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“Though all women are women, no woman is only a woman”: Black, White, and Chicana Feminist Consciousness Development from 1955 to 1985

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A Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors in History.

Faculty Advisor: Barbara Savage

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Abstract
This thesis illustrates how feminist consciousness at the crux of the second wave women's movement was simultaneously unified and splintered. What cut across backgrounds and united women was a common mission to overturn institutionalized and de facto gender discrimination in American society. Yet consciousness development and approaches to these women's-centered goals varied greatly among and between black, white, and Chicana women based on race, distinct history in the United States, class, concurrent liberation struggles, and religion. There was both a women's movement – broadly defined as numerous women acting somewhat contemporaneously for the advancement of women's rights – and several women's movements, meaning the pursuit of rights by women of similar standpoints, perhaps within specific contexts, such as a racial community. These movements overlapped yet rarely blended; the simultaneous existence of one movement and many demonstrates the paradoxical nature of the second wave. It also begs the question of whether internal division is indicative of the movement's failure. This thesis argues that, contrary to the views of many historians and feminists, the movement's power lies in its complexity. The voices contained in numerous anthologies are showcased in this intellectual history to demonstrate how women's thoughts and experiences interacted and molded each other's. This dynamic process compelled the interpretation and application of pro-women's empowerment ideals in myriad contexts, giving the struggle depth and making it accessible to a wider range of women. Women, regardless of background, perceived these ideals from their unique points of view and endeavored to integrate these concepts into their lives, traditions, and faiths. The movement's strength, rather than fatal flaw, is that “though all women are women, no woman is only a woman.”

Keywords
feminism, womanism, consciousness, chicana, civil rights

Disciplines
Women's History

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‘Though all women are women, no woman is only a woman’:
Black, White, and Chicana Feminist Consciousness Development from 1955 to 1985

A senior thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Honors in History

by

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Philadelphia, PA
March 23, 2007

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For their comments and questions that forced me to think in new and different ways, thanks are due to my faculty advisor Barbara Savage and peer reader, Aviva Horrow.
CHRONOLOGY

1892  *A Voice from the South* by Anna Julia Cooper is published, which illustrated the three systems of oppression that shape Black women’s lives and later became the backbone of Alice Walker’s term ‘womanist’

1920  The Nineteenth Amendment is passed, granting women the right to vote

1942  The Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) is founded in Chicago, a group that held sit-ins to protests restaurants’ refusal to serve Blacks in the North

1946  *Mendez v. Westminster* is decided, the case that paves the way for *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and asserts that educational segregation is damaging

1955  Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat and spurs the Montgomery bus boycott; it lasted for nearly two years

1961  President’s Commission on the Status of Women, which, along with subsequent state commissions, raised the public’s consciousness on the status of women

1962  *Sex and the Single Girl* by Helen Gurley Brown is published (this caused a rethinking of women’s place and attitudes towards sexuality)

Port Huron Statement is put forth by Tom Hayden and the Students for a Democratic Society, a document that became the manifesto of 1960s student activism

1963  *Feminist Mystique* by Betty Friedan is published; five million copies will be purchased by 1970 (galvanized women into realizing that there was more to life than just taking care of a family)

Equal Pay Act

1964  The Civil Rights Act is passed, which contains Title VII. Title VII precludes discrimination in employment based on national origin, sex, race, religion, or color. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is formed to enforce Title VII.

*Griswold v. Connecticut*- allowed the dissemination of birth control and it shifted the spectrum of what government could regulate

1965  Casey Hayden and Mary King write and distribute a memo titled “SNCC Position Paper (Women in the Movement)” about the gendered hierarchy within the Civil Rights movement
Farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley, led by César Chávez, head of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, walk off the grape fields in protest inhumane treatment by ranchers.

The Negro Family: The Case for National Action is put forth by Patrick Moynihan, which seems to validate the Black emasculating matriarch myth.

1966  The National Organization for Women is born

10,000 marchers behind Chávez arrive in the capitol of Sacramento after twenty-five days on the road protesting farm worker exploitation

1967  Executive Order 11375 is signed by President Johnson, allowing affirmative action to include women

“Students for a Democratic Society Resolution” is advanced, which demonstrated a shift towards an independent women’s movement and radical feminism because of its focus on equality based on difference; the idea of autonomy and separateness mirrored Black Power thinking.

1968  Radical feminists protest the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey

Over one thousand Mexican-American students walk out of Abraham Lincoln High School in Los Angeles and are soon joined by thousands of other students from predominately Mexican-American high schools; this marks the birth of Mexican-American student activism.

1969  Our Bodies, Our Selves is published

First Chicano National Youth Conference, where El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán is established

El Plan de Santa Barbara, the manifesto of MEChA, is established

1970  Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics is published, which asserted that the personal is political

Lesbians are expelled from NOW

The farm worker strike comes to a close as 26 Delano growers strike a deal

Women’s Strike for Equality

1971  First National Chicana Conference is held in Houston, Texas

1972  Title IX of the Education Act is passed by Congress
Louis Harris Virginia Slims poll shows that Black women are just as likely, if not more likely, to support feminist goals

1973  The National Black Feminist Organization is born

Roe v. Wade is decided

1974  Women’s Educational Equity Act Program (federal funds to schools that countered sex stereotypes and promoted equal educational opportunities)

1976  The National Alliance of Black Feminists is founded

1977  The Combahee River Collective puts forth a “Black Feminist Statement,” which describes the double burden of gender and race for Black women

First National Women’s Conference in Houston, Texas- a platform of national action included many radical feminist ideas, such as those on rape and sexual preference

1983  Alice Walker defines the novel term ‘womanist’ in her book In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens

1985  Katie G. Cannon applies womanist thinking to theology
INTRODUCTION

What we must do now is resist collectively instead of in isolation...We can pool our financial resources to reduce the danger of summary firings; we can share our child-rearing responsibilities to free each other’s time for action. We can support each other emotionally and become sisters in oppression and, finally, in victory.¹

This sentiment would probably fit snugly into the public perception of the second wave women’s movement, which spanned the early 1960s through the late 1980s. Public memory most likely conjures images of women coming together with common goals in a panoptic movement. Perhaps when they reflect on those decades the picture of women standing around a trashcan, watching their bras catch flame comes to mind. Yet this—both the instinctual sisterhood and the bra burning—only caricature the more complex history of women and feminism. Women of all backgrounds did not come together and raise their voices and act in unison. Rather, the women’s movement would be better described as women’s movements, containing the overlapping yet very distinct paths of feminist consciousness development and multiple struggles of black, white, and Chicana women.

Historians identify two waves of feminism. The first, from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth century, focused largely on jure inequality and culminated in the passage of the right to vote. This wave bequeathed a significant lesson about how racial differences can create a schism between women that cannot be transcended with a collective cause. It is this history of common purpose to overturn gender discrimination but internal division and strife that repeated itself both in thinking and deed during the second wave. The idea of the feminist movement as one and many at the same time is at the crux of this study.

Even debates over terminology exemplify this characterization. The term feminist at its center denotes an ideology focused on overturning the oppression of all women as a group in all realms of life. It claims unity among women and distinction between the experiences and opportunities available to men and women.\textsuperscript{2} Susan M. Hartmann, historian of feminism and women’s movements, asserted that second wave feminism was a “multifaceted organizationally diffuse form of activism whose aims were to expand women's opportunities in the public sphere, increase their autonomy and material well-being, and lessen their dependent status in the family.”\textsuperscript{3} To the term autonomy many women added the elements of sexual freedom and choice, as the ability to actively choose the behavior and direction of one’s public and private selves became a necessary mode of empowerment in the second wave. Another definition of feminism, advanced by historian and Chicana activist Cynthia Orozco, is “a recognition of the domination of men over women and attempts by women to end male privilege. It also seeks to redefine female-to-female relations. Feminism is all-encompassing since it is a theory, a method, and a practice which seeks to transform human relations. Feminism is necessary for liberation.”\textsuperscript{4} This accent on gender above all transcends every individual definition of feminism, whatever stresses each may place on particular facets. This universalizing tendency alienated many women of color who felt as if one could not speak of rights advancement in one realm without regard to other, intertwined elements, such as race and class. They asserted that their daily experience of subjugation was not a simple addition of repressive factors. Each exerted varying degrees of oppression in their lives, and it was impossible to extricate one from the others. For women of

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Elizabeth V. Spelman, \textit{Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 165.}
\footnote{Cynthia Orozco, “Sexism in Chicano Studies and the Community” in \textit{Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race, and Gender}, eds. Teresa Cordova et al. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 14.}
\end{footnotes}
color, abolishing sexism would be meaningless unless other systems holding them back disintegrated as well.

The ‘women of color’ discussed in this study are black and Chicana women. In today’s multicultural and multiethnic America, one would be hard-pressed to find an American who is unaware of the African-American presence and explosion of activity in the Civil Rights movement. Yet beyond the southwestern United States, their center of activism, such thorough public awareness and recognition escapes Chicanos and their movement for rights. By Chicana women I mean women who held and advanced feminist ideals in the context of the Chicano liberation struggle, a movement that exploded onto the public stage in the 1960s and 70s.⁵ Alma M. García, whose works on Chicanas appear repeatedly throughout this study, described the Chicano movement and how its gender hierarchy compelled Chicana feminist development: “The Chicano movement—an insurgent uprising among a new political generation of Mexican-Americans—challenged persistent patterns of societal inequality in the United States” yet at the same time that El Movimiento (the movement) “struggled against social injustice,” it “maintained patriarchal structures of domination.”⁶ The hypocrisy of the group fight for equality yet internal sexism compelled Chicanas to think about how to be free on both ethnic and gender fronts. They held a desire to “overcome sexist oppression but still affirm a militant ethnic consciousness… Chicana feminists searched for the elusive ‘room of their own’ within the socio-historical and political context of the Chicano movement.”⁷ Chicanas’ ability to both identify and exemplify this dilemma outside of our traditional expectations of feminism provides a new, less familiar perspective.

⁷ Ibid.
The ‘feminist’ definition, with its primary focus on gender oppression, troubled women of color, yet García’s utilization of “Chicana feminist” was not necessarily contradictory. “Chicana feminist” meant a coupling of the fights against ethnic and gender marginalization. It meant an advancement of female empowerment ideals in a context suitable for Chicanas, with regard to their lower class status in American society, Catholic faith, and fondness for tradition, which included their extended familial networks and stress on female responsibilities. This study will delve into how these issues molded Chicana feminist consciousness in particular, but also use it as a barometer to reflect upon larger intellectual trends in second wave feminism.

In the chapters that follow, I explore, compare, and contrast black, white, and Chicana feminist consciousness development and the movements founded upon this thinking. Although linked by gender, significant gulfs between feminists were based upon race, class, ethnicity, and group history. Even the term ‘feminist’ may not be unvaryingly defined. These divisions led, I argue, to three distinct yet overlapping movements: white women struggling against the chauvinist underpinnings of society on the one hand, and black and Chicana women struggling for gender equality in the context of their racial and ethnic liberation movements on the other. The women’s movements were so divergent that Alice Walker coined the term ‘womanist’ in her 1983 book *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens* because she felt that the feminist focus on sexism above all distracted from the other forms of oppression black women faced. The conceptualization of a new term demonstrated the extent of the distance between white and black women in thought. Further, it showed the ways in which percolating ideas on female empowerment expanded beyond the conventional labels and broke new ground.

Four key questions I will address to demonstrate areas of intersection and distinction in these movements. How does the emergence of second wave feminism support or clash with
concurrent quests for liberation, such as the Civil Rights and Chicano movements? Were female empowerment and cultural stability mutually exclusive? Do methods and rhetoric of protest or advocacy vary depending on race or ethnicity? And perhaps most significantly, does the fact that the "women's movement" lacked cohesion mean it was a failure? In exploring these questions I not only show the multifaceted nature of the struggle for gender equality but also argue that the movement's power lies in its complex character. Interpreting and applying pro-women's empowerment ideals in myriad contexts gave the struggle depth and made it more accessible to a wider range of women. Women, regardless of background, perceived these ideals from their unique points of view and endeavored to integrate these concepts into their lives, their traditions, and their faiths. Women’s empowerment did not need to mean the same thing to everyone for the ideas to resonate. In turn, these diverse applications added richness to pro-female concepts. The dynamism of this process is unmistakable.

This study is an intellectual history, an analysis of feminist consciousness development through the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. I examine what issues and events propelled different groups’ thinking, how thought translated into action, and why they overlapped at some points and diverged at others. It is important to keep in mind that not all women of a particular group underwent the stages in tandem. Although broad generalizations can be useful, to assume that all women of a particular race or ethnicity came to female empowerment ideas the same way or with the same intensity is to deny the diversity of women’s experiences.

This richness is showcased in anthologies, the type of source upon which I rely most heavily. Regardless of an anthology’s specific focus, together they provide a sense of the intense ideological development throughout the second wave. Each piece of writing in an anthology is part of a conversation: with other pieces in the pages preceding and following it, and with the
pieces in other anthologies. Feminist consciousness developed through exchange and interaction, and these collections showcase the wide range of thoughts and experiences.

Throughout this study, there are a few key anthologies I use that best capture the chorus of voices. *Chicana Feminist Thought*, edited by Alma M. García, is composed of eighty-two pieces written between the late 1960s and mid-1970s that focus on numerous topics, such as family, religion, the male-female relationship within *El Movimiento*, and the relationship between Chicanas and white women. García pulled together writings by Chicana women of diverse backgrounds in order to give the reader an opportunity “to see the world through the eyes of women who confronted the walls of racism and sexism with a nascent collective feminism.”

With photographs to supplement the writings, *Chicana Feminist Thought* represented a major attempt to both assemble a theory of Chicana feminism and to make it as personal as possible.

*Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, is a massive collection of writings by black women that demonstrate the evolution of ideas from 1831 through the 1980s. Some themes that weave through this anthology mirror those in García’s tome: family, male-female relationships, white female prejudice, the Civil Rights movement, and nationalism. Guy-Sheftall wrote that this collection “helps to dismantle stereotypes about peoples of African descent, women, and particularly black women, where their intellects and sexualities are concerned. Moreover, it provides greater clarity about the impact and interface of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism on the lives of African American women….” It includes such landmark pieces as Frances Beale’s “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” and Pauli Murray’s “The Liberation of Black Women” in addition to contributions from authors not yet of the same fame. *The Black Woman*, edited by Toni Cade, is

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8 García, 10.  
another anthology devoted to black women, published in 1970. Pieces vary from poems, letters to men, to transcripts of conversations; all showcase the cornucopia of emotions women experienced. Additional anthologies include *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, edited by Jo Freeman, the fifth edition of the anthology originally published in 1968. Freeman noted in her introduction how each edition since the first intended to be more and more in alignment with the reality of the day. As a result, for the fifth edition, there was a thrust towards inclusion of writings that focused on non-white women because their voices were not adequately heard in previous editions. *Sisterhood is Powerful*, edited by Robin Morgan, includes historical documents such as the NOW (National Organization for Women) Bill of Rights. The writings in Morgan’s anthology by white women about familial obligations and the workplace shed light on the relative deprivation they felt in their lives.\textsuperscript{10} These anthologies are both a source for and microcosm of my argument.

***

This paper traces the intellectual history of second wave feminism through three manifestations: origins of movement cultures, reflections on family structures, and interactions among feminist activists. Chapter one focuses on three distinct movements in the 1960s and 70s—Civil Rights, the New Left, and Chicano liberation—all devoted to social justice and equality, yet all perpetuators of a gendered hierarchy internally. The discrimination women felt in each movement clashed with the sense of empowerment they derived from participation in these liberation efforts. This marginalization led women to formulate a feminist consciousness, but the

\textsuperscript{10} Relative deprivation means, according to Rochelle Gatlin, that white women “were not poor, or absolutely deprived, but they perceived a gap between what they believed they were rightfully entitled to and what they could attain under existing social conditions.” They felt as if with their education and social status, there should not be limits on their upward mobility in the workplace or greater respect in the home. Rochelle Gatlin, *American Women since 1945* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 79.
‘radical’ form it took for numerous white women diverged greatly from the racial or ethnic group-centered form it took for many black and Chicana women. Chicana feminist consciousness, like that of black women, entailed unity with men and liberation for the entire group. Men of both groups vilified their women for what perceived to be a cultural attack and a distraction from the liberation movement as a whole. Black and Chicana women needed to find a way to advance women’s empowerment ideas in their specific contexts without alienating their male counterparts.

The second chapter, “The Family: A Locus of Oppression?” discusses how mothers and wives in the post-World War II middle-class white family felt trapped and younger white women not yet at the age of confinement in domesticity dreaded the path that lay before them. Both groups of women critiqued the nuclear family structure to varying degrees, but attacks on the family in general appeared ludicrous to many black and Chicana women. Throughout history, these women viewed the family as a locus of resistance versus oppression in dominant white society. Conceptions of the family, in addition to embedded perceptions held by men and women of black and Chicana womanhood, shaped the feminist consciousness development of each group but in fundamentally different ways.

Chapter three delves into the interplay between groups of feminists and explicates how a novel term coined to express women’s empowerment ideas supplanted ‘feminist’ for many black women. Scores of black women distrusted the feminist movement, which seemed to be dominated by middle-class white women who focused too heavily on gender oppression alone. Moreover, it appeared that white feminists were “piggybacking” on Civil Rights gains, such as Title VII, and they actively sought to preclude racial and ethnic unity. The white feminist rebuke of tradition and the nuclear family alienated black and Chicana women who sought family
cohesion and searched for ways to preserve tradition but simultaneously advance women’s rights. Some black women espoused the label ‘black feminist’ as a way to encapsulate these goals and their ideology. Yet others saw this term as inadequate because they felt that it was an attempt to fit the black female experience into the white feminist paradigm. In 1983 Alice Walker advanced the term ‘womanist’ as a way to more accurately describe black women’s beliefs and aims. Her four-part definition of womanism illustrated a celebration of black womanhood, a belief in the need for black women to speak for themselves, a regard for concurrent struggles for liberation, and a divergence from feminism: “womanist is to feminism as purple to lavender.”  

11 Katie G. Cannon took this concept and applied it to theology, a traditionally male realm. The foundation of the term womanist and its application beyond movement activism demonstrates the intense intellectual development on issues of women’s rights and status that seemed to know no bounds.

The meaning of feminist consciousness varies greatly among women; for some, it was easily definable and for others, it was more of a feeling to which words could not do justice. Ironically, what the majority of women would most likely agree upon is the fragmentation and disunity of thought and action in the women’s movement. This diversity, contrary to what public memory recalls of the time, is what made the second wave dynamic and accessible to all women. There is no doubt that the impact of these three movements continue to shape the American landscape.

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CHAPTER ONE

MOVEMENT CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

What stands out among the multitude of popular memories of the 1960s is the virtual cavalcade of protest movements, all of which shared a common foundation: a critique of liberalism. Although liberalism, the ideal of equality, was ideologically at the crux of numerous governmental programs from the Progressive era through the aftermath of the Great Society, for many it seemed to become more of an abstract semantic device rather than a concrete practice. This realization, that ideology and practice had historically been and remained incongruous, sparked movements to fix this state of affairs. While in later years some would ironically turn on the very assumptions of liberalism itself, initially groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and Chicano liberation organizations formed to make liberalism’s practice match the way it was preached. Involvement in these groups was significant in the development of black, white, and Chicana feminist consciousness and organization. Whether engaged in the Civil Rights movement, the New Left, or the movement for Chicano liberation, a commonality linking women was the realization that freedom and leadership were for men only and a gender hierarchy and traditional expectations of women were inescapable. This chapter explores how feminist consciousness developed in response to discrimination experienced within these movements. It seeks an answer to the question of whether similar beginnings would bring all women together on the basis of gender inequity.
Civil Rights Movement

During World War II, black men were allowed and were indeed drafted to fight and die in Europe on behalf of America, but in the South, segregation and discrimination characterized daily life. They could not drink from the same water fountain or eat at the same lunch counter as whites, they had to sit in the back of the bus while whites rode in the front, and barriers to political participation were high. World War II raised the consciousness of blacks about the hypocrisy of the United States, the country that encouraged fighting overseas and laboring in wartime factories under the banner of democracy but failed to curtail or halt overt discrimination on the battlefield and in the public sphere in America. How could the U.S. fight for freedom when so many were not free on its soil? Why was it okay to lose limbs in France on behalf of the Allies but not okay to sit in a classroom with white students? Blacks’ response to anger and disappointment they experienced at this time was a “Double V” campaign: a fight for victory abroad and victory at home.

The American military-industrial complex built up before and during World War II injected vitality into a country ailing due to the Depression, but not all felt a change in their financial and social conditions. Blacks’ unemployment remained high and the defense industries excluded them. In 1941, A. Phillip Randolph threatened to gather one hundred thousand blacks and march on Washington unless the government addressed this blatant bias. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, shaken by this sign of dissent, created the Fair Employment Practices Committee, which forbade discrimination on the basis of race in defense industries. This set a precedent for later Civil Rights activism because within the black community, it was clear that simply the threat of a march or huge public display could compel governmental action. The other effect of this experience, from the perspective of the government, was the growing awareness that blacks
sought and would demand inclusion in American institutions. Randolph, along with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded in 1942 in Chicago, which held sit-ins at restaurants refusing service to blacks in the North, were two key catalysts in what came to be known as the Civil Rights movement.¹

Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in 1955, an action that spearheaded the Montgomery bus boycott, a mass protest which lasted for nearly two years. This challenge of the Jim Crow system, televised to homes everywhere, drew national attention. It also had an international component: if America wanted to present itself to the world as the embodiment of democracy and rights, particularly in contrast to its Cold War adversary the Soviet Union, inequality could not shape the everyday lives of blacks. Through this first mass action mobilization, it became apparent to whites and fellow blacks that the status quo would no longer be acceptable. This protest – led by Martin Luther King Jr., an adherent to the tactic of nonviolence preached by Gandhi and a leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) – was a break from the route pursued by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which utilized the judicial system for change.² In the years following this first major demonstration, the power of images on television and in print to galvanize people and compel social change gathered momentum. The public witnessed the physical abuse inflicted on the nonviolent black students who staged sit-ins and Freedom Rides and watched as Bull Connor and the Birmingham police unleashed fire hoses and police dogs on black protestors.³ Many young white northern women and men saw the courage of their black

¹ CORE’s actions were a manifestation of the Double V campaign’s domestic element.
³ Many consider the images of unleashed hoses and dogs on Blacks a turning point, because for the first time droves of white people began supporting the aims of the Civil Rights movement. For detailed histories of the Civil Rights movement see, for example, Raymond D’Angelo, The American Civil Rights Movement: Readings and
peers and felt inspired to assist their struggle for justice. The media seared these images into public consciousness, where they remain to present day.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized nonviolent youth protests and activism, particularly in small, rural locations in the Deep South, strongholds of bigotry and segregation. By establishing Freedom Schools and holding voter registration drives, they sought to give blacks what Jim Crow denied them. However, SNCC’s hopes for change were met with disappointment as they saw the depth and breadth of the Jim Crow system and its corresponding way of life. Numerous SNCC activists, principally by the mid-1960s, began to perceive the ineffectiveness of their nonviolent approach because the pace of reform was lamentably slow. One young black man involved in SNCC explained his perception of nonviolence as “the lie-down-before-your-oppressor philosophy.”

Did it signal strength to lie down and absorb the beatings (which were especially forceful in the Deep South) without fighting back? How long would this tactic be necessary before appreciable change? These are questions that activists began to ask themselves, and before long, the tide of opinion within the movement started to change decisively. Feeling “embittered by the lack of support from white allies” and harboring growing doubts about “the efficacy of nonviolent protest,” SNCC participants started to believe in “the necessity for a black movement independent of whites and based on the celebration of black culture.”

Rather than assimilate or integrate into the white mainstream, they desired the creation of separate institutions to give blacks control of their

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Interpretations or Blackside, Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965), a fourteen-hour television series, (Public Broadcasting Service).


everyday lives. If blacks had autonomous institutions, they would not be reliant on white society to give them what they rightfully deserved.

The idea of autonomy and self-sufficiency became a pillar of Black Power, an ideology and movement engendered by blacks’ cynicism towards the practice of liberalism and realization that even ten years after Brown v Board of Education, nothing seemed different. De facto segregation was rife and blacks were disproportionately disenfranchised. Black Power had four main components: rejection of the integration ideal, armed self defense, separatism, and an emphasis on self-help. Rejection of integration entailed the endeavor to create separate black institutions as alternatives to the status quo. Rather than be ruled by a white-dominated government, they recognized the need for their own governmental structures. This tenet made the American black situation analogous to the status of colonized peoples under European influence in Asia and Africa who were struggling for self-rule. The pillar of armed self defense was imperative because clearly nonviolence was not altering the power relations in American society. Images from and experiences in the South demonstrated that the Jim Crow system would not easily be dismantled by those who established it and embraced it as a way of life.

Separatism dictated unity amongst blacks and the strengthening of their sovereign institutions. This ideal transcended political establishments and celebrated the distinctive marks of African American life, such as natural hairstyles, music, way of dress, and art, giving rise to the expression and belief that “Black is Beautiful.” Black feminist Michele Wallace explains the influence of Black Power on her feelings of liberation and black pride:

In 1968 when I was sixteen and the term Black consciousness was becoming popular, I started wearing my hair natural again…Blackness, I reasoned, meant that I could finally be myself. Besides recognizing my history of slavery and my African roots, I began a general housekeeping. All my old values, gathered from
‘playing house’ in nursery school to *Glamour* Magazine’s beauty tips, were discarded.⁶

Blacks’ embrace of a distinctive culture meant that “black culture staked out a sphere of activity relatively free from white influence and domination; it also advanced a positive, black-defined black identity that rejected white stereotypes,” as Wallace demonstrates.⁷ She no longer felt the need to mold herself to standards of beauty established by white society; rather, she could feel proud of her power to defy them. Black Power’s emphasis on self-help meant that if blacks wanted something, they would get it for themselves and not wait for it to be given to them.

Black Power, by attempting to establish the race’s strength and autonomy, seemed to assert and underline black male supremacy. Many men suffered from psychological issues stemming from black women’s modicum of financial independence. Low-wage demeaning work was available to women, yet men lacked similar employment opportunities. Black Power, however, gave men the means to assert themselves as self-sufficient despite their economic status.⁸ Black Power eschewed dependence, and gender relations were another outlet for this belief. Numerous black men shifted the patriarchy and hierarchy they experienced in white society onto the female participants in younger, radical groups such as SNCC. Not surprisingly, the rhetoric of leaders such as Stokely Carmichael in SNCC demonstrated that many black men saw Black Power as a means through which they could “regain their ‘manhood.’”⁹ This had a trickle-down effect, because if “Black Power, as practiced by black male leaders, appeared to mean that black women would step back while black men stepped forward,” this would signal to

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⁷ Schulman, 63.
⁸ This financial relationship will be explored further in the chapter two.
⁹ Hartmann, 33.
men at the grassroots that sexist behavior was acceptable and even encouraged. By acting condescendingly towards women, black men could feel a sense of control that Jim Crow and racism denied them.

As a result of this intense male chauvinism, many women either stopped participating in such radical groups or leaders kicked them out. But it was not rhetoric alone that compelled women to leave; men’s behavior demonstrated their expectation that women would be an invisible support system. In SNCC this meant that “virtually all of the typical and clerical work was assigned to women” and “very few women assumed the public roles of national leadership.” Angela Davis, an activist in Los Angeles in the late 1960s, explained the situation of power relationships within radical organizations and why female leadership was discouraged: “Some male leaders confused ‘their political activity with an assertion of their maleness’ and saw women leaders as a threat to that masculinity.” If women were in control, that would be another realm in which men could and would feel inferior. Additionally, although “women, like men, taught in freedom schools, ran libraries, canvassed for voter registration, and endured constant harassment from the local whites,” they were expected to perform double duty after they returned from the field by cooking food for the men and cleaning up after them. Women sustained the organizational infrastructure, but their efforts were anticipated and unappreciated. It seemed natural to men that women would continue their traditional roles, even within the context of an organization working for greater equality and empowerment.

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13 Hartmann, 33.
14 Evans, 70.
The sexual hierarchy within SNCC clashed with the new sense of empowerment young white women felt through their activism. They broke out of the traditional gender roles that defined their mother’s lives by leaving the private (female) sphere and entering the public (male) sphere. Through their dedication, they illustrated that women could express and act on their own opinions. Women were not simply impressionable, passive people who made men’s beliefs their own. At the same time that they felt like stronger, more independent women than their mothers, they experienced “a cultural undertow of expectations that they would perform traditional feminine tasks.”15 They abandoned traditionalism only to find themselves entrapped by ‘radical’ thinking men. It seemed to movement women that the men in SNCC were actively suppressing their potential and abilities. Although frustrating, female movement participation had a positive flip side. Female activists gained “skills and confidence,” learned about “the values of self-determination,” saw the power of “grass-roots leadership,” and fostered a sense of their own “individual worth.”16 They tapped the reservoir of determination within, showing themselves how much willpower and resolve women really had. Soon, the senses of empowerment and frustration females felt became clear to men also.

Disillusioned with SNCC and utilizing the strength cultivated through their activism, Casey Hayden and Mary King decided to make a statement expressing their feelings of discontent. Their 1964 statement, “SNCC Position Paper (Women in the Movement),” “set the precedent of contrasting the movement’s egalitarian ideas with the replication of sex roles within it.”17 By articulating the movement’s hypocrisy, Hayden and King raised the consciousness of other movement women on the issue and sent the message that women as a collective group were oppressed. They wrote that blacks and women suffered from the same social hierarchy in

15 Evans, 76.
16 Hartmann, 32.
17 Evans, 99.
American society and the men in organizations agitating for black equality did not or chose not to realize that by assuming superiority over women, they reinforced the system. The parallel between women and blacks, discussed further in the second chapter, was at the crux of this major statement. The position paper stated:

The average white person doesn’t realize that he assumes he is superior. And naturally he doesn’t understand the problem of paternalism. So too the average SNCC worker finds it difficult to discuss the woman problem because of the assumptions of male superiority. Assumptions of male superiority are as widespread and deep rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro.\(^\text{18}\)

Just as white paternalism treated the black man as a “boy” and not a man, enumerated in the incidents of discrimination that began the paper were two in which females were not referred to as people or women, but as “girls.”

Beyond the labels utilized to reflect power relationships, hiring and promotion processes provided only certain groups the opportunity for social and economic mobility, Hayden and King wrote. SNCC replicated the same practices that held black men back, as women were “automatically assigned to the ‘female’ kinds of jobs…but rarely the ‘executive’ kind.”\(^\text{19}\) Hayden and King were implicitly asserting that liberalism may have failed blacks, yet if movement men practiced the same hierarchy towards women, they were just as guilty as their white oppressors. This paper was significant because it highlighted and articulated the “contradiction between a liberatory ideology and the helper role women played” for the first time.\(^\text{20}\) Despite this important step for women, Stokely Carmichael’s response – “the only


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 46.
position for women in SNCC is prone” – illuminated the intensity of male chauvinism and demonstrated that change from within would be difficult, if not impossible.  

Michele Wallace, who felt unshackled by the celebration of black beauty and culture, conveyed her feelings of disbelief and betrayal after hearing Carmichael’s reaction to Hayden and King’s position paper:

It took me three years to fully understand that Stokely was serious when he’d said my position in the movement was ‘prone,’ three years to understand that the countless speeches that all began ‘the Black man…’ did not include me…The ‘new Blackness’ was fast becoming the new slavery for sisters.

This statement illustrated the intensity of black male hypocrisy by their replication of the white system they so abhorred. As a result of Carmichael’s statement and other blatantly sexist comments and behaviors on a daily basis, both white and black women involved in Civil Rights organizations realized that for genuine transformation in gender relationships, they would have to change peoples’ consciousness. If even the most ‘radical’ organizations attempting to make liberalism more than simply rhetoric were sexist, society had a long way to go, baby.

The New Left and Students for a Democratic Society

We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit. When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world: the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, an initiator of the United Nations that we thought would distribute Western influence throughout the world. Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people -- these American values we found good, principles by which we could live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency.

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21 Ryan, 46.
22 Wallace in Hull, Scott, and Smith, 6, 9.
These lines began the Port Huron Statement, the 1962 document which became the manifesto of 1960s student activism. Written primarily by Tom Hayden at a Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) convention in Port Huron, Michigan, the Statement encapsulated the impulse of the New Left and students’ discontent with the status quo. The students who participated in the New Left were primarily the children of Baby Boomers and were financially secure, if not prosperous. They had the financial security to take risks and engage in radical and utopian politics. In fact, the mother of Mark Rudd, the leader of activism at Columbia University, delivered him meals when he took over buildings in protest.

What compelled these white students who reaped the spoils of a booming economy to protest? Of all groups in society, they would probably have the least amount of worries or reasons to be disgruntled. Ironically, however, this is what compelled their action. Following World War II, there was a widespread sense of optimism in America. Consumer goods were abundant and John F. Kennedy’s presidency instilled the belief that government could transform society for the better. Yet the events of the early to mid-1960s transformed their generational identity. On television they saw Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches, sit-ins, and race riots. The images flashing across the screen demonstrated that on the surface, America appeared to be a land of equality, but deep down, discrimination and virulent racial hatred were everywhere. This contradiction, apparent on television everyday, jarred students from complacency.

There were a multitude of other reasons for which students began to agitate for change in New Left organizations such as SDS. One was the widespread fear of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, air raid drills in schools, and the

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24 In chapter two, I will discuss the suburbanization of American life, the areas in which these students grew up “in at least modest comfort.”
suspicion of Communist infiltrations caused Americans to be alarmed and expectant that war could break out at anytime. Furthermore, the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy, an icon of optimism, pierced Americans’ consciousness. Perhaps to some it seemed as if the hope Kennedy embodied could not persist without him physically. A third element that compelled activism was the awareness, through television images and Michael Harrington’s book *The Other America*, that the dark underbelly of America was widespread poverty. Although many citizens were more prosperous than ever before, there were still those who were struggling to get by on a daily basis. Conceivably some future activists felt guilty that they could easily obtain material goods while Americans in different parts of the country were unable to eat. Additionally, the blossoming counterculture gave the youth exciting things to embrace as forms of rebellion. Bob Dylan’s music, Motown, Beat poetry, drugs that infiltrated suburbia such as LSD and marijuana, and the legalization of the birth control pill all provided children with ways to practice a lifestyle very different from that of their parents. Of course, the Vietnam War was a major element of the emerging New Left consciousness. The very real prospect of death molded a generation who knew that at any time their draft number could be pulled and they would be on their way to the jungles of Vietnam. All of these factors together led younger people to desire translating their feelings into action. Students for a Democratic Society built on these feelings, causing their numbers to swell by the end of the decade.

**SDS’ internal structure and ideals**

Students for a Democratic Society emphasized participatory democracy, which meant that people had the right and should be involved in the decisions that shaped their daily lives. They believed that such decisions were best made in small groups of collaborative democracy.
rather than by distant people in the government. SDS stressed egalitarianism, in contrast to the injustice evident in society.

Yet within SDS, there was a discernable disconnect between rhetoric and practice. Like SNCC, SDS was an organization that replicated the inequalities it sought to remedy. Rather than egalitarianism, hierarchy dominated. Historian Sara Evans described the internal contradiction: “For all its emphasis on personal relationships, on openness, honesty, and participatory democracy, the northern student left was highly male-dominated.”26 This dominance derived from the fact that traits such as competition and aggressiveness, those most highly prized in the SDS culture, were those that “promoted male leadership.”27 This antagonistic style “discouraged female participation,” causing conflict with the organization’s ideal of everyone’s equal contribution.28 Another similarity with SNCC “was an emphasis on masculinity as hardness and toughness, which went along with a contempt for women that reduced them to servants and campfollowers.”29 The New Left’s heroes, derived from black Power, the Cuban revolution (Che Guevara), and rock music, emphasized the focus on virility. In the tasks assigned to women, this gendered order and concept of servitude was clear.

Women were to take the minutes and cook while the men wrote and dictated the direction of the group’s activities. As in SNCC, women became involved to make a difference and undertake a lifestyle that was distinct, perhaps even opposite, from domesticity. However, the persistence of traditional gender roles dashed their hopes. In other words, women were still “making the coffee, even if the pot was a communal one.”30

26 Evans, 108.
27 Ibid., 112.
28 Hartmann, 39.
Another way in which the New Left disappointed women was how men distorted ideas of the counterculture and emerging sexual freedom for their personal benefit. Treated as sex objects and derided for refusing to practice ‘free love’ to the degree men expected, movement women felt degraded and exploited. One former activist in SDS, Anna Koedt, describes how women in this group “were considered a sort of sex pool” and “the so-called ‘emancipated male’ wants women to be free because he thinks that means free love.”

A widely popular saying of the time, “Women say yes to guys who say no [to the draft],” illustrated the widely-held belief, hope, or expectation that females would take embrace sexual freedom now that they had access to the birth control pill. Although many women saw the pill as a tool of empowerment, this slogan suggests that men may have seen the pill as a way for women to jump into bed with whomever, whenever, wherever.

It became quite clear to women that the New Left, like SNCC, was sexist. Similar to Casey Hayden and Mary King’s proclamation, a statement – “Students for a Democratic Society Resolution” – was put forth in 1967 detailing grievances. It signaled a shift towards separatism, based on the model of Black Power.

Similar to the SNCC position paper, the SDS resolution in September 1967 employed language of oppression and freedom. Yet unlike the position paper by Hayden and King, the SDS resolution utilized “the Third World-oriented revolutionary rhetoric of the time.” This language is worth noting for two key reasons. One is based on the fact that “the New Left was focused on the need for all oppressed groups to organize themselves.”

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32 Helen Gurley Brown’s Sex and the Single Girl encouraged women to enjoy sex as an end in itself, not as a means simply for procreation.
34 Evans, 189.
parallel between themselves and exploited people around the globe, they made the argument that they were just as oppressed. Because SDS espoused self-determination as one of their key beliefs, it was only logical that women would agitate for the same empowerment that SDS desired for people elsewhere. This language informed sexist SDS members that they were mimicking the oppressors that they so detested. Another reason why the rhetoric of this resolution is significant is it laid the groundwork for women disgruntled with the movement to break away and become autonomous. If SDS continued to practice sexism, women would seek power on their own terms, in their own context.

This resolution demonstrated a shift towards an independent women’s movement and radical feminism because of its emphasis on the creation of separate spaces and its emphasis on overhauling society. In it, “they called for the creation of a new society that protected women’s reproductive rights, supported communal child care centers staffed by men and women, and required housework to be shared.”35 The SDS resolution epitomized the belief at the core of what became radical feminism: equality based upon difference. Women desired separate spaces, organizations, and institutions because they felt that male-dominated societal structures did not adequately address their specific needs.

The SDS resolution’s presentation at the 1967 National Conference for New Politics in Chicago failed to garner male leaders’ support and they refused to adopt a civil rights plank for women. When Jo Freeman and Shulamith Firestone protested this dismissal, Firestone received a pat on the head and was told: “‘Move on little girl; we have more important issues to talk about here than women's liberation.’”36 After this conference, women in attendance who saw this display started meeting to discuss their experiences of inequality and formed groups to address

35 Rosen, 126-7.
female needs, led by Freeman in Chicago and Firestone in New York. White women angered and disappointed by their experiences in SDS decided to make self-determination a reality; those who felt similarly in SNCC endeavored to follow the Black Power example.

**Black Power as a Model for Young, Radical White Women**

Just as SNCC began to perceive the futility of following Martin Luther King Jr.’s path of working within the existing societal framework to achieve Civil Rights goals, younger white radical women saw the efforts of current women’s organizations such as the National Organization of Women (NOW) as misguided. NOW sought to reform liberalism and make it more inclusive from within the current system. To the younger generation of women involved in radical movements, this plan seemed hopelessly naïve. Their participation in SNCC and SDS revealed how much sexism permeated society. Neither “participation in” nor “alteration of the political system” would bring about change in the eyes of the younger feminists. They believed “women’s inferior status could be remedied only when these systems [based upon patriarchy and capitalism] were overthrown and replaced by a new political order.” These younger women wanted radical change because anything less would be a continuation of total male control. They felt that the existing dominant women’s organization played by men’s rules, which was equivalent to appeasement. These women therefore sought to create their own groups, separate from NOW and distinct from SNCC and SDS. They embraced Black Power as the model for how to go about their pursuit of liberation. Their first step was separateness.

This break with existing structures and groups also meant detachment from men. These white women believed that because a gender hierarchy shaped every aspect of American life,

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38 This organization will be discussed further in chapter two.
only women could know what females needed and only women would be capable of bringing about genuine change in society. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton asserted in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*: “We blacks must respond in our own way, on our own terms, in a manner which fits our temperaments. The definitions of ourselves, the roles we pursue, the goals we seek are *our* responsibility.” Substituting “women” for “blacks” and the women’s liberation tenet of self-determination is apparent. This was just one instance in which, ironically, Carmichael and Hamilton’s words epitomized the ideals of these younger white women.

Black Power stressed group consciousness, identity, pride, and unity. As Carmichael and Hamilton defined their aims,

> To define and encourage a new consciousness among black people…This consciousness…might be called a sense of peoplehood: pride, rather than shame, in blackness, and an attitude of brotherly, communal responsibility among all black people for one another.

Similarly, radical women wanted to raise people’s consciousness on the issues of sexism and patriarchy, foster sisterhood, and establish women’s-centered structures and communities. Consciousness-raising entailed more than making people cognizant of oppression in gender terms. It meant thinking about and establishing alternatives to the male-dominated system. In the seventies, this translated into “a proliferation of rape crisis centers, health collectives, battered women’s centers, child-care centers, food cooperatives, alternative education programs, women’s studies programs, and feminist journals and newsletters.” Radical feminists created distinct communities with women’s needs and wants at the crux.

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41 Ibid., viii.
42 Wandersee, 56.
The 1968 Miss America Pageant protest was a manifestation of radicals’ desire for female pride, unencumbered by male expectations of beauty. The New York Radical Women targeted this annual pageant because it celebrated an ideal of American womanhood that objectified women.\(^43\) It placed the woman on a pedestal and “seemed to sum up everything these women rejected: woman as spectacle, woman as object, woman as consumer, woman as artificial image.”\(^44\) Feminist activists solemnly crowned a live sheep Miss America and held up photos of women with lines drawn on their bodies as if they were pieces of cattle. These displays were intended to show the extent to which sexism dehumanized women.\(^45\) They also set up a ‘freedom trashcan’ into which women threw “assorted items of female oppression- padded bras, false eyelashes, Playboy, women’s magazines, steno pads.”\(^46\) Women wanted to be recognized for who they were as people, on their own terms, not what men wanted them to be. Carmichael and Hamilton also believed in a group identity unencumbered by outside perceptions and stereotypes: “When we begin to define our own image, the stereotypes – that is, lies – that our oppressor has developed will begin the white community and end there. The black community will have a positive image of itself that it has created.”\(^47\) By rebuking notions that women must be “vacuous, coiffed, cosmeticized and with a smidgin of talent,” radicals sought to establish and embed a new image of women in American society.\(^48\)


\(^{44}\) Rosen, 159.

\(^{45}\) Robin Morgan in *Going Too Far* states that the problem with this protest was that the radical women felt solidarity with the contestants. They were not protesting the contestants; they were expressing their frustration and anger towards the pageant institution.

\(^{46}\) Peter Babcox, “Do you remember La Pasionaria? Meet the Women of the Revolution, 1969,” *New York Times*, 9 February 1969, SM34. Robin Morgan states in *Going Too Far* that the Freedom Trashcan is what gave rise to the myth of radical feminists burning bras, a misconception that lingers to this day.

\(^{47}\) Carmichael and Hamilton, 37.

\(^{48}\) Brownmiller, “‘Sisterhood is Powerful’: A member of the Women’s Liberation Movement explains what it’s all about,” 230.
Radical Feminists

Women who participated in the Civil Rights and New Left movements took the skills they developed, including “a language to name and describe oppression; a deep belief in freedom, equality and community – soon to be ‘sisterhood’; a willingness to question and challenge any social institution that failed to meet human needs; and the ability to organize” and formed their own organizations. Women’s liberation groups (opposed to NOW, which was ‘reformist’ or ‘liberal’) endeavored to make real what had previously been oratory of other radical groups such as SNCC and SDS. They shunned leadership because it created a hierarchy of women and would prioritize a few voices over those of the masses. Additionally, with leaders, decisions would be made that would not reflect everyone’s desires. Along with their dislike of leadership, radical feminists believed in keeping a local focus and complete egalitarianism. Whereas NOW was a “formal national organization” that encouraged cooperation and partnership with men, “the small group branch [radicals]…consisted of a decentralized network in which the basic unit was a group of five to thirty women held together by personal contacts and feminist publications” and it rejected collaboration with men. The movement culture in which they previously participated allowed for the establishment of these contacts. Interestingly, the same infrastructure that spurred the disappointment of the female activists is the same infrastructure that formed the basis of their mobilization efforts. Through small discussion groups all voices could be heard. It was an intense bonding experience for women to come together in meetings and discuss their feelings of exploitation and oppression. A sense of

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49 Evans, 100.
50 The aforementioned structures, such as health collectives and rape crisis centers, were “focused on a whole range of issues affecting women’s lives at a direct and personal level [emphasis mine].” (Wandersee, 56).
sisterhood was fostered through the sharing personal experiences and the knowledge that women collectively suffered from patriarchy. A group formed by Ellen Willis and Shulamith Firestone in 1969, the Redstockings, expressed its belief in the power of consciousness-raising in its Manifesto: “We regard our personal experience, and our feelings about that experience, as the basis for an analysis of our common situation.” Consciousness-raising was a precondition for women’s social and political action, a belief Carmichael and Hamilton espoused for blacks. Anti-leadership, a local focus, egalitarianism, anti-male, small, personal group meetings, and consciousness-raising were characteristics that made women’s liberation unique from NOW and the radical, male-dominated groups from which they developed.

Although the radical feminists formed groups distinct from men and other ‘mainstream’ feminist groups, their consciousness development did not occur in a vacuum. One of the most influential ideas was ‘the personal is political.’ This meant a redefinition of politics; what occurred in the private sphere had political implications. Advancement of this idea is due to Kate Millett’s 1970 dissertation “Sexual Politics” at Columbia University. Her argument – that “women and men are programmed into psychosexual habits after they are born” and that this ‘programming’ is more significant than physical traits – was based on a definition of the word “politics.” The second definition in the dictionary Millett consulted stated that “politics” was the “methods or tactics involved in managing a state or government.” Therefore, she believed that “politics can also be ‘arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another.’” In other words, sex was “an aspect of the power relations between men and women.”

53 McGlen, 46.
54 It was projected to be “the Bible of Women’s Liberation,” according to Marcia Seligson, “De Beauvoir, Lessing now Kate Millett; Sexual Politics Sexual Politics,” New York Times, 6 Sept. 1970, 165.
56 Wandersee, 62.
women adopted Millett’s belief that sex is political, and their myriad initiatives reflected this idea. These feminists made political the issue of domestic violence and the need for women’s bodily integrity to be protected by law. The personal is political also influenced women’s thoughts on reproductive freedom: they felt that women should have control over the means and timing of children. Additionally, contraception and abortions needed to be available. Radical feminists brought the issues of abortion and rape into the public limelight, issues that became a source of unity between NOW and radicals. The 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, which built on the outcome of the 1964 case Griswold v. Connecticut (in which a ban on contraceptives was struck down), validated that states could not interfere in a woman’s right to an abortion. By giving women the right to make this private decision, the grip of man-made laws on female sexuality was loosened. Millet’s adherence to the idea that the personal is political also “raised sexual preference as an issue of discussion.” She believed that because sexuality was programmed, liberation included freedom from societal expectations of heterosexuality and the ability “to love people whatever sex they are,” an idea embraced by the radicals. With the issue of homosexuality raised, NOW had to decide whether it would embrace freedom of sexuality and lesbianism. Ultimately, it did. This stand with homosexual women demonstrated how radical feminists’ ideas and practices had ramifications beyond their small groups.

Although radical feminists had "no single doctrine and no simple set of goals or aims" and groups “formed and dissolved at a rapid rate, especially in the early seventies,” they profoundly influenced feminist consciousness as a whole by making the personal political and

58 Banks, 235.
60 Bender, “Some Call Her the ‘Karl Marx’ of New Feminism,” 30.
61 Banks, 227.
62 Wandersee, 80.
advancing a “women-centered analysis.” In fact, the November 1977 First National Women’s Conference in Houston, Texas witnessed the adoption of a twenty-six plank platform for national action. Many planks resulted from radical feminists’ consciousness-raising ten years prior in the small groups, such as “resolutions on battered women, rape, reproduction freedom (abortion), and sexual preference (lesbianism).” Black and Chicana women absorbed these ideas on sexuality, such as contraceptives and abortion, but in a profoundly different way.

**Black Feminists Organize**

The Black movement is primarily concerned with the liberation of Blacks as a class and does not promote women’s liberation as a priority. Indeed, the movement is for the most part spearheaded by males. The feminism movement, on the other hand, is concerned with the oppression of women as a class, but is almost totally composed of white females. Thus the Black woman finds herself on the outside of both political entities, in spite of the fact that she is the object of both forms of oppression.

Black women in SNCC felt anger and sadness that their ‘brothers’ expected them to be subservient ‘sisters.’ If they were fighting for black liberation, why did that mean only men were to be advanced? These women realized that that their needs and rights were taking a back seat to the racial struggle, but these were concerns that could not be neglected. They were not just black people, they were black women. At the same time, however, they did not see themselves strictly through the gender lens as many white women did. They were not simply women, they were black women. They were thus put in a position of limbo: they harbored feelings of discomfort in their nationalist organizations but also felt as if the predominantly white groups that came out of

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63 Wandersee, 78.
64 Ibid., 175, 188-9.
disenchantment with SNCC and SDS could not adequately address their needs as women of color. Black women needed to address feminism from their own perspective and context.

A difference between black and white women was that many young, radical white women saw cooperation with men as analogous to treason because males were the enemy. They wanted their own groups for distance from their oppressors. On the other hand, black women wanted solidarity with their men because they collectively suffered from the same racist system. They felt the need for groups devoted to women’s rights to show their men that for black liberation, all within the race had to be free. Black women argued that if women and men were equal, the stance of the race in their struggle would be stronger. Like black feminism, Chicana feminism came out of a nationalist movement; hence, their feminist consciousness and differences with white women were very similar to those of black women. Yet there were feminist aims and ideas that transcended race and class, as an examination of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) Statement of Purpose and the Combahee River Collective Statement reveal.

The NBFO’s establishment in 1973 was in response to the need for an organization to address the overlapping systems of oppression black women faced, such as racism and sexism. This first national black feminist organization “articulated the need for political, social, and economic equality specifically for Black women.”66 The NBFO endeavored to overturn the myths associated with black women (discussed at length in chapter two) and intended to “remind the black-liberation movement that there can’t be liberation for half a race.”67 As Mrs. Sylvia Witis Vitale, a student at Queens College and one of the group’s organizers explained: “‘We aren’t

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66 Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (New York: W. Morrow, 1984), 344.
fighting for liberation; we are fighting for female equality within the black community. We’d like black men to know we are their equals.”

Their Statement of Purpose addressed the double burden they experienced and demonstrated similarities with concurrent movements:

Black women have suffered cruelly in this society from living the phenomenon of being Black and female, in a country that is both racist and sexist... We, not white women or Black men, must define our own self-image as Black women... We must together, as a people, work to eliminate racism from without the Black community which is trying to destroy us as an entire people, but we must remember that sexism is destroying and crippling us from within.  

The idea of self-definition and group identity that Black Power and white liberation groups stressed is discernable here, demonstrating the ideological interconnectedness of these movements. Additionally, like NOW, the NBFO’s membership included many middle class and professional women. It was also not without its critics. Some said NBFO was emulating whites and trying too hard to be a black version of NOW, others said its existence was dividing the race, and some labeled NBFO participants as lesbians. These criticisms were similar to those leveled at Chicana women who overcame their fear “of appearing divisive by isolating their own needs and goals” from the liberation movement and set up autonomous organizations. Black and Chicano men saw feminist organizations as destructive of the group unity upon which their racial and ethnic nationalist movements were founded and depended. They argued that it was selfish for women to pursue liberation on their terms because it weakened the group struggle. Black feminist activists asserted that to the contrary, female empowerment and the Civil Rights

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71 Breines, 1116.
72 Campbell, “Black Feminists Form Group Here,” 36.
movement were not mutually exclusive. Their stronger position was not intended to be at the expense of black men; rather, it was for the sake of the group as a whole.

The anger and distrust many black men felt towards their women who organized separately is also discussed in the Combahee River Collective Statement. The Combahee River Collective was a black lesbian feminist group that was meeting in Boston when it presented its Statement in 1974. In it, the members described the type and impact of black male criticisms:

The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative…They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hardworking allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women. Accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women’s movement. 73

Despite the hurdles, erected by white society and fortified by their men’s fierce opposition, this group worked on issues that overlapped with the white feminist liberation movement (which they labeled as “racist”), such as abortion, battered women, rape, and health care. 74 Like Chicana women, they also addressed sterilization issues, because forced sterilization was a significant problem for women of color. 75 The issue of women’s control over their bodies, particularly in regards to reproduction (issues such as birth control and abortion) united women, yet black and Chicana women saw these issues from their own context. Their framework included a history of forced sterilizations in addition to simultaneous racial and ethnic liberation struggles that saw these reproductive choices as cultural genocide.

Black feminist consciousness developed in a way markedly different from white feminist consciousness despite their similar origins in ‘radical’ organizations working to advance

75 Irene I. Blea, La Chicana and the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender (New York: Praeger, 1992).
equality, as demonstrated by the Combahee River Collective and National Black Feminist Organization. Unlike radical white feminists who desired severing ties with men, black women often had trouble with absolute separation. This difference derived from their racial liberation context and the strong pull of racial solidarity. They tried to find a balance between loyalty to the nationalist struggle and advancement of their own needs and wants as women.

Chicano Liberation

The Mexican-American female has taken on some characteristics of what has been described as a Macho. She may be very vocal, aggressive, and an effective community organizer. She may prefer to pursue interests outside the home and reject homemaking as the total fulfillment in her life. This is the new image for some Mexican-American females. The docility and submissiveness are evidently dwindling…Chicanas who have grouped together for strength and unity of purpose are at best tolerated, more often ostracized and ridiculed by Chicanos. 76

In 1929, the League of Latin American citizens (LULAC) formed in order to address issues of education, employment, and health. This early attempt at organization was the Mexican-American counterpart to the NAACP. Despite its efforts, however, LULAC did not yet have the force to effectuate large-scale change. It was not until people felt deep anger from immediate events that the movement towards organization and governmental pressure picked up speed.

Like black men emboldened through their service in World War II but also disillusioned by the United States’ hypocrisy, Mexican-American veterans whose war experience strengthened their self-awareness “chafed at the restrictions historically imposed” on their people. 77 Discrimination against Mexican-Americans manifested itself in such cases as Felix Longoria. He

died the death of a hero in the Philippines liberation, yet the Anglo establishment refused him burial in his own home. The status quo of segregation and discrimination, the target of the black Civil Rights struggle in the South, mirrored the focus of the Chicano movement in the Southwest and West Coast.

Inequality in education was the first target of Mexican-Americans. The damaging effects of educational segregation were made plain in the decision of the 1946 case Mendez v Westminster, a decision that paved the way for Brown v Topeka Board of Education. In this class-action lawsuit, a “U.S. District Court judge ruled that the Mexican American students’ rights were being violated under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.” This case is significant because it laid the groundwork for the major victory of Brown, revealed that the system of segregation was not ironclad, and showed Mexican-Americans that they could challenge the system and succeed. Despite the victory of Mendez, however, inequality and de facto segregation persisted. Numerous public schools in the West and Southwest emphasized this inequality and a social hierarchy through their stress on American history and teaching in the English language. Bilingualism and distinctive Mexican cultural values and history had no place in these centers for Americanization. As a result, generations of Mexican-Americans were instructed that for success in American society, their Mexican side would need to be minimized as much as possible. In the 1960s, Mexican-Americans wanted to foster a sense of pride, cultural identity, and ethnic unity that seemed to be under siege in the American public school system.

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79 Brown, decided in the Supreme Court, struck down Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) which asserted the idea and practice of “separate but equal.” The Plessy doctrine meant the constitutionality of segregation for over fifty years.
In September 1965, farm workers walked off the fields and stopped picking grapes in the San Joaquin Valley as a way to protest the exploitation and inhumane treatment experienced at the hands of ranchers. Ranchers treated farm workers like fertilizer, as if they were just another item in the production of grapes. Paid two dollars a day and exposed to poisonous pesticides under the steaming hot sun, the life expectancy of laborers was only forty-nine years. Fed-up farm workers with a strong leader, César Chávez, head of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, decided to take a strong, unified stand versus the moneyed and powerful growers. Following the example of Martin Luther King Jr., this nonviolent protest endeavored for “the right of farm workers to organize” in their own union. But the strike became more than a labor issue and Chávez became more than a labor leader. Chávez, like King, became the symbolic core of the Mexican-American Civil Rights movement. He talked about the children, racism in schools, and the oppression of local police. The strike and consumer boycott advocated by the UFWOC became a Civil Rights movement and soon took on an international scale.

When César Chávez undertook a three hundred mile long pilgrimage to Sacramento, he opened the struggle beyond Delano area and sent a message to others in the San Joaquin Valley that the strike was for all suppressed farm workers. Attracting workers as it went on, the march became a “literal taking of the territory.” Marching under the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, religious imagery fused protesters into a unified group. On Easter in 1966, ten thousand marchers arrived in the capitol of Sacramento after twenty-five days on the road. It was a “triumphant moment in the history of farm labor” because it was a mass demonstration of

82 Luis Valdez, appearing in Chicano!, episode 2: The Struggle In The Fields.
discontent and unity. It buoyed spirits and gave hope that power in numbers could garner change.

People from all walks of life, such as mayors, religious leaders, and non-Americans overseas supported the protest through their refusal to buy California grapes. The boycott exerted strong pressure on chain stores that sold grapes not under the farm worker union label. Despite such support, this non-violent movement, with its boycott, marches, and pickets, seemed ineffective to some who saw scenes of police beating protestors in Delano. The strike was in its second year, and people started to feel that nonviolence was too slow in overcoming white opposition and bringing about change. Similar to the black Civil Rights struggle, some participants turned away from non-violence and advocated more aggressive actions. Chávez, a reader of Gandhi and follower of Martin Luther King Jr., felt dismay that people spoke of using violence. He decided to undertake a hunger strike on February 14, 1968. Dolores Huerta, Vice President of the UFWOC, recalled that the hunger strike infuriated some movement participants, so much that they abandoned the strike in Delano. To them, it seemed as if this was not a time to slow down and there was no need for a movement martyr. Huerta believed that these people did not understand the spiritual power of the fast as a way to pause and give strikers some perspective.

In 1969, the fourth year of the strike, shipments of California grapes were down twenty-two percent to the major grape importing cities. Chain stores could no longer tolerate the damage to their revenues from the boycott, and their refusal to buy non-union grapes is what eventually brought the growers to their knees. On July 29, 1970, twenty-six Delano growers finally struck a deal with the protestors. Contracts between farm workers and growers guaranteed strict pesticide

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83 Narrator, Chicano!, episode 2: The Struggle In The Fields.
84 Dolores Huerta, Ibid.
85 Ibid.
controls in addition to a wage of $1.80 an hour plus twenty cents per box of grapes. In the cities, inspired by the movement of their people, Chicano youth decided to address educational inequalities and pursue fulfillment of Mendez’s promise.

Angered by the higher proportion of Mexican-American deaths in Vietnam and drawing inspiration from black youth action and the New Left-led student protests, students in March of 1968 walked out of their Los Angeles high schools. Over one thousand Mexican-American students walked out of Abraham Lincoln High School and were soon joined by thousands of other students who left their predominately Mexican-American high schools. Sal Castro, a history teacher at Abraham Lincoln who aided the students, choked back tears in the film Chicano! when he stated that “it was beautiful to be a Chicano that day.” By the end of the first day, there were four thousand students from five high schools participating; by the end of the week, sixteen schools felt the impact of the protest as more than ten thousand students marched in the streets. They wanted bilingual education, more Mexican-American teachers and counselors, Mexican-American history classes, and the end of corporal punishment in schools. This student strike, “The first mass protest against racism ever staged by Mexican Americans in the United States,” was the Mexican-American movement’s version of the 1960 black student sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. This strike (known as a “blowout”) marked the birth of student activism, a significant component of El Movimiento (the name for this Civil Rights movement) in the Southwest.

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86 Huerta was seen as the ‘dragon lady’ because of her gender and her extremely tough attitude towards the growers. Not only was she a Mexican-American, but she was a woman, adding salt to the wound inflicted by her strong stance.
87 Sal Castro, appearing in Chicano!, episode 3: Taking Back the Schools.
For the Mexican-American population of East Los Angeles, numbering almost one hundred thousand in the 1960s, education was a way to break down barriers and achieve what whites had. Only one quarter of them finished high school, unemployment was double the national average, and those who did work earned two-thirds of what other Los Angeles residents earned. Prejudice and discrimination clearly shaped their lives, as three former residents described in the movie *Chicano!* Harry Gamboa stated how East Los Angeles was totally segregated from the rest of Los Angeles, Patssi Valezde recalled how teachers told Mexican-American students that one day they would be cooking and cleaning for other people, and Bobby Verdugo, Jr. explained how administrators directed Mexican-Americans into vocational schools. Educator Raul Ruiz summarized what compelled students to take action: the government collected taxpayers’ money, including that of their parents, but students and the community were losing out. The blowouts demonstrated to fellow Mexican-Americans and whites that Mexican-Americans had power and a strong, unified voice. There was now a movement focus on discontentment in the cities and widespread public knowledge that the entrenched way of life was not immune to this collective power.

Chicano became the name used for Mexican-Americans and their descendents’ group pride, solidarity, and cultural identity. The word ‘Chicano’ had traditionally referenced in Mexico the people who were the poorest of the poor, yet Mexican-Americans in the 1960s and beyond adopted this title with pride. This sense of honor and commemoration of ancestry found expression in Crusade for Justice leader Corky Gonzalez’s powerful poem “I Am Joaquin.” It galvanized people and compelled them to see that despite the discrimination and prejudice of American society, they should embrace and celebrate their roots. This idea took the form of an

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89 *Chicano!* episode 3: Taking Back the Schools.
“agenda of self-determination and empowerment” – known as La Causa – which was at the crux of the Chicano movement.\textsuperscript{91} Like Black Power, the Chicano movement “advanced an anti-assimilationist, cultural nationalist agenda” because they saw the futility of seeking integration “and equality within an ‘Anglo dominated world.’”\textsuperscript{92}

Myriad organizations and groups to address Chicano issues took root, such as La Raza Unida Party (the Chicano People’s Party) and MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán). La Raza Unida was a political party under the leadership of Jose Angel Gutierrez which sought to address the particular needs of the Chicano people.\textsuperscript{93} Its platform was El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán, a manifesto of Chicano nationalism, self-determination, and separate institutions established at the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver in 1969. This Conference, organized by the Crusade for Justice and its leader Corky Gonzalez, drew one thousand participants (which was triple the amount anticipated). El Plan advanced the concept of Aztlán, the “Aztec name for the five southwestern states where the majority of Chicanos live…the home of the Chicanos before conquest by Spain and the United States…the utopian state [that] provides an intellectual framework for liberation,” nationalism as the force that united all Chicanos, and the need for Chicano control over their educations.\textsuperscript{94} The concept of Aztlán was both a state of being and a place, as conference participant Moctesuma Esparza attested: “It meant we weren’t foreigners, it meant we were in our ancestral land.”\textsuperscript{95} In addition

\textsuperscript{92} Schulman, 64.
\textsuperscript{93} Garcia, “Chicano Militants: Assertions and Aims,” 120. It “elected a majority to the city council and to school boards” in Crystal City, Texas, providing a powerful “symbol for the Chicano movement of what was possible through the electoral process,” according to Olivérez, 116. Its platform was bilingual education, regulation of public utilities, farm subsidies, and an equitable tax structure, according to \textit{Chicano!}, episode 4: Fighting for Political Power.
\textsuperscript{94} Garcia, 122-3.
\textsuperscript{95} Moctesuma Esparza, appearing in \textit{Chicano!}, episode 1: History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement.
to formulation of El Plan, cultural songs and dances at the Denver Conference fostered a strong sense of nationalism and Chicano pride.

Yet the Conference was also a place of disappointment and confusion. Although they had ideas and contributed to activities at the Conference, Chicanas were expected by men to cook and busy themselves with clerical work. At a Women’s Workshop, fifty to seventy Chicanas began to question and debate their roles as women in regard to experiences at the Conference and in the Chicano liberation movement. Some asserted that women should always stand behind their men, but others said that women should walk next to, not behind Chicanos. In the end, women decided not to organize separately from men and reaffirmed a Chicano identity. Despite this initial decision, chatter about the Chicana’s place did not stop there. Rather, it only got louder and louder over the next decade.

In addition to El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán, another manifesto was put forth in 1969 by Chicano students who met in Santa Barbara, California. El Plan de Santa Barbara became the founding manifesto of MEChA. It asserted:

The Chicano student movement is more than a political movement, it is cultural and social as well. The spirit of MEChA must be one of hermanidad [brotherhood] and cultural awareness…MEChA, then, is more than a name, it is a spirit of unity, of brotherhood, and a resolve to undertake a struggle for liberation in a society where justice is but a word. MEChA is a means to an end.96

Similar to Black Power, Chicanos articulated a sense of ethnic distinctiveness and dignity. Also like Black Power, Chicanismo (cultural pride) became a manifestation of male dominance. Chicanas’ feminist consciousness, like that of black and white feminists, was fundamentally shaped by the realization that liberation, as the word hermanidad implied, was for men only.

Chicanas’ Burgeoning Feminist Consciousness

Similar to the awakenings experienced by black and white women, Chicanas began to feel the contradiction between liberationist rhetoric and movement expectations of them. Although Chicanas were “encouraged to ‘stand up’ to an Anglo, deference to the Chicano [was] still mandatory.” Chicanas provided the “invisible labor by being the cooks, secretaries, and janitors” when “conferences, symposiums, meetings” took place or when newspapers and magazines were being published. Rather than having positions of leadership “in student organizations, Chicano Studies Departments, and in administration of Raza programs,” the Chicana was assigned work that was “clerical in nature in the organizations, and domestic in the households of Movement men.” Another way in which the Chicano movement paralleled the aforementioned movements is the expectation that women “look after their men” by sleeping with them. If a woman refused, she would be labeled a vendida (sell-out). In other words, she would not be fulfilling her obligation to the movement if she did not comply with men’s wishes. Particularly between 1970 and 1972, Chicanas’ consciousness was being raised due to their involvement in El Movimiento. With models of other female groups (black and white) who were organizing and acting on their raised consciousness, and despite the accusation that women would be selling out their heritage and emulating white society if they aspired for greater equality, Chicanas started to address their subservient status in both Chicano culture and society at large.

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97 Aquilar in Garcia, 138.
98 Sonia A. López, “The Role of the Chicana Within the Student Movement,” Ibid., 103.
99 Ibid.
100 Nancy Nieto, “Macho Attitudes,” Ibid., 117.
101 López, Ibid., 106.
102 Padilla, Ibid., 120.
In three key ways one may see similarities between black and Chicana women: like black women, they desired a strengthening of women’s position for the sake of the liberation struggle. They did not want to separate themselves from their men because they saw group unity as fundamental to combat racism in American society. Second, they did not feel accepted by the white feminist movement. Also comparable to the experiences of black women, their men attacked them for dividing and therefore weakening the liberation struggle. They were also said to be destroying tradition, the heart of the Chicano movement. These three elements shaped the way Chicanas organized and articulated their desires for change.

Chicanas argued that if their position were stronger, the liberation struggle would be that much stronger. They merely wanted equality and recognition for their contributions. Chicana feminist Enriqueta Longeaux Vasquez summarized the Chicana stance:

> The woman must help liberate the man and the man must look upon this liberation with the woman at his side, not behind him, following, but alongside him, leading…When a man can look upon a woman as human, then, and only then, can he feel the true meaning of liberation and equality.

Moreover, they asserted that Chicanos had an obligation to support their women because women’s empowerment was a significant facet of the nationalist struggle. How could *la Raza* (the people) be strong when so many were kept in such a weak position? It was hypocritical for men to practice the paternalism that they felt and suffered from in white society. Like the many black men who acted in a condescending way towards women in their movement, Chicanos asserted power over Chicanas. Historian Irene I. Blea explained this power relationship as part of “the human need for power [that] forces the Chicano to exert power where he can. Because most vehicles of power are denied him, because they are culturally foreign to Chicanos, he exerts

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103 This will be discussed further in chapter three.
power over the lives of women, for women are an available, easy target to control.” Yet rather than break with men, Chicanas tried to address their desires for empowerment within the context of the movement. They took this route to preserve the unity of the cultural struggle and also because they did not feel accepted by white women. Chicanas therefore experienced paternalism from their men and maternalism from white women.

Men did not respond favorably towards Chicanas’ desire for strength because it threatened their assertions of power. Female empowerment was seen as an attack on the very culture Chicanos were fighting to preserve in the face of Americanization. If patriarchy characterized Chicano culture, gender equality would be an erosion of the Chicano way of life. Gender parity would have the same influence as an English-only education: it would be assimilationist and would neglect their distinct heritage. Criticisms directed at Chicanas who wanted change asserted that they were “drawing attention and energy away from the Chicano movement” and “destroying the basis of Chicano culture: the family.” In this way, men made the claim that women’s agitation for rights undermined their identity (which was intertwined with the family). They were implicitly asking these women (and other potential Chicana feminists whose consciousness had not yet been raised) whether they really wanted that emotional burden. This implicit question was a way to deter Chicanas from organizing and acting. Another way of dissuading Chicanas from agitating and departing “from the nationalist political stance” was by labeling. These names, such as vendidas (sell-outs), agabachadas (white identified), malinche (betrayal/ collaborator), or las Chicanas con pantalones (pants-wearing Chicanas) denoted “cultural betrayal and assimilation into non-Chicano values and life-

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105 Blea, 94.
106 Ibid., 13.
By saying that Chicanas emulated white women and were collaborators, men asserted their women were aiding white society in keeping Chicanos powerless.

In this era of refashioning liberalism to make it more than a semantic device, was equality out of reach for Chicanas? Were female empowerment and cultural stability mutually exclusive? Many Chicanas obviously thought that changes were feasible, and they came together at the First National Chicana Conference in May 1971 to formulate their feelings about “the contradictions of the role of ‘La Mujer’ in the Movement.”

This Houston, Texas conference, including over six hundred Chicanas from twenty-three states, called for free legal abortion and criticized the Catholic Church. Chicanas wanted rights like those desired by white and black women, including reproductive choice and childcare options. Chicanas had to address these concerns in a particular way due to the nationalist struggle belief that birth control was a form of cultural genocide. Additionally, Chicanas believed in the need for childcare, but they insisted that it be both bicultural and bilingual. In this way, both women’s goals and movement aims would be addressed.

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In these turbulent decades of overlapping movements for social change, feminist consciousness developed out of the realization that liberation did not mean freedom from the traditional gender hierarchy with men as the power-holders. In even the most ‘radical’ organizations – SNCC, SDS, and Chicano student groups – women were expected to be the invisible labor. Women realized that if they wanted empowerment and societal change, they would need to agitate on their own behalf, in their own organizations. Unlike white radical feminists, black and Chicana feminists did not want to break with men in their pursuit of reform.

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108 Segura and Pesquera in Freeman, 621.
109 López in García, 104.
110 Ibid.
This is because many of these women felt that unity of the racial or ethnic group was of the utmost importance for the success of their concurrent movements for liberation from racism. Black, white, and Chicana feminist consciousness developed in markedly different ways despite common origins. These different conceptions of feminism, particularly in regards to the family, will be explored in chapter two.
CHAPTER TWO

FAMILY: A LOCUS OF OPPRESSION?

When you look into the mirror, what do you see first? Do you see yourself through the prism of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, a profession, familial role, or age? Two people who one may think would say the same thing in reply to what they see first may respond very differently because everyone has unique circumstances that shape their answers. An answer may reveal so much more about a person than readily meets the eye. Now imagine it is sometime during the second wave and three women – one black, one white, and one Chicana – are standing together and are about to perform this exercise with an added question of who or what oppresses them the most. ¹ Would they all say the same thing based on their gender or would their answers diverge because “though all women are women, no woman is only a woman”? ² How could notions of self and who or what was the oppressor influence the ways in which these three women viewed the family? Was a uniform feminist consciousness – transcending non-gender factors – possible despite varying conceptions of self and family?

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The way to a man's heart
So we've always been told,
Is a good working knowledge
Of pot, pan, and mold.

The talented gal
Who can whip up a pie,
Rates a well deserved rave
From her favorite guy.

A juicy red steak,  
Or a tender, fish fillet  
Done to a turn  
In a bright copper skillet

Will soothe the rough edges  
Of tempers, no fooling!!!  
And leave the man happy  
Contented and drooling.

--To The Bride (1956)

This poem, found in the cookbook compiled by the editors of To The Bride, addressed to the recently married woman, is intended to impart the knowledge that dexterity in the kitchen guarantees a successful marriage. If a woman cooked, cleaned, cared for her husband’s every need, raised the children, and did it all without batting a long, mascara-covered eyelash, she was fulfilling her duty as a woman. Her sex dictated that her path was wife, housekeeper, and mother, just as the man’s path was leadership of the home and breadwinner. How is it that white women, destined for domesticity, transitioned from skirt-wearing subservience in the 1950s to throwing bras, Playboy magazine, and hair rollers in a Freedom Trashcan at the 1968 Miss America pageant to the 1970 Women’s Strike for Equality in which thousands for women smashed dishes and tied themselves to typewriters?

A major icon that put such changes in motion was Rosie the Riveter, large muscled and determined looking, who proclaimed to American women “yes we can!” The intent of Rosie, the poster woman of female employment in World War II, was to convince women that temporarily leaving their homes and contributing to the war effort was their patriotic duty. The war necessitated that men serve overseas, which meant abandonment of their jobs on the domestic front. Rosie endeavored to convince women that it was not only acceptable but necessary to fill

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the vacancies left by men, even those traditionally considered strictly male (such as in factories). Before the war, younger women, particularly those aged twenty to twenty-four, would hold jobs typically considered for women (stewardess, secretary) and would leave the workforce upon marriage and childbirth. After the war, however, a marked shift took place. Although the “highly paid, non-traditional work for women ended with the war, many women subsequently returned to work…after their children reached school age.”\(^4\) Rather than leave the workforce entirely, “They accepted jobs in the lower-paid clerical and service fields” in order to continue making money and as a means of autonomy.\(^5\) The shift from younger, single women to older, married women filling the workforce had dramatic implications for women’s lives and the future feminist movement. This is because it “shattered the notion that work outside the home was a male preserve” that was simply a way to fill the “gap between childhood and marriage.”\(^6\) No longer were women earning a little pocket money just to keep busy between their traditional female obligations.

Yet the jobs, not careers, housewives pursued outside of the home were those traditionally considered for women only. Such jobs included “secretaries, social workers, teachers, sales clerks, stewardesses, and waitresses,” jobs that did not entail potential for upward mobility in the workplace.\(^7\) Feminist activist Susan Brownmiller described the way in which “Help Wanted Columns were divided into Male for the jobs with a future, and Female for the dead-end positions.”\(^8\) Why would women work if the jobs seemed to be dead ends? Three explanations may shed light on the reasons why women would accept these positions: they still

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\(^5\) Ibid.


\(^7\) Ibid.

felt the tug of history and Victorian gender norms and did not want to radically overturn what they were raised to believe was their biologically determined path; they simply desired a link to the outside world in whatever form that could take; or women aspired for the middle class lifestyle and wanted to solidify their family’s position in this societal strata.

The first reason for pursuing such job opportunities was the pull of history and its Victorian gender norms. Intertwined with such norms were conceptions of public and private spheres. Nineteenth century gender ideology vigorously divided men’s and women’s social roles; men participated in the polity and had lives outside of the home, whereas women had to stay in the private realm. Reigning assumptions held that women had too little rational ability and too much moral and emotional sensibility to engage in civic activities, making it improper to step outside of the domestic space. Women’s only concerns should be providing a well-ordered household so that their husbands could excel and their children could grow. Women’s education typically devolved to the skills and knowledge needed for home life; education was not supposed to be for personal fulfillment or career preparation. In the 1950s, women felt that the interruptions of two World Wars and the Great Depression did nothing to change their status from that of their foremothers a century and a half prior. Womanhood and domesticity still seemed entwined and marriage was a must. Given the opportunity to work outside of the home, conditioned by the Victorian gendered order and the American tradition of domestic and private realms, the pursuit of ‘female’ jobs could be a way to reconcile the new reality with their upbringing and beliefs.

One notable trend was the increasing pursuit of educational opportunities at the undergraduate and graduate levels by women in the 1940s, 50s, and into the 60s; education that went beyond skills needed for housewifery. Yet regardless of women’s intellectual growth,
domesticity was inevitable. The time of heightened female education coincided and clashed with the growth of suburbia, a place where they felt like their intellect was going to waste. As technologically advanced products to aid women’s domestic responsibilities flooded the marketplace, such as dishwashers and washing machines, women had less work to do around the home but it seemed like standards were so much higher. With the tools to have a perfect domestic space, they felt pressure to find the absolute best mix of machines and products. Maybe a few months or years prior they pored over history or philosophy books, but in suburbia they sought out “the appropriate detergents, bleaches, and rinses to meet changing standards of cleanliness.”

Women’s education allowed them to know about the world beyond carpools and spin cycles, and in the minds of many who later became feminist activists, “Life seemed to be passing them by: shopping trips became forays into the outside world, and husbands, who had less and less time to spend with their families, were now their major link to the public realm.”

Women felt boredom and discontentment with suburbia, a place that historian Sara Evans likened to a “female ghetto.” Therefore, work outside the home, whatever it was, allowed women the human interactions that their daily chores did not permit. A paycheck also allowed these women to not rely entirely on their husbands for their livelihood.

The third reason for female work outside of the home was a desire for a middle class lifestyle. World War II remedied Depression-battered America to the extent that in the post-World War II world, prosperity seemed within reach for many. After the War, large numbers of families joined the ranks of the middle class, enabled in large part by the wages women earned in their ‘female’ jobs in education, advertising, or social work. The postwar boom “ushered ordinary working Americans into a comfortable middle class lifestyle; millions of blue-collar workers...”

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9 Evans, 7.
10 Ibid., 8.
11 Ibid.
workers owned their own homes, [and] garaged late-model cars.”  The desire for consumer goods, home ownership, and college education for their children meant that female incomes were a necessary supplement to male earnings. Although the end of middle class life was enjoyable, one of the means of getting there – the work environment for females – was not.

Women in the 1950s and 60s would not receive pay proportionate to their work and a glass ceiling precluded the opportunity for much upward mobility. Many women began to feel ‘relatively deprived,’ because "they were not poor, or absolutely deprived, but they perceived a gap between what they believed they were rightfully entitled to and what they could attain under existing social conditions." With an education and the mental faculties to succeed in an intellectually challenging job, it was frustrating and humiliating to spend eight hours a day doing what they saw as the “most meaningless and degrading work available in the society.” As more and more women (especially those with educations) entered the workforce, this clash between capabilities and jobs available and pay received, heightened by “the spirit of other movements for rights,” “led to a widening circle of voices demanding change and equity.” The circle continued to grow, facilitated by government reports on the issue.

In 1961, the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, established by President Kennedy and chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, issued reports that illustrated “just how thoroughly women are still denied many rights and opportunities.” In fact, the 1963 report found that even if women held the same jobs as men, they made up to forty percent less than men earned for the

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13 Gatlin, 79.
same work.\textsuperscript{17} Evans explicated the importance of the commissions and their findings: “Such commissions constituted a tacit admission that there was indeed a ‘problem’ regarding women’s position in American society, that the democratic vision of equal opportunity had somehow left them out.”\textsuperscript{18} Even though the PCSW recognized women’s marginalization, historians Blanche Linden-Ward and Carol Hurd Green exposed the commission’s underbelly: participants concluded that “women should still be educated for domestic responsibilities.”\textsuperscript{19} How could female domesticity be reconciled with a desire for their societal involvement and contributions? The report left this fundamental question unanswered. Although the reports produced were lacking because they left many questions unanswered and raised many more, the PCSW and subsequent state commissions’ reports significance is that they raised awareness of female inequality. Women who quietly felt discontentment either in their job or at home because of the expectation that they would simultaneously be a wage earner, mother, homemaker, and wife, saw that they were not alone. In fact, their discontentment was all too common.

The year 1963 saw the publication of Betty Friedan’s \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, considered by many to be one of the catalysts for the feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s. She studied what happened to her classmates at Smith College who graduated in 1942 and “found considerable dissatisfactions among these women, whose lives did not conform to the cultural model of the happy housewife.”\textsuperscript{20} The book resonated with “thousands of educated, middle class housewives who embodied a contradiction between the intellectual and social stimulation of their

\textsuperscript{18} Evans, 16.
\textsuperscript{19} Linden-Ward and Green, 6.
college years and the isolation and routine of domesticity.”\textsuperscript{21} The routine and dead-end path of
the educated white housewife was, according to Friedan, the “problem that has no name.” For
many women, reading Friedan’s book made them realize that innumerable other housewives felt
the same dissatisfaction with their lives and the fact that “they became socially invisible” once
they entered the home.\textsuperscript{22} Friedan made it clear that domesticity was not satisfying and it
precluded the realization of women’s potential.

Feminist activist Susan Brownmiller described the impact of the book on her. She
recalled how “I’d seen myself on every page” and the book “changed my life.”\textsuperscript{23} Brownmiller
was not alone; thousands of other women felt galvanized by the account of “bored, depressed,
middle class suburban housewives who downed too many pills and weren’t making use of their
excellent educations.”\textsuperscript{24} In her 1976 book \textit{It Changed My Life} Friedan chronicled the plethora of
letters she received in response to the book, but not all were expressions of gratitude for bringing
to life what was brewing under the surface. She related that “many were violently outraged at the
charge that American women have been seduced back into the doll’s house, living through their
husbands and children instead of finding individual identity in the modern world.”\textsuperscript{25} Perhaps
many of these letter writers did not want their way of life to be undercut. For many thousands of
women, however, the overhaul of their way of life was exactly what they wanted.

The book, although a milestone in the development of many women’s feminist
consciousness, did not address the family-work issue of non-middle class white women. These
women worked because their survival necessitated it, not so they could solidify their family’s
status in the middle class. For working-class women of any race, “The issue was not the

\textsuperscript{21} Hartmann, 56.
\textsuperscript{22} Gatlin, 49.
\textsuperscript{23} Brownmiller, 3.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
difficulty of leaving home to work but the lack of freedom to choose to work or not.”

Although feminist consciousness was just beginning to percolate in the open on a national scale, already there were divides between women based on family structure, class status, and race. For many white, middle class women, a paying job outside of the home was a “form of liberation,” but this seemed foreign to women who did not have the luxury to opt to work. Noted black feminist writer bell hooks expounded in *Ain’t I a Woman*:

> Implicit in the assertion that work was the key to women's liberation was a refusal to acknowledge the reality that, for masses of American working class women, working for pay neither liberated them from sexist oppression nor allowed them to gain any measure of economic independence.

If race and class were wedges between women on the issue of work, could a cohesive feminist consciousness still be formulated when the movement(s) began in earnest? Did varying positions on this subject foreshadow that a comprehensive set of feminist ideals would be unfeasible?

As Friedan’s book sales climbed, Americans’ awareness of the damages of racial discrimination grew due to shocking images of racial hatred and violence on television. Both internal movement pressure and fears of a tarnished world image (the Soviet Union asserted that the United States sanctioned human rights abuses) compelled the creation and passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. For women, the most significant element of this Act was Title VII, which made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of sex, religion, race, color, or national origin. A Southern congressman attempted to have the bill killed by adding ‘sex’ as one of the grounds for which discrimination was unacceptable, but the bill nonetheless passed. As a result of its acceptance, “Women were now included, almost by accident, in the brief of the Equal

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26 Linden-Ward and Green, 95.
27 Gatlin, 185.
Employment Opportunities Commission set up to administer the Act.\textsuperscript{29} Regardless of how the provision of sex was added, its inclusion meant that women now had a legal tool with which they could “combat pervasive discrimination in hiring and promotion in all aspects of the economy.”\textsuperscript{30} The President’s Commission on the Status of Women, the subsequent state commissions, and Title VII are considered fundamental governmental steps towards the re-emergence of feminism in the 1960’s and 70’s after the forty year quiet simmer following suffrage. While there was top-down attention to discrimination, Friedan’s book may be seen as a bottom-up consciousness-raising device for women. Together, they were crucial for the growth of the second wave.

Although the ideals encapsulated in Title VII were admirable, there was no force to back up the rhetoric and it “suffered from a high degree of structural schizophrenia” because “it provided little substantive power and then distributed this power in such a way that it would do the least good for those who were victims of discrimination.”\textsuperscript{31} Women’s hopes were high, but institutionally, nothing seemed to change. In response to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s either unwillingness or inability to ensure observance to Title VII, the National Organization for Women (NOW), formed in 1966. NOW, generally composed of older, married, white, middle class, professional women, wanted to utilize the existing political structures as the means through which they would achieve their goals.

A \textit{New York Times} article from March 10, 1968 titled “What do these women want? The Second Feminist Wave” described NOW’s main tenets at the time, many of which focused on the home and domestic life. They wanted:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Olive Banks, \textit{Faces of Feminism: a study of feminism as a social movement} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 212.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Evans, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Jo Freeman, \textit{The Politics of Women’s Liberation} (New York: Longman, 1975), 179.
\end{itemize}
Total enforcement of Title VII; a nationwide network of child-care centers, operating as optional community facilities; revision of the tax laws to permit full deduction of housekeeping and child-care expenses for working parents; maternity benefits which would allow some period of paid maternity leave and guarantee a woman’s right to return to her job after childbirth; revision of divorce and alimony laws…and a constitutional amendment withholding Federal funds from any agency, institution or organization discriminating against women.\textsuperscript{32}

It is apparent that these objectives grew out of the expectations and perspectives of Freidan and her housewife readers. Unsurprisingly, the matriarch of NOW was Betty Freidan.

NOW obviously signaled the beginnings of a movement to address female inequality, but perhaps its biggest impact was unintentional. Many feminist groups of younger women in fact formed in reaction to it. To a younger generation of white, middle class women, labeled “radicals” by many both within and outside the movement(s), patriarchy infiltrated every crevice of American life. For feminist goals to be achieved, working within the system – as the “mainstream” feminists of NOW were doing – seemed to be a waste of time. The younger feminists “believed that the end of women’s oppression would not come about through participation in or alteration of the political system...women’s inferior status could be remedied only when these systems [based upon patriarchy and capitalism] were overthrown and replaced by a new political order.”\textsuperscript{33} Where NOW wanted change within existing societal structures, the radical feminists saw the need to establish institutions outside of the existing male-dominated system.

Although the clash between the older, “reformist” and the younger “radical” feminists characterized the 1960s and 70s, it is noteworthy that both groups were primarily the same race and socioeconomic status. As Susan Brownmiller wrote in her 1970 article “‘Sisterhood is Powerful’: A member of the Women’s Liberation Movement explains what it’s all about”: “The

new feminism has taken hold and rooted in territory that at first glance appears an unlikely breeding ground for revolutionary ideas: among urban, white, college-educated, middle class women generally considered to be a rather ‘privileged’ lot by those who thought they knew their politics, or knew their women.”

For these women, inequity in employment was not the largest issue; it was the division of labor within the home and the unrelenting work load. The expectation was that women would work a double shift of menial domestic chores and unfulfilling employment outside the home.

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The majority of middle class white women perceived the home as a locus of repression and their husbands and patriarchy as their oppressors. Women in both the “reformist” and “radical” wings were set on changing the nuclear family structure that so oppressed them. They advanced the notion that there was not one correct family composition or division of labor. Rather, people could find fulfillment in non-“traditional” arrangements that were not “husband’s role as provider, the wife’s role as home maintenance and child care.”

In a 1975 interview, Betty Friedan stated that an aim of the movement was to spread awareness that it was not wrong for women to practice a family structure that diverged from what women grew up to believe was the only way of living. Liberation for women meant liberation from their imbedded beliefs on a woman’s place and the correct family arrangement in addition to physical liberation from men.

But from this discussion on family structure arose the issue of lesbianism. Some in the younger branch “argued first that women should identify with, live with, and associate only with women and eventually that a woman who actually slept with a man was clearly consorting with

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the enemy and could not be trusted.”  

In NOW, lesbianism became a “lavender herring” but eventually, freedom of sexual choice became a key feminist tenet. Although many women wanted to change societal structures, they had their own prejudices – homosexuality – that divided them from women even of the same race and socioeconomic status.

Marriage and child care were two issues at the heart of white feminist ideas. Women sought answers to such questions as: is marriage worthwhile? Can one be both a married woman and a feminist? If a woman gets married, must she use her husband’s last name? What happens if and when children come into the picture; how should they be cared for (communally, by women half of the day and men the other half, or by women six months of the year and men the other six months of the year)? How available should abortion and contraceptives be? Were children, men, and the “traditional” family structure keeping white women in shackles?

These questions and issues differed fundamentally from the black and Chicana perception of family and the home as a locus of resistance versus racist society. Although black and Chicana women agreed with some feminist goals, such as those dealing with abortion and child care, they felt the need to address these issues from their own racial and class perspectives. Many men and women in these minority groups saw abortion as cultural genocide, as a white cultural attempt to eradicate undesirables. Moreover, although the sharing of responsibility for child-care was significant for Chicanas, they believed that it needed to be a bilingual and bicultural facility. White women saw their oppression through a gender lens, whereas black and Chicana women saw their oppression from the viewpoints of race, ethnicity, and class. Could the aforementioned...

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questions be answered in the same way despite these unique views? Would they need to be answered in the same way for the movement to be considered a “success”? 

Are White Women Slaves?

The rhetorical construct of likening white women to black slaves dramatized these differences between white and black women. In both England and France centuries ago, women utilized this comparison to agitate for rights. Mary Wollstonecraft, considered an early feminist, invoked “poor African slaves” and their brutalization in her 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in order to urge her readers to sympathize with another group of disenfranchised people. The utilization of references to slavery and the master-servant relationship also found expression in Etta Palm D’Aelder’s “Discourse on the Injustice of the Laws in Favor of Men, at the Expense of Women,” in which she implored the men: “From now on we should be your voluntary companions and not your slaves.” Revived in the 1960s and 70s, this metaphor alienated black women who felt as if from their status in society, white women just could not understand what slavery or true oppression meant. Moreover, it underlined the distance between “us” and “them” because white women were essentially saying ‘we are like them in that we are discriminated against, but we are unlike them in that we possess the intellectual and emotional abilities to exercise these rights.’ In this way, white women beseeched men not to let their womanhood overshadow their membership in the dominant race. Because of their race they deserved rights and would use them wisely, meaning in a way that would not overturn the societal order of white dominance.

Beverly Jones, a contributor to *Sisterhood is Powerful*, an anthology of feminist writings, referenced this analogy in “The Dynamics of Marriage and Motherhood” when she described how “a relationship between a man and a woman is no more or less personal a relationship than is the relationship between a woman and her maid, a master and his slave, a teacher and his student.” What is so interesting about this excerpt is that she asserted that the servitude of a maid (presumably a black woman) to a woman (presumably one who is white) was a replication of the master-slave arrangement. This implicitly implied a racial hierarchy among women. By linking slavery with the male-female relationship, Jones provided just one example of how this rhetorical device permeated writing and thinking about feminism. An additional example is by Florynce Kennedy, a prominent black feminist and Civil Rights activist. In her *Sisterhood is Powerful* piece she wrote that “women with really good jobs and connections are often kowtowed to, like the ‘Negro’ who has ‘made it.’” Her statement reflected the inequalities both women and blacks faced, because their successes were treated as exceptional feats. Such achievements, if attached to a white man, would definitely not be worthy of note. A further comparison was made by Gunnar Myrdal, Swedish social economist and author of the groundbreaking 1944 study *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, and reported in Martha Weinman Lear’s *New York Times* article “What do these women want?” Myrdal wrote about how the status of woman in society could be likened to the illusion of the ‘contented Negro.’ This myth meant that those in subservient positions enjoyed

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41 Florynce Kennedy, “Institutionalized Oppression vs. The Female” in Morgan, 498.
42 This study, commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation, was conducted by a Swede for objectivity. An outside observer to the American situation was necessary because of the high emotionality attached to race relations. In it, Myrdal described the ways in which whites endeavored to preclude black participation in American society. It was revolutionary to describe the Negro problem as a problem resulting from white racism. Myrdal’s study was cited in the milestone 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision, which asserted the inequality of separate public schools for black and white children. “Who Was Gunnar Myrdal?” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 31 (Spring, 2001), 28. *JSTOR* (17 March 2007).
their status. Lear stated that the comparison also applied to the organizational level, as “NOW often makes this analogy between the Negro and the woman in society, calling itself, in fact, a sort of N.A.A.C.P. for women.”\textsuperscript{43}

Although many white women may have seen this metaphor as accurate, black feminist activist bell hooks saw it as severely erroneous and damaging. Hooks described how a group had never before compared itself to blacks to the extent that white women did. In so doing, hooks argued that white women were making a "subtle appeal to white men to protect white female's position on the race/sex hierarchy."\textsuperscript{44} She also made the case that by espousing this metaphor, white women distracted the public’s focus from Civil Rights and black issues.

**Slavery and its Impact on the Family**

Although slavery ended with the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, the effects of this debilitating system lingered on even one hundred years later, shaping black family structure and conceptions of black womanhood held by black men and white society. The structural consequences of the slave system for black families made women the nominal heads of family. They assumed the primary responsibility for family unity, which was both a goal and marker of emancipation.

According to radical black Marxist and feminist Claudia Jones, this seemed a quite natural position for women. In 1949, she wrote in “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” this role derived from black slave origins in West Africa, “Where the position of women, based on active participation in property control, was relatively higher in the family


\textsuperscript{44} hooks, 143.
than that of European women.”

Jones urged black women, in her opinion America’s most oppressed group, to be more aggressive in their demands for equality and inclusion. Her Marxist ideology entailed the belief that the capitalist system oppressed women in the same way that it oppressed workers. According to Jones, if black women passionately campaigned for rights and succeeded, then their exploitation at the hands of society, with its racial, gender, and class hierarchies, would slow appreciably and perhaps halt. This conception of black women as on par with workers and belief in the need to restructure America’s social and economic structures became a model “for contemporary black women who embrace socialism or communism, such as Angela Davis and Frances Beale.”

This excerpt from Jones is noteworthy because of the contrast in black women’s status between time in the distant past, when they held some power, and their status at the time she wrote. Regardless of their social standing, however, black women were seen and acted as the “guardian[s], the protector[s], of the Negro family” throughout time. How could they play such significant roles but lack rights?

Like Jones, Angela Davis also discussed the history of black women in her essay “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.” In it, she described black women’s legacy of strength and how their role in the preservation of the race was undeniable. She wrote: “By virtue of the brutal force of circumstances, the Black woman was assigned the mission of promoting the consciousness and practice of resistance.”

By teaching their children how to stay strong in the face of such oppression, women emphasized that resistance was essential for Black survival, a value instilled in subsequent generations. Mahalia Jackson, a black gospel singer, substantiated how women inculcated the value of pride despite white repression:


Guy-Sheftall, 107.

Jones in Guy-Sheftall, 108.

It was hard for colored children to be proud of fathers who were treated like that [called 'Boy'] and it was usually the Negro mother who had to keep a certain dignity in the family to offset the inferiority the white man inflicted on her husband. She held her head up high and she showed the way to her children.⁴⁹

This quotation stands out among the others cited here, for Jackson is neither a feminist activist nor an author. Her 1966 statement demonstrated that recognition of black females’ importance was possible and articulated even before the black feminist movement began in earnest. Both Davis and Jackson demonstrated the way black women acknowledged and expressed their history of strength and value in the family. They looked back through history for a usable past and a recognition of the origins of current conditions, a process that became an element of black feminist consciousness.

**Women Working**

Black women historically labored in the domestic sphere, where their work was forced under slavery. Yet after emancipation, they continued to work as domestics because of economic necessity. These jobs proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, some women got the “fringe benefits of extra food, clothes, and perhaps elementary reading and writing skills.”⁵⁰ On the other, black women’s labor as domestics reinforced a publicly subservient role and their families depended on their earnings. Thus, even after slavery, women served as both the emotional leaders of their families and often its major economic support. Yet women earning wages to keep the family afloat resulted in some male psychological issues because they were unable to be breadwinners.⁵¹ The same system that made this work available to women often denied men the opportunity to obtain work that would permit them to single-handedly keep the

⁵¹ The notion in capitalist society that men should be providers is expounded upon in Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1983).
family fed and clothed. White capitalist society, with a paucity of jobs available for men and undignified domestic work available for women, compelled tensions between the genders and psychological issues for both.

Feminist and Civil Rights activist Frances Beale discussed how the system of capitalism, dominated by whites, influenced the black family structure in her widely famous essay “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female.” The essay became a manifesto of black feminism because of its focus on the need to abolish both sexism and racism. She wrote:

In keeping with its goal of destroying the Black race’s will to resist its subjugation, capitalism found it necessary to create a situation where the Black man found it impossible to find meaningful or productive employment. More often than not, he couldn’t find work of any kind. And the Black woman likewise was manipulated by the system, economically exploited and physically assaulted. She could often find work in the white man’s kitchen, however, and sometimes became the sole breadwinner of the family. This predicament has led to many psychological problems on the part of both man and woman and has contributed to the turmoil that we find in the Black family structure.  

Even in this small piece, Beale’s dual emphasis is apparent. The focus on both racism and sexism derived from her experiences as a founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Black Women’s Liberation Committee and as a director of the Black Women’s Alliance (a feminist group connected to SNCC).  

Black feminist consciousness at the crux entailed elimination of these two oppressive systems. Beale, like Jackson, Davis, and Jones, viewed the current family structure with a regard to its history and the woman’s place in it. Whereas white women could look back on history and see male oppression, black women saw white oppression through slavery, white male sexual abuse, and the capitalist system. This caused a fundamental difference in their feminist ideology. Whereas white women saw oppression from the perspective of gender, black women saw oppression as stemming from both gender and race.

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53 Guy-Sheftall, 145.
Myths

That black women were forced by white societal structures to become the household heads, both emotionally and economically, led to the formation of myths about black womanhood. Women were strong and independent, but were they too strong? Did their strength mean that men could not also exercise leadership in the home? These suspicions of female power led to the formation of myths that asserted that they were too strong and their position of strength was at the expense of men. On one level, it is clear that these myths became the basis of black feminist ideology because these women recognized that for genuine change in their status they needed to first counter the falsehoods surrounding them.\(^5^4\) They needed to be understood for who they were so that a genuine dialogue about equality could begin.

Black feminists identified three major myths which arose from their experiences during and after slavery: the emasculating matriarch, mammy, and Jezebel. These conceptions of black women were prevalent not only among black men, but also in white society. One could argue that the myths ‘punished’ black women for the myriad roles into which they were forced as a family leader. This would have a profound effect on black feminist consciousness because in their pursuit of equality they needed to ‘set the record straight’ as to whom black women were at the core.

Pauli Murray described how the matriarchy myth took root in the era of slavery. Women developed the skills for survival and independence but that led to stereotypes of “‘female dominance’ [that were] attributed to the ‘matriarchal’ character of the Negro family developed during slavery and its aftermath.”\(^5^5\) Murray, a feminist and Civil Rights activist, was a member of President Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women and agitated for the passage of


Title VII in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Furthermore, she was a founding member of NOW in 1966. Murray perceived two intertwined reasons as explanations for why black men felt the need to resort to sexism. One is that they could not be breadwinners and therefore felt the denial of their manhood. The other was women’s “self-reliance and independence,” traits that men could not claim for themselves. In other words, they felt their own inadequacies and were resentful that women could exhibit the exact qualities they lacked. Through sexism they could assert their power and reclaim their “rightful” position. Perhaps men felt as if they needed to assert their masculinity even more powerfully if women were strong and would not easily relinquish their will. In her essay “The Liberation of Black Women” quoted above, Murray asserted the term “Jane Crow” as a way to describe the “institutional barriers and stereotypes that prevented black women from realizing their full potential.” This term is clearly a reflection of her political involvement and the recognition that on both an institutional and personal level (myths) women were held back.

Coupled with the myth of matriarchy was the belief that black women were emasculators of black men. This myth implied that women acted as accomplices of white society to preclude their men from advancement in society. Songwriter and actress Abbey Lincoln described the meaning of this myth: “She (the Black woman) stands accused as the emasculator of the only thing she has ever cared for, her Black man.” The myth that black women, along with white men, were the only two groups of free people in the United States discounted suffering they endured and continue to endure, argued Lincoln. To describe the extent to which this perception

56 Guy-Sheftall, 185.
57 Murray in Ibid., 187.
58 Ibid., 185.
was erroneous she wrote: “If this be freedom, then Heaven is Hell.”60 The daily lives of black women, shaped by gender, race, and class oppression, starkly contrasted with the absence of oppression in the lives of white men, occupants of the principal position on the societal ladder. During slavery and after emancipation, women focused on unity of the family and its potential to be a locus of resistance for survival in the face of white racism, a system perpetuated in large part by white men. Yet the emasculating matriarch myth asserted that “black women somehow escaped this persecution and even contributed to this emasculation [of the Black male].”61 The potency of the myth was three-fold: they betrayed their men by trying to keep them down, acted in partnership with white men to do so, and subverted familial unity.

Moreover, to white society, the power of women could be seen as a perversion of the entrenched Victorian order in which the man was dominant. This family structure appeared to some, in fact, as evidence of black backwardness and justified racial discrimination, despite its imposition by white society. The acceptance of this myth also allowed white women “to ignore the extent to which Black women are likely to be victimized in this society and the role white women may play in the maintenance and perpetuation of that victimization.”62 If this myth were accepted as truth, it seemed unlikely that perpetuators of the racial hierarchy – white women – would incorporate the racial oppression of black women into their feminist activism. The myth of the emasculating matriarch drove a wedge between black women and black men because of the supposed female crippling of the male for her own gain. It also planted the seeds for distance between white and black women based on racial tensions.

Yet Beale asked, was the work of black women so liberating? While Black women assumed domestic roles in white homes as either a maid or wet nurse, “Her own children were

60 Lincoln in Cade, 84.
61 Beale, Ibid., 92.
more often than not starving and neglected.”⁶³ The misconception that black women cared more for the white children than she cared for herself or her family seemed to contradict the idea of the family-focused matriarch. Here, the myth of the matriarch crossed over into the territory of “mammy.” Domestic labor for white families perpetuated the image of the Black woman “as a traditional ‘mammy’ who puts the care of children and families of others above her own.”⁶⁴ This meant that black women loved and cared for the white children while their own families were an afterthought. By placing the white children above their own in this myth, it seemed as if they accepted the racial hierarchy in which whites came before blacks. The mammy “symbolize[d] the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power…She has accepted her subordination.”⁶⁵ The smiling, affectionate mammy stereotype certainly made it easy for some whites or black men to believe that black women not only accepted their subservience but actually liked the status quo, both the racial hierarchy and their role within it. The mammy seemed the polar opposite of the matriarch; if they tried to escape the mammy track, black women showed they were not completely compliant and thus risked being branded a too-strong matriarch.⁶⁶ Black women were thus in a lose-lose situation. If they acquiesced, it could seem as if they were content with their role and prioritized the white children. If they digressed from the white ideal for their servants, they were stigmatized as matriarchs. Once again, one may see the way in which external circumstances outside of women’s control were taken as negative reflections of them.⁶⁷

Another image of black women was Jezebel, meaning sexually loose. This myth originated in the era of slavery. Black feminists exposed how the portrayal of black women as

⁶³ Beale in Cade, 92.
⁶⁴ Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” in Guy-Sheftall, 110.
⁶⁵ Collins, 71.
⁶⁶ Ibid., 74.
⁶⁷ The image of the mammy became popularized in one form as Aunt Jemima.
promiscuous was “used to justify the routine rape of women slaves by White men.” If they were inherently sexually eager, then white men could assert that women invited the rape; the blame should be with black women whose nature encouraged male aggression. If she was licentious, perhaps she ‘deserved’ those sexual advances. Sexual abuse could be a form of control, and if the will of the female figurehead were broken, conceivably their family would disintegrate. As with other such myths, false perceptions of black women were utilized by whites as a way to legitimize oppression and dominance. If black men believed these myths also, one can see how there would be a veil of misunderstanding around women.

The Negro Family: The Case for National Action

The myth that has perhaps gained the most traction is that of matriarchy, likely because it appeared to be validated in Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 Report The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. Moynihan, Assistant Secretary of Labor under Kennedy and Johnson, put forth the report during Johnson’s War on Poverty, which began in 1964. In it, Moynihan appeared to blame the black woman for the problems in the black community, such as poverty and crime. He did this by stating that family instability was the root of these crises, and family instability was the black woman’s fault. Bettina Aptheker, historian, feminist, and lesbian activist, reflected upon the Moynihan report in her 1982 book Woman’s Legacy:

The Moynihan report criminalized the Black woman, turning her strength into betrayal. It was she who enforced the structure of poverty and delinquency by robbing Black men of employment and Black children of a stable home life…The racist/male supremacist rendition cast the victim as culprit. She was the potential or actual traitor of her people.

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69 Hartmann, 57.
70 Bettina Aptheker, Woman’s Legacy: essays on race, sex, and class in American history (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 133.
She showed how the emasculating matriarch myth was at play; the woman advanced herself to the detriment of others of her race. The only way to fix this problem, according to Moynihan, was for black men to take black women’s place in the working world. For men to be strong, women had to be weak.\textsuperscript{71} Only after the white traditional family hierarchy was put in place would the problems afflicting the black race be solved.

Moynihan asserted that because women made up a larger portion of the black workforce, men’s feelings of inadequacy caused tensions with women. He feared men would desert their women as a way to escape the psychological stress. This was Moynihan’s explanation for why nearly a quarter of the black population lived in female-headed households. Single mothers making low wages meant that poverty and welfare dependency was rife.\textsuperscript{72} If women did not have jobs, Moynihan speculated, the situation causing the sentiment of inadequacy amongst men, then families would stay intact and the need for welfare would decrease. The report’s interpretation of black family demography, history, and psychology became so popular that even within the black community it was difficult to argue with Moynihan’s theory.\textsuperscript{73} Whether men believed it because Moynihan’s argument was persuasive or they saw it as an excuse for their situation is debatable. Yet it is clear that it reinforced and legitimized the debilitating myth of black matriarchy. By stressing this myth, accusing black women of wrongdoing, and absolving men from guilt, men and women were divided, providing another example of the dominant class trying to divide the black family.\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, the more deeply entrenched belief that black women were

\textsuperscript{71} Beale in Cade, 93.
\textsuperscript{72} Paula Giddings, \textit{When and Where I Enter: the impact of Black women on race and sex in America} (New York: W. Morrow, 1984), 326.
\textsuperscript{73} Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery, “Is the Black Male Castrated?” in Cade, 114.
\textsuperscript{74} Gwen Patton, “Black People and the Victorian Ethos,” Ibid., 145.
matriarchs meant that the hurdle that black feminism would have to overcome to change perceptions and their status was set even higher.

The black family structure differed fundamentally from that of the white family, based on their history of enslavement in America. As a result, they could not relate to the fact that white women asserted in their conception of feminism that the family was a locus of oppression. Their history dictated that the family needed to stand as a unit versus the imbedded system of oppression in American society. Despite the wedge Moynihan drove, black feminist ideology stressed solidarity with men for the sake of the family and for the survival of the race as a whole. In a letter to a man from the perspective of a black woman, feminist Fran Sanders concluded her appeal for unity by saying: “Don’t approach me as you would an enemy. I am on your side and always have been.”75 She asserted that solidarity is necessary, which meant that black men needed to see women for who they are, not who they were stereotypically believed to be. Abbey Lincoln echoed Sanders’ urging that men should not believe the falsehoods and remember that all blacks faced the same racist system:

Your every rejection and abandonment of us is only a sorry testament of how thoroughly and carefully you have been blinded and brainwashed. And let it further be understood that when we refer to you we mean, ultimately, us. For you are us, and vice versa. 76

One may infer that Lincoln is arguing that when black men trusted the myths propagated by white society, they helped the dominant class divide black men and women. In other words, by acting on what white society wanted them to believe, they were the ones holding the race back, not the women. Frances Beale also endeavored to clear up any misconceptions of the black woman: “Black women are not resentful of the rise to power of Black men. We welcome it. We

75 Fran Sanders, “Dear Black Man” in Cade, 79.
76 Lincoln, Ibid., 83.
see in it the eventual liberation of all Black people from this corrupt system of capitalism.”

In this statement, it is clear that Beale was reminding men that white capitalism is what compelled the development of myths and misunderstanding. For liberation, they needed to remember from whom they were seeking freedom and the commonality of blackness needed to be stressed. Only as a cohesive unit could the family and the race survive as it did during slavery.

The history of black people in the United States fundamentally shaped the family structure and conceptions of womanhood. Deeply rooted myths surrounding black women, believed by both white society and black men, had to be understood and addressed by feminist consciousness if they were to be uprooted by the black feminist struggle. Moreover, women had to make it clear that asserting the need for rights was not intended or would not be to the detriment of men or the black liberation movement. Chicana feminists faced a similar task: they had to overcome the mistaken beliefs about their role and demonstrate that their liberation was for the group’s benefit.

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“Tradition” in Chicano culture dictated that the male was to be the head of the household and the breadwinner, whereas the Chicana was to be subservient and support him. She was tethered to the domestic sphere; her responsibilities were to cook, clean, and care for the many children she was expected to bear. Whereas the stereotypes associated with the black woman criticized her power and leadership within the home, the stereotypical Chicana was docile and quietly went about her domestic duties. Chicana feminists had to counter misconceptions attached to their womanhood, both within their culture and in greater society. Yet dismantling

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77 Beale in Cade, 93.
78 In the same vein as Beale, Toni Cade suggests in “On the Issue of Roles” that rather than focus on what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman, there should instead be a focus on “Blackhood.” She is saying that regardless of gender, race (and presumably the oppression that comes with it) unites them. 103.
the submissive, quietly suffering, and pure Chicana perception was a difficult endeavor because of this image’s religious dimension. The Virgin Mary was an ideal to which Chicana women were expected to aspire. Intertwined with this stereotype was that of super macho Chicano men. Machismo for many meant that Chicanos were arrogant, philanderers, overly dominant, and abusers of their women. The Chicana feminist struggle entailed both countering the servile stereotype and asserting that the family, the core of the culture and liberation movement, would not disintegrate (and would in fact be strengthened) upon realization of rights for women. Like black women, Chicanas stressed that their empowerment was not to be at the expense of family unity and the race as a whole. Chicana feminism endeavored to reconcile their desires for rights, strong support of the Chicano liberation struggle, and their respect for “tradition.”

Gender roles dictated that Chicanos would be dominant in the home and women would occupy themselves with domestic chores. This conception of roles extended into schooling, influencing opportunities available and intellectual pursuits undertaken. Education for Chicanas entailed taking courses that would enable them to be the best possible domestics. Schooling was not for personal fulfillment, it was for the sake of men. Women who later became feminists saw that men were encouraged to pursue careers whereas there seemed to be limits on female educational opportunities. They felt like they could learn only to the extent that knowledge gleaned could be funneled back into the household for the benefit of the family and their husbands. The common saying “para que quieres educarte si de nada te va a server cuando te cases” [“Why do you want to educate yourself if it won’t be any use to you when you get married?”] encapsulated the discouragement of learning skills beyond those needed for subservient work in the home, such as proficiency in English. Without language ability,

Chicanas would be hard-pressed to find work outside of the home, rendering them economically dependent on their men. If women were able to find work, they had to pursue the low-wage, demeaning domestic jobs that were also open to black women. In the minds of many future Chicana feminists, domestic servitude was inescapable; the only variable was whether they would be paid for it.

Chicanas who later identified themselves as feminists perceived a cultural expectation that women would unquestionably acquiesce to male dominance. This meant that women were to respect male authority, obey their commands, and be faithful. Moreover, as a good wife, a Chicana was “not expected to find fault with her husband or to be curious or jealous of what he does outside the home” and she was not supposed “to share in his political, economic, or social activities unless they are centered around the home.”80 Her physical realm was clear and mentally she was also supposed to stay confined to that domestic space. Feminist writer Elizabeth Olivárez described how a woman’s identity was defined solely in terms of her servitude: “If, for example, she is not only a homemaker but she is also allowed to be active within the community, her identity is still defined in terms of the credit it brings him, not her.”81

In addition to economic dependence, later to be Chicana feminists felt the pull of emotional dependence on their men. They sensed that women were not seen or treated as distinct beings; they were perceived to be more like appendages to men. Why would women deserve rights if they were more like shadows than people? This was a question that Chicana feminists had to answer for advancement of their cause.

Chicano culture dictated that in order to be a ‘good woman,’ Chicanas had to be completely subservient to men. Women were to be submissive to all men, whether they were

husbands, fathers, brothers, or even sons.82 Sex alone determined status in the family, because when there was not a “father in the home, this role [as head of the family] [was] usually assumed by the eldest son or male in the household.”83 Waiting on others so much may have left little time for women to relax and do things they wanted to do for pleasure. In a culture that ordered women’s total submission to every man, Chicana feminists would have to fundamentally change people’s consciousness. They would have to convince Chicanos and other Chicanas that women could and should be more than servants. People would need to realize and recognize that women were not interchangeable caretakers, destined for that path by birth.

The Chicana’s domestic duties included bearing children and assuming sole responsibility for raising them.84 A blend of cultural and religious expectations was at play: women would procreate in order to carry on the race. As a result, Chicano families have typically been composed of a greater number of children than the average American family.85 With many mouths to feed, finances could be strained, particularly if there was only supposed to be one wage earner. Exacerbating this hardship was the fact that people of color did not have many opportunities for upward mobility in white society. The financial and emotional issues resulting from large families were that:

After one, two or three children, it is likely that her husband will leave the home. This will not necessarily happen because he does not love the woman and children but more often because of economic pressures. He simply cannot find work to support the family.86

Perhaps leaving the family was how men escaped from the emotional issues stemming from their inability to be the manly breadwinners. By fleeing, they would not need to see on a daily basis

82 López in García, 103.
83 Rincón, Ibid., 25.
84 López states: “the role of Chicana abuelitas [grandmothers] mothers, and tías [aunts], with few exceptions, has been to bear children, rear them, and be good wives,” Ibid., 103.
85 Martha P Cotera, Diosa y Hembra: The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the U. S. (Austin, Tex.: Information Systems Development, 1976), 140.
86 Elizabeth Martínez, “La Chicana,” in García, 32.
how they were falling short in their fulfillment of family obligations. Another way to view the Chicano male employment situation is that men left their families in order to earn wages to send back home. Because they were not capable of being physically present, this heightened emotional issues for both genders and stressed women’s role in the home. Women had to ensure familial cohesion, a formidable task in the face of their husbands’ absence and a society that marginalized minorities.

If Chicanas were able to find work with their limited educational backgrounds, it would most likely be in the same sorts of jobs that were available to black women “such as domestic service or working in the garment industry.” Therefore, women would be working two shifts with all of the baggage that entailed: pressure to be a good mother and wife at home before and after a day of work outside the home, exhaustion, perhaps feelings of discomfort at being able to do what their men could not, and potentially unease that they were breaking out of their domestic space. If men were incapable of finding meaningful employment, resentment towards working women could result, according to historian Irene I. Blea. With men deprived of their breadwinning ability by dominant society, Chicanos may have felt emasculated, just as numerous black men did. Blea stated that many Chicanas feared the tension in black families due to women’s wage earning opportunities would manifest itself in their families. If manhood were based upon earning power, then “an increase in female earning power cuts into perceived male social power and worth,” causing many men to see women, rather than white society, as the root of the problem. Although black and Chicana women had different experiences and expectations based upon their unique circumstances, limited employment opportunities and the

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87 Martínez in García, 32.
potential for tensions within the family structure due to male psychological problems linked them.

*Machismo*, the belief and practice of male supremacy and female subordination, was seen by those in and outside the culture as a defining characteristic of the Chicano family. Parents embedded machismo in sons, motivated by their desire “for the males in the family to show manliness, virility, honor, and courage.” Yet Chicano anxiety, compelled by inequalities in the white-dominated capitalist system that denied him “jobs, dignity, and a sense of self worth,” often caused the Chicano to try to confirm or prove his manhood. Hence, machismo “often manifest[ed] into aggressiveness and male ‘watchfulness’ over his female counterpart.”

Perhaps machismo could be seen as a well-intended model of behavior gone awry due to the pressures of capitalism. A man could become abusive in order to overcompensate for his powerless position in the dominant society and an abused woman may have kept him around “because having a man around is an important source of a woman’s sense of self-worth.” Because women’s identity was so intertwined with male presence, if a woman broke away to protect herself, it was likely that she would suffer even more emotional issues than if she stayed. Chicana feminism had to uproot the belief that this extreme dominance was a positive expression of manhood.

**The Role of Religion**

Many Chicanas saw the Catholic Church, which condemned birth control and abortion, as depriving them of their abilities and rights to effectively family plan. According to numerous

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89 Rosalie Flores, “The New Chicana and Machismo” in García, 96.
90 Ibid.
Chicana feminists, by disallowing them from exercising control over their own bodies, the Church kept Chicanas oppressed. The denial of Chicanas’ rights to make these personal decisions meant, according to Sandra Ugarte’s 1971 article on the discussions at a Chicana Regional Conference, that the Church was trying “to keep the woman ignorant, barefoot, and pregnant.”92 Despite the Church’s assertions that contraceptives and abortion were sinful, however, “Many Chicanas with large families risk[ed] their lives every day by trying to abort themselves or by having another do it for them.”93 Abortion seemed necessary because they could not emotionally, physically, or financially support any more children. Hence, even if they wanted to transgress what the Church said was acceptable, Chicanas’ low socioeconomic status precluded the option of paying a doctor to do it for them in a safe, sterile facility. Women risked death because the situation was that dire, yet the Church prohibited latitude on these issues. Chicana feminists responded to the predicament women faced by setting forth free legal abortion as a main goal of their feminist ideology the First National Chicana Conference that took place in Houston, Texas in May 1971.94 Chicanas prioritized their needs and wants and rebuked the notion that men, whether in the Church or government, could dictate what they did with their own bodies. Chicana feminists argued that if women were empowered to make such choices, the core of the race – the family – would be strengthened.95 By making these important decisions rather than following top-down commands, they would be more than passive beings. This quest for autonomy clashed and chipped away at expectations of the ‘ideal Chicana,’ which is exactly what feminists wanted.

92 Sandra Ugarte, “Chicana Regional Conference,” in García, 154.
93 Ibid.
94 Sonia A. López, “The Role of the Chicana Within the Student Movement,” Ibid., 104.
95 A parallel may be drawn with Black feminism, which asserted that the woman’s strength was for the sake of the family’s cohesiveness and survival.
Religion and culture glorified the Virgin Mary as the absolute epitome of what Chicanas should aspire to be. On the most basic level, the Virgin Mary was extolled for her sexual purity. Likewise, a Chicana was to be a virgin until marriage. This “culturally-prescribed virginity” meant that a woman should never be characterized as “a sexual being.”\textsuperscript{96} Intercourse was something for her husband to enjoy; she was to engage in sex for the sake of reproducing the race. As a result, there was a double standard, perhaps stemming in part from the glorification of machismo, whereby “husbands may have affairs with other women, while they themselves are expected to remain faithful to one man all of their lives.”\textsuperscript{97} Moreover, if a woman was not on birth control (and more likely than not this was the case), she ran the risk of impregnation by a man that was not her husband. This would inevitably lead to becoming a social pariah.

Beyond her purity, the Virgin Mary was a delicate woman who quietly suffered and whose identity was based on her association with a man. Chicana feminist Consuelo Nieto explained why Mary was the paragon for Chicana women: she drew “her worth and nobility from her relationship to her son, Jesus Christ,” and was “extolled as mother, as nurturer.” Furthermore, she was “praised for her endurance of pain and sorrow, her willingness to serve, and her role as teacher of her son’s word.”\textsuperscript{98} Chicano culture dictated that women should follow and “identify with the emotional suffering of the pure, passive bystander.” Acceptance and practice of Mary’s “vicarious martyrdom” prepared them for what Chicana feminist Anna NietoGomez called the “oppressive reality” of Chicanas’ lives.\textsuperscript{99} Veneration of the Virgin Mary meant that women learned not to think of themselves but “to yield to the needs of others – the

\textsuperscript{96} Espín in Cole, 278.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{98} Consuelo Nieto, “The Chicana and the Women’s Rights Movement” in García, 208.
patron, her family, her father, her boyfriend, her husband, her God.”  

With roles both culturally entrenched and religiously sanctioned, the hurdles facing the Chicana feminist struggle were extremely high.

**The Pull of Traditionalism as Chicanas Endeavored for Rights**

Although the “traditional” family structure needed to be modified to accommodate Chicana feminists’ desire to be something other than housewives, they did not want to break the bonds that kept their families together. Women wanted to update the traditional configuration, not completely destroy it. Chicana feminist ideology was intertwined with adulation of the family and Chicano culture, yet it tried to downplay “how cultural traditions often uphold patriarchy.”  

Chicana feminists had to reassure other women and men that their desire for rights was not intended to subvert Chicano culture and was actually for the group’s benefit. To her Chicana sisters Elizabeth Martínez exhorted: “We must work to convince the men that our struggle will become stronger if women are not limited to a few, special roles.”  

They endeavored to ingrain the idea that machismo could be redefined as men’s hard work for the sake of the race, not solely men’s strength at women’s expense. It could mean responsible family men who cared about their wives as much as their sons.  

As discussed in chapter one, Chicana feminists argued that their struggle for rights and the concurrent Chicano liberation struggle were not mutually exclusive. These women asserted that success of the latter depended on success of the former.

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100 Ibid.
102 Martínez in García, 33.
103 Cotera, 153.
Due to their ethnic oppression, blacks and Chicanas saw the family as a center of support and resistance in a society that marginalized them. Women’s rights did not mean advancement at the expense of the family; it meant a strengthening of their position for the sake of the family. If the family, the smallest possible but most fundamental unit of the culture, were to survive, all within it needed to be equal and valued. Stereotypes attached to women, such as the emasculating matriarch or the docile Chicana, needed to be overturned because they precluded true understanding across gender lines. In contrast, white women saw the family as a locus of oppression and many wanted to break with the men who kept them in a position of subservience. Class differences also contributed to the differences between blacks and Chicanas on the one hand and white women on the other. Black and Chicana women could not sever themselves from their men even if they wanted to because of their socioeconomic status; the demeaning, low-paying domestic work available to them precluded the possibility of financial independence. Conceptions of family and the ways in which feminist consciousness addressed these varying notions reveal that “though all women are women, no woman is only a woman.”

CHAPTER THREE
INTERACTION AMONG FEMINISTS

Imagine three nuclei encased in a multi-sided structure. As they move within this space, they may go in different directions, hitting walls, rolling along them, and bouncing off of each other. Each contact makes the nuclei develop and grow. As they expand, they may fracture and pieces may break off, and the pieces behave the way the original nuclei did. Those nuclei may be seen as feminist consciousness, and the myriad walls may be the New Left and Students for a Democratic Society, the Civil Rights movement, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Black Power, history and its expectations of women, legislation passed or governmental action (or inaction), the Chicano liberation struggle, stereotypes, and men. Black, white, and Chicana feminist consciousness took shape through bouncing off these walls and each other. The previous two chapters examined nuclei growth in response to the walls, but what about how black, white, and Chicana feminists interacted with each other? Would these nuclei and their resulting movements move in concert based on gender commonality or would their bounces off the walls and the resulting nuclei shapes be so dissimilar that gender could not act as a bridge?

This chapter will explore the uneasy and even unfriendly relations between white women and women of color in the first wave of the feminist movement and how history seemed to repeat itself in the second wave. Such interactions, in addition to the white feminist focus on gender as the primary, if not sole, form of oppression alienated black and Chicana women. They sought and developed a term – womanist – to better encapsulate their feelings of oppression on the levels of race and class in addition to gender.
Lingering History

The perception of white women as part of the power structure, which began during slavery and continued after emancipation, created a schism between white and minority women. In the home, a traditionally female space, white women acted as overseers. White women were to the household what white men were to the public sphere. The desire held by white women to enter the public space in the form of political participation only served to reinforce this perception.

The first wave of the women’s movement focused on suffrage, an endeavor that culminated in 1920 with the Nineteenth Amendment’s passage. Granted permission to participate in the public realm through the right to vote, women were able to take a step away from a strictly domestic presence. This victory was both a product of the movement at the time and a culmination of previous participation “in a female political subculture” devoted to social reform, which included such initiatives as temperance.¹ Early twentieth century women took the abilities and confidence gleaned from these endeavors for societal improvement “to overturn the male monopoly of formal politics.”² White women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Susan B. Anthony led suffragettes in this first wave. Alteration of the status quo was due to women’s prior experiences, honed activist skills, and the rhetoric employed by these leaders. They framed their arguments for suffrage in terms of the womanhood ideal that existed in America since its founding.

Following the American Revolution, it was the duty of mothers to mold their sons into ideal American men who would ensure the triumph of America over the dark forces of antiquity. Men were to be ambitious enough to pursue wealth but virtuous enough that they would not

² Ibid. This activist development foreshadowed that of second wave feminists.
succumb to materialism and decadence. In order to best equip their offspring with the skills to thrive in the public sphere, women needed to demonstrate conformity to the American womanhood ideal: moral virtuosity, piety, and sexual chastity.³ Suffragettes, according to Barbara Andolsen, author of *Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks*, argued that if women had the special role of educating and molding their sons, they would be “uniquely qualified to contribute their moral wisdom in the public sphere.”⁴ Suffragettes invoked this ideal of womanhood, which “manipulate[d] the belief that Anglo-Saxons were uniquely qualified to create good government” in order to advance their cause.⁵ The still potent images of mammy and Jezebel did little to recommend black women for voting rights. This was especially the case when white women explicitly tied these images to a class-oriented profile of ideal womanhood that included chastity and rational motherhood. One could even argue that white women used black women as a point of comparison in order to show their elevated status and exceptional capabilities. The tension between white and black women in the suffrage movement was not just rhetorical, foreshadowing an issue that was to recur in the second wave.

In the movement for suffrage, black women could not participate to the extent of their white counterparts and sometimes, found complete exclusion. This is because many southern white women wanted a limited form of suffrage based on race. They opposed black suffrage and “advocated ‘educated suffrage,’ a strategy that erected barriers to non-white voters.”⁶ Although numerous northern white women did not completely share the same sentiment, they realized

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⁵ Ibid.
“that they needed the support of white southern women if they were to get the Suffrage Amendment passed.” Northern white women therefore marginalized black women in order to appease southerners. This meant that they “discouraged and often barred black women from attending meetings” in addition to outright refusal of membership in suffrage organizations. Such exclusion within a movement for rights created distrust, resentment, and made it clear to black women that their race and womanhood could not be separated into two distinct facets. They saw that when women forged alliances, race would trump gender.

Furthermore, black women saw the way in which leading suffragettes did not publicly endorse their right to vote and would even support state laws that would keep black women from exercising their political rights. When Alice Paul, suffragette and head of the National Women’s Party, stated that her goal was “‘removing the sex qualification from the franchise regulations…to see to it that the franchise conditions for every state were the same for women as for men,’” she was sending a message to the white population, according to Kathryn Kish Sklar and Jill Dias, authors of a Document Project on the National Woman’s Party and Black female enfranchisement. Paul’s message to the white population was “that black women could be just as easily disenfranchised by state laws as black men had been [after they received the right to vote in the Fourteenth Amendment].” By subtly playing the race card when speaking as a figurehead of the suffrage movement, Paul affirmed that white women saw themselves as allies of white men more than allies of black women. Additionally, her comments can be understood to mean that suffrage would be a means through which white women could contribute their unique capabilities as moral, virtuous beings to the public space and black female voting rights would be

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7 Dias and Sklar, 2.
8 Andolsen, 31-35, quoted in Baker-Fletcher, 65.
9 Dias and Sklar, 2.
10 Ibid.
a (regrettable) byproduct of the Nineteenth Amendment. Race, as observation and experience showed, acted as a wedge between women. This discernable divide, in conjunction with myths of ideal womanhood, allow one to see the white female fight for suffrage as an endeavor to equal the playing field for whites. Although enfranchisement extended to black women through this struggle, they still faced Jim and Jane Crow (race and gender oppression, respectively). In the future of women’s rights struggles, the suffrage movement became a point of comparison for black and white female interactions.

White Feminist Aims and Groups

When the second wave of a movement for women’s rights began to wash over America, it seemed to validate the saying that history always repeats itself. As Betty Friedan’s 1963 *Feminine Mystique*, describing the discontent and boredom of educated white suburban housewives, made a splash, not all women in America related to the lives depicted in it. Friedan’s exposé rang hollow to numerous women of color who only had access to low-paying demeaning labor and did not have the luxury of being bored around the house. For minority women trapped in jobs that would not even permit them to see the glass ceiling that numerous white women experienced, work outside of the home was another frontier of exploitation. The belief held by many white women that employment was equivalent to liberation from the confines of middle class life seemed foreign to those women barely scraping by. Although many women would describe Friedan’s book as a significant element in their feminist consciousness development and a starting point of the second wave, it is fair to believe that one would be hard-pressed to find a black or Chicana woman who would agree that this book was significant in the growth of their feminist thinking. Perhaps it was significant in the sense that they saw from the
outset that there could be discord with white women based on different life experiences and as a result, their feminism would take a different form. As white feminism grew, so did tangible gulfs between women.

The gap solidified because feminism seemed to become inextricably intertwined with whiteness. Feminist groups – the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the younger cohort of “radicals” – were predominantly white and middle class. Although minority women were involved in women’s rights issues from the beginning of the second wave, the composition of the movement “became largely and apparently white” due to racial and socioeconomic factors.  

Many married middle class white women worked in order to supplement their husbands’ wages and secure their place in the middle class. They did not need those paychecks so that their families could eat; if they devoted themselves to the movement rather than their secretarial job, their families would not suffer. In sum, black feminists argued, “This material surplus made it possible for women to have the ‘leisure’ to demand certain rights.”

Additionally, single middle class white women (mostly younger women in the radical cohort) “had the most time to devote to political work” because they lacked the commitments entailed in marriage and domesticity. Many women of color simply could not devote the same amount of time because their paychecks were imperative for survival. Racial and ethnic discrimination disallowed men from making enough money that supplemental wages earned by their wives would be unnecessary.

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11 Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All of the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982), xx.
13 Hull, Scott, and Smith, xx.
The movement seemed to be dominated by whites, the race whose actions and words compelled the concurrent Civil Rights and Chicano liberation struggles. This composition created an uncomfortable climate for non-white women. Historian Irene I. Blea explicated how Chicanas "know Anglo females are socialized in a society that practices racism, and therefore tend to distrust these women."\(^{14}\) Becoming part of the movement meant that those who saw white women as part of the power structure that kept them oppressed all their lives were suddenly allies with them. Although fighting against sexism united all groups of women, the memories of marginalization by whites shaped how the groups interacted. Speaking on behalf of black women, Dr. Deborah Harmon Hines wrote in a 1982 article how “black women find it difficult to align themselves with those who have not been a part of the solution, but in fact have been a part of the problem. Black women found it extremely difficult to align themselves with those who say, ‘we have all suffered the same,’ when we know it isn’t so.”\(^{15}\) White women were never just women in the eyes of black and Chicana women; they were white women, a race that had kept their people down for decades upon decades.

In the realm of gender, white women were in a position of inferiority. In the sphere of race, however, white women were superior to both men and women of color. Black feminist bell hooks explained the "white racial imperialism granted all white women, however victimized by sexist oppression they might be, the right to assume the role of oppressor in relationship to black women and black men."\(^{16}\) Hence, the sexual and racial hierarchy in America at this time (and some could argue even today) would be white men, white women, Chicano/ black men, Chicana/ black women. Women of color saw feminism “as a sort of inverted white patriarchy, with the

\(^{14}\) Irene I. Blea, *La Chicana and the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 92.
white feminists now in command and on top. In other words, mainstream feminism is women’s co-opting themselves into main-stream patriarchal values.”\textsuperscript{17} The status of white women shaped their feminist goals, which entailed fighting primarily against gender oppression.

By focusing on patriarchy as the foremost – if not sole – issue of concern, the “racial dimension of oppression” took a backseat to gender oppression for white women.\textsuperscript{18} This alienated black and Chicana women who felt as if their race was inseparable from their gender. The fact that white women compared their oppression to that of blacks served to equate their struggle against sexism and the black struggle against institutionalized racism. The idea that racism and sexism were analogous forms of oppression troubled many black women. They felt that that the systems of oppression they faced – race, gender, and class – were too intertwined and exerted varying degrees of suppression in their lives. It would be impossible to extricate oppressive forces from each other and assign each a value or weight. Black feminist Linda La Rue summarized the difficulty of grouping all women into one giant oppressed group based on gender: “Is there any logical comparison between the oppression of the black woman on welfare who has difficulty feeding her children and the discontent of the suburban mother who has the luxury to protest the washing of the dishes on which her family’s full meal was consumed?”\textsuperscript{19} But it was not only in appearances that black and Chicana women felt left out and alienated.

For many black and Chicana women who tried to join feminist groups, it seemed like déjà vu from the suffrage movement. Bell hooks describes her experiences of racism in the movement:

\textsuperscript{17} Clenora Hudson-Weems, \textit{Africana Womanist Literary Theory} (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), 28.
\textsuperscript{18} Barbara Ryan, \textit{Feminism and the Women’s Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism} (New York: Routledge, 1992), 127.
When I participated in feminist groups, I found that white women adopted a condescending attitude towards me and other nonwhite participants. The condescension they directed at black women was one of the means they employed to remind us that the women’s movement was ‘theirs’- that we were able to participate because they allowed it…They did not see us as equals. They did not treat us as equals…If we dared to criticize the movement or to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing new ideas, our voices were tuned out, dismissed, silenced. We could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse.20

Like black and Chicano men who perpetuated a gender hierarchy towards their women because they lacked stature in mainstream American society, hooks’ experience suggests that white women also exerted power where they could. Doris Davenport, another black feminist, echoes hooks’ account of racism:

We experience white feminists and their organizations as elitist, crudely insensitive, and condescending…When we attend a meeting or gathering of theirs, we are seen in only one of two limited or oppressive ways: as being white-washed and therefore sharing all their values, priorities, and goals, etc.; or, if we (even accidentally) mention something particular to the experience of black wimmin, we are seen as threatening, hostile, and subversive to their interests…Their perverse perceptions of black wimmin mean that they continue to see us as ‘inferior’ to them, and therefore, treat us accordingly. Instead of alleviating the problems of black wimmin, they add to them.21

A way to make sense of these accounts is to infer that white women saw liberation as a finite commodity. At this time, there were numerous groups in America jockeying for rights. Perhaps some white women assumed that if there were only so much liberation to go around, it should go to them primarily because of their racial superiority or because the Civil Rights movement would incorporate the needs of black women. Regardless of the underlying reason for this behavior, feelings of alienation, distrust, and anger resulted from first-hand incidents and the re-telling of other women’s experiences.

These experiences were not specific to black women; similar incidents of discrimination and marginalization occurred vis-à-vis Chicanas. Some Chicanas characterized white feminist organizations as being “exclusionary, patronizing, or racist in their dealings with Chicanas and other women of color.” Two Chicana feminists aptly described this relationship as “maternal chauvinism,” meaning that white women’s attitude towards women of color mirrored the way they felt men acted towards women. Although not all minority women who participated in feminist organizations experienced the same things, these examples demonstrate that conceivably, gender would not be enough to bring diverse women together to act in concert to obtain rights.

These experiences, coupled with the stress on patriarchal oppression, alienated and discouraged the participation of those outside of the white middle class. In addition, these elements weakened the authority of the movement as a women’s liberation or rights movement. How could it be a liberation movement if not all would be ‘freed’ by lessening or removing the grip of gender bias? How could it be a rights movement if not all within it had the right to speak freely? As a result, white men “questioned the credibility of a women's liberation movement that could not attract women from the most oppressed female groups in American society. They were among the first critics of feminism to raise the question of white female racism.” Such assertions weakened the dichotomy that white women tried to foster of women good/ not racist/ victims and men bad/ racist/ oppressive. It revealed the extent of racism’s entrenchment in

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24 For instance, in 1970, Aileen Hernandez, a Black woman, replaced Betty Friedan as the president of NOW.
25 Hooks, 185.
26 Ibid., 150.
American society and underlined the necessity of the black and Chicano Civil Rights movements.

**Interaction of the Women’s Movement and Concurrent Liberation Struggles**

The perception that white women were “piggybacking” on Civil Rights gains was a source of immense tension. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which made it illegal to discriminate based on race, religion, color, sex, or national origin, was a milestone in the movement towards a more egalitarian United States. It was a victory for women and Civil Rights, but many blacks saw the inclusion of sex by a southern congressman hoping to defeat the bill as white women piggybacking onto their struggle’s achievements. This was an early instance during the overlapping Civil Rights and women’s movements that “alienated black women, who feared that white women would benefit more than black people who had fueled the movement making equity measures possible in the first place.”27 With the idea that a segment of the most privileged would benefit from measures intended for the neediest, from the outset of the women’s movement hostility, suspicion, or unease began to percolate. It intensified a few years later when young, radical white feminists modeled their branch of the movement on Black Power.28 The perception of “mooching” developed during the course of the 1960s and 70s made cooperation between white and black women difficult. Yet this was not the only view that divided women.

The fear that white feminists were trying to divide the race also impeded positive relations between white and minority women. This entailed two parts: anger of minority men that

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27 Hartmann, 60.
their women would align with whites and the suspicion black and Chicana women held of the feminist movement with regard to historical circumstances. The concept of a female alliance meant that if and when black and Chicana women started to agitate for change in gender relations, they risked accusations from their own communities of emulating whites and weakening the liberation struggle. And in fact, the voicing of women’s rights did cause tension and division in the black and Chicano communities, where some men and women desired maintaining the gender status quo. The second element that impeded good relations between white and minority women derived from history. Blacks and Chicanos fighting for rights could see the women’s movement as yet another instance in which those in power were trying to keep minorities down by internally dividing them. In light of history and racial survival from slavery forward, “Black people see the feminist movement as an attempt to divide Black people” because men, “Equal partners in the struggle against oppression from early on” were increasingly left out as one moved from the mainstream (including groups such as NOW) towards the more radical end of the spectrum (including groups such as the Redstockings). 29 According to Jo Freeman, feminist activist and historian, this history of racial solidarity and resistance was the reason that black women “derived their identity from their race” and hence saw their “racial group, including the men” as their primary community. 30 In the slave system, partnership, rather than hierarchy, characterized the relationship between men and women and aided the struggle for survival. Hence, domesticity in this context differed markedly from domesticity as disgruntled white housewives saw it:

Domesticity was not seen as entirely oppressive but rather as a vehicle for building family life under slavery; male/ female relationships were more egalitarian; there was less emphasis on women’s work as different from and

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29 Rebecca Johnson, “A Historical Addendum,” in Kalven and Buckley, 81; Hudson-Weems, 49.
30 Jo Freeman, “From Suffrage to Women’s Liberation: Feminism in Twentieth-Century America” in Freeman, 523.
inferior to men’s; slaves and freed persons, male and female, tended to rebel against the sexual oppression of women and the emasculation of men.\textsuperscript{31}

The idea of racial unity first and foremost, bequeathed from the time of slavery, seemed to be under attack by the efforts of white feminists. This perception of divisiveness acted as a barrier to unity based on gender because for black and Chicana women, women’s rights would lack meaning unless they were free from oppression based on race. Their struggle was multifaceted and could not be limited to just one system of oppression as the white feminist struggle was.

The third major area of discord between white women on one hand and black and Chicana women on the other was views held on the institution of family. As discussed in chapter two, many white feminists saw the traditional nuclear family structure of the breadwinner husband and domestic caretaker wife as oppressive. They were slaves in the household and their chains were washing machines, the dishwasher, expectations that dinner would be waiting on the table for when their husbands came home (even if women had been at work all day), and the isolation of suburbia. Feeling exploited by images in the media of Playboy centerfolds, frustrated by the glass ceiling in the workplace, and angered by the idea that motherhood should be a woman’s sole goal in life, many white women saw a break from men as the necessary first step towards empowerment. By contrast, black and Chicana women saw the family structure as a locus of resistance versus the dominant, racist white culture. They saw unity with their men as imperative for group survival.\textsuperscript{32} By distancing themselves from white men, white women underlined their status as part of the dominant class in society because they did not need their men to get by in American society.

\textsuperscript{31} Johnson, “A Historical Addendum” in Kalven and Buckley, 81.
Chicanas saw the elements of the white feminist stance— that traditionalism had to be overturned and the nuclear family was oppressive— as problematic due to the very high regard in which they held these facets of life. White women wanted the dissolution of sex roles and a rejection of social and cultural tradition. They saw their allies and those with whom unity was necessary as other women. On the other hand, Chicanas who espoused women’s empowerment ideals saw the need to create new sex roles in the context of traditional institutions. If Chicanas were afforded more rights and a higher standing in the Chicano community, the race— La Raza— would be stronger and would have a better chance of survival. Their enhanced status, made possible by cooperation with Chicanos, would necessarily be integrated into a larger movement for ethnic power. With white women trying to tear down what Chicana women wanted to reinforce, it seemed that their conceptions of feminism and female progress were running counter to each other. Notions of traditionalism and reverence for the nuclear family were just two more factors that drove white and Chicana women apart.

For many black and Chicana women, different perspectives on traditionalism, who their allies were, whether racial or women’s liberation was the foremost struggle, and conceptions of the family structure became irreconcilable differences them and white women. They wanted female empowerment, but not in the way white feminists advocated.

Is Feminism White?

This desire for empowerment but in a way unlike that promoted by white feminists is evidenced by the fact that black women were just as likely, if not more likely, to believe in

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34 Mason in Melville, 105.
35 Ibid. This concept is discussed in chapter two.
feminist goals, according to a 1972 Louis Harris Virginia Slims poll. The poll reported that sixty-two percent of black women, compared to forty-five percent of white women, say “yes” to change in women’s societal status.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, “Sixty-seven percent of black women were sympathetic to women’s liberation groups compared with only thirty-five percent of white women.”\textsuperscript{37} This finding is interesting because it runs contrary to the public perception of women’s liberation, which was often given “white or middle-class connotations” by the press.\textsuperscript{38} Another fascinating discovery was that “black women more often put white, feminist leaders on their list of ‘greatly respected’ women than white women did.”\textsuperscript{39} These findings reveal that execution of the movement, rather than aims such as increased rights for women, kept black and white women apart.

Despite agreement on the need for female strength, the lack of feminist attention to race and class concerns was deeply troubling for black and Chicana women. They wanted to devote themselves to obtaining rights for women, but they also wanted – and needed – to address the other sources of oppression in their lives. Because feminism focused “on gender empowerment to the exclusion of all else,” black women saw the need for a term that would encompass their uniqueness of experiences based on the myriad types of interlocking discrimination with which they dealt on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{40} The experiences of black women striving for racial uplift and family cohesion diverged greatly from those of white women. But how would black women express this overlap on gender issues but distinctness on racial and class elements?

\textsuperscript{37} Hooks, 148.
\textsuperscript{38} Steinem, “Women Voters Can’t Be Trusted (1972).”
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Hudson-Weems, xvii.
Some black women answered this question by espousing the term ‘Black Feminism.’ In this way, the racial element of their womanhood would be expressed but they would not lose the expression of belief in feminist goals. To other black women, however, this term seemed inadequate. Critics argued that keeping the ‘feminism’ element was a “futile attempt” by black women “to fit into the constructs of an established white female paradigm.”

Jacquelyn Grant, a black woman who, along with Katie Cannon and Delores Williams, was an early leader in the feminist theology movement, described the difficulty of the term ‘Black feminism’:

> Put succinctly, women of the dominant culture are perceived as the enemy. Like their social, sexual and political White male partners, they have as their primary goal the suppression, if not oppression, of the Black race and the advancement of the dominant culture. Because of this perception, many believe that Black feminism is a contradiction in terms.

Black feminism was problematic because it seemed that feminism was a way for white women to be on par with their men at the top of the American social hierarchy. If feminism entailed the perpetuation of a racial order, it would be hypocritical for black women to desire Civil Rights gains and label themselves as black feminists at the same time.

### The Problem That Needed a Name: Developing ‘Womanism’

Alice Walker, in her book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* in 1983, advanced the phrase ‘womanist’ as a way to address feminism in the African American context. Yet decades before Walker penned her four-part definition of the term, Anna Julia Cooper promulgated ideas that can retrospectively be described as womanist. Anna Julia Cooper earned many degrees, including a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne in France. Her attainments would be impressive in their

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41 Hudson-Weems, 27.
own right, but the fact that she was both black and female, grew up in the nineteenth century, and was so highly educated is quite remarkable. She did not see herself as exceptional, because she felt that if more black women had the opportunities to become educated and excel academically, they would. It was not a matter of mental capabilities or willingness; it was the fact that society precluded black women from realizing their potential.  

She crusaded for increased educational opportunities both publicly and in her book *A Voice from the South*. Published in 1892, *A Voice from the South* was “one of the first feminist discussions of the social status of black women and a lengthy discussion of woman’s right to higher education.” In it, she criticized black men for their “failure to support the uplift and higher education of Black women,” white feminists for their “racial insensitivity,” and whites and blacks for their classism. In this way, she brought to light and clarified the three oppressive forces that shaped black women’s lives and became the backbone of Alice Walker’s ‘womanist’ definition.

Cooper’s key contribution to later womanist thinking was her staunch belief that no one besides black women could speak for the experiences that resulted from these forces. White women and black men were equally unable to describe what black women went through. She wrote:

> Only the Black Woman can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then, and there the whole Negro race enters with me.’

This excerpt reveals two additional significant factors that became part of later womanist thinking. One is included in “dignity of my womanhood”: despite the comprehensive oppression black women experienced, they maintained their dignity and self-assurance. They did not break

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42 Burrow, 19.
43 Hooks, 167. Cooper’s arguments for increased educational opportunities may be found in the essay “The Higher Education of Women.”
46 Burrow, 19.
47 Cooper quoted in Burrow, 19.
down and become weak; if anything, they became stronger. Another aspect of womanism contained in this piece from *A Voice from the South* was the inclusion of “the whole Negro race.” Black women saw black men as their primary community and did not want liberation and rights just for themselves. For Cooper and later womanists, if black women had rights and opportunities, the entire race could be uplifted. Their liberation would not be in exchange of liberation for black men; both were necessary if the race were to persevere. Cooper is significant not only because she articulated womanist ideas that Alice Walker later fleshed out. She was a pioneer, “One of the first black activists to urge black women to articulate their own experiences and to make the public aware of the way in which racism and sexism together affected their social status.” For a black woman to speak out so forcefully on such issues — to both her black female peers and society at large — at that time was revolutionary.

Walker’s *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens* opened with a four-part definition of the term ‘womanist.’ The first piece stressed the expression’s black folk roots in addition to the maturity and curiosity womanists exhibited:

> Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one. Interested in grown-up things…Interchangeable with another black folk expression: ‘You trying to be grown.’ Responsible. In charge. *Serious.*

Walker overturned the negative connotations associated with willful behavior and strength in the black emasculating matriarch myth and made such attributes positive. The womanist was sassy, meaning that she spoke for herself and disallowed white women and any men from speaking on

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48 Hooks, 166.
49 This is an excerpt from the first tenet of Womanist; Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.
her behalf, she said what was on her mind, and she possessed the capabilities to determine the
direction of her life.\textsuperscript{50}

The next part of the definition focused on the connectedness between women, “Sexually
and/or nonsexually.” A womanist valued womanhood, female culture, “Emotional flexibility,”
and strength. She could also love men, “Sexually and/or nonsexually,” and she highly valued the
“survival and wholeness of entire people, male \textit{and} female.”\textsuperscript{51} The womanist “is both a
particularist (concerned first and foremost about Black women…) and a universalist (focusing on
the welfare and wholeness of all persons regardless of gender, race, class, sexual orientation,
etc.).”\textsuperscript{52} Walker emphasized this dual focus in an answer provided by a mother in response to her
daughter’s question about their color compared to those of their cousins: “Well, you know the
colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.”\textsuperscript{53} With every
person a color, Walker made what were individual plights those of humanity as a whole.\textsuperscript{54}
Womanism entailed a regard for both particularism (the struggle of black women) and
universalism (other struggles for self-determination) equally. Neither facet was more important
to a womanist because although she was a black woman specifically, she was also a member of
humanity generally.

The third piece of the womanist definition was a passion for life and the myriad
experiences that entailed. She “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. \textit{Loves} the Spirit.
Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. \textit{Loves} the Folk. Loves Herself.
\textit{Regardless.”}\textsuperscript{55} Despite the hardships black women experienced, “Something inside them seems

\textsuperscript{50} Burrow, 21.
\textsuperscript{51} Because of the stress on wholeness, a womanist is “not a separatist, except periodically, for health.” This would
stand in contrast to the white radical feminist stress on separatism and complete self-reliance.
\textsuperscript{52} Burrow, 21.
\textsuperscript{53} Walker, xi.
\textsuperscript{55} Walker, xii.
to keep alive their sense of creativity, sense of self, and appreciation for life and family.”56 Each generation of women bequeathed this ability to the next, bonding all black women together across boundaries of space and time. In the text of the book Walker expanded upon how “our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.”57 Speaking in terms of her own relationship with her mother, a relationship of exemplarity for all black women, she wrote:

Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities- and the will to grasp them. For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time...Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength- in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own.58

A womanist not only possessed this capability to persist and love life despite oppression, but she passed it along to the next generation.

The last piece of Walker’s term was “womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.”59 Although purple and lavender are in “the same family of colors,” they are definitely not the same thing.60 This analogy brings a Venn diagram to mind. There was overlap in the belief of rights for women, but the ways to achieve this goal, race, and class were three of the factors that differentiated the two circles. This portion of the womanist definition highlighted the differences between women rather than the dissimilarity of women and men. Further, it expressed the idea that white women’s experiences did not exemplify those of all women.61

56 Burrow, 22.
57 Walker, 240.
58 Ibid., 241-3.
59 Walker, xii.
60 Burrow, 21.
61 Freeman, 523.
The absence of attention given to the uniqueness of black female experiences and struggles compelled the creation of Walker’s definition. The analytical categories for people that existed pre-Walker focused on “white/male experience,” which lacked space for understanding the lives of black women. With the development of the term womanist, the problem that had no name for black women received one, which shattered “the deafening discursive silence that the society at large has used to deny [black women of] the basis of shared humanity.” The label became a springboard from which womanist consciousness developed.

Womanist consciousness focused on the “tri-dimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism” and sought “to determine why and how Black women actively negotiate[d] their lives in a web of oppression.” It was imperative to recognize each of these three aspects, because neglecting to do so would be analogous “to deny[ing] the holistic and integrated reality of Black womanhood.” Womanism was not just about survival; it was about liberation for women, their families, and their people. For womanists, therefore, it was vital that “men and women can come together in dialogue to define and address the needs of the entire African American community.” Mainstream feminism, which focused on female empowerment, was clearly different from womanism, which prioritized race, community, and class empowerment. With regard to radical feminism, which focused on female empowerment and separatism from men, the gulf separating these two ideologies was even wider.

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64 Ibid., 127.
65 Grant, 209 and Cannon, 125.
66 Grant, 209.
67 Ibid., 205 and Cannon, 121.
Theology

The black church, a site of community togetherness and strength, was also highly gender stratified. Preaching and thinking about religious traditions in the black community focused on the male experience. When women studied theology, their studies suggested that the white female experience was the only experience of women in the Bible. With womanist consciousness percolating, in 1985 Katie G. Cannon decided to direct its focus towards theology, a traditionally patriarchal realm. Cannon, a black woman who earned her doctorate at Union Theological Seminary and grew up in Kannapolis, North Carolina, decided womanism could and should be applied to theology and ethics. Just as Walker’s term forced a reexamination of the analytical categories that existed in American society, Cannon encouraged a new perspective. She “appropriated Alice Walker’s concept and definition in relation to black women’s tradition of biblical interpretation,” creating a space for black women that had not previously existed. In 1985 she wrote:

As an interpretive principle, the Black womanist tradition provides the incentive to chip away at oppressive structures, bit by bit. It identifies those texts that help Black womanists to celebrate and rename the innumerable incidents of unpredictability in empowering ways. The Black womanist identifies with those biblical characters who hold on to life in the face of formidable oppression. Black womanists search the Scriptures to learn how to dispel the threat of death in order to seize the present life.

If womanist theologians viewed black women as descendants of these biblical characters whose strength allowed them to endure despite repression, it could mean that God bestowed a unique capability to persevere upon them. Not only did God provide them with the ability to survive, but

70 “A segregated, rural town” in which she “saw the barriers, witnessed the violence and oppression, and felt the triple-barreled threat of her poverty, her Blackness, and her femaleness” (Cannon, 12).
71 Ibid.
73 Burrow, 23 and Cannon, 56.
the Almighty was “in solidarity with the struggles of those on the underside of humanity.”\textsuperscript{74} In this way, their strength – miscast in the emasculating matriarch myth – was turned into an extreme positive. For Cannon, womanist theology was not just about recognizing the power of black women; it also necessarily included “‘unmasking’ the patriarchy of Black religious traditions.”\textsuperscript{75} She saw how black preaching attacked the social and racial hierarchies in American society but simultaneously perpetuated a gender hierarchy.\textsuperscript{76} Both preaching and the institution of the church marginalized black women. This situation created a need for them to speak for themselves and remove themselves from the inferior position to which men attempted to confine them. Cooper, then Walker, then Cannon articulated the ideas and created the space for black women to do so.

Starting in the era of Reconstruction, the church was the sole center of freedom for blacks. It was a place in which people held leadership positions, a sense of community grew, and a spirit of autonomy prevailed. Regardless of its location, whether in a city or countryside, it was an establishment that blacks could completely control. In sum, “The church community was the heart, center, and basic organization of black life.”\textsuperscript{77} Yet it was also a place of hierarchy that confined women to an inferior position, as historian of black female religiosity Rosetta E. Ross explicated:

\begin{quote}
Black women experience gender oppression through the larger society’s subordination of women and through sexism in Black communities, particularly within Black churches, which often intensify women’s diminished social status by relegating Black women to the background through celebration of their ‘backbone’ service.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{74} Grant, 209.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. This parallels how the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society did not practice the egalitarianism that they preached, as discussed in chapter one.
\textsuperscript{77} Cannon, 51.
\textsuperscript{78} Ross, 9.
Their experiences in greater American society and within the only space of black freedom meant that black women completely lacked refuge from oppression. Religion was yet another realm in which marginalization characterized their lives.

The high regard in which the black community held the church meant that it was a significant position of power to be a preacher in it. Historically, as a way to create a sense of racial unity, preachers fostered the image of a black God who was concerned with the struggle against racism. In so doing, however, the sexism confronting black women was completely ignored. Reverence of the preacher and high value placed on his word by congregants meant there would be a top-down dissemination of belief: that racial cohesiveness was the community’s foremost – and probably only – concern. Further, by a male preacher zeroing in on male experiences in the Bible, frequently the result was that “the organization of the church mirror[ed] male dominance in the society and normalize[d] it in the eyes of both female and male parishioners.”

Womanist theology, acknowledging the intense male focus, sought to remove “men from the ‘normative’ center and women from the margins” both in Biblical study and in church practices. In so doing, womanist theologians made clear how theology as it had been done in the black community up to this point meant that the black male experience was treated as the norm. No longer would this practice be acceptable. One could perhaps make the claim that womanist theology was to traditional theology as violet is to lavender.

Katie Cannon ignited consciousness on the intersection of womanism and theology, becoming one of major leaders in the womanist theology movement. Jacquelyn Grant and

80 Cannon, 128.
81 Ibid., 121.
82 Just as feminism until the development of the term womanist seemed to mean that the white female experience was the norm.
Delores Williams were the other two leaders who joined Cannon to make a triumvirate. Like Cannon, these women received their doctorates at Union Theological Seminary in the mid-1980s. Grant was considered the “mother of contemporary black feminist theology,” whose 1989 book *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* contained her vision of womanist theology. Williams has the distinction of going beyond the work of black male theologians to highlight the motif of survival in black theology. These women, in addition to those who followed them—including Kelly Brown Douglas, Renita Weems, and Toinette Eugene to name a few—“have reawakened, kept alive, and pushed forward the long Afrikan American tradition of stressing black dignity and the conviction that God is supremely personal, just, and loving.” They stress the humanity and poise of black women, all blacks, and all people, examine the way in which black women negotiate their way through ordinary life, and affirm how black women’s activities aid racial uplift. Womanist theologians’ work demonstrates how black women’s contributions to the race have been overlooked. Their studies also illustrate how black women’s immense strength allowed them to keep on despite their status as one of the most disadvantaged groups in America.

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Let us return to the question that opened this chapter: whether gender could act as a bridge between groups of women. It appears as if conceptions of the family, relations with men, views of traditionalism, and the existence of concurrent liberation struggles created irreparable chasms between white women and black and Chicana women. Relations were so strained that Alice Walker developed a new term—womanist—in order to demonstrate the differences in

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83 Burrow, 23.
84 Ibid., 24.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid and Ross, 6.
perspectives on what women’s rights should entail and how they should be achieved. Black women were not the only ones with whom this concept resonated. Chicana women adopted the ‘womanist’ label to describe themselves because they too perceived the inextricability of feminism from whiteness. The term womanist prompts these related questions: does the creation of a different label mean that what is remembered as the women’s movement was a failure? Does a movement have to be totally cohesive for it to be regarded as a success? How one answers these questions depends upon where one sits in relation to feminism and the movement. Perhaps the development of a novel term, which spurred thinking about women’s rights in varied contexts, is indicative of the movement’s power.

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88 Zavella, 29.
CONCLUSION

Feminist consciousness at the crux of the second wave was simultaneously unified and splintered. What cut across backgrounds and united women of the second wave was a common intensity of both thought and action to overturn institutionalized and de facto gender discrimination in American society. Yet consciousness development and approaches to these women’s-centered goals varied greatly among and between black, white, and Chicana women based on race, distinct history in United States society, class, concurrent liberation struggles, and religion. There was both a women’s movement — broadly defined as numerous women acting somewhat contemporaneously for the advancement of women’s rights — and several women’s movements, meaning the pursuit of rights by women of similar standpoints, perhaps within specific contexts, such as a racial community. These movements overlapped yet rarely blended; the simultaneous existence of one movement and many demonstrates the paradoxical nature of the second wave. This marriage of unity and disunity lent late twentieth century feminism its significance and power in American history.

The concept of one and many manifested itself in the protest movements that sprung up in the 1960s. America at that time was fertile soil for protests, as the post-World War II social, political, and economic landscape revealed the United States’ hypocrisy. Proclaimed to be a city on a hill upon its colonization, Americans prided themselves on their uniqueness on the world stage. Many felt that no other country enjoyed democracy and rights to the extent of Americans. This practice and praise of democratic ideals sharply contrasted with America’s Cold War adversary, the totalitarian Communist Soviet Union. Or so Americans wanted to believe. Many Americans, particularly people of color, perceived a gap between ideals and practice. From Jim
Crow in the South, a way of life in the West based upon difference between Anglos and Mexican-Americans, and images of poverty from all over the country streaming into households, the gap was unmistakable. The movements formulated to bridge the chasm between rhetoric and reality – Civil Rights, Chicano liberation, the New Left – exemplified the idea of one and many. All sought to reform liberalism, but they were definitely distinct from each other in group membership, goals, and tactics for change. Unified in their devotion to social change and justice yet discriminatory towards women, female participants saw how far they would have to go to change the public’s consciousness on women’s rights. If even if the most ‘radical’ and socially conscious exhibited sexist attitudes and behaviors, such as expecting women to cook, clean, and take the minutes, it would be a difficult undertaking.

The quest to change people’s consciousness was an undertaking that many women, whether black, white, or Chicana, saw as worthwhile. At first glance, the broad purpose of change and advancement of rights for women suggests a movement of women acting in concert. As this paper has suggested, significant divisions underlay the appearance of sisterhood. But was such division a pre-condition or a product of the second wave? In other words, did the language and actions of white feminists obstruct the formation of a unified women’s movement or did racial, ethnic, or class differences make a singular movement impossible? Indeed, separate historical legacies, economic destinies, or conceptions of the family structure and its ability to be a locus of either oppression or resistance might have made cooperation unlikely. However, any potential, even miniscule, for working in concert evaporated with white feminist ‘maternalism’ and inability or lack of desire to confront other systems of oppression that women of color faced. The feelings that white women practiced maternal chauvinism – whether because of personal experiences, second-hand accounts, or the expectation they would act in this way based upon
their membership in the dominant race – decisively prevented the chance of harmony. Further, the sole or primary focus on gender oppression alienated black and Chicana women who felt that sexism, racism, and classism were too intertwined to extricate one system from the others. Unless all realms of oppression were mitigated or abolished, black and Chicana women would not be liberated. Such discord manifested itself in the different paths of feminist consciousness and attached women’s movements.

History in the United States, including slavery and experiences of segregation and discrimination, particularly in the South and Southwest; a capitalist economic system, which entailed degrading work for women and a paucity of meaningful employment for men (yet the expectation that they would financially provide for their families, which caused male psychological issues); and concurrent rights struggles, such the Civil Rights Movement and Chicano liberation, shaped the distinct character of black and Chicana feminist consciousness and the rhetoric they employed in their feminist activism. The emergence of second wave feminism clashed with these liberation movements for two key reasons. One was the rhetoric employed and ideology espoused by radical feminists. Radicals believed that men were the enemy and for women’s liberation it was imperative for women to distance themselves from men and establish autonomous institutions. This created the public perception of radical feminism “that it was anti-mother, antiman, antimarriage, and procareer and focused on abortion rather than childbirth.”¹ This perception alienated women of color who saw their men as their primary community. Their families were historically loci of resistance, and to break from men would be an assault on their history. Another reason that the second wave was at odds with the black and Chicano struggles was women of color wanted to push for liberation on both fronts. However,

there was pressure on black and Chicana women to choose their alignment, either with their
gender or with their race or ethnicity. Both posed problems. White feminist groups perpetuated a
racial hierarchy, but their men, those who they saw as their natural allies, perpetuated a gendered
hierarchy. This predicament compelled women of color to find ways of bridging the two. They
sought to articulate and advocate for rights with regard to these movements’ goals but in ways
that addressed their specific needs and wants.

Women had to reassure their men that their pursuit of rights was not at the expense of the
simultaneous racial or ethnic struggles. They argued that not only was there no trade-off between
female empowerment and liberation, but women’s stronger position would be an asset and would
enhance the movements’ power. These women passionately asserted that contrary to what their
men (and some other women) believed, cultural stability and female strength were not mutually
exclusive. Tradition could be modified in ways that did not entail female subservience. For
example, Chicana feminists posited that the cultural value of *machismo* could be refashioned to
mean responsible family men rather than abusive alpha males.\(^2\) Black and Chicana feminists
advanced the notion that liberation could not be for half of the race. They argued that liberation
for men alone would only debilitate, not enhance, the group’s standing in American society.

Men were skeptical and angry that women desired change of the status quo because it
was seen as an assault on their culture and history, it meant an erosion of their dominant position,
and they felt that their women were emulating white women and their movement. The resistance
of men to female empowerment, manifested in part through name-calling, was just one hurdle
black and Chicana feminist consciousness and activism had to clear. These women also had to
confront myths surrounding their true character and traditionally ‘rightful’ position. Myths about

\(^2\) Martha P Cotera, *Diosa y Hembra: The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the U. S.* (Austin, Tex.: Information
black women were that they were Jezebels, emasculating matriarchs, or mammies; the perception of Chicanas was that they were and should always be docile and humbly accept and embrace their servitude. Because white women were members of the dominant race in society, there was no need to balance a liberation struggle and feminist activism, and they did not have to correct myths, their rhetoric and activism differed markedly from that of their black and Chicana sisters.

Employing the rhetoric of sisterhood may seem anachronistic in the context of this paper, which detailed the fragmentation of feminist consciousness and movements. Yet sisterhood is, in fact, consonant with the theme of overlap yet distinction. The fact that new ideas and terms (such as womanist) came to the fore is evidence that what we popularly remember as the women’s movement, however fractured, succeeded. This is because myriad women with similar desires for rights, recognition of women’s contributions and value, and attention to their specific needs perceived different means to arrive at the same ends. That diverse sets of women defined and applied the terms “women’s empowerment” and “women’s liberation” in varied ways only enhanced the meaning and universalism of these ideas. The strength, rather than the fatal flaw, of the women’s movement lay in the demonstration that “though all women are women, no woman is only a woman.”

The perspective that diversity was the reason for which the movement succeeded runs contrary to the viewpoints of some feminists and historians who see the fragmentation of feminism as indicative of its failure. If only people could recognize that the movement was more of a triumph because it was so fractured.

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