

struggling to connect: white and black feminism in the movement years

Why did an interracial feminist movement fail to develop in the United States? Were white feminists racist?

I was a political activist in the 1960s. I am a white woman deeply influenced by the civil rights movement, Black Power politics (including the Black Panther Party), and Marxism. I became a feminist in the late 1960s. Having been brought up in the 1950s, when white, suburban, middle-class Americans were filled with the hope and prospects of prosperity and harmony, I was an optimist. When I realized that most southern African Americans lived in servitude and poverty, I was disturbed and disillusioned. My disillusionment with America has lasted many decades, and yet, surprisingly, like many of my generation, ideas of universality and justice still move me, as does the idea of an interracial society in which race is irrelevant to people's life chances and relationships.

I recount this because, as an activist in the socialist feminist movement in Boston, I, like most other white, former new leftists and antiwar activists who became feminists, was committed to creating an interracial feminist movement in the United States. We failed. As a sociologist and scholar of the movements of the 1960s, I have pondered this for many years. Here, I want to explore the issue of race in the feminist movement, particularly why an interracial feminist movement did not develop. While the political story of young, radical feminists who struggled to understand the divisive power of race may seem marginal today in the current era, it is not. Their story is relevant to the problems we face as a society with an increasingly diverse population. In their passionate efforts to create an inclusive feminist movement, they were pioneers in addressing one another directly across racial lines, in struggling to connect while respecting racial difference.

The early women's liberation movement was accused of being racist. Commentators, including whites at the time and since, have consistently described white feminists' emphasis on gender at the expense of race and class as naive, hurtful, and obtuse about what it means to be a woman of color in the United States. The accepted explanation for the whiteness of the feminist movement was that it

was composed of women who were ignorant about racism and the problems that women of color faced. Because of their white, middle-class privilege, the account goes, most early feminists, even those who were radical, socialist, and dissenters from the status quo, created a feminism in which black women—and black and white women are the primary focus here—were unwelcome and uncomfortable. As a result, feminism remained predominantly white for many years.

I had been a socialist feminist, and I knew we were not racist. Nevertheless, in the conventional history of feminism, the movement was. I should add that this subject continues to create strong feelings among former activists. It is a controversial area of research and discussion.

After a considerable period of time, I realized that my research questions were shaped by "white nostalgia." Whites like myself, of my generation, were (and are) sentimental about racial integration. They saw a harmonious, color-blind society as desirable and assumed it would come about if they were consciously antiracist. Race would be irrelevant; integration would prevail. Young, middle-class whites had grown up with the image of "The Family of Man"—the title of a well-known 1950s Museum of Modern Art photographic exhibit curated by Edward Steichen that became a book found in many middle-class homes, a book that underscored the diversity of humankind across the globe. Many of them believed that if only whites would give up their prejudice, "we" could all live together harmoniously. Dr. King reinforced this idea; love between the races, even justice, could be achieved through whites' good intentions. The early, youthful, radical civil rights organization, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had as one of its symbols white and black hands intertwined.

Young, white radicals harbored an image of love between the races that most of them, significantly, had never experienced—one that was based on an idea rather than the reality of racial domination and racist institutions. Most northern whites had little or no contact with African

Americans; segregation prevailed in the North as well as the South. Movement whites were often deeply moved by interracial relationships. Inspired to recall his time in the southern civil rights movement by the anthem, "We Shall Overcome," activist Pat Watters wrote, "'Black and White Together,' I feel the old, choked, aching joy and, for a second, the old leap of hope, boundless hope. We shall overcome." While blacks were not disinterested, they were certainly more interested in equality and justice. Integration was a means to equality, not necessarily the goal.

These realizations led me to recognize that my research questions were informed by disappointment. I was nostalgic for interracial harmony and mourned for what I hoped could have been. I had thought it would be easier than it was, that African-American women would simply see that we were all sisters under the skin and join us. But they did not flock to the feminist movement. I realized that I had to revise my regretful questions and try objectively to understand what had occurred from the perspectives of both white and black women. I learned, for example, that as early as the beginning of the civil rights movement, there were tensions between white and black women activists.

the civil rights movement

In 1964, when SNCC was facing a crisis about its future, two white, female SNCC activists, Mary King and Casey Hayden, with some help from other white women, wrote an anonymous paper about sexism in the organization. It was not well received, as they had suspected it would not be. They had not used their names for just this reason. At the end of a long day at the conference where the paper was submitted, one of the leaders of SNCC, Stokely Carmichael, said in jest, "The only position for women in SNCC is prone!" Repeated and interpreted numerous times, this sentence became iconic. In particular, one of the strands of the radical, white women's liberation movement can in part be traced back to this moment when white women articulated a critique of the situation of women in SNCC and to hear Carmichael's response. This and a second statement by King and Hayden influenced white, female activists in the New Left and antiwar movements who spearheaded socialist feminism. They had been chafing at male chauvinism in the mixed movements and took Carmichael's statement at face value; they believed that he seriously meant what he said and that it represented the attitudes of movement men.

Black, female, civil rights activists did not worry about the sexism in SNCC to the extent that white women did. In

Winifred Breines' most recent book is The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of Black and White Women in the Feminist Movement.

fact, they criticized white women for bringing up issues of gender in the midst of a life-and-death racial struggle. Many denied that they had experienced the kind of sexism about which northern, middle-class, white civil rights volunteers complained. Nor had they felt powerless; they had been raised to take care of and stand up for themselves. SNCC activist Joyce Ladner stated, "We came from a long line of people, of women, who were doers, strong black women, who had historically never allowed anyone to place any limitations on them." The Stokely Carmichael statement and debate about the memos exposed and informed differences between white and black women that followed them into subsequent movements.

These disparate perspectives were shaped by race and class. Many more white women than black women focused on gender issues, discontented with expectations that they would work in offices and in freedom schools (informal schools, taught primarily by white females, set up in Mississippi for black children) and not be out in the field organizing, unhappy that men were the official leaders and that SNCC seemed to be growing less democratic. Black women were impatient with what they considered middle-class, white women's issues when black women were risking their lives against dangerous white segregationists in a racial struggle of immense magnitude. They perceived the complaints of sexism as unjustified or inappropriate. Some were unhappy with heterosexual, interracial, romantic relationships that developed, usually between northern white women and southern black men, particularly during Freedom Summer in 1964, when many white students went south. Ironically, given the interracialism of that summer, gender and sexual tensions divided women racially.

black power

By the second half of the 1960s, the Black Power movement had emerged. Many, mostly northern, black women were deeply influenced by black nationalism and ideas that promoted a proud, militant, black identity that celebrated black skin, bodies, scholarship, and culture as beautiful and strong. They recognized that African Americans had roots and an important history, that their contribution to American life was central. "Black is beautiful," was one of their rallying cries. Black youth believed in black solidarity and in creating their own culture and institutions. Many were militantly antiwhite and thrilled at the new images of dignity, power, and beauty that the Black Power movement instilled in them. They grew Afros and were inspired by Malcolm X, Imiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), the Black Panther Party, and the militant Angela Davis.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, young radical black

women were unlikely to join radical white feminist organizations or easily define themselves as feminists. Their trajectories were different from those of whites, partly because they were members of an oppressed racial minority. They too faced sexism in their movements and organizations, but they were not inclined to separate from black men. Many Black Power advocates, men and women, argued that the black community was just discovering itself, and could not afford gender divisions.

The women, primarily writers, of the cultural wing of Black Power, the Black Arts movement, recognized the masculinism of Black Arts and Black Power leaders. They rejected the idea that racism had harmed black men more deeply than it had black women and that, as a result, black men needed to be the leaders and the heads of households, while women raised the children. In her important 1970 book, *The Black Woman*, Toni Cade wrote that black women were being “encouraged—in the name of the revolution no less—to cultivate ‘virtues’ that if listed would sound like the personality traits of slaves.” They were par-



Angela Davis

ticularly aggrieved when male Black Power advocates, who attacked white society and white people, got intimately involved with white women.

Young, black women became proud and strong and were loyal to the black community and to their men, despite male-chauvinist ideology, even though many criticized the sexism of the black organizations and the politics that nurtured them. Cade's book was evidence of feminism and gender divides in the black movement, although the women's perspectives did not lead directly to a black feminist movement. They were often torn between racial solidarity and gender considerations, critical of the policies and behavior of black radical men but committed to the race and the struggle for racial freedom. By the end of the

1960s, white feminism was taking off, and the chauvinism of militant Black Power politics was obvious. Many black radical women were angry and hurt by black men and white women, with no obvious political space of their own.

radical white feminism

In the late 1960s, young, white, radical women streamed out of the New Left and anti-Vietnam War movements and enthusiastically organized their own movement: feminism. Groups of youthful feminists sprang up around the country. One of these was Bread and Roses, a white, socialist feminist organization, founded in Boston in 1969, that lasted two years, and out of which other socialist, feminist organizations and institutions grew throughout the 1970s. Most of the women were middle-class and college-educated. Like most socialist feminists in cities around the country, Bread and Roses members had been active in the civil rights, New Left, and antiwar movements. They were critical of the movements' male chauvinism and eventually formed their own autonomous groups that comprised the radical wing of the feminist movement. They focused their wrath on movement men and on sexism in capitalist society. As socialists and antiracists, they were aware of class exploitation and racism; their goal was a radical, integrated women's movement that would be fundamental to building a just, peaceful, and racially integrated society. Their statements and position papers, like those of all socialist feminists, referred often to class and race and the necessity of reaching women who were not privileged and white.

Socialist feminists recognized that although their gender put them at a disadvantage, their class and race created privileges. A Bread and Roses leader, Meredith Tax, stated, "We cannot talk of sisterhood without realizing that the objective position in society of most of us is different from that of welfare mothers, of the black maids of our white mothers, and of women in third-world countries. Sisterhood means not saying their fight is our fight, but *making* it our fight."

Notwithstanding such relatively sophisticated understandings of race and class, white feminists often saw women as an undifferentiated group oppressed by men. These contradictory themes persisted alongside one another. Feminists operated politically on a double track: one emphasized gender as the explanation for women's subordination—articulated in the phrase "sisterhood is powerful"—and the other recognized that gender could not explain all women's difficulties, that race and class also mattered. Often they combined these analyses, and sometimes they veered back and forth between them. Throughout, feminists persistently worried about their primarily white

and middle-class constituency.

Even amid the thrill of solidarity, they recognized differences in the group, the most immediate of which was sexual preference. Lesbian feminists came out and demanded to be acknowledged and embraced by their straight sisters, whom they accused of homophobia. In many feminist organizations there was a fear that sexual difference would divide women, and it did. But confronting their sexual heterogeneity was a major step toward understanding that they could be different and still work together, a critical political lesson that took years to learn. White feminists had initially noted that men had more

power than women, but they quickly learned that power differences based on sexuality, race, and class existed among women. It turned out that sisterhood was not simple. Despite their ideals, the efforts of early white, socialist feminists to build an interracial movement

foundered on their inevitable abstractness. While Bread and Roses members embraced antiracist politics, those politics were not rooted in the actual lives of black women. Except for those who had been in the civil rights movement, white women had little real experience with black women. Racial segregation impeded their ability to break out of their own racial and class positions, to understand that they could be racist themselves, and to recognize the particular needs and quandaries facing black women. As a result, their message and the organizing that followed proved confusing, difficult, and ultimately unsuccessful.

radical black feminism

Inspired by the racial solidarity of the Black Power movement, most radical black women did not join the white, socialist feminist, women's movement. Furthermore, they were suspicious of white women's gender politics, with its focus on abortion, personal life, and sexuality. From their perspective, white women complained about lives that were far easier than those of working-class and poor women, particularly women of color. Basic survival issues faced most women of color: they needed jobs that paid enough; sharing housework, for example, was not at the top of their list of pressing issues. African-American women were alienated by feminist analyses that emphasized women's subordination as mothers in the nuclear family. Their mothers and families had nurtured many of them. As racial minorities, they were often connected to their communities and their men in ways that white women were not and to which

whites were insensitive. Furthermore, they often found white women ignorant of race and class and insulting in their analyses and "outreach."

There were, however, black feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Small groups of black women developed feminist organizations that combined gender, race, and class politics. Some were radical anti-imperialists who opposed the war in Vietnam and identified with third-world female revolutionaries. Other groups were not anticapitalist feminists but radicals nonetheless. The most well-known of these groups was the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), founded in 1973 in New York City. The organizers were primarily educated professionals who saw the need for a black feminist organization (polls consistently showed that black women supported feminist goals), and they convened a meeting to which 400 women came. Within a year the organization had a membership of 2,000 in ten chapters around the

country. The group emphasized economic survival issues important to black and working-class women. Some chapters evolved into groups that endured, but these and similar groups never generated a mass movement.

The Combahee River Collective formed a year later in Boston. Its members came together out of the NBFO, deciding to form their own collective because their politics were more radical, particularly regarding lesbianism and socialism. The group was small and is best known for its manifesto, "A Black Feminist Statement," which articulated a black, lesbian, socialist, feminist politics and is considered one of the most influential documents of black feminism. It stated that the group was "actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression" and saw these major systems of oppression as "interlocking." They noted that they were antiracist, unlike white women, and antisexist, unlike men. They focused on their own oppression, which they called "identity politics," but affirmed their solidarity with black men because the black community required solidarity. They were angry at the sexism of black men but loyal to their communities in ways that white women were not.

The Combahee River Collective statement has inspired generations of feminists, white and of color, around the country. Its strong expression of a black, anticapitalist, lesbian feminist politics, critical of black male patriarchy but loyal to the black community and divided from white feminists because of their racism, stands as a milestone in the history of feminism. The idea that black women were under-

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valued in society and that they had no choice but to stand up for themselves and fight oppression on many fronts struck a deep chord in many radical African-American women.

In these years there were bitter discussions among black academics and intellectuals about the black family, relationships between black women and men, black matriarchy, and sexism in the black community. Black feminists were on the defensive as they worked to construct an autonomous movement. The 1965 Moynihan Report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an official in the Department of Labor, revived old controversies about strong women and weak men. It suggested the development of dysfunctional families—men who couldn't or wouldn't support and protect their families and women who would take over and were "too strong." The discussion was framed by bitterness, revealing how deeply participants believed not only that the future of the black community was jeopardized by the estrangement between women and men, but also that feminists exacerbated this divide. It was in this context that black feminism struggled to develop.

Black women were united by their hard feelings toward white feminism. An enormous literature exists by black women and other women of color about white feminist racism. Black feminist anger is not irrelevant to the story of the development of a separate black feminism, and that anger represents the persistence of some radical black women's feelings from the mid-1960s SNCC days into the early 1980s. One important frame of reference for black feminists was, inevitably, white feminism. Despite their sense that they had little in common with privileged white feminists, they had no choice but to respond to them. In addition, they had had numerous personal interactions with white women that had hurt their feelings or annoyed and frustrated them. Thus, the Black Power movement's compelling racial identity politics, as well as its sexism, the inattention to black women's issues in the white women's movement, and racist interactions with white feminists were all factors which convinced black feminists that they needed a movement of their own.

struggling to connect

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of events had taken place that indicated the enormous learning about race that radical feminists had experienced for more than a decade. They were able to come together politically on grounds other than an interracial sisterhood of solidarity and love. Instead, "difference" became the idea that shaped feminism. Difference is the word that describes the central

political insight of feminism in this period, in part because feminists had no choice but to confront difference within and between their own movements. Black women and other women of color struggled over whether and how the inclusive terms "women of color" and "third-world women" effaced their differences and what the implications of this might be. Identity politics were exhilarating for previously marginalized groups, but attempting to carve out bases for cooperation and shared perspectives was not. Whites' nostalgia was replaced by hard-headed political confrontations over how to work for more widely defined feminist goals. The result of all this was raised consciousness about the realities of race and class for all feminists.

A local example of cross-racial learning and cooperation among feminists, the Coalition for Women's Safety in Boston, is instructive. In 1979, twelve poor, black women and one white woman were murdered in black neighborhoods in the city. Black feminists and female community activists mobilized out of fear and rage at the police and media for downplaying the murders. A widely distributed brochure written by several members of the Combahee River Collective analyzed the situation of poor, black women. They wrote, "Our sisters died because they are women just as surely as they died because they are Black." They provided guidelines describing how women could protect themselves in the city. White feminists from outside the community acted as a support group, recognizing that women of color, not they, should be the leaders. Those leaders linked race, gender, and class in their analyses of the murders and the inadequate response of the authorities.

The issue of violence against women became an arena in which Boston feminists could forge common ground, having organized battered women's shelters, crisis centers for victims of rape, and "Take Back the Night" demonstrations demanding that the streets be made safe for women. They had learned how vulnerable women of color were to violence. They were also learning how to work together in coalitions that respected their differences. Audre Lorde, a black, lesbian poet who spoke often in Boston, argued repeatedly that differences could enrich their politics: "As women, we have been taught to ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change." Barbara Smith, of the Combahee River Collective, noted how different the Coalition for Women's Safety was because white women had not sought leadership but had, instead, formed a support group to help ensure that the coalition was run by women of color. White women recognized that they had to raise the issue of racism in their own communities and that they would never be able to end violence against women unless they respected and understood the situation of

women of color and honored their leadership. Everyone involved spoke highly of the emergency political coalition in which feminists of different races worked together.

then and now

The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s were extraordinary. Seemingly from nowhere, out of a relatively conservative postwar period in the United States, radical youth movements appeared. Not coincidentally, these young activists grew up in a time of prosperity, or its possibility, and were inspired by the promise of American democracy. They could afford to be idealistic. Political rhetoric and the economy cooperated to foster the idea, embraced by black and white youth, that racial equality and justice were possible for all.

By the late 1960s and 1970s, the culture and politics of the radical social movements had been transformed. Activists no longer looked to those in power to facilitate change. The government's inertia in response to the civil rights movement, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, and the repression of their movements educated them about how power works. It was no longer easy to be idealistic or hopeful, particularly about peaceful change. Optimism evaporated as frustration and anger grew. Furthermore, ideas of difference meant that solidarity between and within movements could no longer be assumed. In striving to cooperate politically, groups could no longer take for granted that they shared similar worldviews or agreed

on strategies. White feminists, for example, were forced to deal with the real feelings and politics of African-American feminists about racism and unequal resources. Whereas before they had assumed gender solidarity and that their antiracism had been transparent, they now had no choice but to search for bases of mutual interest. Coalitions had to be continuously negotiated. Interracial cooperation was no longer an unexamined movement tenet. Nor was the ideal of racial integration.

These changes continue to shape the possibilities for social change today. Americans inhabit an economically harsher climate and a less democratic society that cannot but shape the fate, even the possibility, of movements, including their ideas and ideals. If cross-racial projects develop, their members closely scrutinize the costs and benefits of cooperation for each group; they do not assume that their interests overlap. Over time, the political goals of many

have become smaller and more local, and today most grassroots interracial coalitions operate on this smaller scale. As they did for the Coalition for Women's Safety, emergencies create the possibility of cooperation, as can local struggles around issues such as schools, job loss, and the environment. But because opportunities for idealism and for expansive social justice are limited in the early 21st century, the far-reaching goals of 1960s and 1970s activists now seem utopian.

Thus, it is less likely today that large numbers of young people would risk their careers, relationships, security, and comfort for a more democratic society, to which racial and sexual equality are central. They do not feel empowered or expect that collective solidarity or commitment will develop on a mass scale. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s are not an easy act to follow, especially those of the early, optimistic years. Nevertheless, the hard-won lessons that feminists had learned by the early 1980s are still relevant: above all, difference in movements must be recognized and respected. Power differentials based on race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality brutally divide society and divide movements; activists must be prepared for this.

They have to consider global links in ways that feminists of the 1960s did not. The abstract antiracism of white feminists had to become pragmatic and take into account activists' differences, particularly those of race and class. We know now how important this is because of their political work.

One of the ironies of this story is that the civil rights movement and its influence among progres-

sive students at the time, especially in college YMCAs in the South, spawned more informal cross-racial contact than in later years when feminism was in full force. Feminists learned they could come together to work in coalitions, despite their differences, but their friendships did not usually cross racial lines, and informal contact was uncommon. Idealistic, earnest, and personal interracial interactions diminished with the loss of the ideal of integration and the civil rights movement's adoption of Black Power politics. The absence of personal contact meant they did not know one another, which made it difficult for white feminists to create politics that spoke directly to black women's concerns. This suggests that the nostalgia I have labeled "white" and the sentimentality about racial integration were, in fact, accompanied by interracial contact that held the possibility of women talking across race, of knowing one another. Idealism gave way to a political realism that eventually

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enabled them to work across racial lines, but it did not connect them personally.

The chance to engage personally with one another in a common endeavor, the heartfelt “we shall overcome” moment, held out the promise of interracial relationships that disappeared with the development of identity politics. Subordinate groups moved away from the idea of integration and segregated themselves in order to develop their own identities and power. In contrast, white radical women had separated from white movement men but had no desire to build a white feminist movement. They had an integrated sisterhood in mind, but little contact with their sisters of color.

Finally, the racial story of feminism is more complicated than white women’s racism. While it is true that radical white feminists were abstract in their antiracism and made many mistakes, it is too simple to dismiss them as racists. Legacies of racism weighed heavily on activists, and still do. They made it difficult for socialist feminists not to reproduce the history of women’s racial divisions. It is a formidable task for a social movement to overcome centuries of slavery, racism, and sexism. Young feminists came face-to-face with enormous forces that were not only “out there” but were, despite their best intentions, inside them. They struggled with these issues and did not give up.

The racial learning curve that began in the early 1960s continues today. White and women-of-color feminists learned that it was possible to be connected in difference, albeit in less grandiose and more circumscribed political projects. There is no clear resolution to the story, although it is a significant story nonetheless. White and black feminists experienced the loss of each other, as do all Americans who live in segregation, separated from people of other races. They were divided but doggedly attempted to work politically across racial lines in order to find

each other again on different, more complex grounds. Feminists’ impassioned project to build a racially diverse movement taught them a great deal. It can teach us a few things too.

recommended resources

Winifred Breines. *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Explores why an integrated radical feminist movement did not develop in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Winifred Breines. *The Great Refusal: Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968* (Rutgers University Press, 1989). A look at the tensions in the New Left between prefigurative politics and strategic politics; the first was based on the idea of living the new values of the movement in the present, and the second focused on movement success.

Sara Evans. *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1979). An important early account of the development of the white, radical feminist movement.

Benita Roth. *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). Roth argues that the three currents of feminism developed separately, based on the idea that the only way they could proceed was on the basis of organizing their own.

Kimberly Springer. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Duke University Press, 2005). Considers five black feminist organizations as an antidote to the dominant history of second-wave feminism as white.

\$1.3 billion: amount the Gates Foundation distributed in 2005

\$28.6 billion: amount the National Institutes of Health spent in 2005

\$260.3 billion: total charitable giving in the U.S. in 2005