Second wave Black feminism in the African diaspora: news from new scholarship

The legacy of Black feminists' organising, agitating, and speaking truth to power has been underplayed, obscured, or simply ignored until relatively recently, writes BENITA ROTH.

In the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of American women organised as feminists, at the grassroots level and in institutions, locally and nationally. The resurgence of feminist activism in the United States (US) became known as the 'second wave' of such protest in the nation's history, and was seen for a long time as a movement of middle-class white women. In the past decade however, scholars have challenged the idea that there was only one second wave feminist movement in the US, a white one, with late-arriving racial/ethnic variants (Gluck et al, 1998). What we have come to understand is that the second wave was comprised of feminisms, plural: organisationally distinct feminist movements that developed and grew along different paths. The vision of organisationally distinct feminist movements has allowed us to better understand how the organising of feminist women of colour, Black feminists among them, proceeded, and how Black feminists in the US second wave shaped feminist thinking beyond the boundaries of their movement.

In this article, I look at recent scholarship on US-based Black feminist activism in the '60s and '70s. Black women formed feminist groups despite a political climate that asked them to choose between fighting racism or sexism; Black women activists who became feminists in the '60s and '70s chose a political label and path that was not encouraged by male (and many female) activists in their communities (Gray White, 1999; Harris, 1999; hooks, 1981, 1984; Roth, 1999a, 1999b, 2004; Smith, 1983, Springer, 2001, in press). Why is it important to look at 2004 scholarship on Black feminism? There are two chief reasons, the first of which involves righting (by rewriting) the historical record, and the second of which involves understanding the roots of current feminist insights into the linked nature of oppressive systems. First, uncovering the feminist activism of African-American women undermines the myth that feminism was a white woman's 'thing', that it was unattractive and irrelevant to Black women. As I argue in my book, Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave (2004), there is evidence that in the '60s and '70s Black women possessed feminist attitudes, possibly to a greater extent than white women (Carden, 1974; Freeman, 1975; Marx Ferree and Hess, 2000). The myth of Black women's hostility to feminism was based on the fact that they didn't join white feminist organisations in large numbers, but formed their own. Second, and as I will show in the discussion that follows, the 'self-defined standpoint' of resistance (Hill Collins, 1998) that Black feminists developed based on their everyday experiences generated feminist thinking that was different from
that of ‘mainstream’ (white) feminists, especially in its understanding of the interlocking oppressive systems of race, class, gender and sexuality in Black women's lives. This intersectional stance has been taken up by feminists of all colours as axiomatic, and as such, Black feminist thinking has had long-lasting and far-ranging effects.

As I consider recent work on Black feminism, I wish to stress that in many ways we are only beginning to gather knowledge about this movement. In the following discussion, I take a thematic look at what this scholarship seems to be uncovering. I first consider the simultaneity of Black feminism's emergence with other feminist movements. In contrast to views which see Black feminism, and the feminisms of other women of colour, as reactions to the deficiencies of white feminism, scholars have shown that Black feminism came from within the Black Civil Rights/Black Liberation movement, and emerged at the same time that white feminism did. I then address the interstitiality of Black feminism as a movement, the way that it was positioned on the margins of the Black movement and of white feminism, and in critical dialogue with them. Third, I look at the intersectionality of Black feminist analysis, as Black feminists used their experiences to theorise about the overlapping, mutually constitutive nature of oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality. Lastly, I touch on Black feminism's relationship to questions of transnationality, and whether obstacles stood in the way of Black feminists' ability to make links to others in national liberation struggles beyond the US.

**Simultaneity: Black feminism's emergence as a part of second wave feminisms**

Recent scholarship on Black feminist organising shows that the movement began when feminist organising in other racial/ethnic communities did (Anderson-Bricker, 1999; Baxandall, 2001; Blackwell, 2002; Gray White, 1999; Harris, 2000; Polatnik, 1996; Roth, 1999a, 1999b, 2004; Springer, 1999, in press; Ward, 2003). In the mid-'60s, discussions regarding the role of women in the mostly Black Civil Rights movement and the mostly white New Left began in earnest. Women in these movements began to ask questions about the existence of gender domination, questions that arose because of the gap between theory and practice in their daily lives. These discussions generated explicitly feminist organising in different oppositional political communities by 1968 (Roth, 2004).

Scholars who have written case studies of second wave white feminism (Buechler, 1990; Carden, 1974; Evans, 1979; Freeman, 1975; Hole and Levine, 1971; Marx Ferree and Hess, 1985, 1994, 2000) neglected the early organising of Black feminists because these women did not join early white feminist groups (Roth, 1999a, 1999b, 2004). Black women are particularly absent from white women's liberations groups, since some professional Black women had been founding members of elected to leadership positions in predominantly white liberal feminist organisations like the National Organization for Women (Harris, 2000). There were a number of reasons that Black
women did not join white feminist organisations in large numbers: some felt white feminists were insensitive to the economic survival issues that concerned Black communities; some felt white feminists were personally racist; some felt that they were accomplishing good by working in their own community organisations; and others felt that what was needed was a Black feminist movement (Roth, 2004).

On this last point, the failure by authors of earlier case studies to recognise early Black feminist organising has led to idea that white feminism was a template that Black feminists later used, or one from which it ‘deviated’. The question of the timing of Black feminist organising is therefore important theoretically; showing that some progressive Black women were busy fashioning a feminist vision for themselves shifts our attention from wondering how Black women reacted to a supposedly imported feminism, toward looking at how Black women constructed their feminism from within their own communities.

Two early Black feminist groups, the Black Women’s Liberation Group (BWLG) of Mount Vernon/New Rochelle, New York (Baxandall, 2001; Polatnik, 1996; Roth, 2004; Springer, 2001, forthcoming) and the Third World Women’s Alliance (Anderson-Bricker, 1999; Blackwell, 2002; Roth, 1999a, 1999b, 2004; Springer, 2001; in press; Ward, 2003) arose directly from the Civil Rights movement in the mid-to-late ’60s. The BWLG of Mount Vernon/New Rochelle (two towns just north of New York City) was formed from two networks of Black women activists (Polatnik, 1996). The women who formed the group had been involved in welfare rights organising and had facilitated a rent strike in protest of poor housing; in doing so, they prefigured the work that Black women would do within the National Welfare Rights Organization. By 1966, the BWLG had also organised a Saturday afternoon ‘freedom school’ for neighbourhood children.

One of the BWLG’s founders, Patricia Robinson, had direct ties to a New York City group called Black Women Enraged (BWE), which had organised to help the family of assassinated leader, Malcolm X.

The BWLG lasted in one form or another until 1976 (Polatnik, 1996). They achieved recognition in the large parts of the white feminist movement by virtue of a position paper, ‘Statement on Birth Control’, published in Robin Morgan’s 1970 edited collection of feminist writings, Sisterhood is Powerful. A longer version of the statement, as well as other position papers appeared in The Black Woman, Toni Cade Bambara’s 1970 watershed collection of Black activist women’s writings. The BWLG argued that the pill and other types of birth control were necessary for poor Black women to resist white domination, and that those in the Black movement who argued that using birth control was genocidal were class-biased and lacked an understanding of Black women’s lives.

The Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA) was also founded by women who had been activists in the Civil Rights movement. It was formed by Francis Beal and other members of the Student
Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the vanguard Civil Rights student organisation. While still part of SNCC, women who eventually became TWWA members began distributing position papers about the necessity of Black women's liberation, arguing for the revolutionary potential of Black women's liberation and the need for Black women's access to abortion (Roth, 2004; Weathers, 1968a, 1968b). Beal's oft-cited manifesto of Black feminism, 'Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female' was written with the aid of other TWWA members in 1969, and then published in 1970 in both *Sisterhood is Powerful* and *The Black Woman*. Thus, we can consider 1970 as a significant year for intellectual production for both Black feminism and the white women's liberation movement. While Morgan's collection is considered a touchstone of second wave (white) feminism, Cade Bambara's collection has only recently been treated by scholars as a product of feminist social movement activism.

Obscuring the simultaneity of Black and white feminist emergence not only has the effect of negating Black women's feminist agency – and therefore giving a false picture of history – it also erases the moments when feminist activists mutually influenced each other across racial/ethnic lines (Roth, 2004). Thankfully, new scholarship on the emergence of second wave Black feminist organisations has corrected earlier misunderstandings about who became a feminist when.

**Politics between the cracks: Black feminist emergence and interstitiality**

Black feminists in the second wave were critical of both white women's liberation and Black liberation, seeing little space in either for a Black feminist politics. They did their 'politics in the cracks', as Springer (2001:155) has characterised it, forming an 'interstitial politics' critical of the blind spots of these movements. They challenged white feminist movements for ignoring economic and survival issues common to the Black community, and for failing to examine personal racism; and they challenged the Black Civil Rights movement as it shifted into a Black liberation/nationalist movement that seemed to be recreating its gender politics along white middle class patriarchal lines. Black feminism's interstitiality was therefore necessitated by the failure of other movements to allow Black feminist women within their ranks the opportunity to engage gender and racial oppression at the same time.

Black nationalism/liberationism in the mid-'60s was strongly characterised by masculinist discourse and practice (Giddings, 1984). Despite the work of Black women in the Civil Rights movements, and the very public presence of a number of women in Black liberationist/nationalist organisations themselves (Johnson, 2003), Black nationalist organisations such as Karenga's US movement and the Black Muslims advocated restricting opportunities for activism by women (Brown 1992; White 1990).
Black feminists thus organised out of dissatisfaction with liberationist and/or nationalist movements that wished to silence some of their concerns while supposedly liberating them. In their organising on the margins, as Springer (in press) points out, they appropriated resources where they could, created new ones where they could, and found time in the interstices of busy lives to fight against oppressions that reinforced each other.

Interstitial politics also included working on the borders of non-feminist Black organisations. As Toni Cade Bambara (1970a:107) wrote, the questioning of gender roles in the progressive Black community was fairly widespread:

> every organization you can name has had to struggle at one time or another with seemingly mutinous cadres of women getting salty about having to man the telephones or fix the coffee while the men wrote the position papers and decided on policy.

Although my discussion here focuses on work about Black women who self-consciously claimed a feminist label, scholars have argued there is a feminist element to Black women's activism on behalf of the race (Giddings, 1984; Gray White, 1999; Springer, 1999; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981; Kuumba, 2001; Omolade, 1994; and Smith, 1983). Some exciting scholarship on second wave Black women's activism has focused on women's work within the Black Panther Party or BPP (Brown, 1992; LeBlanc-Ernest, 1998; Matthews, 1998, 2000; Perkins, 1999; Roth, 2004). The BPP was a highly contradictory space for gender-based organising; on the one hand, masculinism was part and parcel of 'quotidian' (Matthews, 1998:289) life within the organisation, and on the other hand, the BPP had strong women leaders in both public and behind the scene roles. While it is certainly not easy to think of the BPP as 'feminist' space, the complexities of Panther politics, as well as those of other Black nationalist/ liberationist organisations, merits further exploration. In short, our knowledge of how Black feminists built their movement in the cracks and on the margins is only beginning.

**Intersectionality and Second Wave Black Feminist Ideology**

In the groups and organisations that Black feminists formed, they espoused a feminism that incorporated analyses of the consequences for Black women of mutually reinforcing oppressions of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Black feminists posited the intersectionality of oppressions, and thus the necessity of fighting against various forms of domination at once (Beal, 1970; Crenshaw, 1989, 1995; Hill Collins, 1990; King, 1988; Naples, 1998a, 1998b; Sacks, 1989; Spelman, 1982; Thorton Dill, 1983).

Theory on the intersectionality of oppressions was part of Black feminism thinking from its inception (Blackwell, 2002; Harris, 1999, 2000; Roth, 1999a, 1999b, 2004; Springer, 2001, in press).
For example, in 'Double Jeopardy', Frances Beal (1970) argued that Black women occupied a social space constituted by their positions in gender, race, and class hierarchies; the TWWA subsequently named its newspaper *Triple Jeopardy* to incorporate the insight that class oppression intersected with race and gender. Beal and the TWWA laid responsibility for the sexist cultural ideal of Black 'manhood' squarely at the feet of American capitalism. They argued that the construction of masculinity and femininity was driven by the need to sell products; Black women, who had historically worked outside the home, could not conform to the idea of a 'typical' middle-class woman, staying home and being a good consumer. Consistent class analysis by the Black movement required that Black liberation/Black nationalism purge itself of white middle-class goals for gender relationships, and that Black women's groups steer the movement's course straight. Another TWWA member, Maryanne Weathers (Weathers, 1968a:2) argued that forming a Black women's movement was the correct strategy for building a movement that would liberate men, women and children, one that would be 'pro-human for all peoples'. In my own work, I have labeled this approach 'the vanguard center', characterised as it was by the argument that Black women stood at the centre of overlapping oppressions, and thus were potentially best situated to lead a revolutionary movement (Roth, 1999a, 1999b, 2004).

An intersectional analysis of oppression was also present in position papers issued by The Black Women's Liberation Group of Mount Vernon/New Rochelle. In 'On the position of poor Black women in this country' (1970), Pat Robinson and other members criticised middle-class Black leaders for leading poor Blacks down the garden path of capitalism. They also argued for a 'vanguard center' of poor Black women showing the way to liberation:

Rebellion by poor black women, the bottom of a class hierarchy ... places the question of what kind of society will the poor black woman demand ... She allies herself with the have-nots in the wider world and their revolutionary struggles ... Through these steps ... she has begun to question aggressive male domination and the class society which enforces it, capitalism (Robinson et al, 1970a:196).

The BWLG thus sought a united front of middle-class Black and white women who would join poor Black women in continuing to expose male oppression.

Early Black feminist assertions of the intersectionality of race, gender and class oppression left out at least one significant axis of oppression – that of sexuality. In the early '70s, the Combahee River Collective (CRC), an offshoot of the more liberal National Black Feminist Organisation, added heterosexism to the intersection of oppressions, ending the relative silence in Black feminist theory over Lesbianism (Combahee River Collective, 1981; Harris, 1999, 2000; Roth, 1999a, 1999b, 2004; Springer, 2001, in press; White, 1984). The CRC was based in the Boston/Cambridge area, and became known for its 'A Black Feminist Statement', which appeared in several feminist...
anthologies (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Smith, 1983). The CRC added an anti-homophobia stance to Black feminist vanguard centre politics, arguing that if,

**Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression** (1981:215).

As a Black lesbian-identified group, the CRC rejected Black liberationist politics that could not even admit to the existence of lesbian relationships. At the same time, CRC members rejected lesbian separatism, by the late '70s a dominant strand in white feminist cultural politics (Echols, 1989). The CRC was never very large numerically, but despite its small size and somewhat fractious history, it was an example of Black feminist success on its own terms. CRC members articulated an alternative to universalistic visions of sisterhood that erased differences between women, and their statements offered a way to think about the proliferation of identities around which feminist (and other) organising was happening.

**Black feminist groups varied in their relationship to matters transnational**

Although Black feminist groups varied in organisational form (Springer, 2001), Black feminist ideology was characterised by a consistent examination of interlocking oppressions and oriented toward action agendas that linked solutions for gender oppression with solutions to other forms of oppression. Thus theories of intersecting oppressions as mutually constitutive were rooted in Black feminist politics, born of experience and created to guide activism. The intersectional political agenda of feminists of colour today – the need to simultaneously analyse and battle dominations of gender, class, race/ethnicity, citizenship, sexuality – has been incorporated (in theory if not always in practice) into the (white) ‘mainstream’ of American feminist scholarship.

**Transnationality: struggling to make the links**

The unearthing of the activities and thoughts of Black feminists has prompted unexplored questions about whether, when and how transnational linkages were made by Black feminists in the American diaspora during the '60s and '70s. Black feminist groups varied in their relationship to matters transnational. Some saw themselves as part of a world-wide revolt against colonial domination, and were consequently ‘anti-imperialist’ (to use the phrase popular at the time) in their politics. Some were attuned to national liberation struggles if not organised around those struggles, and still others did not seem to have any international agenda at all.

What is clear is that the earliest Black feminist groups, such as the Third World Women's Alliance, and the Black Women's Liberation Group, made links between the struggles of African-Americans and those of oppressed people abroad. Members of both these organisations had anti-imperialist visions and sometimes personal links across the oceans to those involved in liberation struggles. In a book published in 1973, *Lessons from the Damned: Class Struggle in the Black Community*,
the BWLG chronicled attempts to organise against the Vietnam war, which included meeting with North Vietnamese women in 1969 (The Damned 1990, 1973). The Third World Women's Alliance was, as its name implied, very much identified with national liberation struggles abroad, with politics consonant with the anti-imperialist, Pan-Africanist politics developing in SNCC as a whole (Roth, 2004). Frances Beal developed her views as a result of living in Paris in the early and mid-'60s, where she encountered Africans involved in liberation struggles against colonial powers, met Malcolm X, and read Franz Fanon (in French). As she recalled, it was anti-imperialism that fueled her desire to challenge gender contradictions within SNCC in 1966:

*I've become conscious of the colonial world, of imperialism, of Africa, of all of these various different things, of Vietnam....so my consciousness has gone from tiny little Binghamton [the town where Beal was born], to New York, to a world, to Paris, to a world...so that my mind is expanding and becoming very intellectually active, and on the home front, I'm being told to put myself into this little box... And the contradiction becomes just too big* (interview with author, July 12, 2000).

But the anti-imperialism of the BWLG and the TWWA were not universal, as other Black feminist groups showed little interest in national liberation struggles, aside from opposing US involvement in Vietnam. Sometimes, however, consciousness of the international dimensions of women's oppression arose in more liberal Black feminist groups, spurred in part by UN conferences on the status of women, beginning with Mexico City in 1975. For example, Black Women Organized for Action, a relatively liberal group that organised in the '70s in the San Francisco Bay area of California, tried to broaden their knowledge of international affairs by meeting women sent by the UN who happened to come through town (Roth, 2004).

Since early Black feminist groups did reflect an 'anti-imperialist' consciousness, it is worth exploring why that consciousness did not seem to be a larger part of later second wave Black feminist organising. It may have been the case that the space for asserting links to other national liberation struggles, particularly to those in Africa, were usurped by actions taken by the US government, which in turn generated masculinist developments in parts of the Black liberationist/nationalist movement. Bahati Kuumba (who guest edits this issue of *Agenda*) and I (2003) are currently trying to understand the complicated dynamics regarding the use of African history and transnational imagery by Black feminists in the second wave. Our work is very much in process, but we note masculinism in the Black nationalist movement, based on a romanticised version of complementary (unequal) gender roles in Africa, made life troublesome for Black women activists (White, 1990). Black feminists have argued that the masculinist cast of Black nationalism in the '60s was in large part a reaction to the 'Black matriarchy' theory in the Moynihan report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Dubey, 1994; Giddings, 1984; Gray White, 1999; hooks, 1981; Murray, 1975; Pittman quoted in Cantwell, 1971: Wallace, 1996; Marx Ferree and Hess,
Article

2000; Roth, 2004). The Moynihan report labeled the Black family as 'matriarchal' and 'deviant' because married Black women were more likely than white women to be in the paid labour force; despite the fact that Black women were the most economically deprived group in the country, they somehow held an inappropriately large amount of power vis à vis their men. The report claimed that this 'deviant' family structure hindered the progress of Black men, and, by extension, that of the Black community itself.

Masculinists within the Black movement both condemned the report as racist and argued that the patriarchal family had to be re-instituted so as to right the historical wrongs done to the Black male and to restore the Black family's true 'African' nature. Struggles around attempts to enact this misunderstanding of African gender roles in organisations precipitated conflict in Black movement organisations (Johnson, 2003; Matthews, 1998) and a feminist response by some Black women. But in making their feminism, many Black feminists relied less on the African past than they did on US-based African-American history in searches for proto-feminist role models and images of female strength; Pan-African nationalism and feminism became increasingly counterposed to each other in the American movement context (Kuumba and Roth, 2003), potentially constricting second wave Black feminist visions of the transnationality of their struggle.

Therefore, questions about the waxing and waning of concerns with transnationality in second wave Black feminism remain. However, it is safe to say that the more that scholars uncover about Black feminist organising, the more we will understand about how and when consciousness of liberation struggles overseas contributed to radical action in America.

Conclusion: the ongoing significance of American Black feminism

The legacy of Black feminists' organising, agitating, and speaking truth to power has been underplayed, obscured, or simply ignored until relatively recently. I have therefore undertaken this thematic look at the issues raised by new scholarship on Black feminist organising in America's second wave: the simultaneity of feminist transformations within different racial/ethnic progressive movements; Black feminist organising in the interstices of movement spaces; Black feminism's intersectional analysis of interlocking oppressions; and the way in which Black feminists related to transnational struggle. I have highlighted these themes in order to suggest that this body of work significantly changes our understanding of the origins, varieties, and effects of African-American women's political praxis, a goal that would be adequate in and of itself. But the new work on Black feminism is also important reading for those interested in progressive politics generally, because it illuminates other areas of concern to activists. Uncovering Black feminist organising: 1) shows the powerful appeal of feminist organising in different social spaces;
2) reveals the internal contradictions and tensions around gender politics that undermine progressive movements; and
3) allows us to see how oppositional political theory is developed in and for struggle.

The theoretical insights of Black feminists and other feminists of colour, in the US and elsewhere, constitute a mandate for us to complicate our analyses of the role of gender oppression in the lives of everyday women, by rejecting the existence of a 'universal' female experience and through accepting an obligation to think in terms of specific historical and national contexts. As such, feminists struggling inside the American Black community in the last half of the 20th century have broken through the boundaries of their community while working for change. It is my suggestion that increasing our knowledge of their past and continuing struggle strengthens us in future efforts.

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Notes
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2. See Gray White, 1999; Piven and Cloward 1977 for more on the NWRO.
3. The new scholarship on Black feminism makes clear that Black feminists argued against the injuries of class domination. Even liberal Black feminists, such as the ones active in early '60s government commissions on the status of women and in the National Black Feminist Organization included in their statements relatively radical demands regarding economic justice and the redistribution of resources (Davis 1988; Gray White 1999; Harris 2000; Roth 2004).

Benita Roth is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Women's Studies, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY