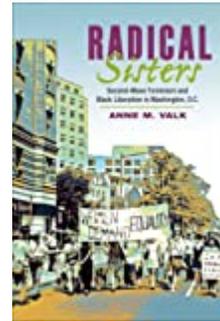


**Anne M. Valk.** *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xiv + 253 pp. Plates. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03298-1.



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## Grassroots Feminisms in Washington DC

Was the so-called second wave of feminism one movement or many? Did it borrow from other concurrent movements, or was it integrally related to them? Was it a white women's movement, or were the concerns and activism of poor people and women of color at the heart of the movement? Did feminism's mission grow ever more broad or did it dissolve into ineffective factions? Political parties, organizations, and also academic studies of social movements commonly assume that a movement's success is related to the movement's apparent internal unity or disunity and to the quality of its relations to other contemporaneous movements. Studies of 1960s and 1970s social movements across many disciplines often portray a movement starting from a common cause and then devolving as differences of strategy, focus, and purpose emerge through internal conflict, a watering-down of radical origins, and uneasy, if not also separatist, relations with other movements. Engaging these conundrums, *Radical Sisters* turns the lens to great effect: instead of measuring the strength of feminism on relative unity and disunity, historian Anne M. Valk shows

that diversity, dissent, and unity all comprised the movement. The book details the ways that the historical roots and evolution of feminist activism, even just within one urban area, owed everything to continuous adaptation, redefinition, overlap, and cross-fertilization with movements for racial liberation and economic justice, as well as gender equality. In so doing, Valk convincingly argues that second-wave feminism both grew out of and also dramatically influenced other contemporaneous movements. This is a refreshing and timely perspective on social movement dynamics as well as a vital contribution to the historiography of feminism in the United States.

*Radical Sisters* focuses on diverse but related grassroots movements as they emerged in Washington DC during the 1960s and 1970s. While providing insights into feminism and social movements for the country as a whole, DC plays a significant role in Valk's analysis. From the constraining as well as inspiring aspects of being the country's political capital, to the predominance of African American residents, Washington offered its activists a distinct mix of local and national perspec-

tives, and of grassroots, legislative, and policy-oriented strategies. Within this city, campaigns for black liberation and economic equality converged as well as diverged with demands to end gender oppression. While DC offered activists several different channels for addressing such concerns, Valk devotes the book to radicals or women who sought to use grassroots methods to transform rather than reform society. Given the porous definition of movements in DC, Valk examines a feminism comprised of both women who explicitly defined themselves as feminists and activists for whom the elimination of sexual or gender oppression did not constitute a primary goal, but who fought to elevate women's status in their own communities and in the larger society through movements for economic justice and black liberation (p. 5).

*Radical Sisters* begins by showing how poor and black people mobilized around direct action civil rights and anti-poverty movements, in part spurred on by such organizations as the Congress on Racial Equality, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the federally funded War on Poverty. Some of the women involved in that activism then effectively constituted a welfare rights movement, joined by public assistance recipients who campaigned to shape welfare policies, the nature and extent of the state's involvement in reproduction, the meanings of motherhood, and the economic status of women. Picking up on these efforts, radical feminism, represented in part by the DC Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), took shape around the belief that patriarchal conditions were common to and therefore united women as a sex. In so doing, WLM invigorated debate around the significance of race and class within social justice movements. When involved in specific campaigns, however, these tenuously related organizations were capable of effectively working together across differences of race and class; in DC, this was thoroughly exemplified by the movement for reproductive rights.

Valk then moves specifically to women within Black Power movements, such as the Black Panther Party and other African American organizations, showing the ways that women organized to advance gender equality not only within such organizations but also as part and parcel of ending racist oppression. This is followed by a close look at the lesbian separatist collective, the Furies, a small group that gained its notoriety by virtue of being divisive and alienating while also contributing useful critique of homophobia within feminist organizations and in society at large. Finally, Valk brings the book's trajec-

tory to a close around the movement against sexual violence that emerged in the early 1970s. As a movement involved in building clear services as well as lobbying and public education, the anti-sexual violence movement brought together frameworks seen in the welfare rights, women's liberation, black liberation, and lesbian separatist movements, effectively broadening and transforming feminism as a perspective, an approach, and a mass movement. Ultimately, then, the book shows that feminism was comprised of multiple campaigns, even multiple movements; in its conception as well as its practice, it was always multifaceted and diverse, alternately narrowly focused and enormously wide reaching.

Valk offers a useful example of historical methodology that combines oral history interviews (largely conducted by the author) with meticulously researched archival sources. The framework of the book emphasizes organizations (albeit grassroots and radical organizations), which is not surprising since documents are generally archived according to organizations. But this is no simple organization-based narrative, thanks in large part to the indispensable oral histories that lend themselves to Valk's sense of nuance and fluidity among activist groupings. If the recent proliferation of online archives has led young historians of twentieth-century social movements to doubt the necessity of conducting oral histories, Valk's work should reaffirm and inspire the continued use of oral history methods.

Through the combination of the emphasis on organizations and the sensitive reliance on activists' own oral narratives, Valk's analysis makes abundantly clear that feminist activism did not proceed according to clearly delineated organization trajectories; instead, movements, causes, groupings, and organizational trajectories fed and leaked into one another and, indeed, far exceeded identity and definitional limits suggested by organizational parameters. This is, perhaps, the book's greatest contribution, as it counters both declension narratives of sixties and seventies activism and, more importantly, finally shows us how various movement strands were woven together even as they were constantly fraying. One may still wish to talk about groupings of white feminists and groupings of black feminists and compare their concerns, or research the impact of class disparity on activist strategies; one might still see strands appropriately termed "black feminism" and "white feminism." But, while attending to racist power structures and fluid movement dynamics even in the face of many instances of race- or gender- or sexuality-based separatism, the book, above all, shows their interconnectedness and mu-

tual reliance (along with movements not named "feminist"), and thus should effectively put to rest the tired trope that "feminism was white and middle class." Valk offers new ways of seeing activism and describing movements, adding to our increasingly rich perspective on a unique period in U.S. history.

The framework of the book, particularly the emphasis on organizations, nevertheless, leaves us with some unanswered contradictions. I remain skeptical, for example, that the Furies should represent lesbian separatism even in their home city of DC. (Chapter 6, "Lesbian Feminism and Separatism," the only chapter to directly address feminist lesbian activism, is largely devoted to the Furies.) We learn that the Furies consisted of twelve white women (all under thirty years old), and that this small separatist collective lasted less than two years. Although the Furies intended to provide "intellectual leadership" to the women's movement (in part through their publication, *The Furies*), their goal, Valk argues, "was undercut by the effort to conform action to theory," and this limited the group's influence and impact (p. 136). I find myself repeatedly wondering about the role the Furies keep playing in the historiography of second-wave feminism, for if they were rather ineffective at the time, we should question their growing influence on the ways we narrate feminist history. Historians from Alice Echols to Wini Breines have emphasized the divisive impact of explicitly lesbian activism in the second wave, and they rely almost exclusively on the Furies to make their point. Surely, the Furies collective was among the arrogant and divisively separatist groups of the era, and they must be considered part of the DC feminist story. But was this small group really the only example of lesbian feminism and lesbian separatism? Were they emblematic of lesbian separatism or of the women's movement? If they

were representative, there should be additional examples to draw on; if they were not, we might well ask ourselves why we like to focus on them to explain lesbian-centered feminism. Valk suggests one reason, in keeping with her movement analysis (in addition to the Furies's necessary critique of homophobia): "the Furies offer an instructive example of the way that feminism was driven forward by energies and experiments that also limited the movement's influence and undermined its impact" (p. 136). This is a concept well worth exploring to help us better understand lesbian activism in its more exclusive and also its more inclusive formations. Consideration of additional, diverse feminist lesbian and separatist interests would go a long way toward showing the way that some lesbian energies and experiments enhanced the movement's influence.

*Radical Sisters* effectively argues that diverse movements formed coalitions, and most successfully met their goals of change when they focused on action around specific causes, such as the campaigns for reproductive control and against sexual violence. Such campaigns could be and were multipronged, involving grassroots organizing, on-the-streets direct actions, public education, and legislative work; they drew together people across race and class (and gender and sexuality); they crossed organizational lines; and they brought new organizations into being. While it may seem that theorizing and writing manifestoes regularly led to or enhanced disintegration and separatist formations, Valk shows that theory also moved the movement, albeit in messy and often difficult and halting ways. Overall, this book provides a crucial new perspective on women's activism, and on social activism in general. It is a terrific and highly readable addition to the historiography of feminism, and will be welcome to teachers and students alike.

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