A post-war woman could not escape the color of her skin.

There would most likely be a consensus that race was the most significant determinant of a woman's experience in the post-war days. The answer is never that simple, though. Nothing ever happens in isolation, and history's relationships are much more nuanced than this simple statement. The place with the worst racism was the old South. Unsurprisingly, this region became the epicenter of many civil rights events. Poverty and class also played into the equation; there was undoubtedly a sense that a growing and ever more ambitious black population would displace those at the lower end of the white class structure. This often made the kind of "hard-working folk, the most fervently racist. Hard-working folks like street cops, bus drivers, or the small businessman running his cafeteria. A black person in Chicago or Los Angeles did not necessarily have it as hard as one in Montgomery. The purpose, then, is to unravel these threads of class, place, and culture to see how it influenced racial discrimination but also started to show the cracks where the light of liberation could shine through.

"Pauli Murray, a legendary lawyer, writer, activist, feminist, and minister, perhaps comes closest to getting at the stifling ways that racism encapsulated African American women's lives, noting that it "was the atmosphere one breathed from day to day, the pervasive irritant, the chronic allergy, the vague

apprehension which made one uncomfortable and jumpy. We knew the race problem was like a deadly snake coiled and ready to strike, and that one avoided its dangers only by never-ending watchfulness."[1] The case of a 14-year-old boy, Emmet Till, is perhaps the best example of this kind of atmosphere. Emmet was lynched in Mississippi after allegedly making a sexual pass at a white woman, Carolyn Bryant. This case, too, played into many aspects of the complicated and interwind factors. Emmet lived with his mom in Chicago and visited family back south near Money, Mississippi. He was perhaps not as attuned to the racial culture. And his lack of weariness did him in. But it is unclear what the true motivation was for the lynching. Was it to put a northern black in his place, or was it related to his cousins? Caroline Bryant was herself put in a difficult position to be subservient and a good wife. When his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, came from the north to look for justice, she was quickly ridiculed as a single mother who did not raise her son properly. She and the lawyers and activists were treated as northern interlopers meddling in the order of the South. [2]

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[1] Berry, Daina Ramey, and Kali N. Gross. “Chapter Eight: Alice’s Medals and Black Women’s War at Home, 1940-1950.” Essay. In *A Black Women’s History of the United States*, 154. Boston: Beacon Press, 2020.

[2] Cerar, Marissa Jo. Whole. *Women of the Movement* 1, no. 1-6. ABC American Broadcast Company, January 6, 2022.

Lilly Ledbetter describes her upbringing and how she felt about poverty. She also describes her Indian heritage, "Sweet Granny Mac," with whom she shared a room with her dad and mom. It is probably true of the time that people of mixed indigenous heritage were perhaps not the Goodyear kind of people. The post-war years certainly favored a white male as the preferred employee again. This is tied to the cycles of poverty and generational violence and abuse. Even though Lilly emphasized class and poverty, race also played into the balance.[3]

To be a nurse is arguably a noble pursuit, yet we see Congress passing around the idea of conscripting registered nurses instead of letting in more black women. That one's place in the world was so firmly defined that even in the trenches of war in arguably the worst conditions, there was resistance to the person who could provide life-saving treatment purely based on skin color. Instead, let soldiers die rather than have the disgrace of a black nurse for white soldiers. Similarly, the nurses caught up in the early Philippine invasion were not considered capable as women, and credit was given to the male physicians who had very little to do with their efforts or survival—a case where class and education could not rise above sex. [4]

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[3] Ledbetter, Lilly M., and Lanier Scott Isom. “Chapter 1: Possum Trot.” Essay. In *Grace and Grit: My Fight for Equal Pay and Fairness at Goodyear and Beyond*, 9–21. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2013.

[4] Collins, Gail. “17: World War II: "She’s Making History, Working for Victory .” Essay. In *America’s Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*, 378, – 379.

The post-war years tell of the sprawling new neighborhoods. Women are returning to raising families while their husbands work. The truth is this was not the life for most African Americans. "African Americans and other minorities were cut off from the chance to buy that first low-cost, low-interest home which formed the basis of the economic fortune of so many white families." Americas women, 400) Poverty in the black communities skyrocketed as many lost the jobs they had during the war years. Many ended up in poor inner-city neighborhoods and government housing (the projects). [5]

A woman's life in 1950 depended most strongly on her race. However, threads of class and culture were also intertwined. Where you were born made a difference. But nothing as rigid at holding a woman down as the color of her skin. It would keep her out of a suburban house. Out of an office job. Out of a good school or college, at the back of the bus. It would strip her of the protection of the law and police.

New York, NY: HarperCollins e-books, 2009.

[5] Collins, Gail. "18: The Fifties: Life at the Far End of the Pendulum." Essay. In *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*, 400. New York, NY: HarperCollins e-books, 2009.