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VIEWPOINT

Moving Forward/Looking Back: Reclaiming and Revising our Feminist Past and Searching for Solidarity

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Abstract: Interweaving personal anecdotes, feminist theory, and literary and popular culture references, this article attempts to provide answers to the question of how we build a social movement and establish solidarity among women while still recognizing and respecting difference. The article traces historical accounts of feminists contending with the “difference impasse” and argues that we should return to and revise the feminist thought that preceded us, weaving together theories from our feminist past with contemporary models, including those of feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin and her ideas of “mutual recognition” and intersubjectivity. Drawing on fictional accounts from literature by women writers, the middle section of the article illustrates what intersubjective relating can mean for the feminist movement and provides a discussion of how differences and interdependencies can be sources of connection rather than division. The article ends with examples of divisions among women drawn from popular culture, wherein the author recognizes the difficulty of establishing solidarity in the face of the neoliberal cooptation of the feminist movement, the intensely materialist and individualistic images and ideas bombarding us daily, and the polarizing economic conditions faced by women today. Ultimately, the article acknowledges that finding solidarity is just a starting point, as we really need a pervasive change in consciousness.

Keywords: feminism, solidarity, intersubjectivity, popular culture, neoliberalism, difference

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When women actively struggle in a truly supportive way to understand our differences, to change misguided, distorted perspectives, we lay the foundation for the experience of political solidarity.

— bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*

At the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, pop star Beyoncé took the stage with the word “Feminist” displayed behind her in colossal, bright lights. I watched her with surprise and excitement, eager to see how today’s young women would respond to this public embrace of the word and all it carries with it. I subsequently learned that my preteen niece and her friends spent the following week making “Feminist” signs with glitter and colored markers and paints to hang in their rooms. I was cautiously optimistic in my reaction to this: optimistic because my niece also began asking questions about what the word means; cautious because I was simultaneously provoked by and nervous about Beyoncé’s public display. She’s a pop star; she’s a

billionaire; and she spent part of her performance dancing on a stripper pole. I was anticipating the debates feminists would engage in about whether or not to embrace this public pronouncement; and indeed even a cursory search into feminist responses revealed a wide range of views, from “she’s too sexy to be a feminist icon” (Hobson 2014a) to “she is a terrorist” because, as bell hooks opines, she confines her body to the values of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (quoted in Hobson 2014b). Is Beyoncé a strong, twenty-first-century representation of how far women have come and where we are heading, or is she a glaring example of the ways in which neoliberalism and our consumerist ethos have coopted feminism for its own use? Some of these questions and criticism deserve consideration, but the entire scenario feels like *déjà vu* to me.

The debates about what makes a good feminist and who can be a feminist have played out in theory, in popular culture, and in mainstream feminism for decades, if not longer, and have centered—along with many of the continual impasses in feminism—on the idea of difference. And yet, academic feminists have grown wary of discussing the so-called “difference impasse,” of talking about what is considered settled theory. But is it really settled theory? Robyn Wiegman argues that academic feminism has essentially abandoned solving the difference impasse or the crisis of the “category of women,” “remaining confident instead that its critical deconstruction, no less than its long-standing activist critique, advances a more compelling future than any that seeks to wrench women from its familiar complicity with universalizing norms” (Wiegman 2012, 64). In *Object Lessons*, Wiegman interrogates the notion of the “progress narrative,” and the theories, critiques, and ideas that get relegated to a troubled past when we believe that we have moved on or progressed to more complex and inclusive theories. That troubled past, of course, includes the problems of and theories about identity politics, and the exclusions often associated with specific kinds of identity politics; as such, it is a past we needed to overcome and, according to many, have moved beyond. I contend, however, that even a perfunctory look at disputes among academic feminists and ideas about feminism in popular culture, as well as women’s own personal lives, exposes a need for political unity, a need for solidarity, and the necessity of returning to our feminist past in order to work on our feminist future.

I am admittedly uncomfortable with what seems to be the prevailing notion among many feminists, that the difference debates are over, a thing of the past, and I want to quibble a bit with the dominant agreement that it is cliché or essentialist to talk about “women’s experience.” In part, my discomfort comes from what I perceive as homogenizing views of those women and theories preceding us, views that allow for an easy dismissal of what came before. Discussions of our so-called problematic feminist past seem to follow one of two trajectories, as noted above: Either we have rightfully and fortunately moved beyond the exclusionary politics associated with earlier waves of feminism, or we have tragically lost the political solidarity and activism that characterized earlier feminist thought and theory. Both trajectories carry with them a somewhat homogenized view of what has come before, a glossed-over picture of feminist history. Like the polarized stereotypical views of the first wave, which hold either that the early suffragists were bonded together in some sort of sisterly solidarity or that they were exclusionary racists who do not deserve the accolades they have received, discussions of the second wave and the responsive feminist thought that developed in the 1980s and 1990s often likewise embrace homogenized views, placing feminists into prescribed camps and feminism into definitive decades. In some ways, as scholars like Wiegman, Jodi Dean, and Claire Hemmings have argued, reading our feminist past as something we have overcome allows us to see where we are now as located ahead of where we were before, as these histories are “mobilized in the service of a broader narrative of progress” (Wiegman 2012, 64). As Hemmings observes, “A shift from the naïve, essentialist seventies, through the black feminist critiques and ‘sex wars’ of the eighties, and into the

‘difference’ nineties and beyond, charts the story as one of *progress* beyond falsely bounded categories and identities” (Hemmings 2005, 120). If we see our history as progression, then we could comfortably move into what many see as a “post-identity” stage of feminist thought.

Reading and thinking about our histories in this way has two related and equally troubling problems. For decades now, feminists have explored the difference impasse in academic and activist feminism, exposing the erasures, exclusions, and silences that characterized much feminist thought from the 1960s through the 1980s, and foregrounding critical responses to second-wave insistence on a unified women’s experience from black feminists, socialist feminists, lesbian feminists, Chicana feminists, and many others. Confidently placing the difference debates and responses in our past leaves behind all of these problems and critiques, erasures and corrections. Wiegman and Hemmings similarly argue about this loss: Hemmings posits that containing black feminist writing in the 1980s “marks the work of racial critique of feminism as over and thus as able to be assumed or gestured to rather than evidenced in work after that point” (2005, 123), and Wiegman argues persuasively that rejecting and “moving on” past the difference impasse in feminism removes not only the sometimes universalizing messages of white feminists but also the challenges voiced by women of color, multiracial feminists, lesbian feminists, and others. Some of the troubling responses to Beyoncé’s public embrace of feminism poignantly illustrate this theory.

The second problem with reading the changes in feminist thought as progress concerns the desire of many to move past what is typically seen as the archaic, misguided, and exclusionary ideas of solidarity and/or sisterhood. If we posit that those ideas were firmly placed in essentialist 1970s, and that they were conclusively challenged by the various critiques registered above, then we can, thankfully for many, be done with the notion of sisterhood. But this narrative neglects to consider at least two important points: 1) that problematizing discussions of difference and essentializing also took place in the 1970s, as well as before (in fact, nineteenth-century suffragists directly confronted racial and socioeconomic class differences between women, and Alice Paul and the women of the National Woman’s Party held public debates about addressing the concerns of working women, for example, points I will return to later); and 2) that critical responses from women of color, lesbian feminists, and others also often continued to embrace the notion of solidarity and sisterhood, alongside their calls for inclusivity and attention to difference. As Wiegman argues, the “idea that only those who came to be privileged by the exclusionary effects of *women* had an investment in women as a political unity seems willfully ludicrous, enabling as it does a totalizing misrecognition of what such critiques were intended to do: to fulfill the aspiration of women as a political unity” (Wiegman 2012, 64). The quote from bell hooks in the epigraph to this article illustrates this claim quite clearly with its call for “political solidarity.”

I contend that the emphasis on the idea of “political unity” among women is needed still today, perhaps more so than it was twenty years ago, and so I worry about our desire to move beyond earlier notions of unity and solidarity. A brief look at women’s place in the political and social discourse of 2014 and 2015 indicates the necessity of women’s unity. Women’s reproductive freedoms are under constant and renewed attack, with 231 abortion restrictions enacted in states in just the past four years, and many states now establishing laws that require unnecessary procedures like vaginal ultrasounds, literally punishing women for trying to control their reproductive lives. Many state legislatures have pushed for and achieved the defunding of women’s clinics like those run by Planned Parenthood, leaving poor and minority women disproportionately without reproductive choice and access to basic care. Right-wing school-board members across the country are rewriting history and removing feminist and civil rights leaders from curriculums, while adding requirements for students to learn about such conservative heroes as Phyllis Schlafly, the

Heritage Foundation, and the Moral Majority. Sex trafficking in the United States, in which girls between the ages of 12 and 14 are the primary targets, is on the rise in alarming numbers. And the continual, tried-and-true rhetoric of politicians, which pits woman against woman, still saturates the political discourse, splintering women with a “divide and conquer” strategy. As Sonia Kruks argues,

the forms of exclusion, exploitation, and oppression against which feminism as a social movement has been developing for over two centuries certainly have not disappeared. Nor have “women” ceased to exist, even if exclusion, exploitation, and oppression have a differential impact on different groups of women, so that many of us are, along different axes, at once oppressed and the beneficiaries of others’ oppression. (2001, 15)

Indeed, the material realities of many women’s lives in 2015 necessitate a return to some kind of political unity.

Wiegman’s and Hemmings’s critiques of the “progress narrative” also interest me in another way. I worry that in describing our feminist past as unified, cohesive, and neatly packaged in decades, and in looking at it as something we either need to get over and progress from or something that we have already progressed beyond, we fail to see the ways in which we could utilize some of the ideas or themes of the feminist activists, scholars, and theorists we study as a part of this nostalgic and/or problematic past. I realize the dangerous ground I’m walking on here; when feminists today attempt to discuss difference, or “women’s experience,” or identity politics, or the idea of unity or solidarity, we risk the possibility of being associated with a bourgeois, white, middle-class, heterosexual feminism of a much earlier time, and, worse still, we risk the possibility that those associations will lead to us being seen as exclusionary, and perhaps racist, classist, and sexist. In no way do I wish to revive a feminism that relies on a universalizing notion of women’s experience. My project is not to recover what is stereotypically seen as a seventies-style feminism or to make excuses for the women theorists, activists, and scholars who lived it. But Angela Davis once asked for today’s feminists to try to develop a “nuanced vision of historical feminism” (1995, 282), and I want to insist upon a similarly nuanced history of our past, so that we can see the ways in which some of what has come before could be beneficial for us in the present, in our activism and even in our feminist theorizing. Looking back could help us move forward; and so in what follows I examine feminism through the theories, literature, and popular culture of our past and present and propose ways to reimagine that which preceded us as a way to establish a new kind of solidarity that may help us deal with the impasses of today.

Looking Back: Finding Connections and Searching for Solidarity

Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.

— Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

In the foreword to Rebecca Walker’s anthology of essays by so-called third-wave feminists, Gloria Steinem claims she often feels like a “sitting dog being told to sit,” and she addresses directly the authors who contributed to the anthology, along with others who are new to feminism and/or feminist theory, to remind them that “some tactical and theoretical wheels don’t have to be reinvented” (Steinem 1995, xix). Although we may want to change their size or direction, or even “put them on a different wagon,” many of these theoretical wheels “already exist” (xix). After providing a detailed description of a room full of diverse feminists all working together on the issue of household workers’ rights, a room which included Steinem and a consortium of black feminists, lesbian feminists, legislative activists, household workers, men and

women, she asks us to “imagine how frustrating it is to be held responsible for some of the very divisions you’ve been fighting against” and argues that a “feminist paradigm of *and* instead of the patriarchal *either/or*” has existed since those 1970s rooms filled with diverse feminist subject positions (Steinem 1995, xxiii, xv).¹ Similarly, Angela Davis, who contributed the afterword to Walker’s collection, asks contemporary feminists to “weave together the last quarter-century’s lessons about the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality” in order to provide a “nuanced vision of historical feminism” (Davis 1995, 282). Davis worries about the ways in which “new feminisms—Black feminism, women of color feminism ...—often constructed the feminism they railed against as the caricatures and stereotypes that we often use to represent adversaries”; feminism, she argues, became a possibility for her and her contemporaries “not because we decided to seek the comfort of a sisterhood without racial or class or sexual boundaries,” as the caricature assumes, but “because we decided to stop playing the *either/or* game” (283; original emphasis). Both of these pioneering second-wave feminists seem to be wondering about a view of their generation of feminism that has become homogenized and arguing that perhaps, as Steinem posits, “the stereotype has completely subsumed reality” (1995, xxii).

Of course, this is not to suggest that the earlier generations of feminism were not troubling in their lack of attention to difference. Their exclusions were often racist, sexist, and homophobic, and have led to much-discussed impasses with which we seem to still be contending, or still need to be contending. But racist erasures and silences certainly cannot be neatly contained within the activism and theorizing of the seventies any more than they can be relegated to the more distant past, that of the early suffragists. One need only look to the 1990s and to the self-proclaimed public representatives of so-called “postfeminism,” like Katie Roiphe, Rene Denfeld, and Naomi Wolf, to see those same kinds of exclusions and blind classism, sexism, and racism; as Deborah Siegel argues, in their writings these women positioned themselves as “harbingers of a new order, a new order that is for middle-class, heterosexual, white women” (Siegel 1997, 64). Similarly, I find some mainstream feminist discussions today to be full of exclusionary politics, and an inability to recognize that some of the theories from feminism’s past can offer many tools we can use to continue to appreciate and embrace differences among us.

Many of the voices involved in today’s young activist feminism, for example, seem to wish to embrace the critiques of earlier feminism without looking closely at those critiques and without seeing the calls for solidarity that can be found in them. In her now famous response to the exclusions rampant in feminism in the 1970s and early 1980s, Audre Lorde poignantly urged feminists to reject the “master’s tools” of “divide and conquer” and instead to find a sense of community, positing that “although we have been taught either to ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than forces for change ... without community there is no liberation” (Lorde 2007, 112). Although Lorde of course emphasizes that community “must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist,” she makes a call for unity, even for “interdependency” (112). And yet, the comments in a recent blog post in the online version of *Ms. Magazine*, in a column dedicated to young feminist voices, contrast starkly with Lorde’s calls for unity:

I think that feminism ... is going to naturally evolve into a different version of itself as women’s studies students and scholars increasingly become non-white. I think “feminism,” like most institutions, is full of people who don’t want to give up power, and in this case power to non-white voices. That’s why, ultimately, I think that students/scholars of feminism who are not white are going to be the force that changes feminism. (Calderón 2013)

While in some ways this young activist is right to credit nonwhite feminists with changing the shape and focus of feminist thought, and while I love to see young feminist voices involved in activism and exposing the kinds of multiethnic feminism advocated by women in earlier decades, I'm admittedly troubled by the exclusionary and divisive language in this post and in many of the responses it generated. How far have we really progressed when some of the young feminists of today believe feminism can only be a powerful movement for change if it becomes exclusively "nonwhite"? What is the power these young feminists see white feminists as possessing and unwilling to give up? What happened to the calls for unity expressed by the black and Chicana and lesbian feminists who came before them? And when or why did feminism become about shifting power from one group of women to another, anyway? As a white academic feminist, who knows of the long and heated discussions about difference that have taken place among feminists for decades, I am reminded of Steinem asking us to "imagine how frustrating it is to be held responsible for some of the very divisions you've been fighting against" (1995, xxiii). I am also reminded of Kruks's argument that "the attempt to deny what still persists gives rise to strange displacements" (2001, 11). Despite academic feminists believing we have contended with the issue of difference and successfully moved beyond it, seeing posts like this and arguments like the ones surrounding Beyoncé leads me to believe we perhaps moved on too quickly.

There were many responses to this post on *Ms. Magazine* Web site, but only one respondent attempted to comment on what she saw as the exclusionary nature of the post, arguing that we should look to "our feminist foremothers" to notice that they did not see feminism as a "path to power" but as a way to "help one another, from all races" (Calderón 2013). This comment, however, was met with some harsh words from others who immediately invoked the names of Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Robin Morgan, and even Susan B. Anthony, women almost universally described with derision and scorn on the blog, as "essentialists" and of course racists, sexists, and homophobes. One comment suggested that we should no longer even celebrate "the majority" of white "so-called feminists" like Steinem, Friedan, and Anthony because of their racism. While critics are right to bring attention to the problems and omissions of those "feminist foremothers," I do not understand the tendency to want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, to use one of my favorite clichés. The "nuanced history" Angela Davis called for should absolutely force us to acknowledge and contend with the exclusionary practices of earlier feminist thought, but also lead us to celebrate those elements of feminist past that paved the way for women generally and provided us with the kinds of "new tools" Audre Lorde urged us to find.

What can we learn from our past if we interrogate the homogenized, stereotypical notions that seem to have become dominant in public discourse? For starters, we can find in the history of nineteenth-century feminism the potential power of direct confrontation between women. Despite the mainstream characterization of the early suffragists as women who were bonded together like sisters, their relationships were often fraught with conflict and disagreement, with contentious confrontations. In some ways, those women relied upon direct confrontations with one another as catalysts for forging intimacy between them, which then often led to personal transformations that provided some of the impetus for their public activism and for political and social change. When we fail to see the early feminists as women who were consistently addressing difference head on, and instead view them as sisters sentimentally bonded together in nurturing and supportive relationships (and/or as exclusionary racists), then we lose a very important lesson about the potential for transformation that confrontations between women about difference can bring. Contrary to the view found in much of the scholarship and mainstream understanding of these early feminists, women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Angelina Grimké, Ida B. Wells, and others were fully aware of the problem of

difference and the difficulty of bridging differences among women through some sort of common bond, as they attempted to deal with the boundaries of sisterhood across class and racial divides, realizing and contending with the harsh truth that it would take much more than attempts at sisterly affection to effect real change.

Of course, political change alone does little for the individual lives of individual women, and the mid-twentieth century in the United States was awash in examples of women who had gained the vote and many of the other political advances fought for by the early suffragists, but who consciously and tenaciously insisted on a silencing of differences in exchange for a group ideology. The most notable example of this was the Women's Movement under the direction of Alice Paul, wherein discussions of difference were silenced as Paul myopically focused on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and on gender solely. Paul's refusal to recognize the concerns of working women, for example, and those who were not middle class, led to frequent and often caustic debates with members of the National Woman's Party (NWP) and other women working for workplace reforms aimed at female workers. The ongoing debate between Paul and Ethel M. Smith, for example, illustrates the fissures in women's organizations at the time most clearly. After working with the poor in England and the US for years early in her activist career, Paul began to develop a class-specific defense of elite women's rights. She abandoned issues pertaining to unemployment and urban poverty, and focused on equality in the law, first with suffrage and then the ERA. According to Amy Butler in her study of Paul, Smith, and their conflicting paths during the ERA fight, Paul "disparaged social work as an inefficient mechanism for social change, because she viewed the poor as passive victims who did not actively seek to better their lives," and she developed a "conservative political philosophy shaped by the belief that each individual had the capacity to achieve his or her goals if they applied themselves" (Butler 2002, 2, 9). The "lean-in" theories of today's mainstream feminist representations sound like echoes of Paul, creating the *déjà vu* feeling I mentioned earlier.

Conversely, Smith, raised in a rural working-class background, dedicated her life to working towards women's equality in the workforce and the home, including their right to equal wages and equal compensation. Smith eventually emerged at the forefront of efforts to block the ERA, believing that it would not ultimately be effective in "redefining women's roles in terms of the law or culture" (Butler 2002, 89). Smith believed Paul's goals were too narrow and not reflective of the needs of the masses of American women. Smith and other progressive women reformers charged that Paul and the NWP were a group of professional women who "wanted all doors open for their own advancement but who had neither sympathy nor understanding for working-class women trapped in sweat shops and factories" (Evans 1997, 193). What, they asked, "does equality mean when women are disadvantaged to begin with" (Evans 1997, 193)? It's a question we would do well to contend with today, nearly a century later. Whatever Paul's personal or political reasons for her myopic vision may have been, the continual disagreements between her and Smith, and their failure to reach common ground and work together, illustrate much of the work of and for women following the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, a battle that in many ways poisoned the movement and persisted well into the 1960s and even beyond.² Productive, transformation-inspiring confrontation didn't come for many women post-suffrage, and the difficulty of women seeing each other as individuals portended the future problematic identity politics of the second wave of feminism, along with the dangers of adhering to a group mentality of progress, long before third-wave feminists began addressing these problems. As Steinem insisted, many of the "wheels" were invented long ago; we just need to look for them.

Feminists have also long been dealing with the idea that simply recognizing difference isn't enough, as evidenced by writings of socialist feminists, black feminists, Chicana feminists, and lesbian feminists of the

1970s and 1980s, and even earlier decades. Furthermore, women like Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Valerie Smith, and many others were addressing and attempting to theorize the problematic category of “woman” long before poststructural and third-wave feminists. Looking at early feminist standpoint theories, Wiegman argues that they “sought to construct an anti-essentialist understanding of the epistemological and political grounds for feminism’s deployment of women,” revealing that “women represented a historical emergence, not a natural unity” (Wiegman 2012, 65). Similarly, Hemmings disputes the positioning of feminist poststructuralist theorists as “the first to deconstruct ‘woman,’” arguing that “one of the abiding concerns for the majority of feminist theorists has always been, and remains, such a deconstruction” (Hemmings 2005, 116). I say all of this not to disparage the work and ideas of third-wave writers but to point out that the sorts of theories which emphasize the fluidity of identity have actually been a part of feminist thinking for decades. One need only look to Morrison’s *Sula* or Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, for example, to see women “theorizing” about the multiplicity of fluid identities; in their literature, these women writers argue for a view of identity as indeterminate, not as an essence or an absolute. Anzaldúa’s 1984 *Borderlands/La Frontera* poignantly theorizes about Chicana women’s liminal space as fluid, ever changing, and constantly shifting. She sets up the multiplicity of borderlands in which she lives, and claims that all who inhabit them are in a “constant state of transition.” This is not always a place of helplessness and restraint; Anzaldúa develops a strategy for living in a border space as a queer Chicana by “developing a tolerance for contradiction, a tolerance for ambiguity” (1987, 19). In their anthology of third-wave feminist thought, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake astutely credit the “US third world feminism” for providing us with the ideas of multiplicity that encompass much of what we write today (1997, 9). They are right to do so. Women like Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Valerie Smith, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill Collins changed the way we theorize, the way we think, and the way we see the modern feminist movement. Returning to their writings, as opposed to attempting to correct or move beyond them, can provide us with tools for continuing to address the various impasses in feminism.

In discussing her discomfort with the homogenized images of our feminist past, Hemmings argues that critiques of essentialism have brought contradictory possibilities. On the one hand, there have been positive gains from the recognition of difference whilst, on the other, loss of the imagined community of “sisterhood” has led to fragmentation and disrupted political cohesion. (2007, 127)

Indeed, if we look at the first and second waves of feminism through either of these lenses, we can either see how far we have progressed or grieve what we have lost. But we should realize that, when interrogated, the sisterhood was really just “imagined,” that those relationships were in fact full of “fragmentation and disrupted political cohesion”; again, a look at the ways in which Angelina Grimké, Lucy Stone, and other abolitionists split from Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and Alice Paul and the NWP split from Carrie Catt and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), shows how these rifts led to a clearly “disrupted political cohesion.” Furthermore, we can see that the disputes over difference have been taking place over the course of more than a century, and that impasse in feminism cannot be neatly placed in any recent decade. Rather than looking to our pasts with a nostalgic sense of loss, or in an effort to reveal how we have progressed beyond the essentialist, racist, and sexist ideas that preceded us, much can be gained if we follow instead Angela Davis’s prescriptions to “weave together” all the “lessons about the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality” that our history can provide (1995, 281).

However, revealing the ways in which the stereotypical “sisterhood” that preceded us was in fact imagined does not preclude the realization that throughout the decades and the many “waves” of feminism women have been searching for a way to bond, searching for unity as a means of making political and social change. And so I feel compelled to ask,

What was so wrong with sisterly solidarity, anyway? Clearly, much was wrong with the idea of sisterhood that insisted upon the gender imperative while erasing differences between women and refusing to address the compounded oppressions of race, sex, class, and gender. But through and during the discussions and sometimes-heated debates about “sisterhood” and about difference, the idea of solidarity never waned until perhaps recently. In a self-conscious moment of dangerously embracing the first-person plural, *we*, Wiegman acknowledges the pitfalls of what she calls this “tantalizing hallucination” and then asks why she must “ignore its pulsing heat when identity knowledges are nothing without the haunting specter and affection traction of *we*” and when there is always present that “measure of hope that *we* will struggle into existence—partial and contingent, to be sure, but resonant and agential” (2012, 13). She continues by arguing that “identity and difference are not opposed to one another,” and that their “relationship is not analogous to the terms by which universalism is set against particularity and difference, or the way inclusion is taken as the opposite of exclusion” (2012, 68). I agree. Similarly, solidarity does not equal or have to mean sameness, and sisterhood does not have to mean, and in fact should not mean, something that is merged or blind to difference or polite, nurturing intimacy without disagreement, contention, or confrontation.

Moving Forward: Intersubjective Solidarity and the Transformative Possibilities of Female Friendships

It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting.

— Simone de Beauvoir quoted by Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde ends her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” with the above quote from Simone de Beauvoir. In doing so, she is in many ways advocating a return or adherence to a form of identity politics, and a sort of reinvestment in the idea that the “personal is political,” but one wherein difference is acknowledged, difference matters, and difference has meaning. Finding strength in our differences, Lorde contends, means rejecting the “master’s tools,” as “difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is formed” (2007, 113). She calls for knowledge and understanding of the “genuine” material conditions of the individual lives of different, individual women, and sees this knowledge and understanding as having the potential for providing us with the basis for political change and action. Lorde’s essay is nearly thirty years old, and yet many contemporary feminist theorists have posited varying ideas about finding a way towards unity that includes and embraces difference, in a search for solidarity that doesn’t preclude difference and that isn’t exclusive; they are trying, still, to reach the goals Lorde outlined so long ago. Although Iris Marion Young contends that the desire for solidarity or unity that is often at the heart of communities and even individuals in friendships always results in exclusion of difference, arguing that an insistence on unity prohibits disagreement and difference of opinion (1990, 311), and while Jodi Dean expresses her conviction that “a major barrier to women’s working together has been our inability to conceive of connecting with each other through and across our differences” (1998, 5), many feminist scholars have continued to find ways of negotiating with what Dean calls the “Scylla and Charybdis of essentialist exclusion and constructivist depoliticization” in the search for solidarity (2).

Some black and Chicana feminists advocate a solidarity that resembles what Chela Sandoval calls “differential consciousness,” wherein members’ allegiances are more fluid and therefore allow for them

to shift across borders and between different sites of resistance to different oppressions (2000, 26). Other feminist scholars have searched for ways to qualify or enhance the idea of solidarity, with many of them drawing on and fleshing out María Lugones's idea of "playful world traveling," wherein Lugones argues that "travelling to someone's 'world' is a way to identifying with them ... because by travelling to their 'world' we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Only when we have travelled to each other's 'worlds' are we fully subjects to each other" (1990, 401). Questioning both the plausibility of Lugones's theory and its appropriateness, Kruks argues for what she calls "respectful solidarity," and, asserting that women in the United States "share certain common embodied experiences that cut across race and class differences" (2001, 150), she opines that "giving attention to commonalities of experience, even to the minimal ones of feminine embodiment, is one of the most important ways we can become open to others different from ourselves" (152). Dean offers a similar enhancement to the idea of solidarity by attaching the adjective "reflective" to it, describing "reflective solidarity" as a coalition process whereby we "continually construct and reconstruct our connections and relationships" (1998, 8). Although I question why we need to attach any adjective to the noun "solidarity," as solidarity doesn't have to mean sameness and doesn't need to be qualified, Dean's position that "we do not need to agree with everyone on everything" to "find moment points of convergence" illustrates the ways in which she, like Kruks and others, persuasively searches for a way to build coalitions that do not exclude, idealize, silence, and/or accuse their others. Thus, what these feminists are arguing for, and in fact what Audre Lorde pushed for decades ago, reflects psychoanalytic feminist Jessica Benjamin's idea of "mutual recognition" and her theorization of what intersubjective recognition can mean for interpersonal relationships between women, in friendships and in communities.

Benjamin's profoundly important theories provide a framework for discussing difference, as well as a lens through which to discuss the problems that arise within many relationships between women and the potential opportunity for transformation that these relationships also harbor. In relation to feminist theory, Benjamin's work posits and then provides a theoretical answer to the question, "How is it possible to recognize an other?" (1994, 231). Reworking Freud's theory of identification, wherein the subject constantly assimilates the other, "what is outside itself," Benjamin attempts to provide a bridge across the divide she sees between feminist object-relations theory and feminist poststructuralism. In her theory of intersubjectivity, she advocates what she calls "empathetic attunement" and describes what relationships look like when this type of connection, mutual attunement, does not take place. Benjamin's psychoanalytic tenet and her ideas about feminist intersubjective attunement provide a constructive and dynamic way in which to think about and examine the relationships between women in groups, in friendships, and in feminism generally.

In its simplest form, Benjamin's intersubjective theory asserts that each individual should be considered a separate unit. Differentiating her ideas from the separation-individuation theory of Margaret Mahler by claiming that growth comes in relation with the mother as a subject, and not from separation from the symbiotic relation with the mother or caregiver, for Benjamin growth is about how we engage with and "make ourselves known" in relationship to the other, how we are able to recognize those others as different and yet capable of being like us, which moves us from seeing relational development as consisting of a subject and its object to an understanding that it involves a subject and another subject. Benjamin refers to this recognition of the other, of recognizing and being recognized by an other, as "mutual recognition," and she asserts that individuals need to recognize each other mutually as independent subjects in order to develop and sustain healthy identities and relationships.

The implications of utilizing Benjamin's theories in studies on the various impasses in feminism become more clear when looking at her ideas of attunement, and at what she sees as damage that happens when this phase of development does not occur. As stated above, Benjamin's term "attunement" means, in many ways, mutual recognition by two subjects. The recognition of another person as separate from oneself, and thus the recognition of difference, occurs through the process of coming to see that one's own subjectivity is dependent upon recognition by other people. The assertion of our selves, Benjamin argues, is almost paradoxically contingent on the recognition by and of an independent other: "Recognition is that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self ... but such recognition can only come from an other whom we, in turn, recognize as a person in his or her own right" (Benjamin 1998, 123). The theory emphasizes the importance of mutually recognizing the other's subjectivity, seeing the other as a subject. As such, Benjamin sees the assertion of our selves and our own subjectivity as being not oppositional but mutually dependent on recognition.

Furthermore, this attunement, and the continual process of assertion and recognition, is not linear, nor is it the movement from oneness to separateness but a negotiating of back-and-forth tensions. If possible, the two subjects negotiate the process, and the "ideal resolution of the paradox of recognition is that it continues as a constant tension between recognizing the other and asserting the self" (Benjamin 1995, 38). And so, in this process, a generative tension is sustained through a person's self-assertion of her own will and the mutual recognition of the other's will, which "allows self and other to meet as sovereign equals" (Benjamin 1995, 39). For Benjamin, the mutual recognition of differences between the self and the other is required throughout all stages and events of life, which is paramount in looking at relationships between women.

Specifically, I find Benjamin's ideas of "attunement" to be most useful in terms of dealing with differences between women, as this part of her theory provides a potential for balance and a way to break down the polarities and binaries with which much feminist thought has wrestled. Intersubjective attunement defines interactions between two subjects wherein each partner embraces "the ability to share feelings and intentions without demanding control, to experience sameness without obliterating difference" (Benjamin 1988, 47). For Benjamin, this realization that "sameness and difference exist simultaneously" can help to "break down the oppositions between powerful and helpless, active and passive," as well as "counteract the tendency to objectify and deny recognition to those weaker or different—to the other" (1988, 48). It is the kind of relating many feminist theories have searched for and described in similar terms. Shane Phelan's ideas of specificity and the role it can play in building unity and coalitions in fact directly correlate with Benjamin's attunement. Phelan writes:

Moving from the idea of "difference," which all too often lends itself to such unbridgeable gaps, toward specificity of locations or "identity points" allows us to acknowledge inequalities of power and position (as well as differences not so easily captured in a linear frame of measurement) while through that very acknowledgement discovering and articulating the linkages between us. Specificity provides the ground for commonality without sameness.... (1994, 70)

While to my mind very reminiscent of much earlier standpoint theories, Phelan's ideas also align with Benjamin's notion that the self both depends on and emerges out of intersubjective relationships with other subjects. These theories of intersubjective solidarity offer us a way through, and not around, the difference impasse.

Interestingly, fictional representations of friendships in the work of many women writers provide us with warnings about the dangers of failing to relate to each other in a way that at least resembles mutual

recognition and attunement, at the same time that they offer examples of relationships that can be potentially transformative by providing us with the impetus for social change. For example, Toni Morrison has written at least three novels that focus on female friendship, which she calls a “discredited relationship” (Shappell 1992, 79), *Sula*, *Love*, and *Paradise*; and in *Paradise* she provides us with a glimpse of what can happen when difference is acknowledged, confronted, and then removed as a divisive factor. In a discussion about her motivation for writing this particular novel, Morrison indicated that she wanted to “suggest something about negotiation that is applicable for the 90s” (Denard 1998, 11), and the relational skills and practices illustrated in *Paradise* can indeed provide a powerful paradigm for negotiating difference for feminists and feminist agendas today and in the future. Although the diverse women living in the convent on the outskirts of Ruby, Oklahoma, in the novel begin their journeys together with intense fighting, disagreement, and contention, the friendships and bonds they ultimately establish allow each woman to find her own authentic self, illustrating the type of intersubjective relating advocated for by Benjamin and other object-relations theorists, and providing us with a framework for negotiating difference in the context of female intimacy.

After years of failing to relate and connect, near the novel’s end, the women in the convent engage in a sort of revised and reconfigured form of “consciousness raising,” a dialogue they call “loud dreaming,” wherein they tell the painful stories of their lives and construct “templates,” painted outlines of their bodies on the floor. The “loud dreaming” and the templates allow the women to see that the pain of their pasts need not determine the quality of their relationships with one another, or the arc of their futures. The process opens them up to a new orientation to themselves and each other. Instead of asserting the priority of their own individual rights over those of the others, the women enter into the horrors the others have experienced: “in spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer’s tale” (Morrison 1999, 264). As each woman tells her story, the “loud dreaming” literally allows the women to enter into the stories of the other, hearing them, feeling them, experiencing the pain of the trauma from the pasts, and recognizing the other as a subject who is both different and who shares pain, loss, and feelings similar to their own. The “coexistence of resonance and difference” is a primary feature of the relationships they build, and the change in the women as a result of this kind of relating is palpable, as the convent becomes the place where each woman might “meet herself—an unbridled authentic self” (Morrison 1999, 177). For these women, the search for their “unbridled authentic” selves starts only when they began to see each other, hear each other, and recognize each other, a recognition Benjamin claims is crucial to the development of both the self and healthy relationships with others.

Of course, despite the existence of such fictional versions of intersubjective relationships between women, the difficulty of relating to and connecting with one another in this way really cannot be exaggerated; the achievement of this kind of intersubjective state, this “mutuality,” is full of tension in a culture that values individualism and praises “our subjective feeling of being ‘the center of our own universe’” (Benjamin 1988, 58) and in a society based in many ways on hierarchies, on relations of domination and subordination. And, in fact, feminism and feminists have contributed to that culture, providing critiques of the paternalistic and patriarchal state and calls for the freedom of the individual that neoliberalism quickly adapted. Rather than the gender emancipation coupled with social solidarity and participatory democracy that some earlier feminists presumably sought, the movement for women’s liberation instead seemingly led to a form of liberalism that values increased choice and meritocratic advancement, granting women, along with men, the benefits of individual autonomy.

Many feminist scholars have addressed what Nancy Fraser refers to as the “dangerous liaison” (2013, 15) between feminism and neoliberalism, the coopting of feminism by the forces of capitalism. Hester

Eisenstein, particularly in her groundbreaking *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World*, traces the ways in which especially liberal feminism has served to legitimize the ideas and practices of capitalism. Perhaps unwittingly, Eisenstein argues, liberal feminists' push for the full integration of women into the workplace provided neoliberals with a convenient justification to lower wages and gut various welfare programs. Similarly, Fraser addresses how feminists' condemnation of the patriarchal state merged with the neoliberal rejection of state regulation and, ultimately, "the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society" (2013, 211). With these sorts of entangled alliances, it is difficult to imagine a future for feminism that even resembles the ideas of solidarity the movement once sought and promised, much less the kind of intersubjective solidarity discussed in this essay.

In fact, a consequence of this cooptation of feminism by capitalist, neoliberal ideas is that much of what we see as examples of female friendships and groups of women in our media-saturated culture certainly does not value relating to one another in any way resembling attunement and/or mutual recognition, but instead displays the gains to be made when value is placed on individual self-sufficiency and advancement. These images reinforce the idea that the days of solidarity and unity are gone. Instead, the creators of the images, television programs, and movies most consistently rely on tried-and-true stereotypical representations of women, reinforcing the binaries and categories some feminists have been struggling against for decades. As Jennifer Pozner argues, in addition to emphasizing that "compulsory domesticity and female subservience are core values" for women, the plethora of dating shows ruling prime-time television, for example, reinforce the notion that women are catty and competitive, backstabbing and conniving, particularly in their desire to win a man (2010, 24). In fact, many of these shows hype the catfights between the participants and emotional breakdowns, emphasizing the ways in which women cannot trust one another and replaying moments of contestants claiming, "I know better than to trust women!" and "Girls can be conniving, deceiving, and just vicious!" As Pozner has discovered in her exposé about reality television, the genre "isn't simply reflecting anachronistic social biases, it's resurrecting them" (2010, 25). In other words, the genre is resurrecting the "master's tools" and continuing to divide and then conquer.

Of course, the premise of dating shows is competition, pitting woman against woman in a battle for the one prince charming. Other shows, however, ostensibly display the unscripted (though strategically edited) lives of groups of friends, typically groups of wives who claim to be friends with each other. The ubiquitous *Real Housewives* franchise, for example, claims to be chronicling the lives of groups of "friends," and the women do in fact refer to each other as friends throughout the episodes. But the image of female friendship we see displayed in these groups of women barely resembles any friendship I have known. Even a cursory look at the Bravo hit reveals formulaic, regressive portrayals of how women relate to one another, and, perhaps more damaging, with whom we relate, as the only common ground between these women is their socioeconomic privilege. These "housewives" attempt to bond around an obsession with materialist culture, a consumerist ethos that only serves to promote competition, envy, and rivalry in their relationships. As such, they represent the culmination of the neoliberal cooptation of feminist ideas. The *Real Housewives* cast members may have achieved material success, but that success is made possible only through the exploited labor of the women working for them, their stylists and housekeepers, nannies and clerical workers.

And yet, again, a return to our feminist past reveals that growing economic disparities between women and the exploitation of some for the benefit of others have been discussed, critiqued, and then, perhaps too

quickly, moved beyond. For example, in response to what she saw as the classist and racist view of women in Betty Friedan's famous *The Feminine Mystique*, bell hooks astutely asks "who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like [Friedan] were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to professions" (1984, 2). Thirty years ago, hooks addressed what Fraser would later refer to as the potentially "dangerous liaison" between feminism and neoliberalism, questioning whether feminists are "aware of the extent to which their perspectives" and, as such, their theories and ideas, "reflect race and class biases" (hooks 1984, 3). hooks proceeded to outline the ways in which feminists can work through and past these impasses, and yet we are still contending with these messages and concerns decades later.

As academic feminists continue to hash out their debates, both old and new, women outside of the academe continue to be bombarded with images and ideas that threaten any potential revolutionary movement for us. In fact, in addition to the ways in which the *Real Housewives* franchise valorizes the individual material wealth of some women and ignores the exploitation of others, the shows literally segregate the groups of protagonists: All of the housewives in New York, Beverly Hills, and Orange County are wealthy and white, in New Jersey they are all Italians, and in Atlanta we find all African American women, with one exception, the over-the-top Kim Zolciak who is best known for her collection of identical blond wigs and who left the show a couple of seasons ago, after the last of her many on-camera battles with another cast member, NeNe Leakes. The producers do not stop with segregation, however, as each show plays up ethnic stereotypes of the cast members: stuck up snobbery from the wealthy white women, all-out tantrums from the Italians in New Jersey, who routinely accuse each other of crimes like drug dealing and prostitution, and one of whom publicly aired her legal battles and impending stint in prison on fraud charges, and verbal brawls and actual physical violence from the African American women in Atlanta.

This ostensibly "unscripted" television show is in fact masterfully manipulated by the producers and directors, casting women in well-defined roles and editing footage to heighten the drama. Nearly every group of "housewives" includes an antagonist, the woman cast to be the troublemaker, the one viewers can rely on to start some drama and instigate discord. Although viewers are led to believe that these friends battling one another represent "reality," and thus that this is how women relate to one another in friendships, the actual "reality" is that these women are actors, chosen to take part in yet another enactment of divide-and-conquer. The one Atlanta housewife who did "have somebody's back" and who refused to be a part of bickering and drama, DeShawn Snow, was dismissed after the first season; the producers told her she was "too human for a circus show," and that "because the show did so well, they were about to pump up the drama and they didn't think that [she] would fit in" (Byrd 2009). The show replaced Snow with Kandi Burruss, the very successful hip-hop writer, singer and producer, who was repeatedly referred to as "ghetto" throughout the second and subsequent seasons.

There are glimpses of camaraderie in the show, but the rare nature of them leads viewers to see that kind of bonding between women as the exception, not the rule. When asked how these women can treat each other in the way they do, NeNe Leakes, an Atlanta housewife turned sitcom star, provides a simple answer: "None of us are friends. Friends don't do what we have done to each other on the show. You have not seen one of us get the other one's back. If you did see somebody get somebody's back, the next week they were talking about them. We are clearly all associates" (Hoffman 2009). Associates, portrayed as friends.

The simple response to my discussion of the problematic ways in which female friendships and women in groups are portrayed throughout our popular culture dismisses it all as missing the point of what is meant to be mindless entertainment, providing harmless distractions from everyday lives. But the priority

placed on individual material wealth, the racial and ethnic stereotypes, the divide-and-conquer setup, and the displays of women consistently fighting with and betraying one another all have meaning in a media culture that bombards us with these images and messages ubiquitously. As Pozner argues, “these ‘guilty-pleasures’ foment gender-war ideology, with deep significance for the intellectual and political development of a generation of viewers” (2010, 18). Today’s young feminists have grown up with such depictions, have grown accustomed to seeing women behave in ways that led that *Bachelor* contestant to claim that she “knows better than to trust women” (Pozner 2010, 24). While women are making strides and gains politically, socially, and economically, our mass media consistently present regressive and oppressive roles for them, and continually push back against the idea of women relating to one another in a way that can be transformational. In the 1990s, Susan Faludi famously spoke of a backlash against feminism and feminist gains, persuasively arguing that “a backlash against women’s rights succeeds to the degree that it appears *not* to be political, that it appears not to be a struggle at all” (1991, xxii). I believe we are once again living in a time of backlash, and we that need to rediscover some form of unity, of solidarity.

In order to establish a new kind of solidarity, we can look to our predecessors, we can look to fictional representations of female friendships women writers provide for us, we can even look to our own friendships. In the best of friendships between women, for myself at least, differences are respected, confrontations over hurt feelings and slights lead to stronger bonds, and respect and loyalty remain despite the disagreements and contentions. Jodi Dean argues for a kind of feminist coalition whereby we “continually construct and reconstruct our connections and relationships” (1998, 8), as we do at our best in long-term friendships; differences and changes that come with marriage, kids, and careers force a renegotiation of terms of the friendship, but do not have to mean the friendship stalls or ends. Perhaps I am being idealistic here; I have had the unique experience of learning from a mother who has had friendships with women that have developed and grown throughout more than forty years, through the raising of kids, the deaths of husbands, and the changing nature of the worlds in which the friends have lived. With that example, I too have relied on my friendships with women for support, for love and laughter, and especially for growth, as I have learned from them and I believe they have learned from me.

As I have illustrated, for decades now feminist scholars have addressed and theorized difference, deconstructing and interrogating the idea of a common “women’s experience,” and correcting the exclusive forms of feminism that preceded us. There have been obvious gains with these interventions, although in some ways the idea of “progress” was too quickly taken to mean “moving on.” My bigger fear, however, is that much of that important feminist thought and theory in academia is getting lost in the translation to mainstream feminism and not doing enough to affect the material conditions of individual women’s daily lives. I find this evidenced in mainstream media representations of women and friendships, mainstream feminist magazines, discussions, and blog posts, and in everyday discussions and disagreements between women who call themselves feminists. In *Outlaw Culture*, bell hooks poignantly asks, “What does it mean for us to share feminist thinking and practice if that work is not coupled with fierce action ... to change sexism in all walks of life?” (hooks 1994, 5). I agree with her questioning of this connection between academic feminist thought and activism, and so I search for a way to have our theory influence our activism, to find ways in which our friendships can influence our feminism, to find connections between academic feminist thoughts and the everyday lives of women, between the ideas and strategies that preceded us and those we developed as revisions. I search for what I see as consciousness raising with a twist, informed and influenced by the later lessons of feminist thought that intervened in those original strategies of the 1970s; a solidarity that can arise from confrontation and discussion. A kind of intersubjective solidarity, in which

difference is not only acknowledged but necessary, a sense of unity in which difference is used to garner strength, not divide us.

And that would just be a starting point, a way to begin to deal with the challenges posed by the ever-encroaching neoliberal capitalism and global economic crises, as well as continual threats to feminism and women's solidarity in politics and mainstream society, in which Kim Kardashian is posing as a Hottentot Venus without any reflection on the history of oppressive racism wrapped up in that imagery. Instead of returning to feminist critiques of careerism and competition between women in the workplace, today's women are being told to just "lean in." Rather than promoting solidarity, our culture now celebrates the individual female success stories and entrepreneurs. Today's young women are being simultaneously hit with contradictory messages: Beyoncé brandishes the word "feminism" in bright lights on the stage, while *Time* magazine includes the word in its poll about which words we should ban from our vocabulary, and it ends up topping the list. There is a long history of feminists battling the forces that attempt to divide and conquer women; the battle continues and we need unity, solidarity, and reinvigorated feminist radicalism to win.

Notes

1. The room described by Steinem included Carolyn Reed, a black service worker; Jill Johnson, activist and author of *Lesbian Nation*; Shere Hite, author of *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality* and *The Hite Report on Men and Male Sexuality*; Patricia Carbine, publisher of *Ms. Magazine*; Brenda Feigen, a legislative activist; three black feminist pioneers, including Margaret Sloan-Hunter, founder of the National Black Feminist Organization; Joan Shigekawa, a filmmaker; Marc Fasteau, author of *The Male Machine*; and others.

2. It is important to note, however, that despite the fights, fissures, and disagreements, and despite the failure on the part of the NWP and many other organizations working for the benefit of women to accomplish many of their goals, much more was accomplished, particularly in the 1920s, than is often remembered or discussed. As Sara Evans details, Roosevelt's creation of the welfare state was in many ways the administration enacting the proposals developed by networks of women following the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, as they "translated their [earlier] visions into specific proposals for the regulation of labor, health, education and social welfare"; she points out that "in fact, the entire concept of social security, governmental sponsored insurance for the unemployed, the elderly, and fatherless children, as well as expanded public health programs, could be traced not only to innovations in western Europe but also to the earlier activities of female-led private charities and settlement houses" (1997, 210). Evans argues that these advancements were made primarily by an "exceptional group of women with a common perspective built on shared history and long-term friendships" (206). With regard to the last generation of women brought up in the Victorian world of female social reform and led by Eleanor Roosevelt, who was the "emotional center" of the group, Evans contends that "the mutual support and understanding which these women could supply to one another, both politically and personally, helps to explain their remarkable achievements" (206).

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