

Second Wave Feminism and its Systemic Racism: What the Educational System Does Not Explain

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ABSTRACT

The modern secondary school curriculum teaching 20th century women's history, the first and second feminist waves, has been designed circularly hegemonic, and for decades following the advancement of academic fields such as racial feminism, gender studies, and intersectionality, this current curriculum has neglected the work of multi-racial feminist groups as well as the dangers of the race-sex analogy. This paper focuses on drawing awareness to the systemic exclusion women faced, the contributions of non-white feminist groups, and how such divisions limited all women from achieving their goals of equality, recognition, and justice as well as possible conclusions to why the educational field has narrowed perspectives for secondary school teaching. By using a comparative approach to his essay, the paper was conducted from researching the correspondence, legal documents, and recordings of these respective non-white organizations housed in the Schlesinger Library archive at the Radcliff Institute for Advanced Study.

Introduction

Why is the most commonly taught side of the story of the second wave of feminism --a women's 1960s-80s movement focused on eradicating inequality and discrimination¹--a White version of feminism when, though divided, a diverse group of multiracial feminists from all scales of the radical spectrum contributed to the life of the movement is not often discussed? Despite its message targeting all women, the reality is that it wasn't all-inclusive to women of color, immigrant women, and lesbians. Thus, it is critical to understand the systemic division of the second wave, to note their contributions to the cause, and to analyze the possible middle grounds shared between the divided groups. Through a survey course of 20th-century history, most high schoolers learn that the women and the contributions of the second wave of feminism are predominantly white. However, there were multi-racial feminist organizational groups in existence. The second wave of feminism was inheritably racist as the majority of its large numbers, second-class white women were spearheaded and mainstreamed due to its structural code of hegemonic feminism; the mantra of feminism that focused on sexism as the primary force of oppression and made its goal to be of equal status to men without taking into consideration a race and class analysis.² The appeal to personal feeling provided by hegemonic feminism found its origins in the second wave at the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the perspective of a housewife criticizing the post-war attitude of women's roles in politics and society only exclusive to the household and raising children.³ The book was successful in grabbing the attention of American housewives by selling nearly three million copies by the turn of the century,⁴ yet the targeted proactive demographic was of women most similar to her: educated, white women, with disposable income. The idea of also relating personal feelings in order to enter the political sphere is the movement's slogan "the personal is political" coined by Carol Hirsch,⁵ which emphasizes how everyday experiences of gender discrimination are intrinsically linked to the societal structure and thus politics. The division between women of the second wave began in the early years of establishing a political identity.

Radical feminist organizations in the form of political action are at the tail end of the counterculture movement: a time when a variety of social organizations began to oppose widely normalized beliefs of the dominant culture. This began in the 1960s with the rise of the 'hippies' challenging the conservative suburban lifestyle of the postwar 1950s.⁶ The rise of these feminist organizations makes practical sense, as women observed previous successful nonviolent movements to which they gathered tools of organizational and leadership tactics hoping to do the same with their own agendas. Such influences derived from Black Power, towards organizing, lobbying, and promoting immense feminist pride.^{7, 8}

Minority women, unlike white women counterparts, couldn't have similar experiences as they have more than one kind of discrimination to systematically overturn in tandem with gender equality whether racial, ethnic, socio-economic, or LGBT rights. As Black Panther leader Ericka Huggins⁹ states in her poem *I Wake Up In Middle-Of-Night Terror*, one of many in her poetry book *Insights and Poems (1974)* she wrote while imprisoned for her political activity, -- charges she would be acquitted for by 1972 -- "I sense a great weight in society pressing down on the little box of room I lie in...like my sisters in prison... How we [women] might struggle together to be free."¹⁰ Analysis for the momentous meaning behind Huggins words cannot be better done than scholar Amy Washburn as she writes,

"She develops a sense of feminist solidarity here by invoking the metaphorical prisons to which non incarcerated women can belong, including institutionalized marriage, single motherhood, wage slavery, low self-esteem, internalized sexism, and isolation. women hold no worth in the world with endemic discrimination. she extends imprisonment to the victims of structural inequality in paradoxically rich ways."¹¹

The acknowledgment of that difference between multiracial feminism and hegemonic feminism --especially in terms of their framework -- is what divided women and thus formed racial implications that would grow to encompass systemic obstacles towards the movements' goals. This does not mean that the work done by white radical feminists wasn't strong or useful; it was just limited in its achievements and effectiveness race-class-gender-sexuality was not the focal center of the organizations' internal attention. A comparative approach was utilized in this research which was conducted while given access to the correspondence housed at The Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. Therefore, this essay will begin with an overview of early feminist ideology providing a foundation of knowledge into the Second Wave feminist groups and their differing respective agendas. Finally, the paper will conclude with evaluating the greater implications of neglecting non-white women's history in secondary education.

History of Feminist Ideology in America

Feminist ideology -- prior to academic scholarship designating the first wave being the beginning-- can actually be observed at the inception of the United States when establishing an American identity. But, just like how we approach concepts regarding subjects of considered political science, our interpretations and roles of the theory have adapted throughout the evolution of society. This section seeks to provide historical context to beginning thoughts of feminist theory. It can be interpreted that though they did not openly identify as a "feminist group"; the Daughters of Liberty, established in 1765 as the counterpart to the Sons of Liberty, had members of founding framers including Martha Washington, Deborah Sampson, and Sarah Fulton. The group attracted hundreds of women and established chapters across Massachusetts that popularized the newly forming identity of "being American" in initiating boycotts on British goods, protesting the Stamp, Sugar, and Townshend Acts, and helping on the warfront with medical and hospitality needs. Throughout the war and decades after its end, Abigail Adams was the model wife for the women's role in America with the adoption of the culture of domesticity also referred to as the Cult of Domesticity. This concept embodied a wife being significantly exclusive and confined to the walls of her home and nuclear family -- and during the war times to look after the farmland that their husbands left to become soldiers. It was seen as a duty to society to raise and teach their children how to

be model American citizens and obey the word of Christianity. It was observed by middle and upper class women as a system of assigning value and purity to a family household and reputation. It is noted that Black women were excluded from this concept.¹² Abigail Adams played an influential role in establishing the culture of domesticity and Republican Motherhood within American context and society.¹³ However, in high school education, students are taught the first exposure to feminist ideology in the United States is the Seneca Falls Convention on July 19th-20th, 1848 where three hundred white women, organized by the female Quaker population in the area and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, over two days of discussion, and drafted their own declaration based off of the Declaration of Independence. Rather than this marking as the initial moments of women's rights advocates, it should rather be considered one of the first events in the first wave of feminism which centered around achieving women's suffrage in the states -- but at the expense of non-white women facing further limitations. The conventions advertised itself as "a convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman."¹⁴ It is important to note that in 1848, "women" did not encompass African American women in the southern states due to slavery still being legal. This structure in mind, and though abolitionists were present at Seneca Falls, this exclusive nature set the precedent for a long history of discrimination in future women's movements. In reaction to the exclusion of Black women at Seneca Falls, Sojourner Truth gave the momentous 1851 "Ain't I a Woman" speech where she states, "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman?"¹⁵

She addresses the forty men that attended Seneca Falls willing to help white women advocate for their rights, but that treatment was not reciprocated for Black women. This attitude by African American women continued during the time of Reconstruction as several women began advocating for women's suffrage after feeling dismissed by their white suffragists organizational counterparts. These included the National Association of Colored Women (later renamed the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs) founded by Frances Watkins Harper, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, and Harriet Tubman.¹⁶ Many of these leaders openly confronted white women in the suffrage movement who ignored the lynching epidemic.

Between Reconstruction to the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote, the work of non-white advocacy groups was white-washed, especially in education. It's also critical to note how high school classrooms observe the Nineteenth Amendment as historic and all encompassing, when in reality it was not. The Nineteenth Amendment allowed for females who were of a socio-economic status able to pay poll taxes and of enough education to pass English literacy tests were allowed to vote -- this demographic most often being white; while Black women faced challenges to vote in midst of Jim Crow Laws which lowered their poll attendance numbers tremendously.¹⁷ It wasn't until the National Association of Colored Women took up the legal fight and in combination with pressure on congress, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed that banned these poll taxes and literacy tests, making voting more accessible to millions of women. Asian American women were also excluded from exercising their voting rights since they were not considered US citizens due to the 1924 Immigration Act that banned immigrants from Asia. With decades of lobbying with notable suffragists like Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, the right to vote and opportunity to grant citizenship was realized in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. In 1920, Indigenous women were not recognized as US citizens until the Snyder Act in 1924, though due to poll taxes and literacy tests indigenous women faced a disadvantage until the Voting Rights Act. Indigenous women did not receive civil liberties until their Civil Rights Act of 1968. Latina women who did not speak enough English were ineligible to vote due to their failure to pass the English literacy tests. It wasn't until the 1975 extensions on the Voting Rights Act that prohibited discriminations against those who spoke a different language, did they receive a full accessibility right to vote.^{18, 19} Therefore, marking the Nineteenth Amendment as a celebration and victory for women rights as illustrated in high school education is constructing a false reality of the systemic discrimination of how we observe feminist history. By

having this overview of early feminist history, the nuances of the Second Wave and its tension between diverse groups becomes more understandable as evident by the precedent.

The Multi-Racial Organizations of the Second Wave

Through the roles of women shifting in effect of two world war mobilizations, the height of United States second wave of feminism arises at the tail end of the counterculture movement, but one advancement to note that transformed women's attitudes was the widened accessibility of the birth control pill, allowing women more adaptability in family planning and thus a career path. And though the pill contributed to a women's societal shift, the greatest beneficiaries of this were white women, nearly 10% took advantage of the pill compared to Black women at only 8% from 1965 to 1975.^{20, 21} The pill was not the only thing that provided social advancement during 1960 as the counterculture movement and grassroots lobbying began to shift how American society viewed civil liberties.

Critical observations and notes these women understood derived from other counter-culture movements such as the Black Power which influenced the success of non-violent approaches to organizing radical feminism. This included the work of Florynce Kennedy, Michelle Wallace, Margaret Sloan, and Eleanor Holmes Norton²² as key founding members of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) established in summer of 1973 to represent the interests of both the Black liberation movement and the second wave women's movement. At the peak of several chapters and just over 2,000 women, they gained a media influence in organizing events such as walkouts, clothing exchanges, regional conferences, and journalism. In the *USA Today* article -- housed in the Schlesinger Library Archive -- published on the day of their organization's announcement, August 15th, 1973, Eleanor Holmes Norton the organization's human rights commissioner elaborates on the "set of purpose" in the clipping stating, "the media," she said, "Have attempted to create the image of the Black woman totally alienated from the women's rights movement without ever attempting to get into our psyches."²³ This would soon be published in more elaborate detail as a mission statement which in full reads, "The distorted male-dominated media image of the Women's Liberation Movement has clouded the vital and revolutionary importance of this movement to Third World women, especially Black women. The Movement has been characterized as the exclusive property of so-called White middle-class women and any Black women seen involved in this movement have been seen as "selling out," "dividing the race," and an assortment of nonsensical epithets. Black feminists resent these charges and have therefore established The National Black Feminist Organization, in order to address ourselves to the particular and specific needs of the larger, but almost cast-aside half of the Black race in Amerikkka, the Black woman."²⁴

It is necessary to note that since these racial exclusive systems existed, white women-ran organizations had prime time media coverage and often excluded or alienated non-white groups from major television sources. Flo Kennedy would make an effort decades later to close this gap with her decades-long running interview show, *The Flo Kennedy Show* (1981-2005).²⁵ Margaret Slogan, the president of the NBFO also gave testimony to the power statement which would soon, due to her media connections as a writer and early editor for the Gloria Steinem founded feminist newspaper *Ms. Magazine*, would become characterized as an advocacy slogan for NBFO, "We will remind the Black Liberation Movement", she continued, "*that there cant be liberation for half a race.*"²⁶ This is an important aspect to make analysis of as it conveys the power of sloganism in advocacy and social justice -- especially in the function of garnering attention towards marginalized, stigmatized, and overshadowed problems.

In my Zoom conference table talk conversation in early August with Anthony D. Romero, the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), I posed to question the significance of this slogan in their advocacy work. He framed it into the perspective that it allowed for an early development to what academic and society refer to as intersectionality, developed by leading academic in the gender studies field Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the theory examines how identities -- whether cultural, social, or biological --

inform one another and thus create a “complex convergence of oppression,”²⁷ as an important concept tool that can be used towards closing the gap between women's issues and discrimination of people of color. It created a pathway toward visibility in politics as a wider issue of oppression further allowing to target the attention of both movements and their respected participants -- as well as their exclusionists.²⁸ Romero's statements are evidently supported by founding members of National Women's Organization (NOW) as Gloria Steinem stated in an special 1977 report interview as she was asked a question about Flo's advocacy style to which the interviewer, a white man, posed it to be “too outrageous the things she says”. In Gloria's response, “Five minutes with Flo could change your life.” “She certainly means them, she has dedicated her life to the struggle... Her verbal karate has been very important to us...She energizes people.”²⁹ Flo Kennedy in this photograph from the Scheslinger library is seen exemplifying Gloria's description of her energy while advocating. While giving a speech at a women's conference attributed to the late 70s, one can observe her strong confident posture, strong vocal presence in front of the microphone, and her hand gesture providing evidence and emphasis of her demeanor.³⁰ However, other NOW members did not believe in Flo's Black Panther inspired approach was adaptable to the women's movement as former Vice President of NOW Lucy Comissar frustratingly stated with the same interviewer in the special report, “She uses the women's movement to her own entertainer ends...she does not pass legislation, she just makes noise.”³¹ Yet despite the division clearly demonstrated, the work of the NBFO and its associates such as the Affirmative Action Union, Black Women United for Political Action, The Feminist Clothing Line, and The Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), this intersectionality created could not have been possible if the reality of the second wave was entirely hegemonic to white middle class women.

A common misconception that has been incorporated with the teachings of hegemonic feminism is that multiracial feminism was a later variant or reaction to those growing numbers and participation of white feminists; which is simply not true given the information this paper --- and all other multi-racial centered gender studies academic work is grounded upon. A primary example of academic backing is Benita Roth's book, *Still Lifting, Still Climbing* (1999) where she asserts how not only was the timing of black feminist organizing equivalent to the timing of white feminist activity, but the same is true about the feminist pursuits of Asian American, Latina, and Native American women.³²

Formed out of the Asian American Political Alliance in 1971, the Asian Sisters of America were a grass-roots organization of college age women who aimed their efforts towards drug abuse and domestic violence intervention against women and provided care for battered women, newly asian immigrants and refugees, and advocated for featuring Asian women's cultural, intellectual, and political diversity to the greater San Francisco and Los Angeles urban spheres.³³ Like many multi-racial feminist groups, their grass-root beginnings were established as a solution to feeling too alienated and excluded by white women's political agendas, but too undervalued in the male dominated Asian American struggle. As scholar Esther Ngan-Ling Chow words their experiences with the earlier years of the second wave, “As Asian American women became active in their communities, they encountered sexism. Even though many Asian American women realize that they usually occupied subversion positions in male-dominated organizations within Asian communities, their ethnic pride and loyalty frequently kept them from public revolt...”More recently, some Asian American women have recognized that these organizations have not been particularly responsive to their needs and concerns as women. They also protested that their intense involvement did not and will not result in equal participation as long as the traditional dominance by men and the gender division of labor remain.”³⁴

Simultaneously in 1971, the Chicana group - Hijas De Cuauhtémoc - was a publication group fiercely named after a women's underground newspaper active during the 1910 Mexican Revolution. The group formed their own Feminista Newspaper that was involved and circulated through the United Mexican American Student Organization, a body of the Chicano Student Movement.³⁵ These publications would later be incorporated into the first national Chicana studies journal, *Encuentro Feminil*, which contained, “Chicana political mobilization and addresses issues such as the right to contraception and the feminization of poverty.”³⁶ Original copies of the first volume cover illustrate an isolated woman struggling while trapped in a net with a sword/saber stabbed

through her; possibly representing the plight of Mexican-American women want to expose the decades long neglect of domestic violence and often murder of women.³⁷

Native American rights activism was quite persistent and potent during the counterculture movement, especially after the 1973 Wounded Knee Occupation and the greater American Indian Movement. Many of those female leaders would grow into the Women of All Red Nations (WARN) that initiated in 1974 included suing the government for attempts to sell reservation land and water --- such as the case regarding the Pine Ridge Reservation --, fighting against sterilizations efforts made by public hospitals, and overall sense of united front with other indigenous nations.³⁸

These autonomous groups opened up a space for women of color to work in coalition with their own independence, identities, and shared experiences. These female oriented groups worked in conjunction with one another, and male non-white solidarity groups such as the Black Panther Party, and nationalists organizations associated with the Chicano Movements, and the American Indians which they appealed towards their anti-imperialist and anti-racist agendas. Unlike in overwhelming white feminist activity, these spaces could transcend gender, racial, class, or cultural boundaries.³⁹ This very idea and consciousness of oppression was a grounding developing principle of multiracial feminine theory.

The Implications

Due to re-analyzing feminist scholarship with the intersectional lens of today, it disapproves the myth that the second wave was a “white women’s thing” and therefore irrelevant to other minority groups, and it is crucial to analyze that the root of past feminist advocacy that our educational systems are teaching and celebrating were rooted and linked to the nature of the oppressionist system our nation is structured upon. This myth has been generated based upon the general fact that African American women did not join white-led advocacy groups in large numbers because based upon their everyday experiences of discrimination being very different due to having more than one oppression to endure in society. Therefore, from not feeling listened to, they formed their own uniting organizations. The distinction that this paper is trying to make is that non-white feminist groups felt strongly opposed to the hostile political climate forcing their advocacy to be directed towards one method of oppression or exploitation whether it be imperialism, race, or sex discrimination, social class, or sexuality; and by establishing these own groups, they granted themselves to opportunity to not have to choose or prioritize one method of suppression over another to fight against, but all collectively establish a strong front over these prejudice norms. Therefore, their feminist critiques, thoughts, and sense of consciousness was impacted by those other oppressive factors, and thus had different feminist perspectives and approaches to protest, outreach, or advocacy because of it; the white women’s hesitation to this concept was encouraging the exclusionists’ behavior towards minority groups, and thus stimulating a vicious cycle.

The feminist usage of the race-sex analogy, founded in hegemonic feminist advocacy and written about extensively by Voichita Nachescu, holds that sexual oppression is the origin, stem, and possible model of every kind of oppression in American society. Feminist groups applied this logic to their anti-imperialist agendas stating the fight against their own oppression -- being male domination and patriarchal abuse -- is a degree of colonized conditions.⁴⁰ White feminists, despite non-white feminist criticism, utilized this harmful methodology as a tactical advantage as Benita Roth explains,

“The analogy of rows in response to mail left accusations of feminism as being “diversionary, bourgeois, and individualistic.” Describing women's oppression in a political language with which the New Left (male) organizers were familiar signified, in the end, how serious women's liberationists wanted to be taken.”⁴¹

From that interpretation, it can be argued that white feminists took advantage of the inequality endured by those who have been colonized, disenfranchised, or violently oppressed as a proving point of their legitimacy. Not only did damaging mentalities such as this deter Black and Latina Feminists from organizing or associating with hegemonic feminism, but inhibited healthy feminist discourse from occurring, thus continuing

a model of exclusionary behaviors. African American feminists heavily critiqued this approach and held women accountable for using this mentality as a promotion of legitimacy to men and a tool for attracting more followers. These rational arguments included and stated that the oppression and violence towards the Black race in American history should have no correlation with how middle class white women are “sick and tired” of their day-to-day lives as housewives; this is not a quality comparison of a “common oppression.”⁴² Therefore, rather than fighting for the equitable rights of all women, the race/sex analogy led white feminists groups to miscommunicate an interpretation as Frances Beal’s momentous, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female”, questions it, “Are white women asking to be equal to white men in their pernicious treatment of third world peoples?”⁴³ The origins of race-sex analogy can be traced back to rhetoric used by first wave feminists in the nineteenth century and even explaining its current usage as a rhetorical tool to link the two waves of feminism together. And thus by imploring its historical precedent, the practice of the race/sex analogy is a trying way for prejudice towards the Black female community and an expansion of rights available for white women rather than womanhood in its entirety -- as they were campaigning. Therefore, the harmful usage of the race-sex analogy was used under the intention to display women having a common identity due to a “shared oppression” of equal victimization, but the consequences of implying such rhetoric ignores circumstances of having more than one society oppression to endure completely alienating non-white feminists from the organization’s agenda, theory, and overarching goals. Using and relying on tactics such as these in advocacy continue the exclusionist and racially systemic structure of society.

An additional factor that also plays an important role is regionalism. Due to how demographics were rapidly changing over the decades of the counterculture movement, more densely populated multi-feminist areas experienced more exclusionist behavior as well as encountered inspiration from other counter-culture social movements. As an example, momentum was building for the establishment of the Chicago chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization, the National Alliance for Black Feminists (NABF); their office was unable to open officially until spring 1976. Here the notable written piece a “Bill of Rights for Women ” would be created.⁴⁴ While on the other hand, the predominantly white attendees of the National Conference for New Politics in 1967 were drafting a manifesto called “To the Women of the Left,” a written inspiration template of the Black Power Movement activity that same year.⁴⁵ The left targeted audience attracted to read this manifesto was predominately white. The more densely and diverse the population was, the more plausible and often these situations occurred.⁴⁶

Final Evaluations

Having these stigmatizations around this discussion of systematic racism in organized advocacy resulted in educational institutions not addressing it at all in classrooms, thus eliminating an entire critical piece in feminist and gendered history. The truth in this lies that learning and grasping the contributions of multiracial feminism means an imperative lesson that race, class, and gender are inextricably linked -- especially in all respects of activism. And while it is nice to admire and celebrate the accomplishments of white feminists, we as a society should have a more all encompassing approach to how we academically observe past social movements to understand the full picture and its unwarranted consequences.

In addition to the systemic inequalities in the American political landscape and society, secondary school institutions may not address these necessary historic views because of the polarized political climate we face on a daily basis and the growing desire to censor gender education, racial theories, continuous banning of books, and contemporary voices and perspectives in the namesake of “preserving traditions” or the idea that people are too uncomfortable by those topics. Though the nature of the topic is not at its core polarized, discussing it in an education setting can surface difficult conversations about our Nation’s virulent history with race, discrimination, and cultural genocide that school systems may not have the strength and ability to facilitate or sustain that nuanced level of thinking.

One powerful legacy of the second wave was the integration of women and gender studies at the greater university level over the last fifty years and it has grown to become extremely sophisticated, but no student should have to “wait” for that level of education in order to gain knowledge of the entire history. High schools could open up safe affinity spaces, amplify non-white feminist voices and authors in the libraries or even within the student body, have a feminist book club, push for more equitable class lessons. These lessons might be implemented into curriculum and classrooms by means of governmental intervention forcing feminist and gender history studies to be a part of the curriculum, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) immersion programs, and more interconnected relationships between these college gender studies departments and their local secondary school districts and communities.

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