Critique and Coalitions: Black and White Feminists Working Together in the 1980s

Introduction

Debates over race and ethnicity within the women’s movement grew ever more complex through the 1980s. An increasing level of interaction between Black and white women within the women’s movement resulted in these issues assuming a much greater importance within feminist discourse of this period. Therefore, this chapter moves away from examining how different ethnic groups within the women’s movement functioned separately, and towards a consideration of how instead they interacted and attempted to move beyond the problems explored in the preceding chapters of this book. The early and mid-1980s saw a blossoming of Black feminism, mixed race collectives and renewed activism on the part of anti-racist feminists. This is not to say, however, that all white feminists responded to the critiques that were mounted of them; many reacted defensively, or simply ignored them.

The legacy of these debates – and of identity politics more widely – is a highly contested one. Despite the complexity of the issues at hand, the crisis of the movement that resulted has often been portrayed simplistically as either the result of the racism of white feminists, or the misplaced radicalism of Black women. For example, Sudbury’s analysis although in many ways thorough and excellent, overplays the racism of white feminists without seeking to understand what it was that made it difficult for white feminists to always respond adequately to the Black feminist critique.\(^1\) She alleges white feminists made allegations that accused Black women of ‘a divisive separatism’, ‘utilising aggressive male tactics’, ‘diverting the cause’ and ‘watering down feminism’.\(^2\) Yet her quotes are dubious and entirely from secondary sources: whilst there is certainly some truth to these accusations, I have yet to come across...
them put down so crudely. This is probably because most white feminists’ views – whilst often problematic – were generally a great deal more complex than this allows for. She also covers very little of the anti-racist efforts of white feminists beyond anti-racist CR groups, which she is very hostile to. Perhaps surprisingly, Predelli and Halsaa apparently unquestioningly accept her analysis. Conversely, as explored in the introduction, many memoirs of white feminists are largely hostile to identity politics, as are the interviewees in film made by Vanessa Engle, *Angry Wimmin*, one of whom (Al Garthwaite) claimed that she could not think of a single positive thing that identity politics had achieved, a seeming denial of the validity of the Black feminist critique and its positive impact upon feminism. Perhaps the most thoughtful and even-handed treatment to these debates is given by Heidi Safia Mirza in her introduction to *Black British Feminism*. This chapter is an attempt to reconstruct these interactions and debates, coalitions and enmities in a more subtle and nuanced fashion, allowing us to focus on points of engagement between Black and white feminists to a greater extent than has been allowed for in previous examinations. This will demonstrate that, despite the tensions between Black and white feminists, the movement was nevertheless able to salvage something positive from these often bitter debates. This chapter will first consider the critiques made by Black feminists of white feminists, before moving on to the responses made to this critique. I suggest that responding to these critiques was difficult for white women because they were so invested in a liberal discourse of racism that characterised it as a moral fault of the individual. Finally, I move to an examination of multi-racial collectives and coalitions to explore how Black and white feminists worked together day-to-day, and both the successes and tensions that these interactions engendered: I also point to the importance of place in the success of coalition work.

**The Black feminist critique**

The prime contention of the Black feminist critique was that white English feminists had little concept of the ways in which racism profoundly structured their lives as Black women. Furthermore, this ignorance was compounded by the white domination of most feminist groups, which created an environment in which Black women’s concerns were silenced: indeed, these concerns around ‘being heard’ within the women’s movement often attracted as much attention as the substance of the debates themselves. As Stella Dadzie suggested: