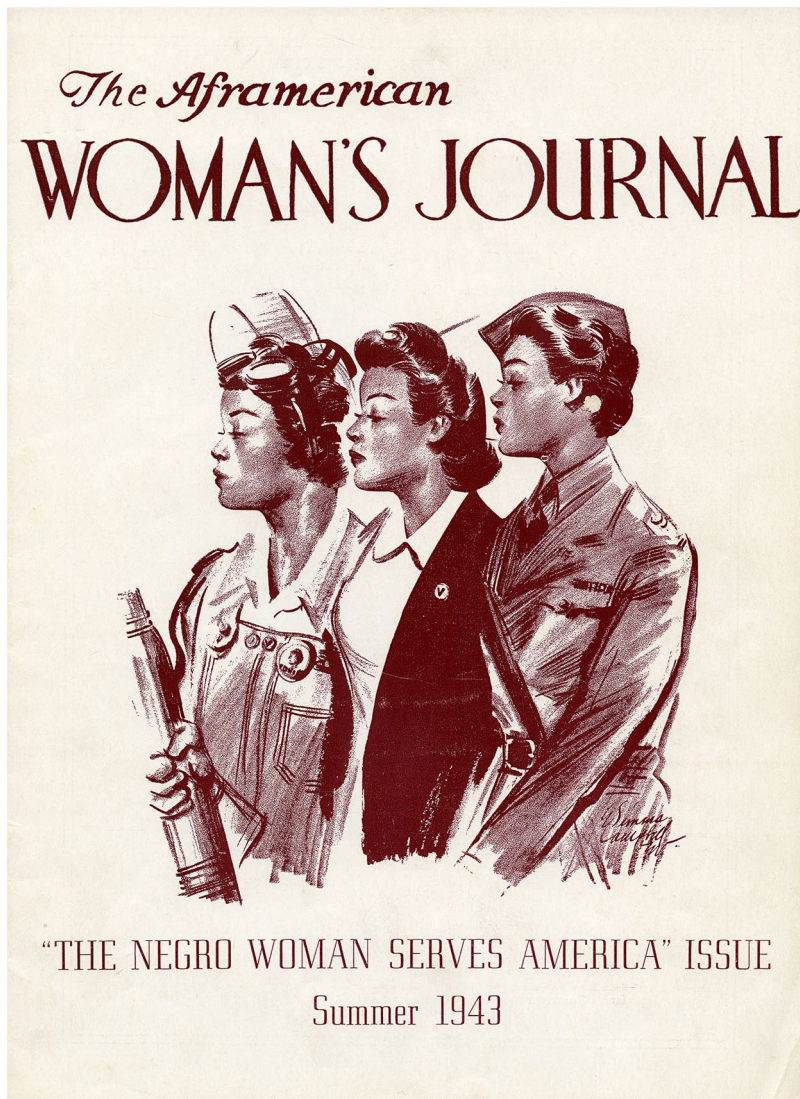
**Figure 4.** Photo of Jewel Mazique working in the accessions division of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC

Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC

Double V effort recognised that African American soldiers were engaged in a double fight for victory, both abroad and at home.<sup>1</sup> The *Aframerican Women's Journal*, published quarterly for 35 cents, offered a rare and positive slice of Black life. The cover of the summer 1943 issue proudly featured a stylised illustration of three Black women war workers (see Figure 5).

Another significant publication, *The Negro Woman Serves America* journal, featured stories of civilian and military women, book reviews, short stories about the patriotic contributions of African Americans to the war effort and a special congratulatory note from First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. Reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's drawings, the pen and ink drawing by Black illustrator E. Simms Campbell unequivocally confirmed the patriotic presence of African American women in the war effort. The journal also boldly featured the issue of institutional racism. Each article in this special issue offered pragmatic advice on

<sup>1</sup> African American men in the military believed that as they fought in the war overseas they were also fighting for equality in America. Oppressive discrimination practices and Jim Crow laws continued to be enforced in America. African American Government Girls also adopted the Double V ideology by becoming actively involved in wartime service community efforts (e.g., buying war bonds, hosting social events for servicemen, etc.).



**Figure 5.** Cover of 'The Negro Woman Serves America' issue of *The Aframerican Women's Journal*

Source: National Archives for Black Women's History (Mary McLeod Bethune Council House NHS)

how to seize the opportunity of employment and play a patriotic role in the war effort. One article made a clear argument for taking advantage of volunteer opportunities with the American Women's Volunteer Services (AWVS) to encourage women to visibly support the war effort (National Park Service, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House NHS, National Archives for Black Women's History, 1943).

A small but significant segment within the research community has focused on visual images of war workers. Leslie T. Davol (1998) and Carl Fleischauer and Beverly W. Brannan (1988) focused their work on



**Figure 6.** Photo of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune  
 Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC

examining visual images during the war era. Memoirs recounting wartime romances (Alsmeyer, 1982), military history and work experiences all failed to include the experiences or perspectives of Black women. Additionally, government publications from the Women's Bureau from the Department of Labor only offered statistical information on occupational issues related to war workers. As early as the mid-1920s, A. Phillip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a vocal advocate for working-class African Americans, became instrumental in expanding access to employment opportunities for African American Government Girls.

James J. Kimble and Lester C. Olson (2006) created an analysis of the visual rhetoric behind the Rosie the Riveter image (Honey, 1999), by challenging our romantic addiction to this 1940s iconic legend. The body of scholarly research of Karen Anderson (1982), Sherna Berger Gluck (1987), Maureen Honey (1983, 1984) and Megan Taylor Shockley (2004) recognised the myopic representation of Rosie. However, while the stark realities of wartime employment (e.g., gender discrimination, microaggressions, sexism) for women existed within this segment of the literature, research literature fails to recognise the lived experiences of African American Government Girls. The only evidence of these women in my review of scholarly studies exists in print media (e.g., archival newspapers and magazines) and government publications. Office of War Information (OWI) photographer Ester Bubley's photos of female white Government Girls and an article featuring Jewel Mazique and Ella Watson (Orbach and Natanson, 1992) remain the only evidence I located regarding the history and experiences of African American Government Girls.



### **'hold your job'**

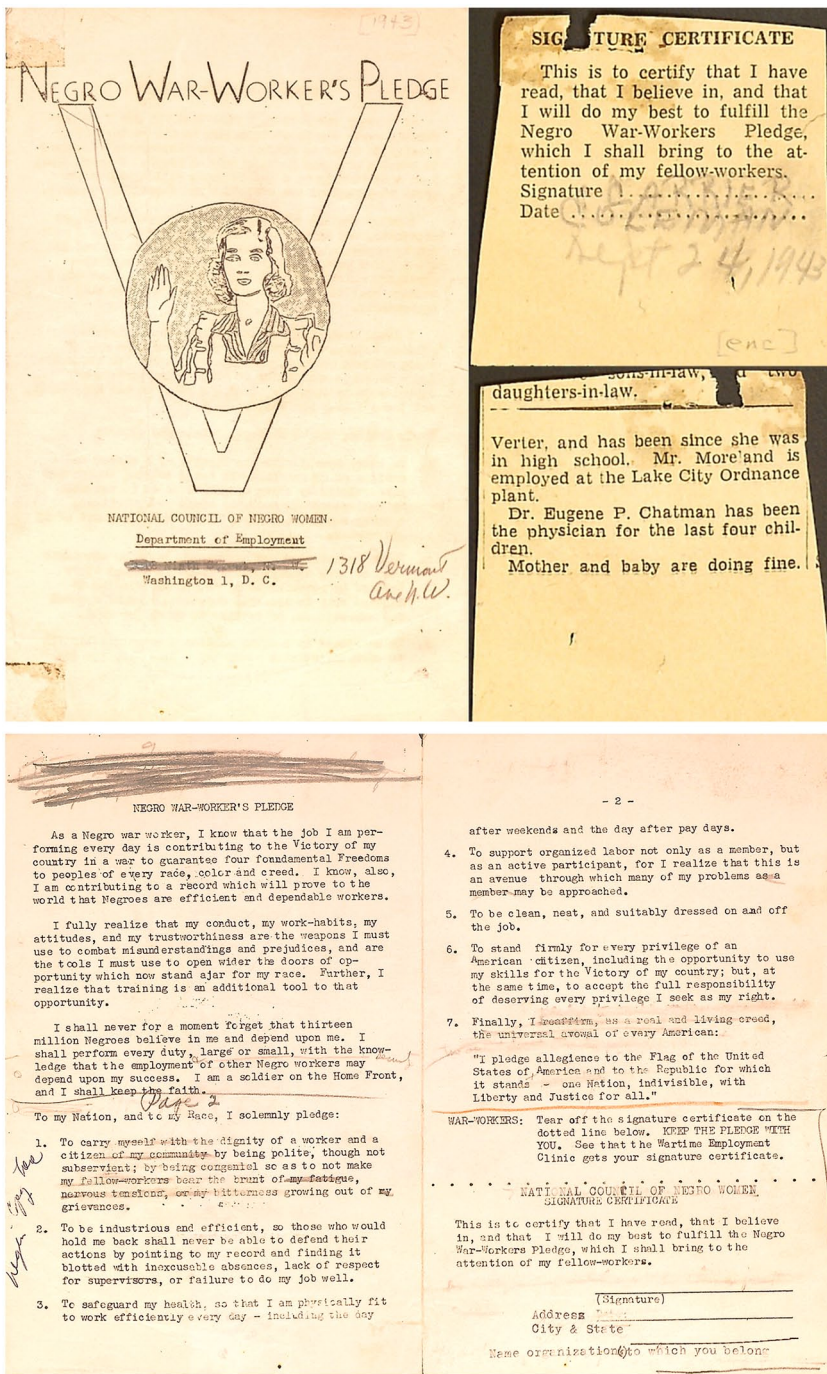
African American Government Girls sought advanced educational opportunities in their high school years and developed marketable skills. They earned their appointments to government service by passing the civil service examination, and in some cases moving to another city to begin work. In an era of segregation, white women and Black women could not live together. For African American Government Girls to live in housing comparable to that of white Government Girls was inconceivable during the 1940s. However, the remarkable friendship between two invincible feminists meant an unscripted move to make reasonable accommodations for Black women. Outspoken feminists Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune used their political muscle to force the construction of dormitories for Black women (see Figure 6). Midway, Slowe, Guam and Wake Halls served as hallowed grounds for liberated civil servants.

When Government Girls entered federal employment, they encountered racism and sexism in the work environment. However, they persisted in their decision to 'keep their job'. Combating ignorance and naïveté became the new mission for African American leaders in Washington, DC. The National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Delta Sigma Theta and other civic groups combined forces to support the new cadre of Government Girls who arrived in the District of Columbia. The establishment of the NCNW District of Columbia Wartime Employment office conducted specific lessons in charm, behaviour and attitude, personal hygiene, efficiency and budget and time management. Correspondence between the NCNW national office and other organisations nationwide indicated an aggressive and strategic approach. A nationwide effort demanded a script for every organisation to follow. Letters flooded into the NCNW office from individuals, colleges, universities and organisations which desired to become a part of the movement.

A pamphlet used to get the attention of Negro Government Girls reminded the women not to take their new government jobs for granted. The 'Hold Your Job' campaign signalled an aggressive and intentional strategy to ensure job security (see Figure 7).

An examination of the NCNW Clinic Registration Form suggested the organisation's mission of supporting women in their quest to survive in a new social setting. Each line on the application form was structured to develop a complete profile of the candidate. The form required the applicant to record their current and past residences, promotions and transfers within government agencies, short- and long-term career goals, job-related problems and solutions to solving the problems and previous employment experience. The Program Planning Information section asked registrants to rank their preferences for assistance in eight distinct areas (i.e. charm, personality, health and hygiene, nutrition, budget, housing, efficiency and union participation). The NCNW correspondence indicated it conducted in-depth seminars on each topic for the women during the week of the 'Hold Your Job' campaign. The NCNW adopted the WWII ration book as another strategy to encourage and teach African American women to 'Hold Your Job'. The *Job Security Non-Ration Book*, created by the NCNW, consisted of seven principles to guide the war worker. The series, designed as stamps, focused on the following values: efficiency, dependability, cooperative attitude, good health, charm and thriftiness (Figure 8).

The NCNW encouraged the recipients of the Non-Ration Book to 'use every stamp in this book. Remember: these stamps are not rationed! Use them freely'. They also created ten cartoon panels directing African American workers on how to 'Hold Your Job' (see Figure 9). The cartoons focused on the following values:



**Figure 7.** 'Hold Your Job' Campaign: Negro War-Workers' Pledge  
Source: National Archives for Black Women's History



**Figure 8.** Job Security Non-Ration Book  
Source: National Archives for Black Women's History



**Figure 9.** 'Hold Your Job' NCNW campaign cartoon panels  
Source: National Archives for Black Women's History

working harmoniously, drunkenness, absenteeism, rowdiness and clowning, 100% effort in work, fighting, cleanliness, patriotism, thriftiness and cooperation.

After working a forty-hours-a-week job, it was not unusual for Government Girls to seek refuge in the pews of a local church. Government Girls who attended church services on Sundays likely heard sermons from the preacher on how to get and keep a job with the federal government. In the African American tradition, once a young, single woman becomes settled in a new city or college campus, it is imperative that she find a church home. There she is automatically covered under the practice of 'watch care'. In the African American church, the term 'watch care' signals church members to 'watch over' and welcome individuals who arrive new to a city without a church home. Spiritual comfort, emotional support and guidance all fell under the term 'watch care'. Individuals maintained their regular church membership while worshipping in a new community. Offered to all visitors, the church members laid hands and lifted up newcomers in prayer. Members in attendance at predominantly Black congregations listened as preachers boldly directed them to follow their biblical examples of endurance and perseverance.

## **challenging stereotypes**

Their intentional decision to become civil service employees interrupted the expectation for Black women to work in domestic service positions. Unpaid employment, servitude and the institutionalised practice of young girls following in the footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers to join the ranks of domestic service was abruptly interrupted by employment opportunities during WWII (Wharton-Beck, 2021). Federal government employment affected the socioeconomic status of the Government Girls by providing a steady source of income, benefits and promotions. Government Girls took advantage of academic and social opportunities. Forming clubs, making and keeping friendships and gaining inspiration from clergy and Black journals helped those living in American society, including the Government Girls, keep their jobs and begin to enjoy the benefits of steady employment. The employment options of WWII changed the course of history for these women and for their families. Young Black civil servants represented the thousands of young women who quietly and intentionally made the decision to change the course of their lives by taking a civil service test. The story of the African American Government Girls offers a counter-narrative of Black women in the diaspora (Wharton-Beck, 2021). They challenged stereotypes, persisted despite consistent discrimination and overcame their humble beginnings to achieve a middle-class life in a pre-Civil Rights era.

The poem that began this piece amplifies and illuminates early feminists who defied the conventional rules of society to become independent, wage-earning government employees. My mother, one of the thousands of African American Government Girls, unapologetically recognised the urgency and agency of the moment to advance and change the trajectory of her life.

## **author biography**

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