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White Women, Anti-Imperialist Feminism and the Story of Race within the US Women's Liberation Movement

Say Burgin

In the past decade, histories of the United States women's liberation movement of the 1960s, 70s and 80s have begun to re-write what Sherna Berger Gluck famously called the 'master historical narrative' of this movement and have especially worked to historicize the efforts of feminists of colour. This paper sees itself in concert with this recent body of scholarship as it attempts to enrich our understanding of the interplay of race and Second Wave activity by exploring the question of how white feminists embraced racial justice politics, particularly during the early 1970s, when it is often assumed that the vast majority of white feminists failed to enact racial justice. In historicizing the efforts of a loose group of white anti-imperialist feminists in the greater Boston area, I maintain that the 'master historical narrative' wrote not only black, Chicana and multiracial feminisms out of history, but that it skewed our understanding of the race politics of white, US feminists.¹

Keywords

Anti-imperialist feminism; US women's liberation movement; race

One of the most significant debates amongst historians of the United States women's liberation movement concerns the ways in which race shaped this movement. In a 2002 special issue on 'Second Wave Feminism in the United States' in *Feminist Studies*, two of the movement's leading historians, Sara Evans and Becky Thompson, pointed out that newer histories reproduced problems associated with the movement's foundational accounts: they marginalized the ideas and activism of feminists of color.² Even prior to this, in her widely read 1998 article 'Whose Feminism? Whose History?', Sherna Berger Gluck lamented the continual telling of a stale version of the movement's history. A simplistic narration that highlighted an 'old litany' of feminist branches – liberal, socialist and radical – this 'master historical narrative' made little room for the work of feminists of colour, who were 'consequently left out of the histories of the early days of "the women's movement"'.³ Beyond the eclipsing of much activism, though, many histories have been unable to impart a complex understanding of the racial implications of various feminist ideologies, strategies and goals, including those of white feminists. As Evans puts it, 'The fact that it took so long even to begin a widespread conversation

among feminists about the meaning of differences of class and race is part of the story, too.’⁴

Over the past decade or so, numerous rich studies have appeared that have not only historicized black, Chicana, and multiracial feminist organizing in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, but have also provided a clearer sense of how race variously shaped women’s paths to political activism, as well as their priorities, thinking and tactics.⁵ This essay sees itself in concert with this important revisionist scholarship even while it works to problematize a particular trend within it. Exemplified through Evans’ insistence that (white) women’s liberationists ‘took so long’ to discuss class and race, newer histories now describe a movement in which white women spent a number of years unwilling or unable to recognize the importance of racial and class differences, only to be directly challenged on these points in the late-70s by a growing number of feminist of colour. Winifred Breines, for instance, claims that Black Power drove a wedge between white and black women, and that ‘contact’ did not redevelop until the late 1970s and 1980s as powerful discourses around differences emerged.⁶ While the story of race in the US women’s liberation movement has grown in complexity and depth, it may also now be hardening into a simplistic narrative that pivots on a ‘moment’ of racial enlightenment and inclusiveness.

This article attempts to demonstrate that one of the ways in which the narrative of race relations within the movement remains problematic and simplistic is by inattention to anti-imperialist feminists. With the notable exception of Becky Thompson, most scholars of the movement have not taken seriously anti-imperialist analyses within the movement.⁷ This is so despite the fact that such frameworks often allowed white feminists to connect issues of class, race and gender; to look beyond US borders; and to critique the racial politics of dominant feminist strands at the time. In this article, I attend to these dynamics through an examination of two groups – one, a loose group of white, anti-imperialist feminists in the Boston area in the early 1970s, and the other, women living underground as part of the militant group Weatherman (later, the Weather Underground) in the early 1970s. The first group converged around a number of feminist projects in Cambridge and Boston beginning in roughly 1970, including an International Women’s Day demonstration that led to the occupation of a Harvard building and the creation of a feminist free school. Meanwhile, women in the Weather Underground began clearly articulating their feminist vision in 1973 within the pages of the Washington, D.C.-based feminist newspaper, *off our backs* – a city and a paper around which anti-imperialist feminists tended to coalesce. All of these women maintained links to antiwar and other New Left groups, and in fact they wanted to bring the anti-imperialist purview of the wider left to bear on the booming women’s liberation movement, which meant they were sometimes dismissed as not ‘real’ feminists. Yet historicizing this groups of women and their feminist framework is not simply about

insisting on the validity of their feminism or adding a new kind of feminist politics (to the 'old litany') that have been overlooked and ignored. These histories, in fact, help us complicate our understanding of the racial cognizance and concerns of the white-dominated women's liberation movement during its earlier years.

Boston-area women's liberationists were buzzing in the autumn of 1970. Already a hotbed of feminist activity with high-profile socialist feminist groups like Cell 16 and Bread and Roses, this city was beginning to attract a number of seasoned activists. Some, like Laura Tillem, who had organized within the Movement for a Democratic Society and had worked on the New Left-turned-feminist publication *The Rat*, left the bitterly divided New York feminist groups to participate in Bread and Roses. Others, like Laura Whitehorn, who had gone underground with Weather Underground, re-surfaced in the Boston area. That fall, many women's liberationists were considering how to mark the tenth anniversary of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. In addition, a number of activists had just returned from the Black Panther Party-hosted Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention (RPCC). Taking place first in Philadelphia in early September and then two months later in Washington, DC, these conventions attracted large numbers of white women's liberationists from the East Coast, provided opportunities for the Panthers to demonstrate a commitment to women's and gay liberation, and, more generally, brought together a range of activists in order to re-imagine a more just and democratic United States. Though historian Anne Valk has argued that 'direct interaction at the RPCC' among white women's liberationists, gay liberationists, and Panther men and women 'exacerbated, rather than smoothed' the political differences among them, at least some Boston-area women's liberationists were buoyed by their participation in the events. They were inspired, in the words of women's liberationist Marla Erlen, to do 'something dramatic', and they set their sights on International Women's Day, 1971.⁸

When the day arrived – Saturday 6 March – a rally was held at Massachusetts State House before the 150-plus crowd marched eastward towards Harvard University's campus in Cambridge. Most were not expecting what came next. Upon arriving at 888 Memorial Drive, the site of Harvard's Architectural Technology Workshop, the action's planners seized upon the building and declared it occupied. The building, organizers said in a statement, would serve as 'a women's center where women from all over will be able to meet with each other, exchange ideas and feelings, and determine what we need to do together.'⁹ Among the hundreds of women involved in the ensuing 10-day occupation were members from Bread and Roses, Gay Women's Liberation, Weather Underground and other groups, but those few feminists who had planned the occupation necessarily did so in relative secrecy. Among them were Whitehorn and

Erlie who carefully and surreptitiously met for months leading up to the occupation. They also canvassed women's groups in the area to let them know about an upcoming illegal action. Though organizers kept silent on most of the other details of the action, they knew that Boston feminists had been discussing the need for a women's centre for months. It had been difficult for women's liberation groups to find spaces for meetings and social gatherings. Area feminists were, thus, primed for this action, and their enthusiasm during the occupation came through via days of dancing, holding workshops, political organizing, childcare provisions for neighborhood families and in providing support for lesbians.¹⁰

The development of a women's centre was the central goal for many, but for others, including at least one occupation organizer, the action served to connect the US women's liberation movement with larger anti-racist and anti-imperialist aims, including an end to the war in Vietnam. Upon arriving at the building, Laura Whitehorn provided a statement of solidarity with the people, particularly the women, of Vietnam, and she and the other organizers, who told the *Harvard Crimson* that they identified as 'feminists, anti-imperialists, socialists', had a list of demands directed at Harvard. The *Crimson* reported them as:

1. That Harvard build low-income housing on this, the Treeland site, in accordance with the demands of the Riverside community.
2. That Harvard provide a women's center to serve the needs of women in the Boston area.
3. That Harvard give us full use of this building, with full facilities (heat, plumbing, electricity, etc.), until it is necessary to tear it down in order to break ground for the Riverside low-income housing.¹¹

Occupation organizers knew about the local Riverside community's ongoing struggle with Harvard to provide affordable housing for the largely black neighborhood, and though some residents doubted the sincerity and effectiveness of this mandate, to organizers such a demand demonstrated solidarity with racial justice struggles and direct support for the needs of the local community.¹²

Tellingly, Whitehorn recalls that a fourth demand was made but quickly dropped – that Harvard cease any research connected to the US military and its war in Vietnam.¹³ Arguably the most demanding of the mandates, to Whitehorn and undoubtedly to others it linked a fundamental institution within the US – academia – to the US's imperialist efforts abroad. As anti-imperialist feminists, she and others felt that they had a moral obligation to protest the US's war in Vietnam in whatever ways they could and that doing so must be a priority within the women's liberation movement. Though Whitehorn never expected the demand to be met, it was crucial to publicly link their local context to larger US imperialism: 'There we were in Boston, surrounded by MIT [Massachusetts

Institute of Technology], Harvard. They both had war research facilities. I mean Henry Kissinger had been at Harvard.’¹⁴ In fact, it had been Whitehorn who, setting her sights on Harvard as a target, had found 888 Memorial Drive for the occupation.¹⁵

For its part, Harvard was selective about which, if any, demands it would negotiate on, and its war research certainly did not enter into discussions. Only the second of the occupiers’ demands, in fact, achieved a direct result from the Harvard occupation. Though Harvard had attempted to switch off the building’s electricity and obtained an injunction in order to force the women to leave, several days into the occupation, some women began to negotiate secretly with Harvard management. A few days later, occupiers voted on the options of persevering with their demands and occupation, or accepting a \$5000 donation from Susan Lyman, who was at that time the chairwoman of the Radcliffe College Board of Trustees. Though some, like Whitehorn, adamantly opposed taking the money – which was to be put towards the purchase of a building for a new women’s centre – occupiers opted to do so, ending the occupation on 16 March. Several months later, in the autumn of 1971, 46 Pleasant Street was purchased and established as the Cambridge Women’s Center, which is now the longest-running women’s centre in the country.¹⁶

That the demand regarding Harvard’s war research was readily abandoned by the larger group of (mostly) white women’s liberationists signaled what, in the later life of the Cambridge Women’s Center, became a clearer division between anti-imperialist and socialist feminists in the city. Feminists of both persuasions sought to challenge racism and sexism, supported nationalist groups like the Black Panthers, and felt that revolutionary change was needed in the US. However, they tended to differ in terms of their goals, the extent to which they included critiques of US imperialism within their political outlooks, and their general understanding of how revolutionary change would come about in the US.

Many, though certainly not all, white anti-imperialist feminists in the early 1970s maintained links with militant white groups like the Weather Underground. Reflecting on the work of one such woman, who left a similar group operating out of the Bay Area in the mid-1970s, Becky Thompson argues that white feminist participation in such groups ‘reflect the reality that during the early 1970s, organizations in which white women could do anti-racist feminist work alongside feminists of color were scarce’.¹⁷ Indeed, a lack of multiracial feminist coalition-building marked the early 1970s, but many militant white groups also attached great political value to whites organizing other whites against racism. In her research into feminist and black freedom activism in Washington, D.C., Anne Valk found that, by the late 1960s, a number of the city’s white feminists were ‘heeding the message of SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] to concentrate their political skills on organizing against racism within white

communities'.¹⁸ A clear directive from SNCC, the Panthers and other nationalist groups, this was a key principle that guided anti-imperialist feminists, who were often frustrated by white women's liberationists' lack of attention to issues of racial injustice. Some, like Marilyn Buck, who served time in prison for assisting in Assata Shakur's escape from prison, preferred to remain within anti-imperialist groups that could sometimes be hostile to feminism rather than join women's liberation groups. Others, like Naomi Jaffe and Laura Whitehorn, participated in both kinds of efforts, and they saw their work within the women's liberation movement as attempts to organize other whites against racism, particularly by expanding feminists' purview to include an analysis of US empire and race.¹⁹ Most feminists might articulate anti-racist positions, but, as Nancy Fraser has pointed out, the 'chief target' for the majority of (white) women's liberationists 'was the gender injustice of state-organized capitalism', which meant that race was often not central to their analyses.²⁰

Anti-imperialist feminists, on the other hand, felt as though their political analyses centered on racism. As Marilyn Buck saw it:

To be a serious anti-imperialist, one has to be antiracist. You can be an antiracist but not be an anti-imperialist. Anti-imperialist means trying to be an internationalist and believe in the right to self determination. To be an antiracist doesn't necessarily mean you believe in the right to one's own nation and the legal steps you might take to establish sovereignty. This is different than people who think that everybody has the right to be equal in society but that doesn't necessarily require major social change. I don't think you can be a very good antiracist and stay there because it is limited. It doesn't take on capitalist society.²¹

For white anti-imperialist feminists, then, the key was to put women's issues in the overall context of anti-imperialism, and they strove to connect issues of racism and sexism at home with the US's larger imperialist efforts to thwart self-determination for peoples of color.

It must be stressed, however, that anti-imperialist feminism was not the creation of white feminists in the 1970s. Many African American women throughout the twentieth century provided gendered critiques of the racial injustices perpetrated within the US and connected their struggles with those of women struggling against colonialism around the world. Groups like the International Council of Women of the Darker Races linked issues of gender, imperialism abroad and white supremacy at home, while in the 1950s and 60s women like Shirley Graham Du Bois and Lorraine Hansberry reflected on the significance of anti-colonial struggles in Africa for black women in the diaspora.²² Meanwhile, given the US's colonization of indigenous lands, anti-imperialism was often the starting point for much American Indian and Chicana feminist organizing.²³ White

anti-imperialist feminists, like those in Boston and in the Weather Underground, were influenced by the powerful critiques of black feminists like Angela Davis, as well as nationalist struggles in the US, Vietnam and elsewhere, but they consistently found themselves at odds with many other white feminists in terms of their feminist goals and strategies.

These differences in organizing principles and political ideology related to other important distinctions between anti-imperialist feminists, on the one hand, and socialist and other radical feminists, on the other. In particular, competing views on violence and its relationship to resistance almost always signified differing priorities and ideals. Often, such disputes highlighted rifts between feminists who viewed violence within the context of the state and those who analysed it in terms of gender norms. A case in point occurred when *oob* received an anonymous letter – one of several sent to a variety of news outlets – with information about plans to threaten the US government and corporations in order to secure the release of political prisoners. The letter left the editors at loggerheads. Received in January 1972, the letter explained that nine bombs had been planted in safe-deposit boxes in as many banks in San Francisco, New York and Chicago. Although one detonated early, all were constructed so as to detonate 7 months after being set, a feat that, the letter said, could be used to ‘kidnap property and offer it in exchange for the freedom of our people’.²⁴ *Oob* explained that it had not opened the letter until after they heard news of the bombs being found, but it had occasioned discussion ‘in cheerful fang and claw oob style’ on the ‘bomb tactic’. In the end, ‘two nearly opposite points of view’ emerged. The first emphasized the risk to life involved in the use of bombs, insisted that ‘it will be the clerks, the cleaning people, working people on their way to jobs’ who would be hurt, and asked ‘Why use the macho ego tactics of the past?’ The second underscored the idea that bombs might push an otherwise all-too-comfortable US public to ‘make the choice that places humanity above property’, and maintained that ‘police department bomb squad’ workers would be those most likely ‘endangered’, though they could ‘refuse to dismantle’ the bombs.²⁵ The latter point of view exemplified two key facets of anti-imperialist feminism: a nuanced and supportive view of armed resistance and an urgency around the release of political prisoners.

Similarly, while she was canvassing Boston women’s groups to alert them to the upcoming occupation, Whitehorn recalls having multiple arguments with feminists about violence. Knowing that they could not divulge a great deal about the action, she and other occupation planners let others know that property damage and arrest were the key risks. She met with great resistance as she insisted that this property damage was not the same as armed struggle, but because ‘the lines were drawn’, most insisted that violent tactics were male-supremacist.²⁶ Having a more complex and supportive view of armed struggle stemmed from an understanding of how revolutionary change would

take place within the US. Liz Horowitz, who moved to Boston in the early 1970s at the age of 18, got her bearings in the city by working first at the Cambridge Women's Center and quickly gravitated towards the anti-imperialist feminists connected to the Center. She remembers that she and others argued that, rather than taking place via 'a classical model of Marxism-Leninism', revolutionary change in the US would be led by peoples of colour, those who comprised what was often referred to as the 'internal colony' of the US.²⁷ She and other white anti-imperialist feminists, she recalls, 'felt that socialism in the way that Marx discussed did not fully take into account the way history, racism, and the nature of class had developed in the US.'²⁸ For them, then, any political action or analysis had to take into account the US's history of racism.²⁹

Hence, many anti-imperialist feminists enthusiastically participated in establishing a feminist free school, the Women's School, out of the new Cambridge Women's Center. The Women's School opened in March 1972 and ran for twenty years, making it the longest-operating school of its kind in the country. Run mostly by feminist activists who donated their time to administer and teach the classes, the Women's School offered a huge range of courses over those two decades. A sampling includes: 'In Amerika They Call Us Dykes', 'Women and Their Bodies', 'The Middle East', 'Women's Literature', and 'Demystifying the Arms Race', as well as how-to classes in self defence, nutrition, writing, auto mechanics, and general 'Fix It'.³⁰ Over the School's first few years – between 1972 and 1974 – anti-imperialist feminist like Horowitz, Whitehorn and others were especially influential in the running of the school, and they staged a number of history-based classes that they hoped would, in Whitehorn's words, 'open white women's eyes'. Whitehorn recalls that they wanted to impart the lesson that 'the key to making social change in the United States is for white people to act in solidarity with especially black people and other oppressed nationalities because the key things holding together the United States are its empire, which is based in white supremacy.'³¹

Thus, their classes focused largely on African American history and included 'Black History', 'The Black Struggle and the White Radical Response', 'Resistance, Repression, Rebellion' and 'Women's History' classes that focused on black and working-class women.³² When Whitehorn ran women's history courses with her comrades Jacqui Pine and Ginger Ryan, the readings included Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Xeroxed excerpts from Gerda Lerner's collection *Black Women in White America*, various pieces from Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman*, and Angela Davis' recently published and highly influential article, 'Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves'. Whitehorn remembers that many women who joined the classes expected to be learning about, for instance, suffragists, which exemplified why, through these classes, she and the others sought 'to redefine who we mean by women...because in those

days, people would talk a lot about women's liberation and by women they meant white women.³³

Their other two key classes were more explicitly positioned vis-à-vis the problems that they perceived within the larger women's liberation movement. The description for 'The Black Struggle and White Radical Response' plainly linked it to anti-imperialist efforts and to general ignorance around racial justice struggles:

We feel it is vitally important for the women's movement to study the history of black people and the roots of white racism for several reasons: (1) racism is one of the main props of the imperialist system; ([2]) black and third world people are the leading force today in the struggle against this system; and (3) sexism and racism reinforce each other and are closely linked in their origins.³⁴

'Resistance, Repression, Rebellion' did not begin running until 1974, when Whitehorn first taught it with Susan Waysdorf in the spring and Horowitz taught it with Ryan in the autumn. Horowitz recalls that this course, in fact, grew alongside the 'burgeoning political line' of anti-imperialists who would later be involved with the Weather Underground's Prairie Fire initiative.³⁵ Focused specifically on the dialectic of repression and rebellion in US history, black history featured prominently within this class because, as the teachers wrote, this history 'provides some of the strongest and longest example[s] of a people in conflict with the state'. Yet, demonstrating the sure influence of Davis's article on enslaved women, they also sought to consider 'the role of women in maintaining the strength of the community and thus providing a base of resistance.'³⁶

Perhaps unsurprisingly, over the years that these classes ran, many viewed the Women's School as peculiar within the larger sphere of the women's liberation movement. Though the Women's Center, in essence, hosted the Women's School, not many individuals spent their energies on both. The Women's School attracted 'most of the women who were more anti-imperialist', which goes some way towards explaining why the two institutions shared an acrimonious relationship. Horowitz remembers that the Women's School folks 'were always kind of castigated' by the Center, whose organizers generally believed Women's School activists were not actually interested in 'women's issues'.³⁷ For their part, anti-imperialist feminists often felt frustrated with the Center's structure, and sometimes the School and Center became divided over race-related issues. Whitehorn thought that Jo Freeman's widely-read article 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' could have been written about the meetings of the Women's Center committee, to which the School had to send a representative. She and others drifted away from the School in the mid-1970s – both to help with community defense efforts as the crisis over school integration took hold in Boston and to take part when the

Weather Underground was re-developed as the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee in 1975.³⁸

But before they left the School, anti-imperialist feminists found themselves divided with the Women's Center committee over another issue – one that divided feminists across the nation and yet prompted a clearer picture of the contours of anti-imperialist feminism for white women's liberationists. In May 1973, white fugitive Jane Alpert wrote to *oob* asking that they publish her open letter to the women of the Weather Underground and a theoretical piece she had written called 'Mother Right'. Alpert had been living underground since skipping bail in 1970 when she had pled guilty to charges related to a number of bombings she had helped to carry out against military buildings in 1969. She wrote publically in 1973 to announce and explain her transformation from 'leftist' to 'radical feminist'.³⁹ It is no coincidence that Alpert wrote to *oob* and that doing so touched off a national debate over the politics of women's liberation. According to Anne Valk, Washington area feminists were known for their anti-war commitments and anti-imperialist politics. Many, including prominent members like Marilyn Webb and Charlotte Bunch, had years of experience with the New Left, via Students for a Democratic Society and the radical think-tank the Institute for Policy Studies. Like many of their counterparts in Beantown, feminists in the capitol city often identified as anti-imperialists and enacted such politics through a continued commitment to anti-war work, solidarity efforts with the Black Panther Party and other nationalist groups, and in maintaining their ties with the Weather Underground. *Off our backs* was a significant vehicle through which the city's feminist politics were broadcasted to the rest of the nation. In obliging Alpert's request for publication, it also provided a platform for one of the most high-profile contestations over anti-imperialist feminism.⁴⁰ Alpert's pieces yielded praise and critique alike. The rejection of the left and essentialist notions that undergirded 'Mother Right – for Alpert believed 'that what basically unites us as women is our common biology' – drew a range of supportive and disbelieving letters.⁴¹

It was her open letter to Weather Underground women, however, that brought to the fore, unfolding across the pages of *oob*, a debate about anti-imperialist feminism around which questions feminism's relationship to the male left, and to wider critiques of US empire, were central. Speaking plainly to her 'Sisters in the Weather Underground,' Alpert wrote that the crux of the problem was that 'you allow men to rule your politics'. Women in WU fooled themselves into believing that they had control of the organization and that their male comrades had changed their sexist ways. Alpert rejected their insistence that 'if I really practiced sisterhood I wouldn't make demands of you in the name of feminism, but would respect your political...path as equally valid as my own.' Rather, she underscored the sexism of particular men in the organization, singling out individuals like Bill Ayers and Mark Rudd and detailing aspects of their chauvinism. In exposing information about individuals living underground, Alpert broke a cardinal rule

of leftist fugitives – to never divulge *any* information about those living underground as the most innocuous details could jeopardize one’s ability to elude authorities. Anticipating rebuke, Alpert insisted, ‘I expose hitherto unknown information about the Weather Underground, not merely to shock but also to challenge other women to confront the oppression we face in the left. I urge women to leave the left and leftist causes and begin working for women.’ To drive her point home, she shared much detail about her relationship with Sam Melville, the lover with whom she had carried out bombings. Melville had been horribly sexist and controlling, she contended, and he had threatened to leave her if she did not conspire with him. That he had died in the Attica prison uprising that took place less than two years previous made her now-infamous ending to this letter all the more bitter: ‘And so, my sisters in Weatherman, you fast and organize and demonstrate for Attica. Don’t send me news clippings about it, don’t tell me how much those deaths moved you. I will mourn the loss of 42 male supremacists no longer.’⁴²

As with ‘Mother Right’, this open letter elicited a range of responses. Collectively, they point towards the serious debates being had, the country over, around the compatibility of feminist and anti-imperialist politics. Those folks at the Women’s School, like many others around the country, were shocked with the callousness with which Alpert dismissed the Attica uprising and angered that she disclosed so much about people still living underground. Yet they found themselves in heated disagreement with their counterparts in the Women’s Center.⁴³ Cell 16’s Betsy Warrior and a group who identified themselves as ‘X-Weatherwomen’ indicated their pleasure in hearing of Alpert’s public exit from the left, while ‘three Bay Area lesbians’ wrote to register their feeling that however difficult feminists find the left ‘it is still wrong to discard all aspects of anti-imperialist, anti-racist thought’.⁴⁴ They likely concurred with another letter writer, Emani Thompson, whose partner had been shot multiple times during the Attica uprising. She spoke of the pain Alpert’s letter caused her and defended her ability to be a feminist *and* supporter of the uprising:

If you cannot “mourn the loss of 42 male supremacists,” at least do not ask me to rejoice in the imprisonment and near death of my partner...my ability to be a serious feminist and still relate to the struggle of the Attica Brothers is my struggle against my oppressions as I understand them.⁴⁵

For their part, women in the Weather Underground offered a public response, printed via *oob* in the following issue.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, they were frustrated with Alpert’s revelations but said they ‘recognize[d] the need for a critical look at our herstory and our present practice – and to acknowledge our debt to the Women’s movement’. Their letter was intended, in fact, ‘to mark a change – to commit ourselves to the cause of women’. They had erred in the past in their denials of women’s oppression (particularly white women’s oppression) but had increasingly felt ‘the need for women working and living

together – the lesson of the women’s movement’. They would, however, continue to struggle alongside men, though they knew that in doing so many women’s liberationists might reject them and their brand of feminism:

We realize that many women distrust us because we work with men. To some this puts into question not only our loyalties to other women but our very womanness. But the last few years we have both learned and suffered from our brothers in our family, struggled with and been passive to them, loved and been alienated and fought with them. We claim the integrity of our choice to work with them, and do not intend to either defend or reject them.

Thus, like Alpert, WU women confessed to a kind of conversion when it came to feminism, and like Alpert and many other white women’s liberationists, experiences in the left had prompted this change, particularly widespread sexism. However, they pushed back against Alpert’s either-or insistence with regard to feminism and leftist struggles. Much as Emani Thompson had, they rejected the idea that their participation in struggles against the war in Vietnam or political repression negated their feminism. To insist on such divisions could only aid in the repression of political movements, the WU feminists wrote, for ‘If women come to deny the Attica brothers their full place as warriors, their beautiful humaneness in the liberation of the prison yard then we are turned against our comrades while our enemies laugh.’

As with Women’s School feminists, this both-and approach (feminism should include *both* a dedication to feminism *and* commitment to ending racism and imperialism) was based in the knowledge that systems of oppression could not be viewed as separate dynamics. Racism, sexism and imperialism were connected, and WU feminists implied that the larger white feminist movement had not attended to these realities:

We cannot liberate ourselves in some vacuum of our self-conception. The great majority of women in the world are bowed down by the questions of survival for themselves and their children’s self-determination in their daily lives. The liberation of women cannot be realized while the U.S. empire remains the main consumer of the world’s food, resources, and energy. Our movement will have to take on the questions of state power. That is why our future is tied to the liberation of the Third World – for it is their struggles which, in our lifetime, have shaken the grip of empire...Our feminist politics must embrace women of other cultures, learn from them the way they see the world, support in action their fight for liberation of their people, from repression, cultural penetration and genocide.

In attempting to demonstrate why the destruction of sexism necessarily entailed the destruction of the US’s status as world super-power – a system based in racist exploitation – these women thus not only affirmed the compatibility the left and feminism. They made clear their view that the liberation of women was inextricably bound to the liberation of peoples of color the world over.

Clearly, many of the white feminists associated with both the Weather Underground and the Women's School demonstrated great racial cognizance and carried out important racial justice activity in the early 1970s. Their commitment to anti-imperialism prompted them to address what they felt were the political shortcomings of largely white women's liberation movement: Euro-centric ideas and aims; a lack of understanding around the ways in which race and class underpinned the US's imperial efforts; an obliviousness to black history and its political importance for the present moment; and a denial of the connections between the left and feminism. These important interventions are overlooked, though, so long as the story of race in the US women's liberation movement is seen as one in which white women do not 'wake up' to racism until the late 1970s. Such an over-simplified narrative of redemption actually leaves much of the 'master historical narrative' intact. The dominant timeline prior to the mid-1970s – at which point, according to many, women's liberation was on the decline – goes largely unexamined. This narrative also falsely implies that there was a historical 'moment' at which racial divisions were overcome within contemporary feminist efforts.

Anti-imperialist feminists in Boston and in the Weather Underground help to demonstrate how much more complex ideas about race – indeed ideas about feminism – were in the movement. I am not merely trying to assert that that we should recognize that *some* white women's liberationists were active racial justice activists *too*. Rather, my concern relates to what may be a tendency within more recent historiography to come to a consensus about the story of race within the women's liberation movement, one that tells a *progressive* history of white women's consciousness around race. I am deeply skeptical of the notion that white feminists gradually gained critical race consciousness – not just because this is an overly simplistic narrative that collapses a great deal of infighting, denial and debate, but also because it relies on overly deterministic notions around nationalist movements like Black Power (and the hindrances they must have placed on women's relationships across race).⁴⁷

For in the end, the history of anti-imperialist feminists reveals that the 'master historical narrative' has skewed our understanding, not just of the rich histories of feminist organizing by Asian American, American Indian, African American, Chicana and other women of colour, but also by white women. It has written out of history the anti-racist interventions that *did* take place within many groups operating in the early years of the movement. That is, our misunderstanding of the racial politics of the Second Wave in the US include not only a relative ignorance of feminist of color organizing but also a distorted take on the work of many white anti-racist feminists.⁴⁸ In this way, the histories I have related here let us know that, in our attempts to overhaul the 'master historical narrative', we cannot simply 'add on' feminist organizing by women of colour and a

subsequent willingness to address racism by white women. We must, in fact, deeply reconsider white feminist organizing, as well.

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¹ Say Burgin is Lecturer in American History at the University of Leeds and a Research Associate with the Research Centre Visual Identities in Art and Design, University of Johannesburg. She researches and teaches broadly in the areas of race and 20th century US social movements. She has previously taught at the University of York, and her work has been published in the *Graduate Journal of Social Sciences*, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, the *ACRAWSA E-Journal*, and the *Journal of American Studies*. She is currently working on a monograph based on her thesis that accounts for the ways in which white activists organized against racism within white communities from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. She is also the co-lead on the interdisciplinary White Spaces Research Network (whitespaces.leeds.ac.uk). Email: s.burgin@leeds.ac.uk.

² Sara Evans (2002) 'Re-viewing the Second Wave' *Feminist Studies* 28, 258-268, (267); and Becky Thompson (2002) 'Multiracial feminism: Recasting the chronology of second wave feminism' *Feminist Studies* 28, pp. 336-61.

³ Sherna Berger Gluck (1998) 'Whose Feminism, Whose History?' In N. Naples (ed) *Community Activism, Community Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender* (New York: Routledge), pp. 31-56 (pp. 31-32, 36).

⁴ Evans, 'Re-viewing the Second Wave', p. 266.

⁵ Benita Roth (2004) *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Kimberly Springer (2005) *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press); Premilla Nadasen (2005) *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge); Anne Enke (2007), *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press), and (2003) 'Smuggling Sex Through the Gates: Race, Sexuality and the Politics of Space in Second Wave Feminism' *America Quarterly* 55(4), pp. 635-667; Becky Thompson (2001) *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 113-170; Winifred Breines (2006) *The Trouble Between US: An Uneasy History*

of *White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press); and Anne M. Valk (2008) *Radical Sisters: Second Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press).

⁶ Breines, *The Trouble Between Us*, especially chapters 3-5.

⁷ Though some scholars have briefly discussed anti-imperialist feminism, they have rarely discussed it in any detail or worked to distinguish it from socialist feminism. See for instance, Evans, *Tidal Wave*, p. 143; Barbara Epstein (1980) 'Thoughts on Socialist Feminism in 1980' *New Political Science* 1(4), pp. 25-35; and Nancy Fraser (2009) 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History' *New Left Review* 56, pp. 97-117. Thompson, on the other hand, explores 'white women activists who, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, chose to work in anti-imperialist, anti-racist organizations connected with Black Power groups rather than in overwhelmingly white feminist contexts', in her book *A Promise and a Way of Life*, p. 115.

⁸ Laura Tillem, phone interview with the author, 14 August 2011, Wichita, USA, and Leeds, UK; Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 27 July 2011, New York, USA, and Leeds, UK; George Katsiaficas (2001) 'Organization and Movement: The Case of the Black Panther Party and the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention of 1970' in Kathleen Cleaver and Katsiaficas (Eds) *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party* (New York: Routledge), 141-55; Valk, *Radical Sisters*, p. 131; and Marla Erlie interview in Susan Rivo (director) *Left On Pearl* (888 Women's History Project) Fine Cut edition, in author's possession.

⁹ Katherine L. Day and the *Crimson* Staff, 'Women's Group Seizes Harvard Building' *The Harvard Crimson*, 8 March 1971 <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1971/3/8/womens-group-seizes-harvard-building-brbrbdemand/>>. Whitehorn recalls that there were a couple of hundred women who arrived to take over the building. Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 21 December 2011, New York, USA, and Lincoln, USA. See also her remembrances, 'Laura Whitehorn on the Takeover of 888 Memorial Drive' *Left On Pearl Blog* <http://leftonpearl.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/laura-whitehorn-on-takeover-of-888.html>.

¹⁰ Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 21 December 2011; Rivo, *Left on Pearl*; and Day, 'Women's Group Seizes Harvard Building'. See also Daphne Spain (2011) 'Women's Rights and Gendered Spaces in 1970s Boston' *Frontiers* 32(1), pp. 165-67

¹¹ Laura Whitehorn, email interview with the author, 26 March 2013; Rivo, *Left On Pearl*; and Katherine L. Day and the *Crimson* Staff, 'Women's Group Seizes Harvard Building'. See also, Breines, *The Trouble Between Us*, pp. 101-02; and Spain, 'Women's Rights', pp. 166-67.

¹² Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 21 December 2011; J. Anthony Day, 'Graham Denies Alliance' *Harvard Crimson*, 10 March 1971 <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1971/3/10/graham-denies-alliance-psaundra-graham-president/>> [accessed 30 October 2014].

¹³ Laura Whitehorn, email interview with the author, 26 March 2013.

¹⁴ Interview in Rivo, *Left on Pearl*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Rivo, *Left On Pearl*; Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 21 December 2011; and Spain, 'Women's Rights and Gendered Spaces in 1970s Boston', pp. 165-67. See also the Cambridge Women's Center website: <http://cambridgewomenscenter.org/aboutus.html>.

¹⁷ Thompson, *A Promise*, pp. 126-27.

¹⁸ Valk, *Radical Sisters*: p. 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-25. On the need for whites to organize against racism within white communities, see for instance, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton (1967) *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Random House). Many black feminists similarly argued that fighting racism was the responsibility of whites. See, for instance, 'The Combahee River Collective Statement'(2000 [1983]) in Barbara Smith (Ed.) *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 264-74.

²⁰ Nancy Fraser (2009) 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History' *New Left Review* 56, 97-117 (104).

²¹ Thompson, *A Promise*, pp. 130.

²² Scholarship on the organizing of feminists of colour has, thus, often paid much more attention to anti-imperialist politics than have histories of white-dominated groups in the women's liberation movement. See for instance, Kate Dossett (2008) *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press), pp. 24-33; Gerald Horne and Margaret Stevens, 'Shirley Graham Du Bois: Portrait of the Black Woman Artist as a Revolutionary', in Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharris, and Komozi Woodard (eds) *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): pp. 95-114.

²³ See for instance, Paula Gunn Allen (1986) 'Who Is Your mother? Red Roots of White Feminism' in her *Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press), pp. 209-221; Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, pp. 129-177; Elizabeth Castle (2010) "'The Original Gangster": The Life and Times of Red Power Activist Madonna Thunder Hawk' in Dan Berger (Ed.) *The Hidden 1970s Histories of Radicalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), pp. 267-83 (pp.268-69); and Thompson, 'Multiracial Feminism', pp. 338-41.

²⁴ 'The 9th Key & Thoughts on Bombs', *off our backs*, January 1972, p. 14. In 1986, the former physicist and anti-war activist Ronald Kaufman, who had been living under a different name since 1971, was arrested by police in Los Angeles. See, Steven Esposito, 'Time Bomber: The Forgotten Yippie', *The Freeman*, 17 July 2013, available online at: <http://fee.org/freeman/detail/time-bomber-the-forgotten-yippie>; and John O'Brien, 'Bank Bomb Suspect from '70s Arrested', *Chicago Tribune*, 17 July 1986, available online at: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1986-07-17/news/8602200779_1_bombing-charges-explosive-devices-ronald-kaufman.

²⁵ 'The 9th Key'. By 1972, debates over the tactic of property bombing were as commonplace as bombings themselves. See also, Wade Greene, 'The Militants Who Play with Dynamite', *New York Times*, 25 October, 1970, p. SM20.

²⁶ Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 21 December 2011.

²⁷ Liz Horowitz, phone interview with the author, 23 August 2011, New York, USA and Leeds, UK. On 'internal colony', see Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*.

²⁸ Liz Horowitz, email interview with the author, 25 March 2013.

²⁹ Space constraints do not allow for a discussion of the limitations of such thinking here. However, see, Say Burgin (2013) *The Workshop as the Work: White Anti-Racism Organising in 1960s, 70s, and 80s United States Social Movements* (University of Leeds: Unpublished PhD Thesis), 190-91; and David Gilbert, Laura Whitehorn, and Marilyn Buck (2002) *Enemies of the State: An Interview with Anti-Imperialist Political Prisoners* (Montreal & Toronto: Abraham Guillen Press & Arm the Spirit).

³⁰ See Boxes 4 and 5, as well as 'Please come to a meeting of the Women's School, March 3', 1973 [1972]: 3 and 1, Box, 1, Folder 40: History of Women's School: Background Information: History of Women's School, Women's School Records, 1971-1992, M23, Archives and Special Collection, Northeastern University, Boston. (Hereafter, WSR.)

³¹ Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 27 July 2011.

³² Box 2, Folder 100: Course and Teacher Lists 1972; Box 2, Folder 107: Course and Teacher Lists 1973; Box 2, Folder 126: Class Descriptions Spring 1974; Box 8, Folder 339: 1972 Winter/Spring, WSR.

³³ Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 27 July 2011. Box 2, Folder 133: Women in America Course Outline Spring 1974; Box 2, Folder 92: Black History Readings; Box 2, Folder 117: Black History Readings Summer 1973, WSR.

³⁴ "Please come to a meeting of the Women's School, March 3', 1973 [1972]: 3 and 1, Box, 1, Folder 40: History of Women's School: Background Information, 197?, WSR.

³⁵ Liz Horowitz, phone interview with the author, 23 August 2011. Prairie Fire was a nation-wide anti-imperialist effort stemming from the publication of the same name by many Weather Underground members. See Dan Berger (2006) *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland: AK Press), 183-98; and Weather Underground (1974) *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism* (Communications Co.)

³⁶ Box 2, Folder 126: Class Descriptions Spring 1974, WSR.

³⁷ Liz Horowitz, phone interview with the author, 23 August 2011.

³⁸ Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 27 July 2011. 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' was published under Jo Freeman's pseudonym, 'Joreen', was originally published in 1970 and has been digitized and reprinted in many places. See, for instance, Duke University Libraries' *Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture* digitized collection: http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlmms01018/.

³⁹ Jane Alpert, 'Letter from the Underground', *off our backs*, May-June 1972, pp. 6-7, 22, 26-28 (p. 6).

⁴⁰ Valk, *Radical Sisters*, pp. 60-65; and Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp.220-28

⁴¹ Alpert, 'Letter from the Underground', p. 6. For responses, see 'Responses to Jane Alpert' *off our backs*, July-August 1972, pp. 24-26; and 'Alpert Response' *off our backs*, September 1973, pp. 30-31.

⁴² All quotes taken from Alpert, 'Letter from the Underground', pp. 6-7.

⁴³ Laura Whitehorn, phone interview with the author, 27 July 2011.

⁴⁴ 'Alpert Responses', pp. 30-31; and 'Responses to Jane Alpert', p. 25.

⁴⁵ 'Alpert Responses', p. 30.

⁴⁶ 'Responses to Jane Alpert', pp. 2-3. All quotes from the WU women's response taken from this source.

⁴⁷ Breines' narrative is a good example of such over-determined ideas. See *The Trouble Between Us*.

⁴⁸ Thompson also makes this point. See, Thompson, 'Multiracial Feminism' and *A Promise*, pp. 115-42.