

The Colour of Feminism: White Feminists and Race in the Women's Liberation Movement

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Abstract

White feminists active in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s have often been accused of being blind to the needs of ethnic minority women and thus 'racist'. While there is significant truth to these accusations, this article argues that such critiques have often been rather simplistic. In this article I explore the many ways in which white feminists of this era did engage with issues of 'race', however clumsily. Many white feminists in the early days of the WLM drew inspiration from the Black movement, and later on in the late 1970s and 1980s significant numbers of white feminists were involved in anti-racist activity in groups such as Women against Racism and Fascism and Women against Imperialism, and smaller anti-racist consciousness-raising groups. I explore the nature of these groups, whilst nevertheless maintaining a critical stance on the ways in which these groups could often – albeit inadvertently – reinscribe white power. I argue that rather than being simply racist, one of the interesting contradictions within the WLM lay in the gap between the awareness of many white feminists of the issue surrounding race, and their inability to translate this awareness into action. I end by suggesting the larger issues that a focus on race in the WLM raises for historians of feminism, both in terms of chronology – such a focus highlights the extent of feminist activity in the 1980s – and regarding the conceptual sensitivity needed when using the term 'racism', given the differing ways this term was used within the WLM.

It has become a commonplace within the Anglo-American feminist academy that white feminists of the 1970s and 1980s were racist.¹ Although less often a subject of discussion domestically, this is also largely true for feminism in Britain – the concern of this article – as it is for the United States, a better-known locus of Black feminist activity.² Unable to look beyond the concerns of their own white, middle-class constituency, white feminists from the era are charged with an ignorance

¹ See Winifred Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York, 2006), p. 7 for a discussion of the American situation.

² I have employed a capitalized usage of 'Black' in this article, reflecting the word's contemporary usage in the period under discussion as a political term covering not just those of African descent, but all non-whites.

and apathy towards the needs of Black women and a complete failure to engage with the racism of the state in which they lived and were a part.³ As Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar wrote in 1984, 'white, mainstream feminist theory, be it from the socialist feminist or radical feminist perspective, does not speak to the experiences of Black women and where it attempts to do so it is often from a racist perspective and reasoning.'⁴ To a significant extent such criticism is justified, and this article is in no way intended as an apologia for the shortcomings of white feminists during this era. However, rather than continue to berate white feminists of the era for their racism, it is perhaps more productive to try to understand *why* white feminists behaved as they did. Specifically, this article investigates the discursive and material constraints on the articulation of an anti-racist feminist politics during the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, any simplistic critique of white feminism as racist fails to engage with the many ways in which white feminists did address 'race' during this era, however clumsily.⁵ The accusation of racism does not always do justice to the complexity of the relationships that white feminists in the UK had with race, Black women and Black nationalism. Whilst white feminists are often accused of ignorance of the concerns of ethnic minority women during this period, there is compelling evidence to suggest that their response to such issues was more than that of simple prejudice or disinterest.⁶ One of the most interesting contradictions that emerges in an in-depth analysis of race politics in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) is that, despite accusations of racism, many white feminists were in fact highly aware of Black liberation movements. Activist women often thought of themselves as dedicated anti-racists, but, paradoxically, evidence of such awareness was lacking in the theory and practice of the movement.

The historiography of the feminist movement within Britain during the latter half of the twentieth century is – to understate the matter – thread-

³ See Valerie Amos, and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review*, xvii (1984), 3–19 [hereafter Amos and Pratibha, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism']; Beverley Bryan, Suzanne Scafe and Stella Dadzie, *Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain Today* (1985) [hereafter Bryan et al., *Heart of the Race*].

⁴ Amos and Pratibha, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', 4.

⁵ Whilst I use 'race' in quotation marks in this first instance to draw attention to the category's constructed nature, I have foregone this usage in later instances, on the grounds that the aesthetic cost of doing this throughout the article would be too great.

⁶ It should be further noted that 'ignorance' and 'disinterest' were not viewed by Black radicals to be neutral states, but attitudes that were enabled by, and sustained, the racist state. The interpretation of racism generally utilized by Black radicals saw it to be embodied in the actions of the white imperialist state, and thus all pervasive. It was argued that society was profoundly structured by race, and that it was impossible for a white person to not have racist attitudes (even if unconsciously). In this interpretation, there is no such thing as a neutral position; anything that is not explicitly anti-racist is racist. By contrast, a liberal interpretation held racism to be the responsibility of individuals rather than a fundamental part of the social fabric. These positions should be seen as two points on a spectrum that also included traditional socialist interpretations of racism as a by-product of imperialism and capitalism, rather than as a binary model for interpreting racism.

bare. Whilst memoirs abound,⁷ very little historical scholarship has been addressed to the subject. Although a few younger scholars have begun to research the subject in recent years,⁸ no book-length academic *historical* study has been produced. This is particularly surprising given how much research the subject has generated in the United States. I would suggest that this is significant in our understanding of feminism, because the lack of attention paid to the historical context of the movement has resulted in assertions of the racism (amongst many other things) of the movement going unexamined. A historical rather than sociological examination of the movement should present a considerably more nuanced vision of feminist activism and theory from the 1970s and 1980s than has previously been the case. Using a source base of contemporaneous feminist periodicals and oral histories, I will begin by examining the backgrounds of feminists active in the early days of the WLM, exploring the gap between a rhetoric that often borrowed from Black Liberation and the reality of a movement that was largely white, with organizational mores that were not conducive to widening its social base. I will then move on to explore the moments where, despite this, white feminists did transcend these constraints and engaged critically – if clumsily – with issues of race. By examining white feminist participation in anti-racist and anti-fascist activism in groups such as Women against Racism and Fascism, and Women against Imperialism, I will argue that white feminists involved in these groups often dealt with these matters in ways that ironically reinscribed white power. However, the existence of these groups fundamentally complicates any simplistic notion of white feminists as straightforwardly racist.

I

Widely considered one of the new social movements that began in the utopian post-war moment of the 1960s, feminism within the United Kingdom in the later twentieth century was a heterogeneous movement that contained diverse strains of opinion, from reformist groups to Marxist feminists through to radical lesbian separatists. The first ‘Women’s Liberation’ groups began to appear in 1968 in London, and the first national conference of this new era of feminism was held at Ruskin College, Oxford, in March 1970. This conference produced the ‘Four Demands of the Women’s Liberation Movement’ – equal pay, equal education and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion,

⁷ For example, see Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties* (2002); Lynne Segal, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics* (2007); and Michele Roberts *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the Seventies and Beyond* (2008).

⁸ Sarah Browne, ‘“A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism”: Women’s Liberation in St Andrews, Scotland, c.1969–c.1979’, *Twentieth Century British History* (2011) (first published online 20 Jan. 2011; not yet available in print form) [hereafter Browne ‘A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism’], p. 2; Jeska Rees, ‘Are you a Lesbian? Challenges in Recording the Women’s Liberation Movement’, *History Workshop Journal*, lxi (2010), 177–187 [hereafter Rees, ‘Are you a Lesbian?’], at 177.

and free twenty-four hour childcare. Over the course of the decade, these demands were added to with an end to discrimination against lesbians, legal and financial independence for women, and for the right for women to be free from male violence, and the laws that perpetuated it.⁹ Although some have dated the decline of the WLM to the acrimonious last national conference held in Birmingham in 1978,¹⁰ recent analysis has suggested that it continued well into the 1980s, as has been noted by Sarah Browne, Jeska Rees and Eve Setch in their studies of the movement. Any examination of the movement that focuses on race demonstrates that feminist activity did not just continue past 1979, but flourished and diversified.¹¹ As Becky Thompson has noted in an American context, traditional chronologies of second-wave feminism implicitly focus on white activists.¹²

During the 1980s, issues around race, class, sexuality and disability – what we would now call the classic issues of identity politics – came to the fore.¹³ In particular, the WLM was heavily criticized for the ‘race-blindness’ of its theories and its apparent indifference to Black women.¹⁴ As Hazel Carby wrote in 1982,

Black feminists in the US have complained of the ignorance, in the white women’s movement, of black women’s lives . . . In Britain too it is as if we don’t exist . . . White women in the British WLM are extraordinarily reluctant to see themselves in the situation of being oppressors, as they feel that this will be at the expense of concentrating upon being oppressed.¹⁵

Meanwhile, following the huge influx of migrants from the Commonwealth in the 1950s and 1960s, a distinctive Black British politics had arisen. Organizations such as the British Black Panthers, the Black Unity and Freedom Party and the Black Liberation Front became prominent in

⁹ Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote, *Sweet Freedom* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 16–18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18. For a demonstration of the many feminists that date the end of WLM to this last conference, see also Jonathan Dean, *Rethinking Contemporary Feminist Politics* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 10–11.

¹¹ Sarah Browne, ‘“A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism”: The Women’s Liberation Movement in Scotland c.1968–c.1979’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Dundee, 2009); Rees, ‘“Are you a Lesbian?”: A Look Back at Anger: The Women’s Liberation Movement in 1978’, *Women’s History Review*, 19:3, pp. 337–356 [hereafter Rees, ‘A look Back at Anger’]; ‘All the Rage: Revolutionary Feminism in England 1977–1983’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 2007); Eve Setch, ‘The Face of Metropolitan Feminism: The London Women’s Liberation Workshop 1969–1979’, *Twentieth Century British History*, xiii (2002), 171–90; ‘The London Women’s Liberation Workshop 1969–1979: Organisation, Creativity, Debate’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2000).

¹² Becky Thompson, ‘Multi-Racial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism’, *Feminist Studies*, xxviii (2002), 336–60.

¹³ For further information on the changes in the nature of feminist activity in the 1980s, see Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain* (Oxford, 1993) [hereafter Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*].

¹⁴ See, for example, Hazel V. Carby, ‘White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood!’, in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, ed. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1982), pp. 213–35 [hereafter Carby, ‘White Woman Listen!’].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Black radical politics,¹⁶ yet Black women often tired of the sexism that – like white women – they found in such male-dominated left organizations. As a result, Black women also began organizing autonomously, with the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) formed as an umbrella organization in 1978 for the numerous Black women's groups that had already come into being.¹⁷ At the same time, in response to the growth of far-right politics in Britain in the late 1970s, a greater interest in anti-racist politics began to be evident in the white British left. By the 1980s, there was in general greater interaction between white and Black British feminists: that intense arguments were sustained over racism is indicative of much more extensive contact between the two groups than had been previously been the case. Nevertheless, white feminists had not been completely ignorant of the problems of Black women before. Indeed, the origins of Women's Liberation owed much to Black Liberation: as Juliet Mitchell wrote in 1971, 'The Black Movement was probably the greatest single inspiration to the growth of Women's Liberation.'¹⁸ This is perhaps unsurprising given the work done by American historians on the roots of feminism in the United States: ever since Sara Evans published her 1979 classic *Personal Politics* most historians have placed the origins of US feminism squarely in the Civil Rights movement, the most recent being Carol Giardina.¹⁹ There was a difference, however, in the amount of contact enjoyed between white feminists and Black women and men in the very different racial contexts of the United States and Britain.

Many of the early participants in the WLM were introduced to radical political activity through anti-imperialist movements. Sheila Rowbotham has claimed that there were many such links for many early UK feminists.²⁰ The struggle against imperialism was one in which many feminists in Britain saw themselves involved. Concern with the struggles of those who were invariably termed 'International Women', subjected to the brutality and force of imperialist power, were commonplace during this era, a concern that was deeply influenced by the ongoing war in Vietnam and the involvement of many UK feminists in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. Along with Black Liberation, anti-imperialism also provided analogies between the oppression of women and of others. This is well articulated in an article in the December 1970 edition of the London-based feminist periodical *Shrew*, which argued that:

¹⁶ Julia Sudbury, *Other Kinds of Dreams: Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation* (1998) [hereafter Sudbury, *Other Kinds of Dreams*], p. 6.

¹⁷ Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Women Organising', *Feminist Review*, xvii (1984), 84–9.

¹⁸ Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 50.

¹⁹ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York, 1979); Carol Giardina, *Freedom for Women: Forging the Women's Liberation Movement 1953–1970* (Gainesville, 2010).

²⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 22–3.

How are national liberation struggles related to women's liberation? An obvious response was that all women are sisters and wherever they're fighting we're behind them, but we found that most of us who joined in the action very definitely supported the liberation movement of the oppressed national group as such, not just the women involved in that struggle. In fact, a much deeper source of identification was unearthed when we began making an analogy between our own oppression as women and that of people oppressed as nations.²¹

Significantly, this was in a special double issue of *Shrew* entitled 'Women's Liberation and National Liberation'. In *Socialist Woman*, a feminist magazine run by the women's section of the International Marxist Group, such concern was particularly evident. This is perhaps unsurprising given the importance of imperialism within Marxist theory. Countries that were deemed to be particularly interesting were the communist countries of China, Vietnam and Cuba. Possessing the twin virtues of being both socialist and struggling against imperialism made them, it seems, practically irresistible to the pens of leftist women wishing to demonstrate international sisterhood.²²

Against this anti-imperialist backdrop, it is unsurprising that some UK feminists found inspiration from Black liberation. Some women had more personal and activist relationships with Black politics. Janet Hadley, one of Michelene Wandor's interviewees in *Once a Feminist*,²³ recalled – despite being white – both going to listen to C. L. R. James, and being involved through her Caribbean boyfriend in trying to start up the Black Panthers in the UK. *Spare Rib* of November 1973 carried an interview with photographer and jazz aficionado Valerie Wilmer, who claimed that she had come to women's liberation through Black liberation.²⁴ And Janet Hadley reflected in 1990 that because of her experience of Black Power, 'when I first came across the notion of women's oppression, I felt I already had a whole box of concepts that I could relate it to. I could say, "oh yes, it's just like with Black people, women feel inferior, they're taught to feel inferior by society"'.²⁵ Rhetorically this analogy worked well, and certainly it is unsurprising that the WLM found inspiration from the Black movement. However, in failing to articulate the racial privilege of the speaker as a white women, such assertions – or at least, the more simplistic of these assertions – could be viewed as patronizing and worse, untrue. Several questionable assumptions lay behind these statements. Firstly, that there was a genuine equivalence between

²¹ Editorial, 'Women's Liberation and National Liberation Special Double Issue', *Shrew* (Dec. 1970), 2.

²² See, for example, 'Cuban Women Today', *Socialist Woman*, ii (Feb./March 1970), unpaginated; 'Vietnamese Women Make History', *Socialist Woman*, i (Nov. 1969), unpaginated.

²³ Michelene Wandor, *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (1990) [hereafter Wandor, *Once a Feminist*]. The text is composed of a series of interviews with those who were present at the Ruskin conference, conducted on the twentieth anniversary of the occasion.

²⁴ Interview with Valerie Wilmer, *Spare Rib*, xvii (Nov. 1973), 39–40.

²⁵ Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 73.

the nature of racist and sexist oppression.²⁶ Secondly, that because of this, white women could understand and empathize with the suffering and pain behind the Black struggle. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly in relation to this article, it implicitly absolved white women from the charge of racism.

Mica Nava, herself one of the first women to be involved in the movement, (deleted brackets) and a child of European refugees from World War Two married to a Black Mexican, argues in her 2007 work, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism* that women – and, particularly, London women – were far more receptive and welcoming to racial ‘others’ over the course of the twentieth century. Indeed, she argues that they were the drivers of cosmopolitanism and racial integration in the capital, because of their relationships with the men who compromised the large majority of migrants.²⁷ These are large generalizations to make on the basis of the evidence that Nava has before her, and in certain respects her arguments are flawed. In particular, her idea that women are intrinsically more likely to feel sympathy for outsiders smacks of essentialism, and fails to engage with the many other forms of privilege that women, despite their sex, may possess.²⁸ Nevertheless, her work is useful in pointing to the complexities of the relationships between white women and ‘racial others’ in the post-war period. Her extensive analysis of the work of female sociologists on immigrant communities such as Ruth Glass, Sheila Kitzinger, Sheila Patterson and Joan Maizels in the 1950s and 1960s is significant, for it provides a vivid illustration of liberal and left-wing thought on these issues during a period that was intellectually formative for many of the women who later became involved in the WLM.²⁹

That it was women rather than men who wrote these books – and women were a tiny minority in the world of sociology at this time – is, Nava argues, deeply significant. Whilst being unable to agree with her that this is simply a result of ‘instinctive extensivity’, I would argue that the concern with immigrants in these works parallels an older tradition within feminism, that of internationalism. Organizations such as the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the British Commonwealth League³⁰ were still very much active during this period. The latter’s motto aimed ‘to secure the liberties, status and opportunities

²⁶ As Black feminist theorist bell hooks has noted in an American context: ‘Of course, if the situation of upper and middle-class white women were in any way like that of the oppressed people in the world, such metaphors would not have been necessary. And if they had been poor and oppressed, or women concerned about the lot of oppressed women, they would not have been compelled to appropriate the black experience. It would have been sufficient to describe the oppression of woman’s experience’ (hooks, *Ain’t I a woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, 1981; London, 1982), p. 142).

²⁷ Mica Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalization of Difference* (Oxford, 2007), p. 99.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Joan Maizels wrote, along with Nan Berger, a highly prescient but astonishingly neglected feminist work from 1962 entitled *Woman: Fancy or Free? Some Thoughts on Woman’s Status in Britain Today*, further illustrating links between these leftist thinkers and older feminist traditions.

³⁰ The BCL later became the Commonwealth Countries League.

between women and men and to promote mutual understanding throughout the Commonwealth countries', and very definite links to feminism were also demonstrated by the fact that the league's 'president of honour' was none other than veteran suffragette Dame Margaret Corbett Ashby.³¹ Another demonstration of how important internationalism was for those still interested in women's rights after the Second World War is seen in the life of Nan Berger, Joan Maizel's writing partner. A communist and a feminist, she describes vividly in both published articles and unpublished memoirs her trips to South Africa and China in the early 1960s.³² Interestingly, though she principally portrayed her interest in these countries in light of her concern with social justice rather than feminism, her writings show that she was extensively concerned with the position of women in these countries, and indeed displayed a tendency to view social justice in light of the position of women rather than men.

Such feminist internationalism may not have had a direct influence either on the thought of the sociologists of the 1950s and 1960s, or on feminists active in the WLM in the 1970s and 1980s. However, it was crucial in creating the dominant paradigm for how sympathetic liberals and left-wingers viewed New Commonwealth migrants. Alongside the failure of leftist theory to deal adequately with the modern phenomenon of mass migration, this was a crucial discursive restraint on the ability of feminist theory to deal adequately with 'race'. Women such as Nan Berger were active in similar leftist circles, in organizations such as the Communist Party and CND, as the generation younger than them who came to form the main bulk of the early the WLM. And because of this earlier emphasis on internationalism, it was easy for progressive thinkers to view female immigrants to Britain as simply another group of 'International Women'. Such thought could accommodate deep sympathy for migrants whilst simultaneously posing them as fundamentally not part of the national group. This goes some way to explaining how white feminists in the earlier days of the WLM were sympathetic towards the needs of migrants, and yet were fundamentally unable truly to integrate the need of ethnic minority women into their feminist agenda. It is significant, for example, that while the socialist-feminist periodical *Red Rag* did not print a single piece about the position of ethnic minority women within Britain during its eight-year run, it did nonetheless sometimes run pieces on 'International Women'.

The vast majority of the mixed-race relationships that Nava talked about were also clearly white women's relationships with Black men.

³¹ For more information see the Papers of the Commonwealth Countries League, Women's Library, London, 5/CCL; Papers of Alice Hemming, Women's Library, 7/ALH. The officers and motto of the League are found on the letterhead of the correspondence.

³² 'Twenty Nine Thousand Nights' (unpublished autobiography), Papers of Nan Berger, Women's Library, 7/NBE/2/6; also for accounts of foreign visits, see 7/NBE/4/2 (South Africa) and 7/NBE/4/3 (China)

Whilst it may be a self-evident point, it is important to understand that, because of the heterosexuality of the majority of women, those white women sympathetic to the problems of migrants were far less likely to have intimate relationships with migrant women. They were thus less likely to have a grasp of the problems facing migrant women, or even to see them as a visible group, as compared to migrant men. Additionally, neither were those white women who also became involved in political activism of the migrant community likely to have come into much contact with migrant women through this route, as these organizations tended to be heavily male dominated. As Janet Hadley remembered:

My experience as a white women in a Black Power context had been one of learning to be extremely respectful and careful towards Black women, because very often the whole question of Black men and white women was a fairly explosive issue. *I didn't really have any close relationships with Black women at that time.*³³

All these factors partly explain the paradox of the ethnocentrism of white feminists who had nevertheless been involved in mixed-race relationships and/or race-based politics. And it must be remembered that mass migration from the Commonwealth was a post-war phenomenon: in the early 1970s, few white feminists schooled in the 1940s and 1950s would have grown up with Black immigrant peers.³⁴ Additionally, immigrant communities were more ghettoized in the earlier phases of migration than latterly.³⁵ Such physical separation between white and Black communities arguably added to the sense of migrants and their concerns as something 'foreign' to white English women: a material constraint that limited the ability of white feminists to deal with race. It is no coincidence that it was a generation of ethnic minority women who had largely grown up in Britain that pushed for greater inclusion in the feminist project in the 1980s.

II

Alberto Melucci has sought to explain new social movements within the context of how the 'collective identity' of a movement comes into being, suggesting that it is created in 'submerged networks' of small groups of people connected to each other in their everyday lives.³⁶ The recognition of 'collective injustice' is dependent on social identification amongst

³³ Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 78 (italics mine).

³⁴ Of course, it is important to remember that there have been small Black communities in Britain for centuries. However, they were tiny compared to the communities of the post-Windrush era. See *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*, ed. David Dabydeen, John Gilmore, and Cecily Jones (Oxford, 2007), for more information on earlier Black communities in Britain.

³⁵ Ceri Peach, 'Does Britain Have Ghettos?', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, xxi (1996), 216–35.

³⁶ Alberto Melucci, 'The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements', *Social Research*, lii (1985), 789–816.

those in the 'submerged networks', which helps explain why those involved in the early days of the WLM tended to be from fairly similar social backgrounds. Carol Mueller has applied this theory to the American women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, where she convincingly demonstrates the importance of early meetings and conferences to the development of the collective identity and theoretical orientation of feminism. This was despite the relatively small numbers of women involved, most of whom were white and knew each other mainly through Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the civil rights movement.³⁷ Such a framework can usefully be applied to the movement in Britain as well. As well-known feminist historian Catherine Hall remarked of her experience at the Ruskin conference, 'I already knew quite a lot of the people, the women who were involved with that, through the kind of left networks.'³⁸ And Juliet Mitchell recalled of her early feminist friendships that 'We all went back, you see, to some sort of connection, university, or some sort of study group, or personal friendship.'³⁹ This latter quote is taken from *Once A Feminist*, and it is striking that every single one of Wandor's seventeen interviewees reported previous connections with the left prior to their involvement in feminism. Although I would argue this situation changed very quickly with the intense media coverage given to feminism in the early 1970s, Wandor's book reveals an important truth. Women who were involved at the very start of this new period of feminist activity did indeed tend to be from a narrow range of political and social backgrounds, backgrounds that tended to be educated and 'New' rather than 'Old' left, and hence backgrounds that were also, by extension, largely white and middle class. Furthermore, it would have been difficult initially to find out about the fledgling movement outside these networks. That the Ruskin conference originated in Sheila Rowbotham's suggestion that there should be a 'history workshop' on women's history in itself points to the academic rather than grassroots genesis of the WLM. The conference was advertised in small circulation papers such as *Socialist Woman*: those who organized it apparently viewed their primary constituency as being located in the narrow world of the left.⁴⁰ One interviewee for this project – Ann Rossiter, an Irish woman who had come to London in 1968 – has written disparagingly of 'the charmed circle of Ruskin' suggesting that this was not something she or many other women had easy access to.⁴¹ The small group meetings that many feminists favoured were, although excellent for developing the trust

³⁷ Carol Mueller, 'Conflict Networks and the Origins of Women's Liberation', in *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*, ed. E. Laranas, H. Johnston and J. R. Gusfield (Philadelphia, 1994), pp. 234–63.

³⁸ Personal interview with Catherine Hall, 24 Jan. 2011 transcript, p. 5.

³⁹ Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 112.

⁴⁰ See *Socialist Woman*, ii (Feb./March 1970), unpaginated.

⁴¹ Ann Rossiter, 'Not Our Cup of Tea: Nation, Empire and the Irish Question in English Feminism in the 1970s and 1980s', Unpublished PhD thesis (London South Bank University, 2005), pp. 113, 245.

and support needed for the intimate revelations often involved in consciousness-raising, hardly conducive for reaching out to a wider social base. They also increased the need for would-be participants to know the 'right people', particularly as many groups quickly declared themselves 'closed'.⁴²

Thus the class and race exclusivity of much of the WLM was heightened by the way in which many of the women first involved in the feminist movement met, although such exclusion operated as much along lines of class as of race. Sarah Browne observes, for example, that the WLM group in St Andrews was largely student led and had few connections with the local townspeople.⁴³ Whilst this was a largely white group, I would argue that the marginalized economic position of the majority of Black women in Britain at this point served to reinforce the exclusion of ethnic minority women from feminist activism.⁴⁴ Perhaps demonstrating Melucci's argument that 'movements in complex societies are hidden networks of groups, meeting point and circuits of solidarity',⁴⁵ another interviewee for this project – Gail Chester, a Jewish woman from London – described her difficulties in trying to find a group in the capital after having left university in Cambridge, where she had first been involved in Women's Liberation:

It was actually very, very hard actually – very hard – to find my way in, in London, because I'd essentially come from a small town, and London was huge, and I didn't. . . . I somehow or other did not find my way to the Women's Liberation Workshop, which would have been the obvious place [. . .] And I was very upset and very lost – I'd been to this national conference in Acton and you'd have thought I would have somehow managed to find my way in more, but I just . . . it was very hard.⁴⁶

Similarly, London and Liverpool based feminist Jo Stanley recalled in a brief memoir that she had initially come into contact with the movement in London through her connections with the underground press/countercultural scene, and in Liverpool through her connections with the university: in both places she recalled the meetings being composed exclusively of white women, who seemed to be mostly middle-class, 'well-heeled, intellectual, women'.⁴⁷ None of these experiences suggest that the WLM in its early years was particularly accessible or approachable,

⁴² See Tufnell Park Women's Liberation Group, 'The Small Group', in *The Body Politic: Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1969–1972*, ed. Michelene Wandor (1972), pp. 103–6.

⁴³ Browne, 'A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism', particularly pp. 5 and 17.

⁴⁴ See Amina Mama, 'Black Women, the Economic Crisis and the British State', *Feminist Review*, xvii (1984), 22–34.

⁴⁵ Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge, 1996) [hereafter Melucci, *Challenging Codes*], p. 115.

⁴⁶ Personal interview with Gail Chester, 11 Jan. 2011, transcript p. 13.

⁴⁷ 'Being a Feminist in Liverpool – 1969–1971', Papers of Jo Stanley, Women's Library, London, 7/JOS/01 (despite the title, the first half of the memoir actually looks at her experiences in London).

despite the overtures of some groups to women in the local community.⁴⁸ And for women living in Black communities, the majority of whom would have been even further removed from these networks, such exclusion could only have been heightened. An interesting parallel in a US context is found in the words of Malaysian–American feminist academic Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, who bitterly criticized the account of the early years of the American second wave that Sara Evans gave in *Personal Politics*, arguing that the white women who were involved had social networks and capital to which only they belonged: ‘By social capital I mean the old-girls networks, the same-o, same-o circles, telephone trees, college connections.’ She continued, ‘The condition that makes possible the intimacy and mutuality so celebrated as core values in Evans’s history is exclusivity.’⁴⁹

The central preoccupations of the WLM during the 1970s also unsurprisingly reflected the composition of its largely white, middle-class and heterosexual adherents, further discouraging the participation of women who were none of these things, particularly as these biases were often unacknowledged. Furthermore, the inability of the WLM to speak to those *within* the movement who felt marginalized by their class, race or sexuality had significant consequences. Rees, Setch and Browne have all looked at the ways in which issues such as sexuality and class fractured the WLM along partisan lines, arguing that it is impossible to understand the nature and trajectory of feminist politics of this era without examining such areas of contention. I argue that the same can be said for race. As Vicki Randall and Joni Lovenduski have noted, many of the issues that were discussed within the WLM were often framed in a way that marginalized Black women both inside and outside feminism.⁵⁰ Such issues included sexuality, reproductive politics, and housewifery and the nuclear family. In particular, the issue of housewifery and the nuclear family makes for a good mini-case study for there is a wealth of discussion from the era around this subject, both English and American. Works on the topics abounded, such as Lee Comer’s *Myth of Motherhood* and *Wedlocked Women* and Ann Oakley’s *The Sociology of Housework* and its popular counterpart *Housewife*. These in turn had been preceded by classic 1960s works such as Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and Hannah Gavron’s proto-feminist work *The Captive Wife*, both of which were ground-breaking but relied entirely on interviews with white women. The ‘Peckham Rye’ paper on ‘Women in the Family’ – presented

⁴⁸ As seen by the establishment of several women’s community centres, such as the Kingsgate Centre in North London, and by campaigns such as those around the night cleaners, in which WLM activists linked up with night cleaner and political activist May Hobbs in an attempt to unionize this most exploited of work forces. See also, Sheila Rowbotham, ‘Cleaners’ Organizing in Britain from the 1970s: A Personal Account’, *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography*, xxxviii (2006), 608–25.

⁴⁹ Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, ‘Ain’t I a feminist? Reforming the Circle’, *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices From Women’s Liberation*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York, 1998), pp. 450–66, at 452.

⁵⁰ Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p. 80.

at the Ruskin conference and written by the members of the Peckham Rye 'One o' Clock Club', one of the first consciousness-raising groups – was one of the most frequently quoted and reprinted essays in the whole movement and, again, there was extensive discussion of the issues in feminist periodicals. For example, the May 1971 edition of *Shrew* had the subject of 'the family' as the theme for the issue.⁵¹ The rationale behind this decision is worth printing in full, for it is an excellent demonstration of white feminist thought on the subject:

This issue of *Shrew* is about the family. We're writing about the family because we are all in one. You can't spend much time in Women's Lib without realizing that the institution of the family is responsible for many (all?) of our hang ups. The family is a structured refuge from all our insecurities, and everything in our society militates against changing it:

1. Women and children are economically and emotionally dependent on the family.
2. Houses are built to encourage the isolation of one family from another.
3. There is no way to bring up children other than in the context of a small family.
4. Our society conditions us to expect that we shall only be truly fulfilled through marriage and a family of our own.
5. We are conditioned to feel that a relationship is a failure if it doesn't live happily ever after.
6. We are brought up to accept unquestioningly the concept of the nuclear family.⁵²

This was doubtless true for many women in Britain. Yet, as Hazel Carby has argued, the family had a very different meaning for Black women. Black families, she argued, had to be understood as the site of resistance to white oppression.⁵³ Black and Asian women were also considerably less likely to be in a classic nuclear family: Black families were more likely than white families to be headed by a single mother, and Asian women were likely to be part of an extended family structure.⁵⁴ Additionally, both Black and Asian women were more likely to be in paid employment than their white counterparts.⁵⁵ That concern with the oppressive nature of the nuclear family was an implicitly white one is well demonstrated by Ann Oakley's methodology in *The Sociology of Housework*, in which she explicitly noted that she only interviewed women of

⁵¹ *Shrew* was edited by a different group in the London Women's Liberation Workshop each month, a practice which lent itself to the production of themed issues.

⁵² Editorial, *Shrew*, iii (May 1971), 2.

⁵³ Carby, 'White Woman Listen!'.

⁵⁴ Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory', *Feminist Review*, xx (1985), 23–47 [hereafter Barrett and McIntosh, 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory'], at p. 31. For a discussion of families and Asian women, see Amrit Wilson, *Finding A Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (1978).

⁵⁵ Barrett and McIntosh, 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory', p. 31.

British or Irish descent because she wanted to have a coherent study base.⁵⁶ This rationale was in some respects understandable, and indeed stemmed from standard sociological practice, but in doing so, Oakley implicitly made white women the subject of feminism. It certainly leaves both white feminists and the leftist sociology that it – like so many other social movements of the time – drew on, open to the charge that they were not fundamentally interested in the experience of ethnic-minority women.

This critique was echoed by the controversy generated by Michele Barrett's and Mary McIntosh's book *The Anti-Social Family*, in which their analysis of the family – very much predicated on a white western model – was deemed to be racist. They partially accepted these criticisms in their response to these accusations in their *Feminist Review* article, 'Ethnocentrism and Feminist Theory', but claimed that their analysis still largely worked when transposed to Black families, and that they were guilty only of 'ethnocentrism' rather than 'racism'. Ironically, this article then became subject to the same accusations, as their response was deemed by some such as Caroline Ramazanoglu and Heidi Safia Mirza to be insufficiently engaged with the realities of Black women's lives.⁵⁷ The furore this occasioned attests to both the power of race in the WLM and the difficulty in establishing what exactly 'racism' meant. As Ramazanoglu noted, by utilizing the language of ethnocentrism, Barrett and McIntosh had misunderstood criticism of them as specifically 'racist', and did not appear to understand what this term meant for Black feminists.⁵⁸ It was unclear whether the marginalization of Black women by white feminists counted as racism per se; and such uncertainty both engendered hostilities between feminists and led to confusion over the appropriate response to these issues.

III

Despite the overwhelming whiteness of the WLM's organizational mores and theoretical biases, over the course of the decade an increasing number of white feminists were involved in anti-racist and anti-imperialist campaigns, again complicating the notion that such women

⁵⁶ Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (1974), p. 37.

⁵⁷ Heidi Safia Mirza, 'The Dilemma of Socialist Feminism: A Case for Black Feminism', and Caroline Ramazanoglu, 'Ethnocentrism and Feminist Theory: A Response to Barrett and McIntosh' [hereafter Ramazanoglu, 'Ethnocentrism and Feminist Theory'], *Feminist Review*, xxii (1986), 102–5; 83–6.

⁵⁸ Ramazanoglu wrote: 'Perhaps the core of the problem in Barrett and McIntosh's conception of how socialist-feminists should respond to black criticisms is that while they think the political issue is one of race rather than of ethnicity (1985:26–7), they have presented their self-criticisms as an article on their ethnocentrism (1985:28). It seems to me that black women are not accusing white feminists so much of ethnocentrism, which could perhaps be corrected by extending the field of vision, but of a crushing, institutionalized racism which is so totally and deeply entrenched in our ways of thinking and being that we cannot see clearly how we help to justify and perpetuate it' (ibid., p. 84).

were insensitive to these matters. There were two groups or networks in particular who organized against racism and imperialism in the late 1970s: Women against Racism and Fascism (WARF) and Women against Imperialism (WAI), although these groups have been largely ignored by chroniclers of both feminist and anti-fascist campaigns.⁵⁹ The late 1970s were a period of heightened racial tension in Britain, with the rising popularity of the National Front (NF) stimulating widespread interest across the left in anti-racism, motivated also by the fact that the NF were appealing to the white working-class voters considered traditionally to be the core supporters of socialism.⁶⁰ Pressure groups such as the Anti-Nazi League and Rock against Racism were formed, and the magazine *Searchlight* was re-launched in 1975.⁶¹ WARF and WAI were very much part of this milieu. As Vron Ware's excellent autobiographical introduction to *Beyond the Pale* demonstrates, white feminists did not just *react* to Black feminist critique, but were often already engaged in this complex range of anti-racist activities. As she wrote:

In 1978 [. . .] groups of feminists all over Britain began to organise specifically against racism, in conjunction with various other local and national radical and liberal forces, in response to the greater visibility of fascist groups such as the National Front and British Movement. This Women Against Racism and Fascism (WARF) network did not survive as a national alliance, but some local groups contributed to new ways of thinking about gender and race.⁶²

As Ware's description suggests, much of the initial feminist bout of organizing around racism in the later 1970s originated from socialist feminist involvement in a wider spectrum of progressive – in this case, anti-racist – activities. According to an article about the group in *Socialist Woman*, for example, WARF was 'founded in response to our experience as women on the 23 April anti National Front demonstration [in Lewisham]', further adding that 'for many women there was only a qualified sense of unity with the other groups present'.⁶³ Rather than arising directly as a response to racism within the WLM, then, WARF was founded by feminist women on the left in response to the

⁵⁹ Whilst the omissions of historians of feminism have been dealt with elsewhere in this article, it is worth noting that the (almost equally threadbare) historiography of the anti-racist movement in Britain has failed to chart in detail the activities of these groups. Neither WAI nor WARF get so much as an indexed entry in Nigel Copsey's *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2000) [hereafter Copsey, *Anti-Fascism*], or Dave Renton's account of the Anti-Nazi League, *When We Touched the Sky: The Anti-Nazi League 1977–1981* (Cheltenham, 2006) [hereafter Renton, *When We Touched the Sky*].

⁶⁰ Anthony M. Messina, 'Postwar Protest movements in Britain: A Challenge to Parties', *Review of Politics*, xlix (1987), 410–28.

⁶¹ Copsey, *Anti-Fascism*, p. 121.

⁶² Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Race and History* (1992) [hereafter Ware, *Beyond the Pale*], p. 18.

⁶³ 'Feminists in Action' pp. 4–6, *Socialist Woman*, vi (1978), 4.

sexism they found there. They also complained that the left failed to see the threat that fascism posed for women as well as ethnic minorities,⁶⁴ which suggests that they unconsciously viewed 'women' as 'white women' – a constant cause of consternation for Black feminists. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain exactly why, as Ware put it, WARF did not survive as a national alliance, it seems to have burnt brightly before fading away: in 1978 the network held a national conference, a regional conference in Birmingham, and one local group published a pamphlet, *Taking Racism Personally*.⁶⁵ Similarly, WAI were a group of white feminists who had organized around issues of imperialism and racism since the late 1970s, evolving out of a series of day-long 'educationals' on racism and imperialism run in London in the autumn of 1978, again appearing to have been as much a product of the wide left as of feminism, especially given their Marxist analysis of imperialism.⁶⁶ And despite the initial London base of both of these groups, they were nationwide and not merely metropolitan phenomena, as a special edition of socialist-feminist periodical *Scarlet Women* on 'The Roots of Fascism' made clear, with contributors sending in description of groups from all over the country.⁶⁷ It does, however, seem that England was the locus for the majority of Black feminist activity in the 1970s and 1980s, probably reflecting the much smaller ethnic minority population in Scotland and Wales, though both Cardiff and Glasgow had significant ethnic minority populations. This seems especially likely given the fact that in 1993 the Equal Opportunities Commission organized large conferences for Black and ethnic minority women in both countries, with the stated aim of establishing autonomous Black women's networks there.⁶⁸ This suggests that neither Scotland nor Wales saw a significant amount of Black feminist activity, although there was at least one short-lived group in Edinburgh.⁶⁹ Indeed, both Sarah Brown and Avril Rolph have suggested in their respective studies of the Scottish and Welsh WLM that issues surrounding English hegemony over the Scottish and Welsh cultures were of great significance, and this seems to have been the focus of the articulation of ethnic difference there.⁷⁰ And

⁶⁴ Ibid. See also 'Women and the National Front', *Red Rag*, Aug. 1980, pp. 28–31.

⁶⁵ Feminist Archive North, 'Chronology of the WLM–1978', <www.feministarchivenorth.org.uk/chronology/1978-1.htm>, accessed 30 May 2011; Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, p. 19.

⁶⁶ 'Draft Discussion Paper of Women Against Imperialism Group', Papers of Stella Dadzie, Black Cultural Archives, London, 1/1/22.

⁶⁷ *Scarlet Women* 9, special edn. 'The Roots of Fascism', Jan. 1979.

⁶⁸ Sudbury, *Other Kinds of Dreams*, p. 212.

⁶⁹ See Rowena Arshad, 'The Scottish Black Women's Group', in *Grit and Diamonds: Women in Scotland Making History 1980–1990*, ed. Shirley Henderson and Alison MacKay (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 118–20. This book also records other groups for ethnic minority women, but it is not clear that they were specifically feminist in orientation.

⁷⁰ Avril Rolph, 'A Movement of its Own: The Women's Liberation Movement in South Wales', in *The Feminist Seventies*, ed. Helen Graham et al. (York, 2003), pp. 43–57; Sarah Browne, 'A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism'.

of course, Northern Ireland had its own unique set of problems in the arena of ethnic difference.⁷¹

A new visibility – and a new language – of leftist, anti-racist discourse that specifically focused on domestic rather than imperial concerns, then, was the crucial element that allowed for a greater focus in the feminist movement in the later 1970s on racism than had been possible before. Without the existence of feminists who had maintained their connections with the wider left and brought these discussions into the mainstream of the WLM, it is doubtful whether the race debate would have occurred in feminism at this point. However, such anti-racist attempts did not necessarily escape the white-dominated organizational structures of the feminist movement. An examination of these activities hardly suggests that Black feminist critique of white feminists was unfounded: rather, such activities were often organized in a way that excluded Black feminists and still tended to place white women centre stage as theorists of racism and imperialism. Furthermore, many feminists involved in these groups failed to reflect on the racially marked identity of white women themselves, which, as American sociologist Anna Zajicek has argued, ‘allows white women to acknowledge the existence of white privilege without implicating themselves in its operation’.⁷² Despite the rhetoric of the WARF pamphlet *Taking Racism Personally*, on the whole the activities of both WAI and WARF suggested that they located racism as something that existed within specific sites, rather than as a system which structured society and in which they too were implicated. As the journal of the Brixton Black Women’s Group, *Speak Out*, damningly concluded:

For them [The All London Anti-Racist Anti-Fascist Co-ordinating Committee of which WARF was a part] racism is embodied in the National Front, which is regarded as a cancer that contaminates the non-racist. Therefore, if it goes, racism will also disappear . . . [They] have failed to understand the true nature of racism in Britain.⁷³

This is well demonstrated by some of the anti-racist events that occurred within the movement during this period. The reports from these events – many of which were in *Spare Rib* – suggest the shortcomings of white anti-racist feminism. One of the most important events in this regard was the National Socialist Feminist Conference in 1980,⁷⁴ for which the chosen theme was ‘Women’s Oppression and Imperialism’. The conference was well attended: the report in *Spare Rib* stated that at

⁷¹ See Myrtle Hill, ‘Challenging the State We’re In’, in *The Feminist Seventies*, ed. Helen Graham et al. (York, 2003), pp. 75–90.

⁷² Anna Zajicek ‘Race Discourses and Anti-Racist Practices in a Local Women’s Movement’, *Gender and Society*, xvi (2002), 155–74, at 164–5.

⁷³ Editorial, *Speak Out* (1978?), reprinted in *The Feminist Seventies*, ed. Helen Graham et al. (York, 2003), pp. 2–3, at 2.

⁷⁴ One can only assume that the planning committee overlooked the unfortunate connotations of the term ‘National Socialist’.

least 1,000 women were present.⁷⁵ In the same *Spare Rib* report, the planning committee explained the conference's origins:

A wide range of political opinions was [sic] represented but the uniting factor was the need to examine why British feminism has not addressed itself, analytically or practically, to issues which are of relevance to working class, Black, Irish and other colonial minority women and the consequent lack of involvement in socialist feminism by these women.⁷⁶

It is revealing that British feminism was implicitly assumed to be white and middle-class in this statement. Perhaps more surprising is that fact that, although attendance at the conference was multi-ethnic, the conference itself was organized entirely by WAI, a largely white group. Their efforts were theoretically sophisticated, and it would be difficult to level at them the accusation that they were simply unaware of the problems faced by ethnic minority women. However, the fact that they organized such a conference without involving Black women suggests a certain blitheness around the issues of the race politics of the organization itself. As one of the interviewees for my research project – prominent Black feminist and co-author of *Heart of the Race* Stella Dadzie – said:

I think there was arrogance in the sense that there was no deference to Black women's experience or a sense that they might have something to contribute . . . an arrogance that was represented in a lack of a presence, you know, there was no attempt to get us involved, or to ask how we felt, or to bring our perspectives to the table.⁷⁷

Thus, the white feminist domination of the conference could be seen as a replication of the white organizational mores of feminism, and one that allowed these women to keep their place as the guardians of anti-racist feminism. It illustrates all too well the problems that existed in being anti-racist in practice as well as theory. Certainly the Black women who attended the conference reported feeling uncomfortable, writing in the 'report back' on the conference that:

Black women were dissatisfied about the way in which white women discussed racism and especially in the way they were excluded from workshops by the use of 'we' etc, in discussion of racist attitudes. There were questions over the possibility of any joint work as long as these attitudes persisted and women refused to analyse the racism within themselves.⁷⁸

Particularly controversial was the fact that the conference organizers had chosen to screen the film *The History Book*, a socialist take on human

⁷⁵ Sue O'Sullivan, 'Connections between Our Struggles', *Spare Rib*, cii (Jan. 1981), p. 23. It is worth noting that this was four hundred more than were present at the Ruskin conference, despite this being at a point when many were claiming that WLM was in deep decline.

⁷⁶ Planning Group for the 1980 National Socialist Feminist Conference, 'What's Imperialism Got To Do With It?', *Spare Rib*, cii (Jan. 1981), 22–3, at 22.

⁷⁷ Personal Interview with Stella Dadzie, 24 Feb. 2011, transcript p. 9.

⁷⁸ 'Report Back', Papers of Stella Dadzie, 1/1/32.

history that was felt to perpetuate racist and anti-Semitic stereotypes.⁷⁹ In Sheffield, a one-day conference on race and class held in July 1982 was reported in *Spare Rib* thus by a white women who attended:

One group of white women saw their anti-racism taking the form of supporting Black women on pickets etc, doings *for* Black women. But they seemed unwilling to talk about their own racism. Another group of white women wanted to talk about their own racism and wanted Black women to tell them how not to be racist. And the third group wanted to work out a way of facing their own racism and fighting it, and listening to Black women. *The conference was dominated by white middle-class women, despite the presence of working class Black and white women.*⁸⁰

The Black woman who wrote the second half of the report write that: 'I did not get a feeling . . . of a real solidarity from white middle class feminists for either Black or working class women.'⁸¹ That such a conference was held in Sheffield, one of Britain's less racially diverse cities, is itself revealing of the importance that these issues had acquired in the movement. It is also suggestive of the sometimes destructive politics of feminist conferences themselves, as noted by Rees.⁸²

By the early 1980s, these initiatives were complemented – and increasingly replaced – by many local CR groups made up of white women who wished to examine their own racism, and by myriad local anti-racist initiatives and conferences, many of which can be found in the pages of the *London Women's Liberation Newsletter (LWLN)* and the newsletter of the *Women's Information and Referral Service (WIRES)*. These groups and events have yet to receive any scholarly attention – perhaps because of their ephemeral nature – but it is also clear that historians of feminism have yet to examine thoroughly sources such as newsletters for evidence of anti-racist activity. For example, in December 1983, the *LWLN* advertised a regular meeting group for 'white, gentile, non-Irish women' looking to discuss their racism and anti-Semitism: it was so well attended in its initial meetings that the women involved decided to split into three.⁸³ A few months later, a 'Women's Action Group against anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Irish racism', was formed, also in London. In a later announcement in the *LWLN*, it recorded that it had held seven monthly meetings, during which time between thirty and forty women had attended, and had managed to organize a benefit for the women's anti-deportation centre, a series of meetings around racism, discos, and an awareness training day workshop.⁸⁴ And again, such

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Anon, 'Yes but . . . what do Black and Working Class Women Think?', *Spare Rib*, cxxii (Sept. 1982), 18 (italics mine).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² This also echoes Jeska Rees's work on the sometimes destructive politics of feminist conferences themselves, as outlined in Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger'.

⁸³ 'News and Announcements', *LWLN* 346, 20 Dec. 1983, unpaginated.

⁸⁴ 'News and Announcements', *LWLN* 398, 8 Jan. 1985, unpaginated.

activism spread beyond metropolitan centres: a local Women's Liberation Conference held in Bolton in May 1982 produced a resolution that 'The WLM should fight racism' and that this should be a separate demand from the others.⁸⁵

It is useful to make a distinction between initiatives from the late 1970s and those that originated in the early to mid-1980s. Jenny Bourne, a worker at the Institute of Race Relations at the time, argued that two distinct phases could be seen in white feminist anti-racist organizing, dating them from between 1977 and 1979, and from 1980 onwards.⁸⁶ This is overly simplistic – there was some cross-over in terms of both time and personnel between the two phases – but there was certainly a perceived lull in the activities of the groups formed in the late 1970s by the early 1980s, giving credence to her essential contention of a distinctive shift in the nature of such activity. For example, Black feminist, Jan McKenley, wrote in *Spare Rib* in November 1980:

For the last 6 months or so I've been feeling left out in the cold, passé, on the shelf. I've found myself muttering very unsisterly thoughts about how everything is Irish these days and wondering what happened to dialogue with Black women and the commitment to anti-Racism which was so strong two years back . . . I'm beginning to feel invisible again within the WLM . . . You know a lot of the arguments too. I'm not going to drag them up but how about taking them out of the 1978 file and looking at them again because I'm very much 1980/81 and I'm very visible.⁸⁷

A women writing in response to her article several issues later also agreed with her on the waning of commitment to anti-racist activity in the WLM, writing: 'I agree totally that racism became a trendy issue when two or three years ago it reached a focal point in the women's liberation movement and left politics. It carries the remnants of that revival today.'⁸⁸ This mirrors the trajectory of groups such as the Anti-Nazi League.⁸⁹ Whilst a clear dividing line cannot be drawn and a commitment to anti-racism was still evident in the pages of the feminist press, by the early 1980s, the emphasis began to shift away from the activities of white women in left anti-racist groups such as WAI and WARF, towards a Black feminist critique of the white feminist movement and the smaller groups – often based around anti-racist consciousness raising – that were formed in response by white women. As Bourne noted, 'the question that is being posed for women has undergone change, from 'how do we fight racism as women' to 'why is the women's movement so white?'.⁹⁰ This

⁸⁵ 'Report Back From Bolton Conference', *WIRES* 132, June 1982, p. 9.

⁸⁶ Jenny Bourne, 'Towards an Anti-Racist Feminism', *Race and Class*, xxv (1983), 1–22 [hereafter Bourne, 'Towards an Anti-Racist Feminism'], at p. 4.

⁸⁷ Jan McKenley, 'What, Me Racist?', *Spare Rib*, ci (Dec. 1980), pp. 24–7, at 24.

⁸⁸ Sue Wilson, Letters, *Spare Rib*, civ (March 1981), 5.

⁸⁹ See Renton, *When We Touched the Sky*, for an extensive discussion of the decline of Anti-Nazi League activity in the early 1980s.

⁹⁰ Bourne, 'Towards an Anti-Racist Feminism', pp. 14–15.

change occurred largely because, as Randall and Lovenduski note, Black feminism in Britain by this stage was commanding an increasingly visible presence.⁹¹ Although OWAAD had broken down, Black feminist conferences continued. The early 1980s saw the publication of several influential Black feminist texts, again calling into question a periodization of the feminist movement that places its decline in the late 1970s.⁹² Furthermore, a change in the power dynamic of the debate was also effected by a change in the composition of those who controlled the internal organs of communications of the feminist movement, a vital part of any new social movement, as Melucci has argued.⁹³ By late 1982, half of the *Spare Rib* Collective was composed of women of colour,⁹⁴ and by late 1984, the *LWLN* refused to allow 'white British gentile' women to volunteer to join the collective that produced the newsletter.⁹⁵

Rather than setting the agenda for anti-racism, then, these events placed the onus on white feminists to respond to Black feminist criticism, and to prove themselves to be anti-racist women. This produced an introspective turn in anti-racist politics, whereby white subjects analysed their own racism to a far greater extent than groups like WAI and WARF ever did. Both in my own oral history sample and in the feminist periodical press, a common theme running through white anti-racist feminists who told their story of 'coming to consciousness' was their move from anger at being accused of racism, to an acceptance of their place in the white power structure and their need to fight that structure. Such discourses were influenced both by the practice of consciousness-raising so popular in the feminist movement in the 1970s, and the confessional tendencies of this later anti-racist movement in Britain which, as Alastair Bonnett has argued, placed an onus on the confession of being guilty of racism.⁹⁶ One woman who had been interviewed for a job at *Spare Rib*, but turned down because of her lack of anti-racist awareness, wrote in saying:

I recently had the interesting experience (!!) of being interviewed by you, and being eventually turned down for the job on the grounds that I had racist views which I had never acknowledged. At the time, I was disappointed, angry and totally denied the allegation – but on reflection (and a discussion with one member of the collective), I have realized that in fact, like most people brought up in our society I *am* racist! The fact that I have

⁹¹ Lovenduski and Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p. 82.

⁹² Carby, 'White Woman Listen!'; Bryan et al., *Heart of the Race*; and the highly influential Black feminist edition of *Feminist Review*, xvii (1984) subtitled 'Many Voices, One Chant' were all published in this decade.

⁹³ Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, p. 113.

⁹⁴ Editorial, *Spare Rib*, cxxx (May 1983), 4.

⁹⁵ 'Newsletter Collective Meeting Minutes', *LWLN*, cccxcv (4 Dec. 1984), unpaginated. However, it should be noted that this action was taken by the already largely white and gentile collective as a means of trying to increase the racial diversity of the collective, rather than being an exclusionary action taken by Black feminists.

⁹⁶ Alastair Bonnett, *White Identities: Historical and International Perspectives* (Harlow, 2000) [hereafter Bonnett, *White Identities*], p. 128.

never acknowledged this ever to myself is totally mind-blowing and has opened up a whole new level of consciousness and avenue of thought to me.⁹⁷

Another women wrote in to say that: 'I think very many "liberal" whites are terrified of finding the racism in themselves but really that is where we must begin if we truly want to eliminate racism from all our lives.'⁹⁸ One woman wrote in to the *LWLN* that: 'Yes I do have obvious racist tendencies and am horrified about them. But I'm really trying to sort them out.'⁹⁹ Leah Thorn, a Jewish feminist from London interviewed for this project, said that:

I mean early on, before I really understood it, it felt like they were ruining the solidarity, you know, we've got this movement, and they were ruining it. But, I mean . . . my learning was at their expense, and I'm still obviously learning, but . . . gradually I could see that what I took for granted as feminism, it wasn't the whole picture.¹⁰⁰

Another interviewee, Mandy Vere, a white feminist from Liverpool, remembered that:

I think [. . .] the white women's movement was, quite rightly, seen as, however un-awarely, being racist . . . I certainly wasn't aware, when I was sitting in a room of ten women, and they were all white, or there was only one Black woman, that there was anything wrong with that. You know at the time . . . it wasn't until we were challenged by Black women that we started to see that we'd been making assumptions, and things like that.¹⁰¹

Evidently, then, at least some white feminists did respond to the charges of racism within the movement and engaged in critical reflection on the absence of Black women in the feminist movement. Nevertheless, it was a critical engagement that had its limits. Alastair Bonnet has suggested that white anti-racism has resulted in the establishment of whiteness as 'an arena, not of engagement with anti-racism but of self-generated altruistic interest for others'.¹⁰² Thus, whilst white women placed themselves as a group 'characterised by their moral failings', I would argue that, paradoxically, this self-beratement helped some women established their identity as the moral centre of multi-racial/anti-racist feminism. What the appropriate response really was, however, was perhaps far from clear in such a charged climate. And, in the final analysis, confusion over the appropriate discursive and material forms that anti-racism should take itself constrained the articulation of a truly effective anti-racist politics in the WLM.

⁹⁷ Veronica Reilly, Letters, *Spare Rib*, cxxxv (Oct. 83), 5 (italics in the original).

⁹⁸ Chris Wilson, Letters, *Spare Rib*, cxxxvii (Dec. 1983), 34.

⁹⁹ Dyana Maloney, *LWLN* (5 Aug. 1983), unpaginated.

¹⁰⁰ Personal interview with Leah Thorn, 3 Nov. 2010, transcript p. 13.

¹⁰¹ Personal interview with Mandy Vere, 7 Dec. 2010, transcript p. 5.

¹⁰² Bonnett, *White Identities*, p. 128.

IV

This article has argued that white feminists' relation to race should be considered in a more nuanced fashion than has previously been the case. Rather than uncritically accepting criticism of white feminists as racists, we should interrogate what was meant by this, and the ways in which such a term limits our understanding of how white women did interact with race. By exploring sources that have not been previously examined for evidence of anti-racist activity, this article has attested to the existence and variety of anti-racist practice within the WLM. Nevertheless, such activity coexisted with ethnocentric – sometimes deemed racist – theoretical concerns and organizational practices that made the WLM a largely white affair. This brings into focus several larger questions for historians. Firstly, it forces us to examine how useful the term 'racism' is without an exploration of the contexts in which it was used. As a term, it is often used simplistically without any real examination of what the content of racism is or was. It is clear that many Black feminists used a definition of racism that was far more radical than that which many white feminists used. Furthermore, when white women *did* confess to being racist in the feminist movement, they were not necessarily admitting to a racism that was the same in content or virulence to that of, say, the National Front. Rather, taking their cue from Black radicals, they were understanding the implications of their position as white women in a white society. This meant understanding the way in which growing up in a racist society inevitably structured their unconscious attitudes to race, and also how 'white privilege' operated and how they benefited personally from it. Secondly, by focusing on the question of race, the periodization of the feminist movement, which classically places second-wave activism in the 1970s, is brought under review. There is a tendency within much writing about UK feminism to date the decline of the movement to the final, disastrous conference of the WLM in 1978. However, as other writers have noted, equating a lack of national conferences with the end of feminist activism is rather simplistic. A focus on the dynamics of race in the movement reveals that feminist activism in the 1980s was vibrant: rather than dying, feminist concerns had simply shifted from those of the 1970s, and Black feminism was flourishing. Finally, it is also clear that questions surrounding race are still salient to contemporary feminism.¹⁰³ Despite risking the accusation of writing present-centred history, in writing this article I hope that, by understanding in a more nuanced way the shortcomings of white feminists in the past, feminism will be able to improve its anti-racist practice in the future.

¹⁰³ See Terese Jonsson, 'Piercing the Whiteness Silence', published on the F-Word on 16/03/2009, <www.thefword.org.uk/features/2009/03/piercing_the_wh>, accessed 16 Dec. 2011, for an excellent discussion of the contemporary situation.

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