THE EARLY YEARS OF THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN CHICAGO

Naomi Weisstein

This is a revised excerpt from six hours of taped recollections recorded for Peg Strobel for her research on the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. Naomi Weisstein is professor of Psychology at SUNY Buffalo and author of numerous articles 'on visual perception. She was a founding member of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union and the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band, and author of "Kinder, Kuche, Kirche as Scientific Law or Psychology Constructs the Female," "Adventures of a Woman in Science," and .many other articles about conumporary feminist issues. For the past eight years she has had an extremely severe case of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (Epstein-Barr Vzrus) and has been unable to get out of bed. She welcomes responses to the ideas in this memoir on tape or by letter.

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The following is a description of the early years of women's liberation in Chicago, culminating in the founding of the·Chicago Women's Liberation Union in 1969.* What I want to emphasize is our joy and confusion, our openness to the possibilities, our ecstatic vision, and simultaneously, our terror of the prospect of going beyond the pale of True Leftism by exploring ttiese possibilities. It's hard now to reconstruct a picture of what It was like in those days; we truly have moved far beyond the unquestioned, unbelievably blatant, sexism of that time. The idea 'of feminism (what we called women's liberation) was utterly foreign then. *'l{e* were just emerging from the kno.v-nothing, obscurantist, repressive, mother-blaming,'woman-hating fifties. If we'd known our own history, known about the struggles, bravery and clarity of vision of previous feminists, we would have been smarter. But this history wa8 lost to us; feminism was. a dim dirty 'joke. A feminist was an •ugly spinster,• the worst, absolutely very worst a woman could sink to in those days. So we began at the beginning.

* * *

In the spring of 1965, my husband Jesse Lemisch and .I participated in an anti-Vietnam demonstration on State Street, and our political life began. We had been active in civil rights events before this, but we hadn't yet experienced involvement in a daily way. Neither of us had been communists, but we had witnessed our parents' painful involvement in the old left. Now, we joi ned Chicago SNCC and Chicago SOS, and both of us were delighted to be part of a New Left, a left that was open, generous, and, at that time infused with a spirit of beloved community vision.

But something was wrong. Beginning in the fall of 1965, I had been a lecturer in Psychology at the University of Chicago. During the sit in at the University's administration building in 1966, I found that I couldn't speak in public and that no woman was speaking except for Jackie Goldberg. She did fine, but nobody else did fine. A number of the students who would later be active in Women's Liberation were there. Heather Booth was there; she wasn't speaking. I think that Bernadine Dorhn was there; she wasn't speaking. Evelyn Goldfield and Sue Munaker were there; they weren't speaking. None of us were speaking. I tried. I got up on a chair and announced that we were organizing classes in the administration building, but no one would listen. I shouted for awhile and then I said, "Fuck" and I got off the chair. Ifelt very weird. Heather and I spoke about it; we both felt very weird. I told her about my struggles to get a halfway decent job in psychology, a profession where I was already over-qualified, having taken a year's postdoctoral training in mathematical biology. After this herculean effort, I found, to my utter amazement, that nobody was interested in hiring me.

Then Jesse lost his job for participation in the sit-in. I had already lost my job, a demeaning "lectureship"--a position tailored for over-qualified faculty wives-which at the University of Chicago didn't even carry library privileges. I had to get a note from the authority-loving secretary of the social sciences division every time Iwanted to use the library. No wonder I lost my job. I was angry and uppity, demanding faculty library privileges and submitting a grant proposal to the National Institutes of Health despite the rule against lecturers applying for grants. And I participated in the 1966 anti war sit-in as well. But at that time, even though I had acquired many political allies and friends at the University of Chicago, nobody even blinked at my losing the job. It just wasn't an event in anybody's life, that a woman would lose a job. It was trivial; I wasn't supposed to be looking for a job or wanting to be a scientist in the first place. So, how could anybody mourn if I lost it?

In the summer of 1967, Heather and I taught a seminar on women at the University of Chicago, and in the fall

of 1967, Heather and I, Amy Kesselman, Fran Rominski, Jo Freeman, Shulamith Firestone and Leah Firestone, started the Chicago Westside group, so named because we met at Jo's house. Vivian Rothstein, Sue Munacker and Evelyn Goldfield joined about six months later, and we always had out of town visitors passing through, bringing the word and sending it to other places. Spontaneous women's groups sprang up all over the country that year. (I have thought about this phenomenon a lot since. This was a bottom up, leaderless, spontaneous eruption of radical women's groups. It was as grass roots as you could get. There's some law of history here-- change from the bottom up--to use. Jesse Lemisch's term.)

The best part of the group was that we all took each other seriously. We had become so used to the usual heterosexual chill that it was a giddy and slightly terrifying sensation to talk and have everybody listen. (The process of being cut out of normal social relations has been documented subsequently by numerous social psychological studies: women in a mixed group are ignored and don't get to speak very much, and when they d0, nobody listens to them.) Well, all of a sudden we were no longer invisible. I can hardly describe the joy! Unbelievable! The sound system had just been turned on. We couldn't wait to go to meetings, where we talked ecstatically about everything. We talked about the contempt and hostility we felt from men not only walking down the street, but from our male friends in the New Left. We talked about our inability to speak in public. We asked ourselves what we should call the thing that was squelching us. Male supremacy? Female subordination? Male chauvinism? And who were we? We were afraid to call ourselves feminists, since where we had come from that was hopelessly "bourgeois.• We finally came up with "women's liberation,• an analogy with third world struggles (since we had no idea of our own struggle).Women's liberation! Libbersl in the later scornful caricature of that time. *we* never did burn our bras. Too bad--1 wish we had.)

We harried ourselves constantly over the fact that we weren't doing action. We'd come from the New Left. And the New -Left WAS action: no more study groups. No more sitting around and talking about strategy vs. tactics. ACTION! "Put your balls on the line,• (which we were still saying in those days, to my great shame afterwards). We wanted to talk and talk and talk, but it made us feel terribly guilty. Wagging before us was the cold instructional finger of a male left that had at best relegated women's aspirations.to a comical whining tacked on to what it saw as the larger struggle.

Much of the way we handled this conflict was to question whether we were really oppressed, and how and whether capitalism had really done all this to us, or whether women's subjugation preceded capitalism. In

other words we kept talking, but centering the subject around the left assuaged our guilt, and using the categories we'd inherited persuaded us that we were doing something almost as important as action. So we talked about whether Jackie Kennedy was our sister or our enemy and whether we were too middle class and "white skin privileged" and well educated to be complaining at all. And anyway, after we had kicked around capitalist disaccumulation for a while, we went back and talked about monogamy and our egalitarian, anti-hierarchical vision of utopia and community, and where children fit into our scheme.

So we talked and talked and talked. We talked about cosmetics. Suddenly, it was no longer an imperative of nature that we paint our faces and squeeze our breasts into little cones (or in my case, pad our breasts into bigger cones). Some of us decided to give up make-up and brassieres. It was a brave thing to do. I remember the feeling I had the first time I went out without my eyeliner. It was like wearing a big day-glo sandwich sign saying "HATE ME, I NO LONGER CARE WHETHER I'M PRETIY."

And we talked about whether it was true that we were less aggressive, less creative, less profound, less artistic, less "linear" (whatever that means), less honorable, less smell-free and less funny than men. (Years later, two weeks into my new job at SUNY Buffalo, the chairman of my division chased 'me down the hall screaming, "Admit it, admit it, women are not as funny as men.• I said, "Nobody is as funny as you right now,• and that sort of set the pattern for the next fourteen years of my professional life).

Out of all this talk, we began writing. We wrote position papers--"Kinder, Kuche, Kirche" was written during this period. (It was later published by New England Free Press and then found its way into the anthologies. A note about the ethos of those times: New England Free Press published it without my knowledge--but to my surprise, my name even appeared on it. In those days, we didn't sign our name to what we wrote.) We published a newsletter, Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement. Even though we were conflicted most of the time, the sheer momentum of what we were doing made us more serious about our own oppression, more sure of our self-worth, more adventurous about theory and politics than any of us -had been before. For the first time we were uncovering the truth about our own pain, we were discovering our own righteous anger. We even felt some of that necessary condition for insurgency: namely, that we were authentic actors in our own movement to change our own lives. For the first time, we were genuine revolutionaries, not on the borrowed terms of a cornball working-class fiction, or of a racist, jive-ass "be like blacks.• We were the actors and we knew why we were acting.

Although talking may have been the most important thing we did during those two years, of course we did do a lot more than talk. This feeling of having real agency buoyed us up and made us exuberant, dedicated, obsessive politicos, ready to turn the world upside down. What we did with this new awareness of our own dignity and agency in those two 'years before the Union was a kind of inchoate but fiercely creative experimentation, multi-leveled and centripetal.

The sense of agency and purpose gave us the confidence to confront people who had intimidated us a year before. We were bad-ass. For exal"(lple, in the fall of 1967 the University of Chicago chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society (SOS) had been invited to meet with some South Vietnamese NLF representative.s in Canada, and no women had been invited by the SOS leadership. So Sue Munaker and I, and I think Heather, barged into a meeting and threatened the SOS leadership, telling them that they would have to have an equal number of women in their group or we would tear down the organization--somethi ng like that. As a-result, three women went to Montreal and our action sparked the Women's Radical Action Project, the Southside feminist organizatiQn based at the University of Chicago. We also did some similar actions at Northwestern University and a Northwestern group got started up there.

The more conscious we became, the more atrocities we noticed in a left that we had considered •our movement.• Although we still were, in Ruth Rosen's words, •constantly looking over our shoulders at the male left,• and even though we were stunned by its hostility and horribly guilty over our apostasy, we mutinied nevertheless. For example, Fred Gardiner had circulated leaflets asking women to join G.I. coffeehouse teams. What could be a better idea? Talk about organizing in the belly of the Leviathan! But the leaflets were couched in such demeaning terms for women, that we wanted to tear down the whole project. In effect *they* told us to go pimp for the revolution--to assume our traditional roles as madonnas and whores and "be there; "for. the G.I.s going out to Vietnam. I was livid. But opinion was divided in our group. ·Some even thqught it was a good idea to go, and a couple of women did go to check it out, but the ones who didn't were ready to bring down the whole New' Left, we were so angry at this manipulatioo.

Our actions weren'Uramed only in relation to the male left. We thought a lot about outreach and wondered what kinds of projects would engage substantial numbers of women. We tried many pilot projects.

I myself wanted to *r* rganize singles bars. What inspird me was my excruciating years in the heterosexual marketplace before I got married. In those years I had organized my friends to collectively resist attacks on their

dignity by male predators. I had formed a •syndicate• for the collective pursuit and assessment of males that we knew. The collectivity preserved our dignity and put us on a more equal footing in the game. My husband, Jesse Lemisct}, was a syndicate project. Now I wanted to intervene on a larger scale. Women in singles bars seemed to be an ideal group to organize, because if you're a heterosexual woman and you !aven't had the paranoid perspicacity to marry in schooJ when boys are still around, the man market dries up and you're in deep shit. Chances are you're in some kind of lousy oppressive job. You're subject to all the scorn, ridicule, and social isolation of being single. You're not invited to social events any more because social events mean •couples.• So what are you going to do, talk to interesting felons on the subway? So you go to singles bars, and the men there call all the shots, because you are desperate; whereas, in the state of sexual politics of this society, they can always find somebody. Thus, Ithought we feminists should take an active interest in this little bit of war crime that calls itself heterosexual "fun.• I figured that because of the humiliation and degradation of singles bars, it would be a good place to do an action. We could get to know the patrons, and then try to set up some sort of alternate way of pursuing love and romance and intimacy that would be rational and have dignity.

So, I organized our group to meet at a bar on Rush Street, "Slaughters,• or "Butch" or "Lancepricks.• Some bar, I don't remember the name. Two of us arrived at the agreed-upon time, I and Leah Firestone. We were dressed piss elegant and were wobbling on ten inch heels. We waited for the rest Of our group before mounting our assault. We waited and we waited, and we waited, and nobody else showed up. Now, the women in my group were some of the bravest women I've ever known. They'd faced down tear gas; some of them had gone to Mississippi; raging cops didn't faze them. But going into the trenches of the singles bars was too much. (And with good_ reason. Until we women are no longer defined by our ability to attract men, putting ourselves on the line in the stock market of male-female relations will always be terrifying. Our very humanity is at stake. I'm not saying I was the one courageous little fucker in all this business. I was less terrified because I was married and because my prefeminist years of organizing my friends around this issue had taught me that attracting a man was just a routine job like any other, like typing eight hours a day or fixing toilets. Some may object, arguing that there's more pleasure and excitement in the dating ordeal; I don't know. A plumber I knew told me that when she finally hears the water gurgle down the pipe she wants to burst into song. In any case, by that time the outcome of

a heterosexual skirmish didn't actually determine if I had a soul.)

After waiting for about forty-five minutes, Leah and I decided to go into Savage's and check it out anyway. We each had our own style of approach, of course, but our aim was to talk to the women in the bar, and assess their openness to alternatives. I said something like: "Hi! I've been in'this bar an hour already and all I've met are nerds, turds and gorillas. What is it about bars like this that turns ordinary nice guys into such pigs?• At which point we expected, and got, an answer like, "well, we'll just have to stand here and wait. Something will turn up.• Then the follow up: "But don't you think we could make singles bars happier places?" "Would you be interested in meeting with a group of us to try and figure out how to do it?" The response was awful. Women eyed us suspiciously and walked away. 'But ttien with only two of ,us working the crowd, we expected this. The ethos of competition among ·women was so strong there that you would have needed a small army to redirect attitudes toward cooperation.

Parenthetically, I think that finding a mate remains a very touchy area in feminism. Femii1ism's answer to the horrors of putting yourself on the market has been in large part lesbianism, which has been enormously liberating to some women, but which has its own market· and its own cruelties, although nothing like the barbarity of the heterosexual meat market. The issue has not been attacked head-on, however. There has been this curiously Victorian attitude toward •meeting people"-an assumption that finding love cannot be subject to rational analysis, debate, or even anything but silence.

Humanizing the heterosexual ritual--indeed <u>any</u> mating ritual--has not been a priority for feminism. And now it has been taken out of our hands. Computer dating services, video dating tapes, singles bars, and endless books about women who love too much, provide more access to a singles population, but do nothing to change the rules of the game. The whole business could have been a feminist industry. We could have influenced millions of women around this country.

To my surprise, during those two years, I developed some skill as an orator. It was thrilling. The women's m9vement was giving me back my voice. I was really surprised, at first at least, when my talks and speeches would get standing ovations. I gave "Kinder, Kuche, Kirche as Scientific Law or Psychology Constructs the Female" at the American Studies Association in Davis, CA, in 1968. When I was through, the audience stood up. I said to myself, •oil, my God. Now I've done it. Now I've really fucked up. They're all going to walk out of here.• They started clapping, and I was confused. I really did not understand that this was a standing ovation. After that, I got better and better at speaking. I would give talks that would, in a good-natured

way, terrorize the men in the audience, rally the women, and have us all laughing at the end. I could even disrupt sessions in psychological or scientific association meetings, and have the audience on my side.

What I want to turn to now is the incredible rage and ridicule we encountered in those early days, seemingly from all sides. Of course, we expected it out there in sexist America For example, I remember, at the second Miss America demonstration in Atlantic City, the men on the sidelines, surrounding our pickets, were murderously enraged. They strained at the police lines with their faces alarmingly red and their veins popping in their heads. And loud? There's nothing louder than an angry male voice. "Ugly! Youse ugly bitches! Youse whores! Youse commie whores!" The cops, who got a bad rap in these days, but were sometimes quite professional, wrestled back the ones who broke through the lines and saved us from summary annihilation. But those were the Yahoos. Surely the male left would understand? Wrong. It out-did the Yahoos. At a famous SOS meeting in Michigan, which Ididn't go to, some men jumped on chairs, roared and bellowed, and then pulled down their pants and waved their penises in the air when women proposed a women's caucus in SOS.

Okay, so men weren't welcoming us with their much vaunted cold reason and universal morality.[1] But women would be on our side, no? No. Heather and I ran our workshop at the radical organizers institute in the summer of 1967, a couple of women got really upset and started insulting us about our sex lives. In the summer of 1967, like the summer of 1989, you didn't mess around with sex lives. It was important to have, or pretend to have, insanely thrilling sex, preferably twice a day, and to adore it or pretend to adore it.

Some denounced us as counter revolutionary in the pseudo-tough language that most of us had adopted to signify our shift from young privileged nobodies to authentic revolutionaries, drivers of the bulldozers of history. "You chicks-uh-gotta getcher shit together. I mean, man, this is dividing us man, this is tearing down the brothers. You're fucking with the revolution!!" (Sometimes I still talk that way, although I really hate it when I slip into it. After all, it is highly inappropriate language in which to address anybody that you want to organize, because you just frighten them away. They think you are some kind of low life.)

Another example of women's hostility to us was when Heather and I and Marlene Dixon proposed a women's caucus in the New University Conference in 1968. I was chosen to announce the caucus in a plenary and when I did, I heard a roar of laughter from the audience. One male voice boomed "where's the party? I thought every woman in the room would be enraged. But afterwards a group came

up and said, 'Heyl We don't need a caucus. We don't give a flying fuck for women's liberation. If you chicks want to do something useful, why don't you do day care for us?'

Men would resist us all the way, because we were threatening to usurp some of their power. But gradually we came to understand that what we were saying was so threatening and so basically embarrassing to women that their attacks were simply desperate maneuvers in defense of their self-esteem. After all, so many of us women had been trying so hard and for so long to be people of worth and consequence, questioning our hard won accommodati on was downright terrifying. We had distanced ourselves from that despised and trivial caste known as women; now we were supposed to embrace this caste and fight as the despised. It always takes a little while to realize that its better to name your situation and get back your humanity by fighting it, than to pretend that it has nothing to do wh you.

The emergence of women's liberation was also threatening the traditional niche that women had carved for themselves in the peace movement. In·1967, I went to Washington to join a coalition of peace groups that was organizing an anti-war march in Washington, D.C. The planning for the women's contingent, which waS called 'The Jeannette Rankin Brigade,• brought the simmering tensions between women with left versus feminist loyalties to the surface. Ann Koedt and Shulamith Firestone had brought a float to Washington-"The Death of Traditional Womanhood.• They had just found out the organizing committee for the march did not want them in the parade. The organizers of the Jeannette Rankin brigade opposed the float because it detracted from the most important message-that women want to stop war--by bringing in the obviously lesser question of women's own liberation. Shulie and Anne called a meeting of women in the New Left and in women's liberation in Washington to gather support for their float. The meeting became. unbelievably sexist. It was like watching an automobile crash on the thruway where each new car that comes along plows into the wreck. At one point Barbara Haber said, "Why are you acting so coy? Why don't you spread your legs and act like menschesl" (Whatever that meant. Amy guesses that it meant why don't you grow up and rise above your petty concerns.)

I was angry at the resistance from the New Left, and disgusted at the Chicago Westside group's vacillation. Shulie and Ann had devised this imaginative and dramatic statement protesting the idea that· women must act in their traditional roles as wives and mother$ in order to be effective. Far out! As we used to say in those days. But most of the Chicago Westside group were paralyzed with indecision even though we were certainly on their side. We had even prepared leaflets patiently arguing that

if we marched on the basis of our roles as wives and mothers, we were simply perpetuating the system. However, the glory and grief of the Chicago Women's movement was our endless search for unity. We did not want to break with our sisters on the non-feminist left, even in this case where they were being so sexist and vile.

I argued for the float with my new-found eloquence and the meeting finally decided that we should have it in the parade after all. The women chose me to go down and talk to the organizers of the march, who were old left Women's Strike for Peace Pols, and see if we couldn't get the float in there someplace. But the Women's Strike for Peace people were adamant. This float wasn't going to usurp the message of peace. Period. I remember I had to resort to the hard-cop/soft-cop argument that if we were given permission to march in the parade with the float, then things would be very peaceful. But if they weren't given perm1ss1on, I just couldn't be responsible for what was going to happen. After passionate denunciation, they resigned themselves to the inevitable. The.float sailed down the parade route. And it was a joy to behold.

To summarize those two years of inchoate beginnings of the Chicago movement: The West Side Group struggled and puzzled, talked and wrote, got wiser and stronger and, best of all, became fiercely connected to each other. We were small and structureless, but we were part of a network of politically active women ranging from those in the SOS National Office who were extremely hostile to women's liberation, to "bourgeois" feminists who were organizing NOW groups.

The SOS convention of 1969 led to the transition from small groups to a broader more ambitious organization--the Chicago Women's Liberation UniQn (CWLU). It also illustrated the gridlock between a male left, sodden with the politics of joy through strength and thick with the dogma of bankrupt left history and a new, vulnerable left feminism which rejected received authority and all forms of hierarchy, and which sought to gather its wisdom from the authority of lived lives. The most salient thing about that convention, the most memorable and, I hope, the most unrepeatable was that almost everybody dropped off the edge of the world in the throes of a wild irrationality. True, going crazy had been building up for a while. For instance one issue of the SOS newsletter showed a picture of student/workers as bikers going down to Dallas for an SOS Convention with the caption "Are you ready for us?• Another cartoon was of the mythological student/worker sticking his fist in the face of a cop and saying,: "Taste the sweetness of destiny, racist pig.• This growing celebration of cruelty was an astonishing turnabout for a New Left which had founded itself on the principles of democracy and a humane society, and none of us really

humane society, and none of us really took it seriousty, thinking it was the work of a couple of nutcases in the SOS National Office.

But at the SOS Convention of 1969 the trend exploded in all its fulminating, lurid lunacy. Bernadine Oorhn came dressed, biker-style, in a leatherette microskirt, with a couple of chains around her neck. She was there to herd us women into Weatherman, a little sect competing with numerous other sects, urging us to terrorism, Marxism, and a recognition of Stalin as the father of the revolution. And of course all the various sectlets were furious with each other, threatening that, come the revolution, they would kill each other. After a speech about who was going to be executed first, I turned to Steve Goldsmith, who Ithought was my friend and said, "did you hear what that guy just said?" He looked at me and said solemnly, "Of course, I heard. When the revolution comes, it will be necessary to execute the counter- revolutionaries.• People who were sane, compassionate, civilized and rational the day before had become little Stalin replicas, furious lunatics posing as the barbaric generals of the new order. They were adopting, taking to their bosom, the worst of the old left's traditions, complete with purges and execution of counter-revolutionaries, and the whole hideous weight of Communist history.

Then the Black Panthers got up to speak, and *die ValKerie* changed into Comic opera. They were totally ignorant of women's liberation and totally sexist, and we women stli!-rted roaring in disbelief and outrage. Trying to calm us, one Panther took the mike and began yelling, "Pussy Power,• hoping no doubt, to start a chant. When this didn't go over, another Panther grabbed the mike and said "Permit me to explain the brothers. Clark Kent was a fink because he never slept with Lois Lane.• It got rockier and rockier. Many of us started pounding chairs on the floor, asking to be heard'. Well, that was not possible. They were barring known feminists from the mikes.

Vivian Rothsteinwas appalled at what happened at the SOS Convention, especially because people, women,that we had been friendly with the day before, would no longer talk to us. We were petty bourgeois, counter-revolutionary shits. In fact, this epithet was subsequently applied to us so often that Amy and I made up a petty bourgeois, counter-revolutionary shits marching song. It had a recitative that went, "Where are our cartels? Where are our horse farms? Where are our international diamond mines? We don't have the constituency, but we have the will!" I was of the opinion that we shouldn't fight to maintain ties with these women, that they had gone crazy. But Vivian, who was always much saner than I, said that these women were some of the most gifted political organizers in Chicago, which was true, and that we had to maintain contacts with them.

A couple of days later, she called me and she said, "Let's have an umbrella organization for all the different women's groups, projects, and activities in this city. We'll have a conference; we'll found an organization; we'll have a series of pre-conference meetings; we'll have position papers; we'll call everybody we know--every woman we know--and tell them·that we're trying to start a pluralist, democratic, open, empiricalfeminist New Left organization, and we'll see if we can't restore some decency and generosity toward each other. "Fine!" I lied, not believing for a minute that we could pull it off.

We got to work. At the pre-conference planning meetings, we tossed and turned over the question of what a left wing feminist group should be. There were many people at the conference planning committee whose main interest was in a left women's organization not a women's liberation organization. The apparent criterion of being left was that we get a black, Latin or genuinely working class woman to attend.

Amy and I decided that this was going to be a very awful conference, that it would make people very cranky and leery, and what we needed was some sort of theater which would emotionally get across the point that we were there to celebrate both our commonality and our differences, and diversity. The union aimed to unite women in a loose association, respecting different kinds of energies, different kinds of creativities, (what Vivian always used to call a multi-level struggle) on the assumption that no matter what our differences, we shared a common oppression and we shared a common history of resistance. So we decided to make a play that would say all those things. Also, because we were both interested in alternative democratic culture rather than the passive stuff that was fed to us by TV and movies, we wanted to make a play that would involve as much audience participation as we could imagine.

We were right about everybody getting cranky at the conference. Half the women there were simply out to prove that feminism, especially white middle class feminism, was irrelevant. The other half of the women wondered why they were there, since they thought they were going to a conference that was at least not woman-hating.

Things came to a head when an apparent representative of Latin groups, Hilda Ignatin, gave the keynote address. Hilda was actually, I think, one of those people who functioned in the late 1960s, and the early 1970s as a stand in for what we most ardently desired: real contact with black and Latin women. But she had almost as few ties to the Latin community as we did. The culmination of her talk was her statement that "When I think that you white, middle class women are oppressed, it makes me laugh.• At that point I blew out, as they say. I stood up, my face enpurpled, and said in a low voice: "Now look. If Iwere a Latin woman, I might come here and say the

same thing you are saying. Iwould be annoyed at the composition of this group, I would know in my bones that it was racist, that it had enormous amounts to learn about Latin women, and that it was blithely ignorant of those things. I agree with you that we are racist, even with all the good will in the world, because Of our position in this racist social structure. But it isn't racist for we white women to organize around our own oppression, or to have a somewhat different agenda than Latin women. It's only racist when we don't realize that our concerns may be parochial. The way out is not to insult us or to guilt trip us about our white skin privilege. Rather let's try to figure out a common agenda that we can work on together. If we can work together and equalize power and develop some trust, then perhaps we can mutually instruct each 9ther on the racism that's inherent in our lives. On the other hand, if you're saying that women's liberation is a trivial issue compared to the racist oppression of Latins, forget it. It's a losing game to compare oppression and pick only the worst for action. It doesn't expand a movement; it diminishes it. We can't accept that.• I paused, groping for words. Then I concluded, "Nobody wants you to shuffle for us, and nobody wants to shuffle for you. We are through denying our pain.•

In retrospect, Ithink Isaid some of this rather badly. The fledgling Chicago Women's Liberation Movement was in an ironic and complicated situation which could destroy us. We wanted to build a movement that was broad and powerful and represented all women, and we knew that could only happen if women from different class and race backgrounds shaped the movement together. But that was a very tall order, because of the power differences between different sectors of the society. The political perspective that we had developed in the West Side group was imbued with the conviction that everywhere the powerful make continual war on the powerless--doctors against patients, insurance companies against accident victims, nursing homes against the elderly, men against women, white people against black people, rich against poor-and we believed that any group of powerless people organizing against their own oppression was a rare event and should be treasured and nurtured whenever it occurs.

But we also understood that all inequalities corrupt, and our experience with the male left had taught us that the only way members of a powerless group could work with members of a dominant group was from a position of strength. Individual female voices were drowned by the arrogance of the male leadership which treated us either as tokens ("their women"), or more often as vermin whose voices were inaudible squeaks. So we wanted to join with groups of women from Black and Latin communities, but on a basis of equality. And there were no Black and Latin women's organizations at that time (at

least, despite our efforts, we didn't know of any) that were interested in fighting for women as a group.

What was happening grew out of the desperation about universalizing our movement. Because of the guilt about our white constituency we had become extremely vulnerable to denial and make believe, pretending that this or that particular scam or scoundrel was our big break. (The male left was in the throes of a similar dilemma.) The worst thing about thi dilemma was the guilt it engendered and how quickly the guilt led us to thinking that our movement was invalid. On the left, Black and Latin people were seen as legitimate agents of change and women as a group weren't. The guilt demoralized us and turned our attention away from our own development and towards a desperate sycophancy that allowed us to accept an agenda antithetical to our own legitimate purpose if it came from the politically correct color.

At that point I had to get ready for my part in the play. So, I said, "Excuse me,• and I walked out of the hall. About fifty women walked out with me, because they thought I was leading a protest. It was like the first time I had gotten a standing ovation. I was flabbergasted: were they following me because they approved of what I had said? Or were they planning to beat me up? I turned and faced them. "Where are you going?" I said. "We're following you,• they said. 'Why?' I asked. "Because you're leading a breakaway.• "A breakaway!" Irepeated. •rm leading a breakaway!• ipondered this. Part of me jumped at the idea of leading a breakaway. I was afraid that women's liberation would die in its infancy from an overload of dogma and conflict. But the other half of me was too committed to the Chicago West Side Group's style of non-sectarian politics to actually consider such a move. And despite Hilda Ignatin's incendiary way of raising questions of parochialism, they did need to be addressed. So, I slowly shook my head. "Listen,• I said. "I'd like to lead a breakaway, but I can't. We've gotta stay and work this out. We are in the position to organize something that may be a lasting and enduring institution in this city. We can't throw away the chance. We just have got to argue it through.• The women slowly backed away, disappointed.

I dressed and went back. The atmosphere had grown unbelievably tense. Blue-lipped women faced the players in stormy silence. The play began with two witches arguing about how to make the revolution, a comic turn. Nobody laughed. Then Sherry Jenkins and Kathy Rowley started singing and the tension fell.

The witches took up again, and now women began to laugh. The witches started arguing about what to throw into the cauldron in order to start the women's revolution:

Witch #1: I don't care what she says. I'm going to throw in everything. Here go my earrings.

Wtch #2: What about the things basic to woman's oppres$ion? Capitalism, private property, imperialism, the family, the state, private ownership of children?

Wtch #1: Listen. We'll throw in everything and then we'll have to throw' in imperialism and capitalism and the family

Witch #2: (muttering) Voluntarism, tailism, adventurism, infantile leftism, economism, schachtmanism.

Witch #1: (Is throwing things into the pot.) Here are my earrings, here are my shoes. Here's my little girl doll that cries real tears. Here's my flowered stationery. Here's my padded bra . . .

Witch #2: Your padded bra? Here's my gi,rdle. My high heeled shoes. My false eyelashes.

Witch #1: (backing up with each imprecation) My hair spray, my skin spray, my breath spray, my underarm spray, my douche spray.

Witch #2: The industrial revolution (throws typewriter). Capitalism (one dollar bill). The family (baby carriage). Imperialism (coffee can), war (emblem of lost son in Vietnam).

Witch #1: Oh I hate this fucking pot. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it. (Runs up with flying kick. Witch #2 kicks too.)

Here Sherry Jenkins detonated a smoke bomb, the lights dimmed and the music began again. The narrator explained that the women's revolution had begun long ago. We had researched the history of women's resistance in whatever books we could find in 1969 and had written descriptions of women from around the world, which we distributed to the audience. One witch would call out the name of a historical figure. For example, Witch #2 says: "Remember the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention?" This was the signal for a woman in the audience who had received a slip of paper saying "Seneca Falls Women's Convention,• to stand up and recite:

> *The history of mankind is a history of repeated zn1urzes and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object, the establishment of absolute tyranny over her.*

At times an explanatory narration would precede an audience member's speech.

> *Na"ator: Akron, Ohio, 1851. Fugi,tives were everywhere. A white face could not be trusted. Friend, enemy? Will they help me to Canada or sell me back into slavery? Free blacks were not safe in Ohio. No bla.ck was safe south of Canada. That song was by Sojourner Truth. Who was Sojourner Truth? There was a meeting of the Ohio Woman's Association. At this convention appeared Sojourner Truth, a tall, gaunt, black woman in a grey dress and white turban. She had been born a slave in New York and had published a narrative of her life as a slave . . .*

In researching the play we had discovered inspiring stories of women from all over the world, such as Chiu

organizing, ecology, hurting men's feelings. And everything is important; but sexism is .Qill struggle, and if we don't fight it, nobody will. The fundamental fact of society's power relations, of dominant males controlling lesser males and females, is so intertwined with every other evil in the world that it must be changed along with all the other evils. If sexism remains, we will also have privation and misery and torture and rape and war and holocaust and environmental disaster. But even if sexism had nothing to do with the other horrors, it is our pain and our lives and our human dignity that are at stake and they are worthy of our life's struggle. When we emerge again as a force in American life, and there is no doubt in my mind that we will emerge again, I hope that we can learn from our experience and, for the first time in history, be faithful to our own central vision.

L. Kohlberg and C. Gilligan, "The Adolescent as a Philosopher: The discovery of self in a post conventional world," Deadalus, 100, (1971); and C. Gilligan, !!! a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development, Carrbridge, 1982.