ESSAY

The Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations

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The sociopolitical conditions and social movements of the late 1960s gave rise to an unprecedented growth in Black feminist consciousness that is reflected in contemporary feminist theorizing. Anthologies such as *The Black Woman and Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology* gave voice to Black feminists' alienation from the sexism, racism, and classism found in the civil rights movement, the women's movement, social policy, and popular culture (see Bambara 1970 and Smith 1983). However, we know little about the formal organizations resulting from the rise in Black feminist consciousness.

Politics in the Cracks

Black feminists' voices and visions fell between the cracks of the civil rights and women's movements, so they created formal organizations to speak on their behalf. Within five organizations—the Third World Women's Alliance (1968–79), the National Black Feminist Organization (1973–75), the National Alliance of Black Feminists (1976–80), the Combahee River Collective (1975–80), and Black Women Organized for Action (1973–80)—several thousand Black women activists explicitly claimed feminism and defined a collective identity based on their race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. As one activist I interviewed remarked, Black feminists conducted their politics "in the cracks." (Burnham 1998).

Politics in the cracks, or, hereafter, "interstitial politics," conveyed two meanings for Black feminists and their organizations. First, as activist

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Linda Burnham noted, Black feminists, not unlike activists in other social movements, fit their activism into their schedules whenever possible, serving as full-time unpaid staff for their organizations. Second, Black feminists developed a collective identity and basis for organizing that reflected the intersecting characteristics that make up black womanhood. Black feminists were the first activists to theorize and act upon the intersections of race, gender, and class.

While Black feminists crafted their collective identity and their organizations from the fissures that developed within the civil rights and women's movement, that description and analysis was obscured in the Black and women's liberation scholarly literature. Research on Black feminist organizations can contribute a crucial, previously ignored chapter to the historiography of the civil rights and women's movements. These organizations, with their roots firmly entrenched in the civil rights movement, provide a crucial link to the burgeoning women's movement. Black women, as leaders in civil rights movement organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), played a pivotal role in demonstrating the leadership capabilities of Black women, as well as in speaking about the burden of oppression under which they functioned. Research on Black women civil rights leaders flourished in the 1990s, laying the foundation for examining the continuity of Black women's activism through slavery, suffrage, the women's club movement, and labor movements (see Barnett 1991; Davis 1981; Giddings 1984; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Robnett 1997). African American history, in the process of unearthing a wealth of information about the leadership role of Black women in the civil rights movement, makes little notice of the Black feminist activism sparked by this leadership. As this research on their organizations shows, Black feminists learned valuable skills and ideological beliefs from the civil rights movement and incorporated these resources into women's movement activism. They based their analyses and actions on the work of their activist foremothers, but also took that work a step further by adamantly laying claim to gender as a salient point of Black women's identity.

Similar to the gaps in civil rights movement historiography, women's movement histories lack in-depth descriptions and analyses of Black feminist organizations that contributed to the expansion of the

movement's goals and objectives. Past studies of the women's movement document Black women civil rights leaders who served as role models for white feminist activists, but they neglect to mention how in practical and ideological ways, Black women mentored Black feminist activists (see Carden 1974; Davis 1991; Echols 1989; Freeman 1977). Additionally, Black feminist activists, through their theorizing and organizations, broadened the scope of the women's movement by challenging Eurocentric and classist interpretations of women's issues. The literature on the women's movement and Black feminist activism cursorily acknowledges the existence of select Black feminist organizations—most often, the Combahee River Collective and the National Black Feminist Organization—but mainly as a reaction to racism in the women's movement (see, e.g., Buecheler 1990; Davis 1991; Echols 1989; Giddings 1984; hooks 1981).

However, recent scholarship in Black women's studies and sociology is turning its attention to Black feminist organizations as a parallel development to the predominately white women's movement, rather than merely a reaction to racism (see Guy-Sheftall 1995, Introduction; Roth 1999; White 1999). By recasting Black feminist organizing in this light, we gain a sharper picture of the development of Black feminist theorizing on the matrix of domination,[1] as well as a better understanding of how Black feminists articulated their agenda in concrete action.

For this discussion, I used archival data (including organizational newsletters, calendars of events, position papers, correspondence, and minutes of meetings) and, from 1995 to 1998, conducted twenty-three oral history interviews with Black feminist activists. These tape recorded interviews, lasting from forty-five minutes to two hours, covered the activists' personal and political histories, organizational structure of their groups, group objectives, significant events, ideological disputes, coalition work, organizational accomplishments, and factors of decline.[2]

The organizations included in my sample all explicitly incorporated the feminist label into their organizational vision, statements of purpose, slogans, or recruitment materials. The first organization, the Third World Women's Alliance, emerged from the civil rights movement in 1968, accompanying the turn of some integrationist civil rights organizations toward Black Nationalism and masculinist rhetoric. As the window of opportunity for integrationist efforts began to close, the opportunity for feminist activism widened.

EMERGENCE OF BLACK FEMINIST, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

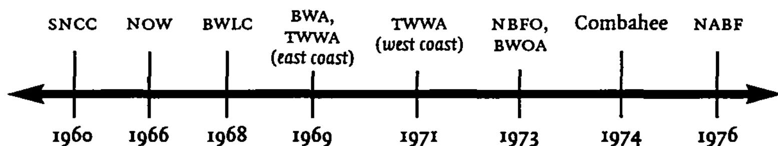

Figure 1

However, by 1980 all five organizations were defunct or in decline. Faced with a rising tide of conservative, anti-feminist backlash, leadership burnout, few financial resources, and ideological disputes, Black feminists dispersed into other social movements and organizations, while maintaining a diffuse Black feminist movement that still exists today.

In this essay I will discuss the forces that compelled Black feminists to organized independently of other social movements and the organizations that they founded. Black feminists and their organizations played crucial unacknowledged roles both in continuing the work of the civil rights movement and in shaping the women's movement. My research shows that while racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism actually encouraged the emergence of Black feminist identity and organizations, these forces of discrimination also played a complicating role in the organizational structure of Black feminist organizations.

In section one of this essay, I briefly outline the theoretical framework that informs this examination of the growth of interstitial Black feminist politics and organizing. Using resource mobilization and collective-identity-formation perspectives I combine organizational and social psychological theories to explain how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation impacted the contours of Black feminist organizing on the meso- and micro-levels.

In section two, through a combination of resource mobilization and collective identity theories, I describe and analyze the emergence narratives of the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA), the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF), the Combahee River Collective, and Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA). The Third World Women's Alliance and National Black Feminist Organization's emergence narratives demonstrate how Black

women's grievances against sexism in the civil rights movements took shape to form a Black feminist collective identity. Reacting to the marginalization of Black women in the women's movement, Black Women Organized for Action emerged as a dynamic force of Black feminist activism on the West Coast. The emergence narratives of the National Alliance of Black Feminists and the Combahee River Collective demonstrate the dynamics of this political phenomenon, as these two organizations split from the National Black Feminist Organization because of its failure to address structural, class, and sexual orientation issues (see chart in Appendix).

The organizational structures of Black feminist organizations are compared and contrasted in section three. The founders brought experiences from hierarchical and collective organizations into their organizing, and experimented to find forms that would best advance a Black feminist collective identity and agenda. However, to varying degrees, they did not anticipate how differences among Black women would affect the longevity of their organizations.

Theoretical Considerations

Though Black feminist organizations are absent from social movement history and social movement organization theory literature, when used as a case study, they can provide insight at the intersections of these two disciplinary fields. The approach I use bridges resource mobilization and social constructionist perspectives—two competing, but not unrelated, schools of social movement organization theory. Black feminists stated that their socially constructed collective identity emerges between that of "Blacks" and that of "women." Yet, placing Black feminist organizations into the historical record of social movement organizations also highlights the impact of this complex identity on the resources Black feminists mobilized (or failed to mobilize) in the formation and maintenance of their organizations.

Resource mobilization theory emerged as the 1960s yielded civil rights gains for Blacks and women. To counter theories of collective action that define it as the work of unorganized, irrational individuals, resource mobilization theorists posit that people engage in political action and in social movement organizations as a result of cost/benefit analyses. Resource mobilization theorists shifted the theoretical focus from social

psychological causes of collective action to the structural preconditions of social movement mobilization and of cycles of protest (see Freeman 1973; Gamson [1975] 1990; McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zaid [1987] 1994; Oberschall 1973). Of particular interest here, as facilitators of Black feminist mobilization, are resource mobilization theories on the opening of political opportunity structures, on leadership dynamics, and on membership recruitment as facilitators of Black feminist mobilization.

The opening of political opportunities signals to contenders in the polity that elites are vulnerable to challenges. Access to political participation, ruptures among elites, changes in "ruling alignments," and the creation of influential allegiances characterize these openings (see Tarrow [1994] 1998, 86). The civil rights movement's integrationist achievements in a new political climate favorable to equal rights persuaded feminists, Black and white, that they could achieve similar gains for women. Also, by expanding the tactics used to demand change, the civil rights movement, much like the abolition movement before it, created new spaces and modes of social protest that feminists could emulate in their agitation for resources. Black feminist organizations inserted themselves into the cracks of the dominant political opportunity structure as well as into the fissures created by other social movements.

Activists come to social movement organizations most often through preexisting interpersonal networks. Friends, relatives, and colleagues serve as the impetus for attendance at meetings, participation in rallies, and other avenues of organizational involvement. As shown by women's movement theorists, these networks were especially useful for those women who were confined to the private sphere, and were unsure of the validity of their dissatisfaction.[3] By banding together with other like-minded women around issues of gender and racial oppression, Black feminists began to attribute their personal struggles to causes other than personal failings and racism.

A central condition for taking advantage of these openings in political opportunity structures is the translation of grievances into action. Much debate centers on pinpointing the exact moment in time when individuals realize that social conditions are not necessarily the product of personal failings but rather are the consequence of structural inequality. McAdam effectively links preexisting networks and political opportunity openings through positing cognitive liberation as a crucial social psychological process in organizing. Shifts in the political opportunity structure, McAdam explains, provide cognitive cues by demonstrating

symbolically that challengers can extract concessions from dominant elites. Meanwhile, preexisting networks of like minded activists provide the necessary stability for cognitive cues to trigger liberatory thought and practice (McAdam 1982, 51). Through their networks in the civil rights movement and through cognitive cues, such as the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Black feminists experienced increasing degrees of cognitive liberation, first, around racial issues and then concerning gender oppression.

Black feminists carried this cognitive liberation with them into the women's movement, but they also gained valuable leadership skills in the civil rights movement. Several women I interviewed named women leaders in CORE, SNCC, SCLC, and the NAACP as influential role models who demonstrated Black women's political savvy. Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Ruby Doris Smith Robinson exemplified what Robnett conceptualizes as "bridge leadership," an ability to connect the will of the people to traditional leaders of the movement through grassroots organizing skills (Robnett 1997). Black women leaders, lacking traditional qualifications for public leadership (including maleness, education, clergy status), challenged the binaries that determined leaders and followers in social movement theory. Bridge leadership demonstrated for young Black feminists that distinctions between leaders and participants, elites and grassroots activists were not necessarily set in stone. Like white feminist activists, Black feminists could attempt to model different forms of leadership and organizational structure based on their experiences in the movement.

Overall, resource mobilization theory illuminates the macro-level and organizational aspects of Black feminist organizations. As I will discuss, these organizations emerged, grew, and operated under similar political opportunity structures, and utilized similar recruitment methods, but had varying leadership styles. As organizations within a movement, they reflected the heterogeneity of Black women's activism and political perspectives.[4]

Social constructionist perspectives on collective identity formation begin to address the plurality of organizing styles and ideological positions among Black feminist organizations. Collective identity perspectives bring social psychology back into the literature by including identity-based movements as legitimate forms of social protest. In particular, through framing, political actors link their values, beliefs, and interests with the goals, activities, and ideology of social movement organizations

(Snow et al. 1986). Organizations devise rhetoric and symbols to construct their political claims through framing processes that take into account identity-based claims. The framing of these issues and claims affects recruitment to the organization, as well as how activists relate to the organization once they become members. Black feminists not only expressed their specific race, gender, class, and sexual orientation as group interests, but they also had to face their differing backgrounds and political agendas.

Distinct from social movement organization theory, but a critical addition to the collective identity perspective, is Sandoval's work on the concept of oppositional consciousness. In her critical article on the contours of U.S. Third World feminism, she argues that oppositional consciousness is not an inherent trait of people of color but that it "depends upon the ability to read the current situations of power and [involves] self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations" (Sandoval 1991, 15). Similar to Anzaldúa's formulation of *la facultad*, this oppositional consciousness is a survival skill (Anzaldúa 1987). I found that Black feminists assimilated oppositional consciousness into their collective identity formation as a site of commonality among Black women. As evidenced in the decline of their organizations, Black feminists failed to recognize the multidirectional flow of power and privilege inside, as well as outside of their organizations.

Black feminist organizations offer a unique case study for examining the interaction between collective identity and resource mobilization. Given the interstitial constitution of these political actors and groups, gender, race, class, and sexual orientation all directly influenced the growth and sustenance of their organizations. Black feminists took advantage of openings in the political opportunity structure, but they did not all do so in the same way. Black feminist organizations document a cyclical movement process from emergence to decline.

Interstitial Politics and Black Feminist Organizational Emergence Narratives

Common to the emergence of all Black feminist organizations was the push toward collective identity through consciousness-raising. In New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Boston, Black women's initial

meetings were held simply to discuss "what it means to be Black, woman, and feminist (Davis 1983, 43). Far from contemplating formal organization, Black feminists reached out to one another to confirm that they were not alone in seeing disparities between the rhetoric of the civil rights movement and the treatment of women within that movement.

While Black women did hold leadership positions in the civil rights movement and in some instances wielded more power than their white counterparts, Black feminists still noticed what Francis Beal of the Third World Women's Alliance calls a disjuncture between democratic action and practice:

> I mean, we used to stay up half the night talking about freedom, liberation, freedom, you know, all these ideas and it was natural—that in a sense freedom was in the air. And all this talk—it's like Sojourner [Truth] says, "What's all this talk about 'Freedom'?" In a sense that happened to us, "what's all this talkin' about freedom?" And then when people, internally, would do things that were not democratic there was a disjuncture between some of these broad philosophical ideas and some of the practice. And it became obvious in some ways that the—well, the movement talked about freedom and liberation as it related to you as blacks, [but] it still accepted a lot of the premises when it came to women in terms of how life should be. And this was very jarring and it was a disjuncture also because women actually did step forward and play certain roles, leadership roles. And then, when people began talking about men should do this and do that and women should do that, we said, "Now, wait a minute. This sounds familiar" [laughter]. (Beal 1997)

Black feminists received cognitive cues through their discussions with other Black women, as well as through sexist experiences within the civil rights movement. Margaret Sloan, a youth member of CORE and co-founder of the National Black Feminist Organization, recalled observing women performing tasks such as cooking and childcare while men planned strategy for rent strikes and demonstrations. At fourteen she concluded, "no matter how much we organized as women, no matter how many lead poisoning campaigns we organized and worked with on the Westside [of Chicago]; no matter how many tenant rent strikes we organized we weren't really that effective. It really didn't really matter so much how you organized during the day. It really mattered how well you performed at night. And who you attached yourself to" (Sloan 1973).

Cognitive liberation for Black feminists involved equal parts of growing awareness and disillusionment as they debated whether the civil rights movement could accommodate their concerns.

THE THIRD WORLD WOMEN'S ALLIANCE. The disjuncture between movement ideals and practice, along with her growing awareness of sterilization abuse directed toward women of color, prompted Francis Beal, a former NAACP youth leader and member of the SNCC International Affairs Commission, to present a paper at SNCC's 1968 personnel meeting in New York. Beal recommended that SNCC form a Black Women's Caucus to take a closer look at how issues of racism and sexism affected their constituency, an issue they had previously neglected.

Few members opposed the formation of the caucus because the organization was in decline. The women who formed the Black Women's Liberation Caucus (BWLC) stepped into the breach created by SNCC's destabilization due to the loss of popular financial support, the failing anti-poverty campaigns in the North, and increased militancy. The few Black men who did openly oppose the formation of the caucus did so on the grounds that it smacked of women's liberation and was a "white women's thing" designed to divide the race. These accusations were not new to members of the BWLC. It was a time of heated debates in popular Black periodicals, such as *Ebony* and *Essence*, and within Black Nationalist organizations about the relevance of feminism to Black women's lives.

In 1969 the BWLC split from SNCC to expand their membership base outside the confines of the main organization. In particular, the new organization, now named the Black Women's Alliance (BWA), wanted to expand their membership base to include "women from other organizations, welfare mothers, community workers, and campus radicals" (Third World Women's Alliance 1972, 8). Though they were following the lead of SNCC in incorporating the poor into their work, the BWA felt that an independent Black women's organization could more effectively address the needs of Black women than a mixed-sex organization and could do so without marginalizing gender issues.

The BWA's goals were three-fold. First, like other Black feminist organizations founded later on, the BWA aimed to dispel the myth of the Black matriarchy. Their second goal was to reevaluate the oppression of Black women in slavery. Countering "the widespread concept that by some miracle, the oppression of slavery for the black woman was not as degrading, not as horrifying, not as barbaric as it had been for the black

man," the BWA argued that, in a society where Black men were oppressed because of their race, Black women were "further enslaved by our sex." The BWA's third goal, to redefine the role of Black woman in revolutionary struggle, responded to the sexism of Black Nationalist rhetoric, which, while it elevated Black women to a pedestal as "African Queens," also called for their subservience to Black men. In recounting the history of the organization, the TWWA collective illuminates the contradictions in nationalist rhetoric: "Now we noticed another thing. And that is, with the rise of nationalism and the rejection of white middle class norms and values, that this rejection of whiteness...took a different turn when it came to the black woman. That is, black men began defining the role of black women in the movement. They stated that our role was a supportive one, others stated that we must become breeders and provide an army; still others stated that we had Kotex or pussy power" (Third World Women's Alliance 1972, 8).

Beal recalls that former SNCC members in BWA viewed genuflection to male power as contradictory and absurd. They did not bow to the violence of Alabama State Troopers in the South, so why did Black nationalist men think that Black women would submit to patriarchy from anyone, be it in Black organizations or in the bedroom? (Beal 1997). The BWA recognized the contradictions in redefining Blackness based on sexist ideas about family and sex roles including following the white patriarchal nuclear family. It called, instead, for "a true revolutionary movement [that] must enhance the status of women."

About the time the BWA incorporated anti-imperialism into its agenda, a few women active in the Puerto Rican independence movement and the Puerto Rican Socialist Party approached the BWA about joining the organization. Their request led BWA members to debate the dynamics of oppressive power relationships beyond the black/white paradigm. There were two positions on whether the BWA should permit women of non-African descent to join the organization. Some women felt that the situation of Black women in the United States was so unique historically that the BWA should not unite with women of other races. These members felt that the work of BWA would be diluted if they allowed non-Black women to become members; they favored working in coalition with other revolutionary groups on specific issues. The second group held that "the complexities of intersecting oppressions [were] more resilient than the distinctions of the particular social groups and...that there was no other

group for these women to be involved in—that we should be open to our Puerto Rican sisters to join with us" (Beal 1997). This position held sway. A multicultural alliance that would broaden the organization's agenda was approved.

First, the organization formally established solidarity with Asian, Chicana, Native American, and Puerto Rican women based on anti-imperialist ideology. The BWA's belief was that the similarities among these women transcended their differences. Beal observed, "We realized that we would be much more effective and unified by becoming a third world women's organization" (Beal 1997). The group, now to be called the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) brought differences of culture, race, and ethnicity into the fight against capitalist exploitation in communities of color, stereotypes, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Equally important to the multiracial expansion of the TWWA was the organization's spread to the West Coast. Cheryl Perry, became a member of the TWWA in 1970 through a preexisting network of friends in New York City connected with the third Venceremos Brigade.[5] In 1971, Perry went to Cuba with the fourth brigade and decided to relocate to the West Coast upon her return to be closer to the brigade's headquarters. At the time the TWWA consisted mainly of Black and Puerto Rican women, and the New York members agreed that a West Coast branch could help them expand their membership base, particularly to Asian/Pacific Islander women and Chicanas.

Replicating her own recruitment into the organization, Perry recruited West Coast Venceremos Brigade participants into the TWWA, as well as members of other organizations, such as the Committee to Free Angela Davis. In 1972 a number of Black women who met at other women-oriented political events, particularly abortion rights rallies, formed an organization called Black Sisters United. Linda Burnham, a CORE activist since high school and a member of Black Sisters United, joined the TWWA at Perry's suggestion. The West Coast TWWA operated under the same anti-imperialist, antisexist, antiracist philosophy as the East Coast branch with Perry acting as liaison. Yet, she notes, the activities of the two branches were consistent only in their adherence to the same ideological stance (Perry 1998). Perry was the main organizer on the West Coast and therefore shaped the activities of that branch. One of its activities was organizing health information fairs for communities of color. The East Coast branch, on the other hand, focused on articulating the connections

between feminism and anti-imperialism through the publication of the TWWA newspaper *Triple Jeopardy*.

THE NATIONAL BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATION. In the late 1960s, many Black women did not fully understand the meaning feminism could hold for them, and downplayed the potential importance of Black women getting together to talk. In a 1974 report to *Ms.* magazine on the founding of the National Black Feminist Organization, Margaret Sloan, the organization's only president, described how a three-hour discussion unexpectedly continued on well into the night: "We listened. We laughed. We interrupted each other, not out of disrespect, but out of that immediate identification with those words and feeling that we had each said and felt...many times alone. We had all felt guilty and crazy about our beliefs. And yet, all the things that have divided black women from each other in the past, kept us from getting to that room sooner, seemed not to be important"(Sloan 1974, 98).

Using their interpersonal connections to other activists and acquaintances, Black feminists across the country gathered in groups to examine what feminism had to offer them. Yet, they also questioned whether their involvement in feminist activism would benefit or harm the overall struggle of Black liberation. In the process of these discussions, Black women shared their experiences as racially gendered and impoverished people and discovered their commonalities.

While Beal had given attention to sterilization abuse as a reproductive rights issue of Black women, Sloan and members of the NBFO gathering noted that the recent Supreme Court decision in Roe v. Wade sparked sexist rhetoric, prompting many Black women to consider feminism as a viable political option. Noting Black Nationalist denouncements of the pro-abortion decision as favoring genocide, and the women's movement's singular focus on abortion as the only reproductive rights issue, fifteen of the thirty Black feminists from the initial meeting held a press conference on August 15, 1973.

Although initially they had called the press conference to announce plans for a regional Black feminist conference, Eleanor Holmes Norton (then New York City Human Rights Commissioner) and Sloan broadened the focus to tackle head on myths about Black women and feminism. By pointing out that Black men could not achieve liberation without Black women, Sloan addressed the misconception that feminism divided the race. She and Norton also countered accusations of selling out by

arguing that Black women's entrance into the women's movement would inject an antiracist politic into that movement and shift its focus from gender oppression alone (Campbell 1973, 36). Having addressed several points of contention, Sloan and Norton announced plans for an Eastern regional conference in December and declared the formation of the National Black Feminist Organization a historic moment in both Black and women's history.

In an interview I conducted with Sloan, she admitted that announcing the formation of a national organization was a spur of the moment decision at the previous night's meeting. The women in attendance thought that they would be taken more seriously if they called themselves a national organization and referred to chapters in San Francisco, Cleveland, and Chicago. This proved to be a tactical error: they received a deluge of calls (400+) the following day from women wanting to join the (nonexistent) local chapters mentioned at the press conference (Davis 1988, 44). While the New York women did have contacts in the other cities, the infrastructure to support the influx of new members was not yet present.

Still, this response to the NBFO announcement, along with the overwhelmingly positive response Sloan had received from Black women during a two-year speaking tour with Gloria Steinem, convinced her that the time was right for a national organization. Later, noting the coverage by *The New York Times* and the German newspaper *Das Speigel*, as opposed to the lack of coverage by the Black press, Alice Walker voiced the disappointment of many Black feminists that their interests clearly were marginalized in the Black community. Several indicators spoke to the number of other Black women who felt marginalized by both the Black and the women's movements. They included the more than two hundred women (ranging in age from age eighteen to fifty-five) who attended the NBFO's first public meeting, the influx of women at the Eastern Regional Conference who discussed issues such as feminism, civil rights, and Black male-female relationships, and a special section of letters to the editor in the May 1974 issue of *Ms.* heralding the Eastern Regional Conference as a turning point in Black women's organizing (Golden 1974, 36; Davis 1988, 44; Sloan 1974, 99). Not only did the NBFO move forward through openings created by the civil rights and women's movements, the organization itself also held open the door for other Black feminist groups, including the Combahee River Collective and the

National Alliance of Black Feminists. A lack of formal infrastructure created tensions that gave birth to organizations that did not agree with the direction of the NBFO. Black feminists in Boston, for instance, believed that the national organization did not adequately address class and sexual orientation in its mandate. The Combahee River Collective emerged as a challenger to the NBFO's elite position as the organization with, at the time, the most widespread attention and influence over large numbers of Black feminists.

THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF BLACK FEMINISTS. NBFO can be credited with prompting the consciousness-raising efforts of Chicago area Black feminists. From June 1974 to September 1975, Black feminists in Chicago, under the banner of the NBFO, conducted consciousness-raising sessions around issues such as employment, access to childcare, rape, drug abuse, and incarcerated women. Yet, citing a lack of communication on chapter formation procedures, Brenda Eichelberger, the initiator of Chicago NBFO, split from the national body to form an organization that could speak specifically to the needs of women in the Midwest.[6]

In January 1975, the NBFO's chapters in formation received a letter from the national office detailing reasons for the inadequate communication, including the lack of human and financial resources to maintain dialogue (NBFO 1974). Still, by September, the Chicago women, particularly Eichelberger, decided that the need for Black feminist action in their city was urgent and they could no longer wait for directives from the national body. From September 1975 to May 1976, the Black feminists in Chicago worked out their own organizational structure for a new group, the National Alliance of Black Feminists. The NABF filled in some of the gaps left by the NBFO by formulating a Black Woman's Bill of Rights which spoke to the objectives of the organization and designed standing committees to work on short- and long-range plans. The NABF also broadened their support base by allowing Black men and whites to join the organization as dues-paying affiliates, as long as they supported the NABF's mission, which was attaining the right of Black women to full social, political, and economic equality (NABF n.d.).

With this mission and a stronger organizational foundation, the NABF did not split from the NBFO for ideological reasons, but from impatience at watching the NBFO cast about for a focus and functioning infrastructure. Eichelberger, Brenda Porter, and Janie Nelson built upon the ideas

of the NBFO independently from the national organization because they were unwilling to lose the momentum of interest in Black feminist organizing among women in Chicago and the surrounding area.

THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE. The Combahee River Collective, on the other hand, had concrete differences with the NBFO's seemingly bourgeois political stance and inattention to issues of heterosexism. Nevertheless, the NBFO did provide future members of Combahee with a sense of Black feminist collective identity. Barbara Smith learned about the NBFO's Eastern Regional Conference through her sister Beverly, who worked at Ms. magazine with Margaret Sloan. Barbara Smith had been active in CORE as a youth and in the anti-war movement as a college student. However she was dubious of the women's movement from the time of her initial contacts with white feminists in graduate school and political work:

> [The Eastern Regional Conference] was really pivotal for me because, see, I could never see myself joining a white women's organization. I just couldn't even imagine that. The first time I heard about feminism I thought those women were crazy. I thought they were *perfectly crazy*. I could not even understand it. And my sister says the same thing because, see, my sister, being at the University of Chicago, she was at the place where some of the strongest feminists—early feminists in the country was growing up. Heather Booth, you know, and all the rest of them.... We both talked about how we thought these people were just crazy because we couldn't understand what white women had to complain about. It [the Eastern Regional Conference] was a very positive experience for me, but there were days when it was like, 'Oh, my goodness, I'm the only black woman/woman of color in this room.' But I had never gone to a NOW meeting. I never did that. So having something called the National Black Feminist Organization made it possible for me to be a Black feminist because I just couldn't imagine being involved in a white women's group. (Smith 1998)

The Smith sisters voiced the ambivalence during this period of Black women who thought feminism was a crazy invention of privileged white women, but still attended the Eastern Regional Conference in order to move beyond media and Black Nationalist generated stereotypes. When Barbara Smith returned to Boston with the names of other local women who had attended the conference, she posted signs for a local chapter meeting of the NBFO in Roxbury, Boston's largest Black community.

In 1975, after a brief time away from Boston, Smith connected with her sister Beverly and Demita Frazier to reconstitute the local NBFO chapter. Their initial meetings at the Cambridge Women's Center focused on consciousness-raising. It was through this process that they examined the incipient politics of the NBFO. Several socialist and Marxist members at the meeting brought with them a breadth of political knowledge that included a class-based analysis of the oppression of Black women. Fine-tuning their socialist critique of the NBFO, Smith recalls a certain level of dissatisfaction with the national organization:

> I don't think that we thought it was fine for them [the National Office] to be going the way we were going because we were dealing with race and class realities. I mean, no Black woman is going to be served by a simple NOW agenda. You see what I'm saying? We wanted to integrate a race/class analysis with an anti-sexist analysis and practice. And we didn't just want to add on racism and class oppression like white women did. And so, I think that we felt a NOW-type approach was definitely not going to work for Black women. (Smith 1998)

Rather than alienate themselves within the group by attempting to force ideological changes, the Boston women decided to split from the national NBFO. Having named their new group after a heroic military initiative led by Harriet Tubman in 1863, Frazier and the Smith sisters proceeded to craft a Black feminist political statement. Widely read and anthologized today as a definitive text for Black socialist lesbian feminism, the Combahee River Collective Statement still carries with it the legacy of the NBFO.

BLACK WOMEN ORGANIZED FOR ACTION. The final group, Black Women Organized for Action, was formed in the San Francisco Bay Area in response to the lack of representation of Black women in local women's organizing. Though members had strong roots in the civil rights movement, they had gained equally valuable skills in the women's movement. More so than any of the other organizations, BWOA exhibits a clear link to the women's movement. Aileen Hernandez was one of several Black women who played a key role in the women's movement before the emergence of distinct Black feminist organizations.[7] Hernandez, appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to serve on the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, was instrumental in the landmark case to end discriminatory practices against flight attendants. Disillusioned by the

limited powers of the EEOC, Hernandez resigned and later joined NOW, which she believed could more effectively push for social justice for women. In 1967 Hernandez served as NOW's Western vice-president and, in 1970, succeeded Betty Friedan as the organization's president (Rudolph 1993, 276).

Hernandez maintained that NOW's statement of purpose addressed Black women's issues as feminist issues. In fact, Hernandez, Patsy Fulcher, and Eleanor Spikes, were part of NOW's National Task Force on Minority Women and Women's Rights (Gant n.d., 128). In addition to their participation in NOW, these three women co-founded Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA), because they wanted explicitly to define and work on Black women's concerns, as well as to encourage Black women's leadership.

By the early 1970s, due to the efforts of the civil rights movement, Blacks had made significant inroads in electoral politics. In addition to grounding in the women's movement, BWOA also had roots in a political organization that was originally established as a fundraising auxiliary for Black male politicians. Dames for Dellums had been formed to raise money for Ron Dellums, a Black politician from Berkeley who opposed the Vietnam War, in his first run for Congressional office in 1970. Valerie Bradley, a BWOA member from 1973 to 1977, recalled that Dames for Dellums continued after the election, still in the auxiliary fundraising role, as Black Women Organized for Political Action (BWOPA). Bradley was critical of accepting this helping role: "This group supposedly had the same goals that eventually BWOA had, but what I found was they seemed to exist primarily to hold fundraisers for male candidates, to re-elect male incumbents and did not seem to really be encouraging women to get involved in a more active way in the political process—by running for office, anyway, doing the grunt work" (Bradley 1997).

Some members of BWOPA decided to form BWOA, a single-sex organization dedicated to "work to develop a consciousness in Black women that politics is a 365 days a year activity, in which we must all participate if we are to survive and progress" (BWOA n.d). From the beginning, BWOA's role was defined as more than supplementary to Black men's activities, though they did not stop supporting Black men in their bid for public office. In fact political candidates, regardless of race, gender, or partisan affiliation, actively courted BWOA's endorsement.

Fifteen women founded Black Women Organized for Action on January 10, 1973, when they assembled in San Francisco to challenge the Mayor's

Committee on the Status of Women. The committee had conducted hearings on the status of the city's women without including any testimony from Black women. As Eleanor Spikes, a founding member, told *Essence* magazine, "We decided that it was high time to test the Bay Area's longstanding image of grand liberalism."(Gant n.d., 46). Through written and oral testimony to the Mayor's Committee, BWOA successfully addressed the needs and interests of Black women in the area, creating an identity for themselves in the public arena as Black and feminist.

Empowered by this first action, BWOA's founders built an organization designed to voice the concerns of Black women, and also to cultivate Black women's leadership in addressing those needs. BWOA, its leaders said, "decided to educate, develop and motivate Black women to function at all levels in the community—identifying issues, devising strategies for solving problems, finding and encouraging women to run for office and seek appointments to boards and commissions" (Fulcher et al. 1974, 52).

Black feminists came out of civil rights and women's movement organizations with a growing awareness of their particular place in the U.S. economic system. Aware of the ways that these movements ignored the intersections of racism and sexism, Black feminists formed their own organizations to address their needs. Yet they also began to discover, as they struggled to structure their organizations, that there were significant differences among Black women. United through a collective racial and gender identity, they discovered cleavages based on their inattention to class and sexual orientation as shapers of the parameters of Black women's oppression.

INTERSTITIAL POLITICS AND BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE. Black feminists' developing collective identity significantly influenced how they structured their own organizations. Emerging from the same sociopolitical conditions as the New Left and women's liberation, Black feminists used known patterns of organizing to structure their organizations. Some had been involved in hierarchical, bureaucratic civil rights organizations. Others were members of organizations schooled in participatory democracy. Yet Black feminists were also part of the emerging women's movement and adopted some of its innovations. Given these disparate influences, Black feminists organized across the spectrum of structures, from hierarchical to collectivist to a mixture of both forms.

Commonalties and differences among Black feminist organizations reflect the heterogeneity of their political views. Freeman maintains that

"the different style and organization of the two branches [older and younger branches of the women's movement] was largely derived from the different kind of political education and experiences of each group of women"(Freeman 1973, 797). Such an analysis, applied to Black feminists' organizational structure, provides the link between resource mobilization (organizational structure) and collective identity formation (ideology). As Black feminists' understanding of multiple jeopardy and of their collective identity grew, they found that their organizations needed to reflect their political education, understanding of the intersection of race and gender, and personal experiences.

Organization leaders faced the tasks of mobilizing adherents and framing issues in ways that linked them to the organization. Archival records on Black feminist organizations reveal that organizational structure often mirrored their organization founders' previous experiences in the civil rights or women's movements. Leaders who emerged from civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, instituted hierarchical forms of organization, whereas women's movement activists formed nonhierarchical organizations.

Of the five groups in this study, the NBFO and NABF were hierarchical organizations that had formal officers, written by-laws, and a division between intellectual versus administrative work. Conversely, the TWWA, Combahee, and BWOA were collectivist organizations that rejected hierarchy and sought more egalitarian modes of decision-making. Many founders of Black feminist organizations gained organizing experience in hierarchically structured civil rights organizations as youths, but decentralized, student-led organizations (for example SNCC and CORE) radicalized them. Two equally daunting tasks—the formation of collective identity and creating organizational infrastructure—began to accommodate one another, as Black feminists discovered that not all Black women held the same political beliefs. Some organizations even underwent dramatic shifts in their structure as they attempted to distribute power among their members according to their evolving understanding of interstitial politics and how these politics shaped power dynamics within their organizations.

HIERARCHICAL BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS. Both the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and its spin-off, the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF), were hierarchical organizations with formal officers and by-laws directing the daily functioning of the group. As founders of both organizations soon learned,

within rapidly expanding hierarchical organizations the burden of responsibility usually fell to those selected (by election or default) to lead. It was then up to the leader or leaders to delegate responsibilities, motivate others to complete assigned tasks, and align potential recruits into agreement with the organization's framework. For NBFO leaders, these tasks proved difficult because of the organization's rapid membership growth and the struggle to define a Black feminist collective identity. The NABF, as an offshoot of the NBFO, learned from its predecessor's mistakes. Early on, NABF founders defined the leadership structure and established an organizational vision before formally announcing their group's existence.

As seen in figure 2, the NBFO experienced three transformations as it tried to create a structure amenable to its feminist constituency.

PHASES OF NBFO'S LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

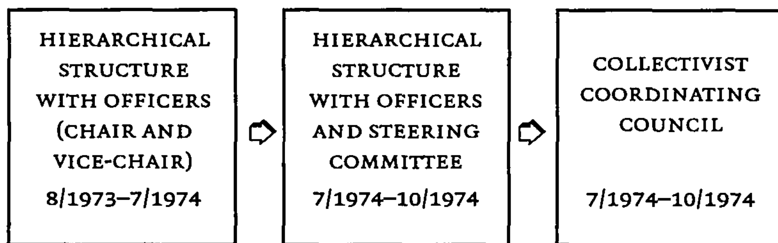

Figure 2

The NBFO's membership base grew too rapidly, at least on paper, and the founding members did not anticipate the overwhelming demand for a national Black feminist network and the subsequent complications that arose in organizing this group. Problems included domination of the organization by the initial members, lack of long-range planning, burnout, unmonitored growth, absence of clear lines of accountability, poor or nonexistent office systems, and extremely long meetings that were not conducive to action or to retention of members (Avyazian 1986, 173, n. 1). The NBFO did not have an established leadership base at the time of their press conference nor had they mapped out a clear direction for the future of the organization.

From May 1973 until July 1974, Margaret Sloan and Jane Galvin-Lewis served as NBFO's chair and vice-chair respectively and oversaw daily operations. Sloan and Galvin-Lewis were familiar with hierarchical

organizing through their involvement with the civil rights and women's rights movements. This was the model they initially saw as effective in taking advantage of openings in the political opportunity structure. NBFO's founding members faced several tasks. They simultaneously needed to define the organization's agenda, orient women in other cities who wanted to form chapters, and effectively delegate the work of running the national office in New York City. A hierarchical structure seemingly was the fastest way to organize given the unique circumstances of the NBFO's formation. When an array of Black women, all with differing definitions of Black feminist activism, joined the organization, NBFO's leadership was unprepared to effectively meet their demands.

Sloan, a recognized public speaker on Black feminism, and Galvin-Lewis, a veteran of the women's movement through the Women's Action Alliance, possessed the skills to run a national organization, but were soon overwhelmed with the scale of the task. In hindsight, both women voiced the wish that they had had time to develop the organizational structure of the NBFO. Citing burnout and personal issues as reasons, Sloan resigned as chair of NBFO in July 1974 (Davis 1998; Galvin and Lewis 1997; Sloan 1997). By August 1974 the women left on the steering committee had increased the number of meetings from one a month to one a week and had established a coordinating council to plan the organization's future.

The evolution from a bureaucratic, formalized structure to a collectively run coordinating council reflected the desire of the leadership and the general body for a truly participatory, democratic organization. The founders wanted membership input on policy and structural issues, but they did not have channels for receiving input from chapters or members outside of New York City. The NBFO's shift from a leader-centered structure to a multiple-member coordinating council was an effort to solicit that input. It also allowed the organization to stave off activist burnout by drawing on the resources of more than a few members. This new delegation of tasks established accountability, and the coordinating council benefited from the groundwork established by Galvin-Lewis and Sloan, who had dealt with constant challenges to Black feminists' race/gender analysis early in the organization's existence.

Until the election of an executive board in October 1974, a temporary coordinating council worked to define the focus of the organization in order to attract recruits and regain the trust of its membership. The coordinating council hoped to jumpstart the NBFO in New York City with a

number of committees and services such as a clothing exchange, "rap line," for social service referrals and advice, and regular child care at the NBFO's monthly meetings. Most important, the coordinating council planned to produce a monthly newsletter to keep dues-paying members around the country better informed about the operations of NBFO.

The monthly newsletter was the only initiative accomplished, publishing four issues. It called for establishing a new, democratically elected seven-person coordinating council. The general body agreed to this leadership structure and, as Galvin-Lewis recalled, the temporary coordinating council moved closer to feminist ideals of cooperative leadership. However, as is apparent in the following conversation, she and Deborah Singletary recall the pitfalls of egalitarianism:

GALVIN-LEWIS: We divided the work, we ran the meetings, we did the agendas, we did the press *with* the various committees. See, that was the whole point of having a coordinating council instead of president, vice-president, treasurer—all that kind of thing was to spread the decisions over the group.

INTERVIEWER: And so did that work better than having the officers?

GALVIN-LEWIS: No. Not in my opinion.

SINGLETARY: I never realized that the coordinating council was the problem. Did we have in-fighting on the coordinating—?

GALVIN-LEWIS: Not at all.

SINGLETARY: I don't remember the coordinating council being the problem. I felt the problem was our own egalitarian way of being. That we wanted to avoid the more patriarchal concept of, "What we say is right." We wanted to hear from other people. I think that's the part that didn't work.

GALVIN-LEWIS: Yeah. That's what I meant: that the coordinating council was the format that we used to get to that goal. That's what I meant. So, we slipped from president, vice-president. But the coordinating council itself remained solid 'til the end and we worked beautifully together, I think and it was a great—that was the one good thing. The relationships...were the good things that came of the coordinating council. That the whole idea—that it was born to spread out the

leadership was, in my opinion, a mistake (Galvin-Lewis and Singletary Interview 26 April 1997).

In her comments, Galvin-Lewis makes a distinction between a small core group working together collectively and attempted egalitarianism among *all* organization members. A pitfall of egalitarianism, or structurelessness, is that factionalism can more easily erupt between members with differing political agendas and ideologies who claim a stake in organizational structure. Unfortunately, the NBFO was never in an organizationally or ideologically stable position, and certain factions took advantage of its egalitarianism, leading to the defection of chapters.

The NABF, the Chicago chapter of the NBFO, was not privy to details of the disorganization in New York, but judging from the lack of communication with the national office, they assumed that all was not well. After contacting other NBFO chapter leaders in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and Detroit about problems with the national office, the Chicago chapter decided to split and form their own organization. Brenda Eichelberger and other members took a six-month hiatus to plan the structure of the organization.

The result of NABF's planning was a three-tiered organizational structure that included a board of directors.[8] In theory, this highly bureaucratized structure delegated responsibility and accountability to several members of the NABF. In reality, the NABF had difficulties keeping these unpaid positions filled and, thus, the majority of the work fell to Eichelberger and Gayle Porter, the chairperson. Eichelberger, the executive director for the duration of the organization's existence, was responsible for representing NABF publicly and for fundraising. Porter oversaw the daily operations of the organization, such as internal finances and communications.

The NABF also relied on a steering committee composed of the chairs of each active NABF committee, and an advisory board of consultants.[9] The advisory board consisted of invited prominent Black women from universities, labor organizations, media associations, and social service organizations, who kept the organization informed about the needs of the community. The board also helped to obtain resources for the organization through solicitation of funds and by serving as an oversight body for grant applications (Porter 1998).

In its work over six years, the NABF adopted an effective hierarchical leadership structure and, as much as possible, diffused responsibilities

among a number of its members. Compared to the leaders of NBFO, which existed for only two years, NABF leaders realized that the survival of the organization depended on using its primary resource—its members—without overtaxing them. In spite of its hierarchical organization, the NABF served as an incipient model for the type of feminist institution Freeman proposed: a structure best facilitating the completion of tasks to move the organization forward from introspection to direct action (Freeman 1997, 204).

Yet, contrary to Freeman's hopes for this form of organization, all members of the NABF did not feel empowered to make decisions. The NABF was not unlike other women's movement groups in which friendship networks, which serve as effective recruitment channels, can also create an elite. Some members were jealous of the amount of attention Eichelberger received in the media, and others thought she was dictatorial in defining the terms of Black feminism in the Chicago area (see Ritchie, in Barbara Smith Papers 1997; Nelson 1997; Porter 1998). The NABF did not manage to avoid the star system and participation from members was not as active as it might have been. Members seemed to feel no obligation to put resources into the group once they had accomplished their personal objectives (Nelson 1997).

COLLECTIVIST BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS. The Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA), the Combahee River Collective, and Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA), like most women's liberation organizations of the time, functioned as collectives. These three organizations had smaller aspirations than the NBFO and the NABF, who wanted to attract members and influence racial and gender politics nationally, while building their local support base. There were significant differences in how the TWWA, Combahee, and BWOA enacted collectivist politics, but these organizations were successful in combining models from the civil rights and women's movements into their organizing principles at the local level.

As a direct descendant of the SNCC, the Third World Women's Alliance was, in Beal's words, "ultra-democratic" (Beal 1998). They operated under the inherited philosophy of participatory democracy, more specifically of democratic centralism:

> Democratic Centralism ensured organizational and ideological unity through a centralized administrative structure and a decentralized implementation structure. In other words, individual members and

> chapters were directly responsible to the National Coordinating Committee for carrying out its directives, program and ideological platform, but how each chapter chose to do this depended on local conditions and decisions. The organization supported collective leadership, collective decisions and input from all members, but abhorred individualism and disregard for the will of the majority. (Anderson-Bricker 1999, 61)

The collective structure encouraged members to work in all facets of the organization, including decision-making. The East Coast branch of TWWA had a steering committee, but membership on the committee was open to all members and all decisions were brought to the general body. The West Coast branch did not have a steering committee. Instead, Cheryl Perry served as leader, contrary to the stated goals of democratic centralism. Other members of the West Coast TWWA eventually challenged Perry's leadership when they wanted to take the organization in a different direction, which included collectivist politics.[10]

The Combahee River Collective did not have an articulated definition of collectivity, and decision-making was informal. Similar to Honor Ford Smith's contemporary experience in the Jamaican women's collective Sistren, discrepancies in how members defined collectivity masked power differentials between Black feminists within Combahee in the 1970s (H. Smith 1996). Freeman points out that, though groups advocating structurelessness may believe that all members have equal power, "structurelessness becomes a way of masking power, and within the women's movement it is usually most strongly advocated by those who are the most powerful (whether they are conscious of their power or not)" (Freeman 1997, 203). In 1975, Barbara Smith wrote: [M]ajor elements of our [Black feminist] movement seem bent upon parodying the hierarchy and power-mongering of "mainstream" organizations. The only way Black feminism can survive is as a radical movement whose goal is the overturning of patriarchy, the complete questioning of things as they are. In our internal structure we should strive for collectivity and reject the tokenism and careerism that has undermined other movements" (B. Smith 1975).

In her support of collectivity, Smith aspired for Combahee to observe lessons from civil rights and women's movement organizations and made an effort to organize nonhierarchically. Members of Combahee did work together on a broad range of issues, but interpersonal dynamics, the

time women had available for movement tasks, and the needs of the movement were key considerations when attempting collectivity and an informal organization structure.

Smith was aware that her position as a leader in Combahee gave her a different perspective on the organization's collectivity than that of those who felt they were outside of leadership positions. Smith's understanding of the leadership of the organization was based on a distinction between collective decision-making and the role of the leader. She defines leadership as "really based upon someone who did the work and who had the capacity in their lives to fit in doing the work.... It wasn't a male model of leadership" (B. Smith 1998). No one was officially in charge, but biographical availability and personality played a large part in the assumption of leadership roles.

Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and Beverly Smith emerged as the central leaders in Combahee, jointly writing the statement of the organization's principles. These women were not selected leaders, but their biographical availability allowed them to invest more time in the organization. Many members of Combahee were undergraduates, were pursuing advanced degrees, working full-time jobs, engaged in other political causes, or a combination of these activities. Without establishing a subjective hierarchy of commitment, it became difficult to measure availability to the organization. How individual members prioritized their obligations to Combahee, to their families, and to their political ideals played a significant role in the development of an elite within the group.

Two members, Margo Okazawa-Rey and Mercedes Tompkins, disagree with the view of Combahee as collectively run. Tompkins and Okazawa-Rey, housemates in a collectively owned sixteen-room Victorian house, learned of Combahee through word of mouth and joined in the winter of 1975. Okawawa-Rey, a social worker, first participated in consciousness-raising with a branch of the homophile organization Daughters of Bilitis, and later joined Combahee to meet with other Black lesbian feminists. Tompkins, at twenty-one, was not politically active with any particular group when she joined Combahee and was only beginning to define her lesbian identity.

In contrast to Smith's assessment of Combahee's collectivity, Tompkins and Okazawa-Rey both experienced hierarchy within the group and contest the use of the term collective to describe it. Tompkins agrees that Combahee's members discussed issues as a group, but maintains that she was not part of an "underground network" that made significant

decisions. In her words, "Before things came to the group, things got filtered. So most of the requests for information or participation, or anything that was...on the docket for Combahee, went through Barbara Smith" (Tompkins 1998). Okazawa-Rey concurs with Tompkins's perspective, believing that certain core members held disproportionate power within Combahee: "I think "collective" was probably a misnomer. I think the ideal was to have it a collective, but because it was really loose—first of all, for a collective to be a collective there needs to be...clear ideas about decision-making that are consensus and all that...So, in a way, it was kind of hierarchical.... It was tricky. It was a tension there" (Okazawa-Rey 1997).

It is possible that Barbara Smith's talents as a writer put her in a privileged position in a movement that valued connecting the personal to the political through the written word and verbal acuity in general. Additionally, by the late 1970s, the women's movement began to make disciplinary inroads into academia through women's studies, creating another space for Smith's work as a feminist theorist and literary critic and highlighting her role in the articulation of contemporary Black feminism. As Smith accurately notes, in social movements "people who write get far more visibility than those who don't" (Smith 1998). This is particularly true when we consider the civil rights movement; women performing in the private sphere were not recognized as leaders, unlike men, who represented the movement in public. In the same way, until more scholars reconstruct narratives, and until more Black feminist movement participants record their memoirs, well-known personalities will continue to predominate in the historical record.

Black Women Organized for Action was also collectively run, but this organization began with a well-articulated vision that "those who share the work, share the power and the glory" (Fulcher et al. 1974, 63). The organization was structured so that leadership, work, and community involvement were shared among members willing to participate. Instead of designated officers or assuming leaderlessness, BWOA operated with three coordinators who served for a three-month tenure. Coordinators convened, organized, and facilitated meetings, as well as serving as spokespersons for the group in the media and in direct action (Fulcher et al. 1994, 52).

This structure was consistent with the organization's mission to develop leadership among as many different Black women as possible. In addition to facilitating the work of the organization, Aileen Hernandez

found that the rotating coordinator structure recognized the varied political positions of Black women:

> The way we were structured we gave whoever happened to be the coordinators for that quarterly period full authority to do what they wanted. We had some very distinctly different approaches when we had coordinators because some of the coordinators were very heavily involved in the Black Power movement at that point in time. Some of them were very much involved in the Democratic Party. We almost never had an ideological difference because we had agreed that one of the things we wanted to do was link African American women from whatever perspective they were in. And when people sort of said, "Well, that's crazy because some people will do wild things," we said, "Well, how much trouble can you make in three months?" What we said essentially was, "Get the ideas out there. We don't run from any idea." It certainly made a difference in some cases as to who was participating in a particular event, but it was never an ideological difference in terms of how the organization functioned. (Hernandez 1997)

Potential problems with this kind of structure included inconsistency in information dissemination and poorly run meetings, but BWOA managed to operate effectively for seven years.[11] By honoring the diversity of Black women's political interests, BWOA appealed to many different women, inside and outside of the organization. Members were free to choose the activities in which they participated and they were not obligated to subscribe to an organizationally-dictated political perspective. The imperative for BWOA was for Black women to be involved in political organizing in any way they chose. Hernandez also notes some members participated throughout the duration of the organization because they "were philosophically committed to bridging all of the different points of view in the African American community" (Hernandez 1997). The survival of Black communities, in BWOA's opinion, did not depend on one *solution but on the conscious, consistent political awareness of the communities'* members.

Another reason for the success of the coordinator structure was the number of women who also held memberships and leadership roles in other social movement organizations in the Bay Area. BWOA provided a forum for women to develop their leadership skills further or to experiment with styles that were not permitted in mixed-sex organizations. Take, for example, Flora Gilford's experience as a coordinator in

BWOA as described by Valerie Bradley: "And Flora had been, you know, had raised her children and worked at the Veteran's Administration as a director of purchasing.... But she said that she really felt intimidated about being in a leadership position or whatever until she got in BWOA and got so involved. She was a coordinator at one point. And it gave her a lot of experiences. I mean, Flora is just a dynamo now. She does all kinds of things now. And she did then. I saw her grow. You know, I saw a lot of women grow who might not have done something had they not been encouraged in an organization like BWOA" (Bradley 1997).

In addition to fostering leadership, the rotating structure thwarted the media's tendency to create a star spokesperson. This avoidance of star representatives also prevented BWOA from becoming a "power base for any one faction or personality" (Gant n.d., 128).

Discussion

In summary, the leadership structures and emergence narratives of Black feminist organizations reflect the position of these groups at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Though they struggled against discrimination on both fronts, Black feminist organizations would have been completely different had they argued for concentrating on either race or gender. Instead they developed a political viewpoint that would accommodate racial and gender concerns. By coming together and discussing their experiences, Black feminists realized that they could form organizations independent of Black men and white women that would address their particular survival issues based on the intersectionality of oppressions.

Black feminist organizations serve as an exemplary case study for resource mobilization theories on leadership styles because they offer several models for analysis. Leaders of organizations, particularly nascent ones with tenuous financial status and memberships bases, often face the dual dilemmas of keeping their organizations running and dealing with interpersonal dynamics. For example, Sloan, Eichelberger, and Smith all were leaders with written and verbal talents that thrust them into the spotlight in their communities as cogent voices of Black feminism. Two emerged as leaders of hierarchical Black feminist organizations, but one led a collective. Did they intentionally take control of the direction and focus of emerging Black feminist organizations? Or were

they enacting leadership skills and styles that, while they may have seemed dictatorial, sustained their organizations through the crucial time of emergence? These women were not purged from the Black feminist movement, but eventually they left the organizations they helped establish because of interpersonal conflicts related to the star system. Regardless of their organization's structure, whether hierarchical or collective, leaders in the women's movement faced the dual tension of successfully disseminating information while avoiding the perpetuation of hierarchies among Black women.

With the East Coast TWWA and BWOA, two organizations with articulated definitions of collectivity, the media's desire to create star spokespersons was thwarted because all members could serve as spokespersons. The TWWA's principle of participatory democracy and the BWOA's "sharing of the power and the glory" grounded those organizations in group-centered leadership. Particularly useful from the TWWA and BWOA models is the strategy of creating an agreement between the organization and its members that decision-making is communal, and framing leadership as a responsibility instead of a right.

Black feminist organizations worked toward modeling a feminist philosophy of leadership with varying degrees of success. Organizations that began with collective structures and an explicit articulation of the meaning of those structures fared the best in avoiding factionalism and in developing widely diffused leadership among their members. Those organizations with hierarchical structures found that their leaders grew weary of carrying the load of mobilizing and of trying to articulate the plurality of Black women's voices.

Although they were based on previous experiences in the civil rights and women's movements, Black feminist organizations developed innovations on the basis of understanding how the matrix of domination influences hierarchy. Attentive to the limits placed on women in other organizations, Black feminists worked to create egalitarian organizations that accommodated the varying political perspectives of Black women. They incorporated a class analysis when devising their organizational structures with the goal of allowing as many women as possible to participate in the organizing of a Black feminist agenda, despite economic or educational limitations.

Yet Black feminists also contended with the limitations on resource mobilization wrought by their multiple identities. Few Black women could spare the time or money to commit to such organizations at a level

that would ensure organizational longevity. Considering that Black feminists, in general, earned less income and had less discretionary time than their white counterparts, the longevity of these organizations over a twelve year span, as an aggregate, is impressive.

Overall, Black feminist organizations were products of tensions around race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, and were as well seats of tension themselves. They were shaped by and were shapers of openings in the political opportunity structure that allowed for the challenges of identity-based movements. An assessment of Black feminist organizations on their own merit, as a force to be reckoned with in the Black and women's movements, offers a valuable case study for the comparative examination of social movement organizations through the lens of multiple identities.

Appendix

BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS 1968–1980

	THIRD WORLD WOMEN'S ALLIANCE	NATIONAL BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATION	NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF BLACK FEMINISTS	COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE	BLACK WOMEN ORGANIZED FOR ACTION
ORGANIZATIONAL INFLUENCES:	NAACP SNCC	CORE Women's Action Alliance	NBFO	CORE Anti-war Movement NBFO	NOW Gov't Civil Rights Agencies
DATE OF EMERGENCE:	East Coast: 1968 West Coast: 1971	1973	1976	1974	1973
NUMBER OF CORE MEMBERS:	12	9	6	3	12
NUMBER OF MEMBERS AT LARGE:	200	2000	133	400	400
LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE:	Collectivist	Bureaucratic (1973–1975) Collectivist (1975)	Bureaucratic	Collectivist	Collectivist
DATE OF DECLINE:	East Coast: 1977 West Coast: 1980	1975	1980	1980	1980

NOTES

The author would like to thank Deborah King, an anonymous *Meridians* reviewer, and Kimberly Wallace-Sanders for their thorough and insightful suggestions.

1. Patricia Hill Collins defines the matrix of domination as a system that demands attention to the interlocking and simultaneous nature of oppression (that is, to the intersections of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability).
2. The organizational data and the oral history interviews served to give me a clearer picture of events during a particularly exciting, yet volatile political moment in U.S. social movement history. A significant limitation of the oral history interviews is that they developed as a snowball sample, so activists most often referred me to friends or acquaintances with whom they held similar political views or were aligned in ideological disputes. Thus, I did not interview women who might be considered contenders to organizational power, leaving this study biased in favor of organization founders. I did, however, attempt to correct for this bias by weighing archival primary source material as a more accurate reflection of events and disputes than interviews given in hindsight.

   I should also note the methodological and ethical tensions around the use of oral history interviews for this project. As a historical and sociological analysis of little-researched organizations, I felt it was important to identify the organizations by their real titles. To disguise the names of the organizations would only further obfuscate the role of Black feminists in feminist organizing. However, the issue of revealing the names of Black feminist organization participants, particularly those interviewed for this research, posed a more significant dilemma. I submitted my interview survey and process for interviewing to Emory University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), a requirement for sociologists, though not for historians, and it was approved. I secured signed consent forms that noted that the interviewees could decline to answer questions or stop the interview. Only one person interviewed requested anonymity, and that request has been honored. The consent forms also specified that the interviews would be used for publication.

   Therefore, to honor the historical significance of this study, as well as the pivotal role of particular Black feminists in the movement, no names have been changed. I am of the opinion that all of the women I interviewed should be recognized for their role in making (Black) feminist history—regardless of how we in the present might interpret their actions or thoughts at the time.
3. While white women were confined by traditional gender norms of the public/private split, Black women worked predominately in the public sphere in *private* domestic situations. This construction created a paradoxical public/private split for Black women.
4. Here, I am distinguishing between social movements (SMs), social movement organizations (SMOs), and political actors—or the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of social interaction.

5. In 1970 the Cuban government set a goal to harvest ten million tons of sugar cane to demonstrate that the revolution could succeed despite American imperialist policies. In response, the Venceremos Brigade, a U.S-based group, organized to take young Americans to Cuba to help with the harvest and to expose them to socialism in practice. The brigade had two goals: (1) to break the U.S.-imposed blockade against Cuba and (2) to demonstrate the solidarity of all races of American youth by assisting with the harvest.
6. The Washington, D.C. and Detroit chapters experienced similar frustrations with the lack of NBFO infrastructure. Though the incipient affiliates appeared to be willing to contribute resources to the stabilization of the organization, the NBFO lacked formal channels for those contributions. The lack of direction also created leadership tensions, particularly between the Washington members and the New York-based NBFO leadership.
7. Several other women spearheaded the emergence of the Black feminist movement, challenging the dominance of white feminists' leadership and concerns. They include Pauli Murray, Mary Ann Weathers, Cellestine Ware, and Doris Wright.
8. The NABF's structure was strikingly similar to NBFO's proposed structure, suggesting cross-pollination between the two organizations. NABF's officers included the executive director, chairperson, recording secretary, corresponding secretary, treasurer, financial secretary, social service director, and communications coordinator.
9. NABF's advisory board consisted of such prominent women as Carol Moseley Braun, a state representative at that time; Aileen Hernandez, former president of NOW and a co-founder of Black Women Organized for Action; poet and professor Sonia Sanchez; writer Vertamae Grosvenor; and former U.S. congresswoman Yvonne Braithwaite Burke.
10. The organization that developed through the opening created by the West Coast TWWA was the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, a group of feminists of color and white feminists.
11. In 1974 BWOA fine-tuned its leadership structure by creating a steering committee to ease the transition from one coordinating team to the next. The steering committee consisted of the newly installed coordinators, the immediate past coordinators, and the facilitators of each meeting. The addition of a steering committee continued BWOA's mission of sharing the leadership of the organization, insuring that the organization did not collapse during transitions.

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