Community Activism and Feminist Politics

Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender

Edited by
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Chapter 1

Whose Feminism, Whose History?

Reflections on Excavating the History of (the)
U.S. Women’s Movement(s)

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Whose History? Old Perspectives, New Dilemmas

The parentheses in the title of this chapter are less a sign of my infatuation with postmodernist gimmickry than of my own continuing ambivalence about how to “do” the history of feminist activism in the U.S.—what is still conventionally referred to as “the second wave.” Initially annoyed by bell hooks’s refusal to use the article—as in “the” women’s movement—in one of her earliest works, I now realize that it actually captures my own dilemma (hooks 1984, 26). Referring to women’s movements in the plural, on the other hand, reflects a deepening awareness of how the multitudinous forms of women’s activism throughout the world all work to challenge patriarchal hierarchies.

Yet, even as we now recognize multiple “feminismS” in contemporary discourse, with few exceptions the histories of their recent manifestations in the U.S. are still largely based on the old hegemonic model. Trapped in a time warp, and constrained by our particular historical trajectories and relationships, most U.S. historians of contemporary feminism still resort to the old litany, describing “the women’s movement” as having three (sometimes four) branches variously described as: liberal/reform feminism; socialist/Marxist feminism (a category that at times also includes anarchist-feminism); and radical feminism, which sometimes also encompasses lesbian feminism and sometimes classifies it as a separate branch. Because this model provides such a convenient pedagogical tool, and one that is more manageable than the real com-
plexity of feminist activism based on the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, it is reproduced continuously.

Women of color whose feminist activism cannot readily be placed within this paradigm are consequently left out of the histories of the early days of "the women's movement." Moreover, as Katie King (1994) points out in her far-reaching analysis of some of this literature, even when women of color—particularly African American women—were central players in radical feminist groups, they remain largely unmentioned. To counter the restrictiveness of the three-fold typology and the invisibility it confers upon women of color, at least one Feminist Studies class at Stanford has added a fourth category: "feminism and women of color" (Lee 1995). And while this might be an effective heuristic tactic, it does little to address the basic historiographic problem.

For the most part, the early history of feminist activism among women of color and/or working-class and poor women remains, at best, particular and separate, and does not challenge the accepted paradigm of "second wave" feminism. It is only when autonomous groups like the National Black Feminist Organization (1973) and the Combahee River Collective (1977) come out with statements that explicitly ally them with "the women's movement," that at least some women of color become incorporated into the master narrative.

This veil of silence, particularly with respect to working-class and poor women activists who remained anchored in their local communities, was lifted only after these women became more visible to the larger movement at and following the 1977 National Women's Conference at Houston. By 1982, on the heels of difficult political struggles waged by activist scholars of color, groundbreaking essays and anthologies by and about women of color opened a new chapter in U.S. feminism (see especially Moraña and Anzaldúa 1981). The future of the women's movement in the U.S. was reshaped irrevocably by the introduction of the expansive notion of "feminism S." Nevertheless, this new perspective has not been seriously applied retroactively to re-vision the earlier history.

One of the difficulties in revising the historical narrative and embracing the concept of "feminism S" is the historian's genuine concern about presentism, i.e. projecting contemporary meanings onto the past. Even more problematic is the issue of "ownership," the deep investment on the part of the participants in the early days of the women's liberation movement in preserving the primacy of our particular experience and analysis (also see King 1994). Not directly faced with race-ethnic or class oppression, the mainly white, middle-class activists—
regardless of their analysis of the causes of women’s oppression—foregrounded gender. As a result, they assumed both that feminists of color would form autonomous groups and that they would openly criticize the men in their communities. This expectation only widened the chasm and caused many working-class women, poor women, and women of color to distance themselves from “the women’s movement,” although they were often pursuing similar goals in the context of their own communities or movement groups.

Because so many of the white, middle-class activists themselves—or their admirers—initially charted the course of feminist history, it is no surprise that their own pasts have shaped how that history has been written. In contrast, women of color and U.S. Third World feminists like Chela Sandoval have challenged the hegemony of “white feminism” and forwarded more plural and differentiated “feminismS” (Sandoval 1982). However, what is often counterposed is a model that implies a unified movement among feminists of color—the result, perhaps, of a homogenization assumed by white feminists (Sandoval 1982; Alarcon 1990). Furthermore, because this vision evolved and was elaborated by members of a cultural and literary elite, the implications of class have not been well integrated into this emergent discourse. In contrast, the hallmark of so much of the activism of working-class and poor women has not been their articulated gender or race or class analyses, but rather their activities growing out of immediate needs. These have been referred to by some as practical gender interests, and in the Latin American context their expression has been dubbed “popular feminism” (Molynex 1985; Jaquette 1994).

By and large, this kind of neighborhood-based organizing of women in the U.S. has been ignored by feminist historians, except for the discussions of housewives organizing in the Depression years, largely under the aegis of the Community party organizers (Orleck 1993). On the other hand, there is a growing body of feminist sociological studies that document this kind of activism. However, this work is usually focused on individual case studies, and is often produced within the framework of social movement theory. The broader implications for a re-visioning of U.S. women’s feminist activism have not been fully explored.

The issues raised by the community activism of women place in sharp focus one of the major dilemmas facing any historian who wishes to rewrite the history of contemporary feminism. Focusing on groups whose activities are based on an analysis of women’s subordination—what has been referred to by Molynex as strategic gender interests—
seems merely to reinforce the old hegemonic model and discourse. Alternatively, widening our lens to include the kind of community organizing that is the hallmark of working-class and poor women’s activism can reduce the idea of feminism to mean simply the empowerment of women.

In an attempt not to focus only on groups driven by a gender analysis or, alternatively, merely to equate feminism with any activity that empowers women, regardless of its intent, the California State University, Long Beach, Feminist Oral History Collective (a.k.a. “De-Centerers”) developed the following working definition of feminist activism:

Women’s groups (including formal and informal committees, subcommittees and caucuses) organized for change whose agendas AND/OR actions challenge women’s subordinate [or disadvantaged] status in the society at large (external) and in their own community (internal).

The definitional process was not itself uncomplicated and the oral histories we were conducting with a range of activists were used to evaluate its usefulness and to guard against it being either too broad or too narrow. The question of intended and unintended effects remains somewhat ambiguous, but a distinction can be drawn. For example, a group dedicated to promoting women’s education as a way to empower them would fall within this net. But a group whose members are individually empowered by virtue of organizing, e.g. to close down a neighborhood toxic-waste dump, might not—unless they were also challenging the gendered basis of the decision-making process or began to confront the gendered hierarchy within their community as they organized.

As complicated as the question of intent is when the focus is on working-class community activism, it is even more confusing when it comes to deciding how and where lesbian activism fits. Like most women's liberation groups, lesbian feminists were part of a constructed social community, not a spatial or ethnic community. They are usually considered in the master historical narrative of “the” women’s movement to the extent that these groups often spun off from radical feminist groups. But where does a group like the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), founded in 1955, belong? Although many of its early members depict the group as serving mainly a social function (Gittings 1976), was their gender-bending nevertheless a challenge to women’s subordinate status? If so, the conventional periodization of “second wave” feminism is further under-
mined, and a new twist is added to the dual question, whose feminism, whose history?

New Perspectives, New Dilemmas

In 1963, at the same time that women professionals were convening the President’s Commission on the Status of Women in Washington, DC, a handful of Black women in Watts (Los Angeles) met to found the first grassroots welfare-mothers organization, ANC Mothers Anonymous (named for the Aid to Needy Children program under which they received assistance). In 1968, radical feminists from New York tossed their bras into the trash bins outside the convention hall of the Miss America pageant—a piece of guerilla theater that became mythologized as bra-burning. At the same time, a group of women students in Long Beach, California, were laying the foundation for one of the first modern-day Chicana feminista groups and newspapers, Hijas de Cuauhtemoc. In 1970, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of woman’s suffrage, one hundred thousand women marched in New York. That same year, American Indian women (who did not win suffrage until 1924) met to form the North American Indian Women’s Association. And, in 1972, when Ms. magazine was launched, Asian American feminists in Los Angeles were already working on the second special women’s issue of the radical Asian American community magazine, Guadina.

While the actions of the mainly white women’s groups have become major historical markers, the actions of these women of color and poor women in the American west have been little more than footnotes. The study, and particularly the oral histories, of women from the ANC Mothers Anonymous, Hijas de Cuauhtemoc, and Asian Sisters, and of those involved in American Indian women’s organizing, adds not just the dimension of race and class, but also a sorely needed western regional perspective. As Ellen DuBois and Vicki Ruiz (1990, xii) so eloquently point out, looking to the west provides an important corrective:

For the possibilities of a richer palette for painting women’s history, we turn to the “west”... if only because grappling with race at all requires a framework that has more than two positions. Nor is white history always center stage. Even the term “the west” only reflects one of several historical perspectives: the Anglo “west” is also the Mexican “north,” and the Native American “homeland,” and the Asian “east.”
Moreover, Asian American and Chicano activism had their origins in the west in the 1960s. The feminist activism of women in these groups actually predated that of east-coast groups, which are the ones usually cited (see, e.g., Chow 1987; E. Davis 1991). Indeed, the birth of the west-coast Chicana and Asian American women’s groups was contemporaneous with the east-coast white women’s liberation groups that are at the center of the master historical narrative. Like them, the groups that poor women, Chicanas, and Asians formed in the west were significant beyond their initial, small numbers.

Some of these groups embraced the feminist label, while others elaborated their own versions; and some of the activists openly challenged the sexism of the men in their communities, while others were more oblique in their approach. Regardless of these differences, all drew on their daily life experiences and their political organizing, and were oftentimes attracted to feminist ideas by the contradiction between the liberation discourse of their movements and their practices. They pursued agendas that were designed to mobilize the women in their own communities (national/ethnic, if not necessarily local) and to redress the ways in which sexism, racism, and class domination disadvantaged them in the larger society. Most sought the sources of their strength in their own histories and heroines.

An exploration of the similarities and differences among these groups challenges the conventional history of feminist activism, even as it also reveals some similarities with the experiences of the white feminists. It also challenges what is sometimes presented as a unitary notion of “Third World feminism.” Such an exploration is not unproblematic, furthermore, because it must rely so heavily on oral histories, and thus poses serious intellectual and ethical dilemmas revolving around the issue of interpretive authority. For example, to what extent can the consciousness and experience of individual key activists be used to construct the meaning of a group’s agenda, particularly when written documentary sources are either missing or minimal? Even more critically, what are the implications of incorporating into a re-visionsed history of the women’s movement individuals and groups who eschewed the feminist label because of its implications of skin and class privilege? In other words, does an attempt to be inclusive by imposing our 1990s historical sensibility in fact subvert their politics?

These are some of the questions to which I will return after reviewing the history and work of poor women in Watts who became involved in the ANC Mothers Anonymous, the Asian American women activists who
formed a host of women's groups within the context of the Asian American movement in Los Angeles, the Chicanas who began to formulate their own gender politics in groups like the Long Beach-based Hijas de Cuauhtemoc, and the American Indian women who came together in the west to forge a common bond of sisterhood and address their issues as native women.

This chapter, strictly speaking, is not a collective product. It is, however, the product of a collective process and represents an ongoing dialogue among us that began in a women's oral history seminar, Spring 1991. The following section draws on my own research as well as that of the three named collaborators, including their oral history projects. Maylei Blackwell conducted interviews with members of Hijas de Cuauhtemoc; Karen harper with activists in the L.A. Asian American Women's Movement; Sharon Cotrell with American Indian activists. The material on the various groups discussed here also draws heavily on the research that we each did and the papers we separately produced and/or presented. And while the discussion of each of these groups is drawn from our individual research projects, the framework for the discussion is a result of our earlier collective process and our ongoing conversation.

Origins, Roots, and Traditions

The Black civil rights movement of the 1960s, so often cited as one of the major sources for the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the later part of the decade, also had a profound impact on students and youth in the Asian and Mexican communities. In contrast, the poor women's movement that took hold in local communities in many cities in the early 1960s had little connection to the civil rights movement. Groups like the ANC Mothers Anonymous of Watts (whose anonymity could not be maintained after they appeared on Alan Lomax's radio program in Los Angeles) predated the formal organizing by the male founders of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). These groups developed out of the immediate survival needs of welfare mothers. As Johnnie Tillmon (1991), one of the founders, made eminently clear, the group was organized on behalf of class interests. Rubbing her thumb and forefinger together, she commented: "It wasn't a Black thing, it was a green thing."

Tillmon, who later led the NWRO, was typical of the women who founded many of these early grassroots groups. After taking ill in 1963, she decided not to return to her factory job, but rather to follow the
advice of her neighbors that she stay home to supervise her youngest daughter. A hard worker all her life, going on welfare was new to her, and she did not take kindly to a slight she overheard about welfare mothers from a middle-class African American woman in her neighborhood. Through rather ingenious and somewhat devious means, she managed to pull together a meeting of other women in the public housing project where she lived. From this meeting, a core group of eight women formed the ANC Mothers Anonymous. This spontaneously organized community-based group was one of the first links in the chain of a poor women’s movement that was eventually joined together in the National Welfare Rights Organization.

The main issue for these women was survival. For many, their jobs did not pay enough to support their children. For others, like Tillmon, their children were beginning to get into trouble and needed more supervision. The women of ANC Mothers demanded attention, respect, and the full share of benefits to which they were entitled under various federal programs.

In contrast to the poor single mothers who founded groups like the ANC Mothers, the younger women who constituted some of the earliest women’s groups in the Asian American and Chicano movements emerged within the context of these movements, particularly as they were beginning to flower on college campuses in California. Both the Black Panthers and the largely militant Mexican and Filipino United Farm Workers (UFW) provided the model and often the training ground for these ethnic-based and/or nationalist movements. And while the women who joined the Chicana feminista group, Hijas de Chicaúmenos, and those who worked in the array of Asian American women’s groups in L.A. followed similar courses, each drew on their own cultural roots.

By 1967, student groups like UMAS (United Mexican American Students) were developing a broader political agenda. They also provided a safe haven for the Chicanos/as, who represented a very small minority on the college campuses. Anna Nieto-Gomez, who was to become a major Chicana figure, quickly moved into a leadership position in the organization after she enrolled at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) in 1968. The male leadership charged her with the task of educating the women, and keeping them in line (Nieto-Gomez 1991, Tape IV:3). Like the leaders of the Chicano student movement, generally, the CSULB men believed that women had less political knowledge and consciousness and that it was the responsibility of the women in the
organization to politicize and raise the consciousness of new women (Blackwell 1991, 22).

Ironically, and predictably, the women’s discussion group that formed for this purpose evolved into a feminist consciousness-raising group, a place where the women explored the contradictions between the civil rights values espoused by the men and the way they treated women in the organization. It gave the women a voice, as Nieto-Gomez explains:

[What the women] wanted, in essence, was some accountability from the men . . . that they be consistent with their ideology, because the women weren’t treated with respect. (Nieto-Gomez 1991, Tape IVA2)

Researching their own history as Chicanas/Mexicanas, the members of the discussion group unearthed information about a Mexican woman’s organization that had published an underground newspaper during the 1910 Revolution: Hijas de Cuauhtémoc. The discovery was momentous, as Nieto-Gomez indicates:

... it was like I had been in a cave and someone has just lit the candle. I [suddenly] realized how important it was to read about your own kind, the women of your own culture, or your own historical heritage, doing the things that you were doing. It reaffirmed and validated that you’re not a strange, alien person, that what you’re doing is not only normal but a part of your history.... So then they became our models, our heroes. And to carry on the tradition, we used their name in the newspaper. (1991, Tape IVA5)

Discovering the history of the Mexicana feminist group did more than provide a name for the group and the newspaper they began publishing in January 1971. It also provided legitimacy in the face of increasingly hostile responses from the men in the Chicano movement (which will be discussed later). Many of the original members of Hijas eventually became leading figures in the emergent Chicana movement, and were also involved in launching the first major national Chicana studies journal, Encuentro Feminil.

The Asian American movement, much like its Chicano/a counterpart, was fueled by the growing consciousness among the largely first-
generation college students. And like many activists in the Chicano movement, students organized both on the campuses and in their communities. The Vietnam war, in particular, radicalized many Asian American students. In Los Angeles, a group of these radicalized activists broke off from the more conservative "Oriental Concern" organizational structure (which initially grew out of a 1966 youth conference) and instead formed a grassroots organization, Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA).

The focus and constituency of AAA was broad and included groups as diverse as "Asian Hardcore," a group of gang members and ex-cons, and "Asian Sisters," which focused on drug-abuse intervention for young women. Committed to meeting the needs of the community, the young people established a Service Center in Little Tokyo and ran a variety of programs, particularly focused on health needs (Harper 1992). While engaged in reformist activities, they were also busy developing their own revolutionary consciousness. Several activist women, like Miya Iwataki, joined the Community Workers Collective, and started an experiment in communal living. Members of the collective worked in the community by day and discussed politics at night, even as they were ready to rush out to deal with emergency drug overdoses. Their activities in these various contexts set the stage for the evolving feminist consciousness and agenda of the women, as Iwataki recounts:

When you work with ex-gang people and elderly men—they are the most chauvinistic. If you have a mind of your own and there are things you want to accomplish, there is no way you cannot fight for women's liberation, too. It was an evolutionary thing. To be told by people, "We're going out to do field work, you stay here and answer the phones"—so much work to be done in those days. We had to stand up for ourselves. (Iwataki 1991, Tape IB6-7)

In meetings among the different groups of women, they discussed their own situations. Not surprisingly, it was not only their relationships with the men in the movement that they explored, but also the particular ways in which they experienced and internalized racialized sexism:

In the first informal groups, women began talking about years of Scotch-taping eyelids to create a double eyelid fold and then carefully painting in over with Maybelline eyeliner. Women began to break through years of checking out each other as competition for
Asian men; of fearing being found out that one was not a virgin; or having to be anything but a “natural woman.” (Iwataki 1983, 36)

Although these activists later read and discussed white feminist works like Sisterhood is Powerful (1972), they mainly sought their feminist inspiration from the women involved in the revolutionary struggles in China and Vietnam, and even adopted some of the language of the Chinese, e.g. dubbing patriarchal practices and beliefs “feudal.”

American Indian women also looked to their own cultural roots for the source of their strength, but their feminist trajectories appear to be different than those of the Chicanas and Asian American women. Despite the long history of separate Indian women’s organizations dating back to the 1920s, the members of the newer generation who were active in the American Indian movement community of the late 1960s and early 1970s did not form their own women-centered groups until considerably later. They did engage in informal networking, like the potlucks held by the women connected with AIM and the Alcatraz occupation, and later the meetings and conferences held by women professionals involved in education and social services (Cotrell 1991b).

These women’s gatherings apparently aroused the same kind of suspicion among American Indian men as they did among Chicanas, and the same critique about their divisiveness was forwarded by the men. However, while the men’s suspicion served early on to spur some Chicana feministas to form autonomous groups like Hijas—even as the Hijas women continued to work with the men in the larger movement groups—the outcome was different for American Indian women. For one thing, given the history of Indian peoples in the United States, the slogan calling for Indian sovereignty played a major role in the strategy for Indian self-determination. And while it might have served to unify diverse tribes, it might also have served as a deterrent to criticizing tribal policies, and by extension, the male leadership of the American Indian movement community. As Rayna Green pointed out, the “Native American” women activists themselves did not know how to react to the 1980 Supreme Court decision that tribal sovereignty took precedence over women’s equality:

We debate whether such [tribal] rules are traditional with Indian cultures or whether “imported” from European “patriarchal” traditions. And we debate whether we should attack Native tradition the way majority feminists have attacked their own... If we tam-
per with things, some of us think we'll be worse off then ever. . . . The double bind of race and sex is too real. Two powerful words—
tradition and equality—do battle with one another in Indian coun-
try. But whose versions of tradition and whose version of equality
should we fight for? (Green 1982, 172)

Even when a women's group like Women of All Red Nations (WARN)
was eventually formed in 1978 as an "arm" of AIM, or when women held
their historic Ohoyo Conference in 1979, the criticism of Indian men
and of sexism, as Sharon Cotrell points out, remained oblique (Cotrell
1995). At the same time, the matrilineality that characterized so many
Indian people's past provided the women a form of indigenous femi-
nism which they quickly grasped. This seemed to serve both to empower
the women and to silence the men's criticisms—especially in light of the
way that "traditional" Indian culture was being valorized in the process
of decolonization. Nothing illustrates this better than the 1977 retort by
a Mohawk woman to the lament of a middle-aged man about the pass-
ing of the old days and the increasing number of women running for
tribal council:

I'm certainly for a return to the old ways. In the old days the
women in my tribe ran things, and in some tribes they still do. So
bring back the old days. (Green 1982, 172)

Recounting the incident, Rayna Green, a leading Indian feminist writer,
comments:

My friend and I are delighted. Her speech isn't exactly the open-
ing shot of the revolution, but it puts Indian women where I don't
always believe we are—squarely in the feminist consciousness.
(Green 1982, 172)

In many ways, 1977 marks a turning point in Indian women’s
activism, as native women delegates from around the country gathered
at the National Women's Conference in Houston. Despite tremendous
enthusiasm about the opportunities this gathering offered, leading
activists like Green expressed grave concerns about the problems of
pulling together an assembly of all Indian women in attendance at the
conference:
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Tribal differences and the press of other life—and death—issues may rob us of what majority feminists call “sisterhood,” we worry. “Perhaps,” I say, “but Indian women will be seen and heard in the context of the Women’s Movement.” Bring on the new days. Bring on the new days. (Green 1982, 172-173)

The Indian women did pull together, issued a Manifesto to the conference (later published in Ms.), and began to lay plans to form a new national women’s organization. Two years later, Ohoyo (the Choctaw word for woman) was formally founded and established a resource center in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, with a grant from the Women’s Education Equity Act program. By the time Ohoyo, together with the North American Indian Women’s Association, sponsored a national conference in 1981, “Indian Women at the Crossroads,” Indian women had planted themselves firmly in the women’s movement. The flowering of an Indian feminism was evident not only in the proliferation of autonomous women’s groups in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but also in the burst of publications on, about, and by Indian women.

Challenging Women’s Subordination

All of the groups discussed above drew on their daily life experiences, including race and class oppression, and focused largely on their survival needs. In their own ways each was also engaged in challenging women’s subordination, although this may not have been articulated as their primary goal. For the ANC Mothers, the focus was on the ruling establishment, and went to the heart of the definition of gender roles. Others, as a result of their activities in raising women’s issues, found themselves confronting not only white, male, patriarchal values, but also the men in their own communities and movements. While the Chicana and Asian American activists were often embroiled in rather combative relationships, the American Indian women usually trod more lightly.

The women in the ANC Mothers were solidly rooted in their own community, but in contrast to the American Indian, Chicana and Asian American women activists, they were not allied with the civil rights or nationalist movements of their community. Indeed, as the grassroots movement grew and was incorporated into the structure of the emergent National Welfare Rights Organization, these groups increasingly cut across the various movements and communities. The welfare mothers, from the beginning, were focused on getting respect and what was
due them, and this brought them into direct confrontation with the welfare bureaucracy. At the local welfare office in Watts, for instance, Tillmon and her band of welfare mothers in ANC Mothers were viewed as a cantankerous watch-dog force that was acknowledged, respected, and even feared.

It is difficult to determine how many of the grassroots leaders of the earliest welfare-rights groups had a vision that extended beyond their immediate goals, but it is clear that from the start Johnnie Tillmon did. She believed that welfare mothers should be trained and receive an education in order to get decent jobs, if they wanted; and that publicly funded child care was absolutely vital. She came up with a child care model which, as she later discovered, closely resembled the original kibbutz design: a place where the children would be kept during the week, especially for the mothers who were working as live-in domestics. The demand for control over their lives appears in later statements of the NWRO, and is a recurring theme in the Tillmon oral history, focusing on the right to stay home and be full-time mothers, with a guaranteed income for their social-reproductive roles (prefiguring the later argument of Wages for Housework); or the right to be trained and gain employment, and have the necessary services available.

Like other poor women and most women of color, Tillmon felt that “the” women’s liberation movement did not address the bread-and-butter issues so critical to welfare recipients. At the same time, she began to build alliances with it, particularly by 1972, when she wrote her now famous, “Welfare Is a Woman’s Issue” for Ms. magazine. Playing on the stereotypes of the women’s liberation movement, she nevertheless makes clear in her oral history that what was at stake was survival, not privilege:

Most of the women in women’s liberation groups were white women. Most of the welfare recipients were also white women. . . . The women’s liberation part, they don’t want to wear no bras, they don’t want to wear no girdles, they was concerned about men opening the door, that kind of stuff. That isn’t where our heads were. Our heads were—do we have a door; do we have money to buy a bra to put on, or panties. . . . Our thing was survival. (Tillmon 1991, Tape VE6-7)

Their movement, which was largely run by and for women, did also include men. In fact, the founder of the national organization was a
man, George Wiley, and so were many of the original staff. However, even as many of the male staff members continued in the organization, the women soon became the dominant force. By all accounts, they held their own. And while they might have engaged in some confrontations with the men on gender issues, or on class issues with national leaders like Martin Luther King, these seem to have been largely asides.

For the American Indian women, too, the skirmishes with the men seemed to be treated like minor annoyances, and they generally tried to smooth the waters by legitimizing their gender interests with historical precedents. Group unity was critical in the face of the continued racism and genocidal practices of the U.S. government, like the sterilization of an estimated one-fourth of Indian women. As a result, even as the women began to form their own groups and develop an agenda focused on their gender interests, they framed most issues in terms of group survival and tribal rights (WARN 1980; Oheo 1981).

The June 1979 WARN International Year of the Child Conference, which was viewed as "an attempt, from a traditional Native perspective, to identify the many problems—the very threat to survival—currently facing the future generations," included a workshop on sterilization abuse, midwifery and natural healing, and herbal medicine (WARN 1980, 1). A thread running through this conference and continuing through subsequent Indian women's gatherings was a dual focus on education and spirituality. Oftentimes, these were integrated, for instance in "The Women's Dance: A Women's Health Course for Native American Women," which focused on traditional concepts of womanhood as well as practical steps to educate women on gynecological complaints, sexuality, and herbal medicine.

The need for unity in the face of continuing assaults on Indians made it particularly difficult for women to deal with issues such as sexual assault perpetrated by Indian men. In 1979, rape was reported to be the number one crime on the Navajo reservation (Allen 1986). And although the ultimate blame was placed squarely on the effects of colonization, Indian women did begin to mobilize around the issue of spousal and child abuse, forming groups like the White Buffalo Calf Society as early as 1977. By 1983, even WARN, a group that had skirted conflicts with male leaders, showed a greater willingness to focus on gender and to promote women's leadership. When Gail Sullivan, a long-time AIM supporter, expressed surprise at this unexpected turn, WARN leader Madonna Thunderhawk retorted, "after all, we are feminists" (Sullivan 1983, 79-80).
While the change in organizing and in agendas was evolving towards a more feminist orientation among reservation-based and/or-focused Indian women, a similar turn was occurring among the more highly educated, urban, professional women, particularly those involved with education and social services, in which Indian women played central, leadership roles. Following their successful caucusing at the 1977 Houston conference, and the establishment of the Ohoyo Center, and particularly with the assistance of Women's Equity Action grants, these women began to produce educational materials and to host conferences. And while the handful of highly published women like Rayna Green and Paula Gunn Allen came to represent Indian feminism for many white women, the conferences gave voice to many more. Kate Shanley, for example, wrote, it “was a returning home . . . taking my place beside other Indian women . . .” (Shanley 1995, 416).

Survival remained a basic theme for Indian women, and running through all the literature and through the interviews of several activists is the theme of both physical and cultural survival. This dual struggle also meant fighting multiple oppressors, as so eloquently elaborated by Paula Gunn Allen:

To survive culturally, American Indian women must often fight the United State government, the tribal governments, women and men or their tribe or their urban community who are virulently misogynist and who are threatened by attempts to change the images foisted on us over the centuries by whites. (Allen 1986, 93)

Fighting the misogyny of the men in their own communities and movements, as well as the racialized sexism of white society, was a task in which Chicana and Asian American women activists also engaged—even as they, too, worked on basic survival issues in their communities. And while their agendas seem to have had many parallels, their experiences with and responses to their male activist counterparts differed.

Even if the fears about divisiveness expressed mostly by male leaders were legitimate, it is important to note that in the Chicano movement potential differences based on class or regionalism were largely ignored, while battle lines were drawn when it came to gender issues. Women like Anna Nieto-Gomez and her feminista cohorts were labelled vendidas (sell-outs), and worse (Garcia 1989; Nieto-Gomez 1974). For instance, when Nieto-Gomez ran for the presidency of MEChA at CSULB in 1969,
she was hung in effigy and a tombstone was erected bearing her name and the names of several other outspoken women.

Arguments raged in the Chicano movement between those who were embraced as *loyalistas* (i.e., women in the forefront of the Chicano movement who by their actions were feminists, but who toed the party line that women should wait until the Chicano won his liberation) and the *femenistas* who were excoriated for being "Anglicized."54 Faced with this charge, the *femenistas* legitimized their ideas by turning to their Mexicana history. Their allusion to groups like the original Hijas de Cuauhtemoc was a particularly powerful defense in light of how extensively the Chicano movement as a whole drew its imagery from Mexican history. As Nieto-Gomez explains:

It made it more like a national issue as opposed to an individual issue—which made us feel less selfish. Because it took us a while to feel comfortable in talking about ourselves as women and women's problems because they were always being minimized and diminished, they were always being viewed as something that was petty... (Nieto-Gomez 1991, Tape IV A6)

The young women who founded Hijas were concerned about the problems that this first generation of Chicana college students faced, including racialized sexism, reproductive issues and the paucity of sex education, and the sexual politics of the student movement, coupled with financial and social/family pressures. Seeking to understand the causes of drug use, on the one hand, and a high drop-out rate, on the other, the activist women uncovered a high incidence of pregnancy and of self-performed abortions among these students. In response, they became involved in providing social support and services to other Chicanas, and some participated in the late 1960s underground abortion movement at one of the local churches. At the same time, they were trying to secure a better future for other Chicana college students by recruitment and retention programs and by introducing a Chicano/a curriculum. While their focus began on their own campus, their activities were broadened through regional Chicana feminist organizing. Eventually, members of Hijas were drawn into playing a leading role in the national dialogue among Chicanas.

At the same time that they were organizing among students, the early activists in Hijas remained rooted in their community, working with wel-
fare mothers in East L.A., in the community in nearby Hawaiian Gardens, and with the Long Beach La Raza Center. They maintained and expanded their ties to community-based groups, such as the East L.A. Welfare Rights Group, Catolicos for La Raza, Comision Feminil and, after they left the college campus in the early 1970s, with various Teatro groups. In addition to their persistence in raising women’s issues in the larger Chicano movement, members of Hijas initiated the publication of the first Chicana feminist journal, Enenetro Feminil, in 1974; they introduced courses on women in the newly developed Chicano Studies programs; and they began to develop the new Chicana scholarship.

The Asian American women activists shared the dual focus of the Chicanas, working both on the college campuses to develop courses on women, and in the community to address women’s immediate needs. As one of the activists explained, everyone was busy doing community organizing as well as women’s theory (Quon 1984). The range of activities in which the Asian women activists were involved and the number of different groups they formed in the late 1960s is staggering. And so was their broad constituency. Asian Sisters, for instance, attempted to combat drug addiction and prostitution among young women by working to raise their self-esteem through feminist consciousness. The Asian Women’s Center was designed to reach out to Asian women of all ages in the community, while the Little Friends Playgroup established a daycare center in collaboration with Chinese immigrant women in Chinatown. A media group developed a traveling multimedia program on Asian American women’s history and oppression, including skits on abusive date situations.

While many of the educational programs developed by the new generation of activists in other movements were frequently addressed to their own peers or to a white Anglo audience, the Asian American women’s theatrical group also attempted to address their parents’ generation, even going to service organizations such as the Japanese American and Chinese American Rotary club meetings. The highly energetic group of women wrote regularly for the Asian activist newspaper Gudina and produced two special issues in 1971 and 1972.

Like the Chicana feministas, the Asian American feminists in Los Angeles remained firmly anchored in the larger movement. But in contrast to the Chicanas, their focus on women was not perceived as a parallel, women’s movement. Rather, they incorporated their fight against misogyny into all aspects of their work in the Asian American movement. For instance, the decision of three women activists to move into
the Community Workers Collective reflected the women’s determination to force activist men to confront their sexism twenty-four hours a day.

The women were incredibly daring and undaunted in their confrontations with men. They directly intervened to extricate women from gang activity and/or life on the streets and when men were abusive toward women. For instance, if a parent or friend called Asian Sisters about a young woman in a motel somewhere, two women would jump into a car, go to the room and take the woman out of the situation. Afterwards, they would arrange counseling and try to get her involved in community work instead of drug use/dealing and prostitution (Iwataki 1991).

Perhaps taking their cues from the Chinese, whenever any of their male cohorts behaved inappropriately, the women “jammed up” a man, i.e. three or four of the women pinned him against a wall as they criticized his behavior. Miya Iwataki, one of the activist women leaders, recounts a rather dramatic incident in which a young woman came to one of the communes seeking comfort and protection from a boyfriend who had beat her up again. The women’s study group happened to be meeting and in a spontaneous burst they decided to go as a group to confront the man, a young thug who had a reputation as a dangerous gang member. Frightened, but nevertheless determined, the women first explained to him why his behavior was wrong and why he had to change. According to Iwataki, “even the most meek and quiet ones” then set upon him, each striking a blow or kicking him as a statement of solidarity and to emphasize the seriousness of the issue. Much to their relief, he took the blows without defending himself. After that, word went out on the street: “Don’t mess with the women anymore” (Iwataki 1991).

The men might have been more responsive to the women’s critiques because of their shared admiration of the Vietnamese and Chinese Communist revolutionaries. In any event, by the late 1960s, all mixed-gender organizations in the Asian American activist community in Los Angeles reportedly had a strong women’s presence in the leadership (Nishio 1993).

Whose Feminism?

The thumbnail sketches of the activism and consciousness of the women and groups highlighted here are by no means definitive, nor are
they meant to supplant the very sorely needed histories of these groups by the participants. Rather, they are a way to concretize some of the problems we face as historians trying to replace the old, hegemonic model. We have no doubt that the conventional narrative history of contemporary women’s movements does not work. But what happens if we use our formulation to try to write a new one? In different voices, Anna Nieto-Gomez, Miya Iwataki, Johnnie Tillmon, and the other women interviewed all expressed their alienation from the white women’s movement. They felt that it did not deal with survival issues and was not relevant to them.

Today there is a new language used by many women of color that emphasizes a feminism rooted in their own experiences and positionality. And while some Black women like bell hooks claim the feminist label, others feel more comfortable adopting Alice Walker’s “womanist” identification (Walker 1983, xi-xiii; hooks 1984). And while some Chicanas have consistently used the femenista label which, from the beginning, set them apart from the white women’s movement, many are now adopting the more differentiated feminist consciousness implied in Ana Castillo’s “xicanista” (Castillo 1995).

This language might provide important tools for writing a much more expansive and inclusive chapter of current feminist activism/consciousness, but it does not necessarily provide a solution to the dilemmas faced in writing the past history. We must still ask if we are distorting the experiences and histories of the groups we have been discussing here by incorporating them into a narrative that includes the various white women’s movement groups? Does it make sense, for instance, as Marleni Blackwell has asked, to include groups like “Redstockings” (a radical feminist group that repudiated the family as the site of women’s oppression), alongside Chicana femenistas who organized with their families as a base? Though Chicanas may have struggled within the family over its patriarchal character, this did not detract from their commitment to it and their belief that it was basic to their cultural and racial/ethnic survival.

When we asked our narrators how they fit into a more broadly conceived history of the women’s movement, most were still ambivalent. The memory of their alienation, and particularly their disdain for what they viewed as more frivolous issues, still weighed heavily. Living the intersection of race, gender, and class, many resented what they perceived as “the” women’s movement’s single-minded focus on gender, and the gender separatism that often resulted from this analysis. For,
regardless of the differences they had with the men in their movements, activist women of color remained aligned with them. And although not all of the activists were from poor backgrounds, their ties to their communities made class issues paramount.

For many Chicana and Asian American activists, the earlier repudiation of the feminist label was a political statement. Instead, like the women in Hijas, many refashioned feminism in their own image. And although they took much of their inspiration from their own historical roots and were busy creating their own literature, they also read and discussed the literature of “the women’s movement,” particularly the essays in *Sisterhood is Powerful.* Indeed, some of their activities and groups in the late 1960s look like those of the women involved in the white women’s liberation movement. However, what most clearly differentiates them from the white feminist activists is that they remained anchored in their own communities/movements, where they worked together with the men—even as they repudiated their misogyny—on issues of cultural, racial/ethnic and economic survival.

Anna Nieto-Gomez’s expansive description might most appropriately capture the way in which both the *femenistas* and the Asian American women activists straddled their own ethnic/national movements and the women’s movement:

> Yea, yeah, there was a Chicana women’s movement. It was part of the larger women’s movement that was going on in the United States. It was part of the Chicano Movement and it was part of the Civil Rights Movement that was going on and a part of the institutional changes that were going on at the time. . . . (Nieto-Gomez 1991, Tape IVF6)

And, we might add, the birth of both these movements fits into the same historical time frame of the 1960s.

By comparison, Johnnie Tillmon and her welfare-mothers’ group preceded them, and the American Indian women’s groups seemed to evolve a women’s agenda considerably later. These two groups, in very different ways, and in contrast to the Chicanas and Asian American activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, might best be characterized as representing “hidden gender insurgencies.” For the ANC Mothers, their demand amounted to a call for self-determination, i.e. for the conditions that would enable them to choose whether they would stay home or become wage earners. As noted earlier, Tillmon also repudiated the
white women's movement, but by 1972 her "Welfare is a Woman's Issue" was a clarion call to the women's movement to include poor women's issues. Although her response was terse when I asked if the welfare mothers should be considered part of the women's movement, it clearly demonstrates her own criteria—the very same criteria espoused initially in defining feminist research: "Well, welfare rights, the organization itself was started by women, of women and for women" (1984, Tape IA, 1). There is documentary evidence to support the feminist visions of the Chicana and Asian American activists, but none remains for the earliest activities of the ANC mothers. This makes it difficult to assess if the consciousness revealed both in Tillmon's oral history and in her 1972 article also characterized the early ideas of the group.

The American Indian women, despite the much later emergence of a clear women's agenda, from the start used their own indigenous imagery—particularly of the "strong woman"—to articulate what might also have been a "hidden gender insurgency." Like the Chicana and Asian American activists, their gender interests could not be separated from their ethnic/national identities; and because of the unique situation of the indigenous people in the United States, the women had to tread more softly, and slowly. The later emergence of a clearer agenda and espousal of Indian feminism might be suggestive of earlier activities that were largely hidden from view—activities that might be uncovered only through many more interviews.

The oral histories of women involved in these movements, and particularly our dialogue with them about the meaning of their activism, might help to avoid violating the historical integrity of their activism. But we must still ask if we can safely use the individual experience to represent the group. The question is not necessarily resolved by turning to written documentary sources. All too often, the literature that was published was penned by the very same women whose stories we have been collecting. We must also keep in mind that during this time period government funding heavily influenced how groups publicly articulated their goals. Obviously, interviewing as many former participants as possible is important, though still not a solution, since those who can be located are usually the ones who remained more visible and, hence, more traceable.

The inclusion of action in our definitional framework takes some of the edge off our discomfort, to the extent that it captures not only the articulated analysis of leaders, but the practice of followers, too. The invasion of welfare offices by groups like ANC Mothers, demanding
their right to choose their future, and the willingness of the Asian American activists to take direct action in confronting sexism in their community, testify to the agendas of both groups to challenge women's subordinate status and to empower women. Even if all the members of her local group might not have conceived of their confrontations with establishment bureaucracy in Johnnie Tillmon's language of self-determination, the very nature of their acts asserted it, as did those of the Asian American activists. So, too, the underground abortion network in which members of Hijas participated, and the workshops that gave American Indian women the tools to control their own fertility, including how to resist involuntary sterilization.

Once we concede the plurality of "feminismS"—and the differences among them, captured so well in some of the new language used by Afro-Americans and Chicanas—and abandon the investment in the conventional one-sided history of "the women's movement," there remains the difficult task of figuring out how to "do" a new kind of history. How can we avoid compartmentalizing each group, on the one hand; or blending them to such an extent, on the other hand, that very real differences between them and with the white women's movement are submerged.

Indeed, forwarding a construct of feminism of women of color (Lee 1995), or of Third World feminism (Sandoval 1991), promotes the same kind of oversimplified unitary view of feminism that the conventional three- or four-fold typology of the white women's movement does. And while it might be appropriate in reconceptualizing and writing feminist theory, it might actually distort the lived activism of community-based groups. In fact, the kind of "differential" mode of consciousness that Sandoval claims as the mode "enacted by Third World feminists over the past thirty years" (1991, 12) has marked the organizations and activities both of different women of color and of white women. This "differential" mode of consciousness—the non-exclusive embrace of different forms of consciousness identified by Sandoval as equal-rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist—seems to represent little more than the kind of fluid strategies adopted, sometimes simultaneously, by activists on the ground. For while individuals and groups might have had a defined ideological stance—which has become the basis for the tripartite distinction, also captured in Sandoval's taxonomy—the actions and programs were responsive to the immediate needs of women and were not as distinct as their ideologies. For example, the socialist, anarchist, and radical feminists who staffed both the Crenshaw and Venice
Women's Centers in Los Angeles in the early 1970s were extensively involved in social services for women, i.e., reformist activities. These ranged from rape counseling to abortion counseling to workshops on "doing your own divorce." Similarly, the Asian American women's groups discussed here might best be characterized as espousing a socialist ideology. Yet they, too, engaged in providing services to women in the community, ranging from health screening to drug intervention.

Furthermore, when we start to redo the history and look at organizing strategies, we find evidence of coalition work across racial-ethnic and class lines taking place in the community well before the 1977 Houston conference. Chicanas, Asian Americans, American Indians and Anglo-Europeans often came together to act in concert around very specific issues. In Los Angeles, in the early 1970s, these included demonstrations against the forced sterilization of Chicanas at Los Angeles Country General Hospital; fund-raising for the defense of Joanne Little, the African American woman who stabbed her jailor to death when he attempted to rape her, and for Yvonne Warrow, the native woman who was being tried for killing the man who tried to abuse her children; and demonstrating support at the trial of Esther Lau, a Chinese woman who was assaulted by a police officer when she was stopped on a Los Angeles freeway.

Indeed, when we listen carefully to the activists who were challenging women's subordination in a host of ways, what we hear are multiple voices that sometimes sound like a cacophony, and other times are in harmony. At times each one may be saying something jarringly different; other times it might sound more like variations on the same theme; and occasionally the voices may come together, perhaps even using the same notes. I can conceive of how to do this as performance, but to write it is more daunting. Perhaps that is another reason that the first generation to write the history of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminism has settled into complacency and not tackled the problems inherent in producing a more complicated, multilayered history. The task might best be left to the new generation of feminist scholars who are developing a language and style that might better communicate this more nuanced understanding—a generation whose understanding of historical processes is not tied up with their own direct experience and the sense of "ownership" that this seems to have engendered.
Notes

3. This conference was convened by the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year (appointed by President Ford in 1975 in response to the IWY conference in Mexico City). Regional conferences were held in all fifty states, where delegates were elected to attend the national meetings.
5. This definition was developed over the course of four years and in concert with others who participated in the Women's Oral History seminars from 1991–1995 as cited below (see note 7).
6. At the historical juncture being discussed here, the Asian Pacific Islander, or Asian Pacific American identifications were not yet current. And, among Indian activists, American Indian has been the preferred designation, Native American being viewed as a construction created by white liberals and academicians.
7. Each of the collaborators gave me feedback on early drafts of this paper, but they cannot be held responsible for the particular articulation of the ideas presented here, including the ways in which I used the materials. I have tried to weave their reactions and comments into the text, and have added some additional comments in the endnotes regarding points they wished to emphasize. In addition to the direct contributions of the three named collaborators, other students have greatly influenced my thinking, particularly Julie Bartolotto, Vivian Deno, Rubi Fregoso-U, Ken Garner, Cris Hernandez, April Johnson, Karen Jackson, and Chano Nettles.
8. UMAS, founded in 1967, was supplanted by MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicoano de Aztlán) in 1969, following a national conference in Santa Barbara. El Plan de Santa Barbara, issued out of this conference, eschewed a hyphenated identity and embraced Aztlán and Chicano identity, leading to the change of name.
9. The sources vary in regard to the group's original name. It was either Las Chicanas, Las Hermanas, Mujeres de Largo, or Las Chicanas de Aztlán.
10. The historically correct spelling of the name is Cuahtémoc, but it is often spelled Cuauhtémoc.
11. Although it was the first journal edited by the new feministas (Ana Nieto-Gomez and Adelaida del Castillo were the co-editors), there was at least one precedent; a feminist paper, Mujer Moderna, published in the early part of the twentieth century in Texas by Andrea and Teresa Villarreal (Cotera 1976, 68).
12. These same tensions over women's discussion groups undoubtedly also surfaced in the Asian American movement, but they are not foregrounded.
in any of the interviews, either with the several women activists or with one of the men. This might be a result of the way these particular Asian American activists looked to both Vietnam and China in defining their politics.

13. West 1981. This was also confirmed in a personal conversation with Tim Sampson, one of the key staff people in the NWRO.

14. This scenario was played out dramatically at the first national Chicana conference (La Conferencia de Mujeres por la Raza) in Houston, Texas, in May 1971. The loyolista/feminista categories were devised by Nieto-Gomez, who believed that the only difference between the two groups of women was in how the men targeted them (Nieto-Gomez 1974).

15. Karen Harper adds: “At least three informal study/discussion groups with non-hierarchical leadership and fluid membership worked hard on consciousness-raising, theory, and development of actions. Formal groups then formed to carry out needed actions. In other words, both formal and informal groups operated simultaneously and influenced each other.”