

(En)gendering Violence, Imagining Safety:
Carceral Politics in Rhode Island's Feminist Movement, 1970-2009

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Introduction

“To build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled; we need to ask what it is we are against, what it is we are for, knowing full well that this we is not a foundation but what we are working toward. By working out what we are for, we are working out that we, that hopeful signifier of a feminist collectivity. Where there is hope, there is difficulty. Feminist histories are histories of the difficulty of that we, a history of those who have had to fight to be part of a feminist collective, or even had to fight against a feminist collective in order to take up a feminist cause.”

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

At the 22nd annual Rhode Island “Take Back the Night” (TBTN) protest in October, 2000, white feminist activist Jodi Glass stood in front of a small crowd in downtown Providence. It was hardly the first time she had spoken out at a TBTN demonstration. In 1979, in the midst of the second wave feminist movement, Glass organized the state’s first TBTN march, protesting along the same streets she walked again that fall. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, Glass was deeply involved with feminist anti-violence advocacy across RI, organizing with a local rape crisis center, founding a chapter of the grassroots anti-porn organization known as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), and supporting numerous efforts to put an end to gender violence as she understood it. Reflecting on these moments in her activist career, Glass’ speech emphasized the continued importance of the feminist fight against violence. To conclude, she proposed her vision of a just feminist future, inviting the crowd to:

“Imagine if every police officer truly integrated a [feminist] mindset into every day. Imagine if lawmakers took enforcement of the law seriously and used it consistently... Imagine a world without the current epidemic of violence against women. Imagine a totally celebratory Take Back the Night.”¹

¹ Jodi Glass, “Speech (Jodi Glass) - TBTN 2000,” 2000, Box 4, Folder 4, Jodi Glass Papers.

With these words, Glass suggested that a truly safe world would be one in which the criminal legal system adopted a feminist conscience and took violence against women seriously. To Glass and activists like her, feminism's most fruitful strategy would be translating its ideals into the language of the law—that is, promoting an understanding of violence against women as a “crime” to be prosecuted and punished.² Glass took up this carceral strategy in full force over decades of feminist organizing, building relationships with local police departments through TBTN, attempting to pass legislation to criminalize pornography, and training police officers to recognize gender-based “hate crimes.”

In the same years that Glass turned to the state to protect women against violence, the criminal legal system in RI and across the United States was expanding at a rapid pace. Between 1979 and 2000, the rate of women's incarceration across federal and state prisons increased by 522%, from 26,378 to 164,221 imprisoned women.³ RI saw an even more staggering increase of 1,150%, from 17 to 212 women across the same period.⁴ Much like the rest of the country, RI incarcerates relatively more Black and brown people than the state population.⁵ Many women are also incarcerated for crimes related to poverty; in the early 2000s, for instance, more women were imprisoned in RI for prostitution charges than any other offense.⁶ Indeed, while Jodi Glass and other white feminist activists focused on sex as the central theater of women's oppression and called for assistance from the criminal legal system, in RI and throughout the country,

² The term “feminist” is used capaciously in this thesis to refer to people who defined themselves as feminists, even if other feminists would find their version of feminism exclusive or reprehensible; because this history traces the use of feminist ideals as a veneer for violence, I find this to be necessary.

³ “Fact Sheet: Incarcerated Women and Girls,” The Sentencing Project, (Washington, DC: 2016).

⁴ “Population Report, FY 1976 to FY 2021,” Rhode Island Department of Corrections, Planning & Research Unit, 2021.

⁵ “Fact Sheet: Incarceration Trends in Rhode Island,” Vera Institute, 2017. According to the Vera Institute, in 2017, Rhode Island's Black population was 7%, while Black people made up 30% of the incarcerated population. Latinx people made up 14% of the state population, and 25% of the incarcerated population.

⁶ Steven Brown, “Presentation Before the Special Legislative Commission to Study Ensuring Racial Equity and Optimizing Health and Safety Laws Affecting Marginalized Individuals,” RI ACLU, February 28, 2022.

women whose identities situate them differently in relation to the state experienced carceral violence as raced, classed, and gendered.

This thesis traces the development of carceral feminist logics in the RI mainstream feminist movement, beginning in the 1970s with feminism's second wave and extending to the early 2000s. Examining feminist anti-violence organizing, in particular the local TBTN movement, I suggest that carceral strategies emerged in tandem with mainstream feminism's turn to a politics of recognition, which displaced the early movement's more expansive, multi-dimensional notions of gender justice. I end by interrogating the consequences of growing alliances between law enforcement and white feminists on the landscape of sexual policing in RI, analyzing the relationships between a certain thread of the mainstream movement—that is, dominance feminism—and the adoption of more punitive crime prevention measures.

Understanding Carceral Feminism: Rhode Island in Broader Context

Jodi Glass' faith in the criminal legal system's capacity to actualize gender justice reflects widely held visions of the feminist cause across the national and international feminist movement. As feminist philosopher Amia Srinivasan reflects in *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, over the last fifty years, carceral solutions to gender violence have been "increasingly accepted as common sense in most countries," as mainstream feminist activists have collaborated with governments in an effort to prosecute violence against women.⁷ Centering her discussion on carceral feminism's relationship to the criminalization of sex work, Srinivasan notes how carceral solutions fail to target systemic causes of gender oppression: "The belief that a sex worker will be helped by the criminalization of her trade rests on the assumption that she

⁷ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 162.

has other choices available to her,” she writes. “That it is prostitution... that is her fundamental problem,” rather than poverty, patriarchy, or any other systemic oppression.⁸

In 2007, sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein coined the term “carceral feminism” to refer to a feminist politic that envisages the carceral state, including police, courts, and prisons, as an essential tool in the fight to achieve gender justice.⁹ Describing the contemporary landscape of the feminist “anti-trafficking” movement, which descends from the same “anti-prostitution” feminist lineage which Srinivasan critiques, Bernstein’s article situates carceral feminism in relation to neoliberalism, which, she argues, shaped “a carceral turn in feminist advocacy movements previously organized around struggles for economic justice and liberation.”¹⁰ Instead of pressing for structural change and attacking the preconditions necessary for gender oppression, carceralism constrained feminist horizons to the individual and the punitive.

Several scholars including Nancy Fraser and Kristin Bumiller have elaborated on carceral feminism’s entanglements with neoliberalism. As Fraser notes, the second wave feminist movement was gradually unmoored from its radical beginnings during the neoliberal era, as calls for state-based recognition aligned with a contemporary rhetoric to get “tough-on-crime.”¹¹ While “the ‘68 generation” embraced several dimensions of gender justice—at times, staunchly critiquing the political economy and capitalism—later feminists focused on shifting androcentric

⁸ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, 62.

⁹ Elizabeth Bernstein, “The Sexual Politics of the ‘New Abolitionism.’” *Differences*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2007, pp. 128–151, 137.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Bernstein, “Carceral Politics as Gender Justice? The ‘Traffic in Women’ and Neoliberal Circuits of Crime, Sex, and Rights,” *Theory and Society* 41, no. 3 (2012): 233–59, 233. In Bernstein’s article and throughout this thesis, the term “neoliberalism” refers to a theory of political economic practices proposing that humanity’s advancement is tied to the liberation of personal skills and freedoms via an “institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.” Under neoliberalism, the state’s role is to defend this institutional framework, and “beyond this task, the state should not venture.” Quoted here: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005).

¹¹ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State Managed-Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Verso, 2013).

formulations of women as subordinate, fixating on cultural battles.¹² Though activists believed that a campaign for recognition would synergize with political and economic struggles, Fraser illustrates how the latter goals were conceded in favor of the former; she writes, “instead of arriving at a broader, richer paradigm that could encompass both redistribution and recognition, second-wave feminists effectively traded one truncated paradigm for another.”¹³ No longer prioritizing critiques of state institutions and systems, white mainstream feminists pivoted toward carceral apparatuses for redress.

The feminist struggle against sexual violence became particularly available for liaisons with the neoliberal policy regime. As Kristin Bumiller outlines in *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*, feminist efforts to raise awareness around sexual violence developed in tandem with a generalized “‘culture of control’ which which was grounded in the essential ‘otherness’ of the criminal.”¹⁴ Feminist claims to the pervasiveness of rape and sexual harm fed into this reactionary environment, and were thus made to justify the expansion of state surveillance systems that targeted racially and sexually profiled people.¹⁵ Describing neoliberalism’s interest in promoting a new “ethics of personal responsibility,” which divorced individual experience from social conditions, Bumiller details the ways in which feminist visions of justice were limited to a register of punishment as opposed to systems-level transformation.¹⁶ In the name of protecting women, police departments

¹² Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State Managed-Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, 220.

¹³ Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review*, no. 56 (April 1, 2009): 97–117.

¹⁴ Kristin Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 6. Notable texts from which Bumiller builds her analysis include David Garland’s *The Culture of Control* (2001), Loïc Wacquant’s *Punishing the Poor* (2009), and Jonathan Simon’s *Governing Through Crime* (2007).

¹⁵ Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

developed specialized “sex crime units” and lobbied for more robust legislation targeting so-called sex crimes, expanding law enforcement’s “symbolic, coercive, and administrative power over both men as perpetrators and women as victims.”¹⁷

Countering Carceralism: Abolitionist Feminism

Long before Bernstein coined the term “carceral feminism,” many Black and women-of-color feminists critiqued the mainstream feminist movement’s interest in carceral solutions and developed analyses of gender violence at the intersections of identity. In her 1975 article “Joan Little: The Dialectics of Rape,” Black feminist and political activist Angela Davis levied a powerful critique of white feminism’s “one-dimensional” understanding of sexual violence. Breaking down beliefs that the socially imposed category of “womanhood” united all women in a common experience of sexual oppression, Davis demanded that the feminist movement acknowledge the particular situatedness of Black women in regard to the experience of sexual violence.¹⁸ Asserting that “for black women, rape perpetrated by white men... must be classed among the brutal paraphernalia of racism,” Davis argued that campaigns fighting to achieve feminist justice for all women, including Black survivors of sexual violence, must be anti-racist to succeed.¹⁹

Davis and other contemporary Black feminists contended that the feminist movement must reject relationships with carceral state to truly carry the mantle of anti-racism. Citing the criminal legal system’s historic entanglements with racial violence, from “slave patrols” to the enforcement of the Jim Crow laws, these theorists insisted that to collaborate with the carceral

¹⁷ Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*, 7.

¹⁸ Angela Davis, “Joan Little: The Dialectics of Rape,” *Ms. Magazine*, 1975.

¹⁹ Davis, “Joan Little.”

state was to concede the safety and security of Black women. Examining the entanglements between gender oppression and the prison-industrial complex, Davis reflected that “the threat of violence emanating from prison hierarchies is so ubiquitous and unpredictable” that some incarcerated women have pointed to “striking structural similarities between the experiences of imprisonment and battering relationships.”²⁰ In drawing a direct connection between the prison itself and gender violence, Davis theorized an “abolitionist feminism”²¹ that proposed a world without gender violence as a world without prisons.

In her book *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation*, Black feminist scholar Beth Richie describes the feminist movement’s convergence with the carceral state as a consequence of white feminism’s failure to attend to race and class in analysing gender violence. As Richie describes, a fundamental function of the “prison state” is to suppress, through violence and punishment, those who deviate from white hegemonic cultural norms: people who are not white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and/or wealthy.²² Referring to “intersectionality”—a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to name an idea first articulated by an older generation of feminists, including Claudia Jones, Frances M. Beal, the Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, Enriqueta Longeaux y Vásquez, and Cherríe Moraga²³—Richie argues that multivalent, integrated political analyses of gender violence are essential to ending gender violence in all its forms.

²⁰ Angela Davis and Cassandra Shaylor, “Race, Gender, and the Prison Industrial Complex: California and Beyond,” (Meridians, 2001, Vol. 2, No. 1: Duke University Press, 2001).

²¹ When I refer to abolitionism in this thesis, I am speaking to the political theory and organizing efforts of prison abolitionists, who seek to upend and destroy the carceral state as it exists, and rebuild a system of collective safety and care that is not based on punishment or logics of racial capitalism. Note, when I use the term “abolitionist feminism,” I am not referring to feminist thinkers who critique prostitution or trafficking as “modern day slavery” and co-opt the term “abolitionist” to refer to their practices. See Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie’s collaborative work, *Abolition. Feminism. Now* (2022).

²² Beth E. Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation*. NYU Press, 2012. 160.

²³ Srinivasan, *Right to Sex*, 17.

Over the past decade, scholars such as Emily Thuma and Mimi Kim have documented the transformative work of abolitionist organizers over the same historical period that this thesis examines.²⁴ As Thuma writes in *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing and the Fight to End Violence*, the political activities and theories that came to shape “anti-carceral” or “abolitionist” feminism were established within and between numerous coalitions involving incarcerated and formerly incarcerated activists, beginning in the 1970s with the Free Joann Little campaign and extending to contemporary organizations like INCITE! Gender non-conforming and Trans People of Color Against Violence.²⁵ Activism centering issues of racial and economic justice, specifically those efforts spearheaded by radical Black and queer feminists, she notes, coalesced to create an expansive analysis that clashed with the “tough-on-crime” ethos of the 1970s. Thuma’s work illustrates how these groups developed a distinctive anti-violence politics that saw violence against women as encompassing “the structural violence of social inequalities, the violence of state institutions and agents, and interpersonal forms of violence” such as rape and sexual coercion.²⁶

Sex worker rights activists have also been instrumental in developing an abolitionist feminist politic, particularly through campaigns to decriminalize sex work. As Juno Mac and Molly Smith recount in *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights*, carceral feminist thinkers have often rationalized the criminalization of sex work by arguing that the law can put an end to prostitution, what they see as the ultimate expression of women’s oppression. Rather than promoting transformations in the political economy to afford women more options,

²⁴ See Mimi Kim, “From Carceral Feminism to Transformative Justice: Women-of-color Feminism and Alternatives to Incarceration,” *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 27:3, 219-233, and Emily Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (University of Illinois Press, 2019).

²⁵ For reference, this group was formerly called INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence.

²⁶ Emily Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 2.

criminalization puts sex workers at risk of violence by forcing them to work in more dangerous settings and fear being caught and extorted by police.²⁷ Mac and Smith go on to detail how receiving a criminal record for sex work can lead to housing instability or losing custody of one's children, consequences that exacerbate gender violence rather than mitigating it.²⁸

In Rhode Island, the local chapter of the sex worker rights organization Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) RI has advocated for decriminalization since the RI state legislature passed more stringent laws criminalizing sex work in 2009. In the winter of 2021, I began working with COYOTE on decriminalization efforts, as well as the group's collaboration with the National Coalition for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls, a national organization fighting to close women's prisons across the country. Organizing with COYOTE, I first developed an awareness of the ways that purportedly feminist ideals have been mobilized in support of measures that threaten the safety of women involved in the sex industry. Through this work, I became interested in studying the case of carceral feminism in RI to better understand how parts of the local feminist movement forged relationships with the criminal legal system, compromising the safety and security of many women across the state. While the national rise of carceral feminism and its consequences is well documented and theorized, as the above literature review has demonstrated, the specific case of carceral feminism in RI has not been explored in depth. This thesis illuminates this history.

Studying Power: A Note on Voice and Method

Though feminism seeks to remedy women's lack of power under patriarchy, many feminists have had relative power and influence in shaping public agendas and the treatment of

²⁷ Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Worker's Rights*, (Verso, 2018).

²⁸ Mac and Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes*.

women in the law. As Amia Srinivasan notes in *The Right to Sex*, this is true of feminists who figure themselves into existing hierarchies as business executives and managers, claiming to have “broken the glass ceiling.”²⁹ It is also true of feminists whose interests converge with those of the political right, however unintentionally or unwillingly, including carceral, anti-porn, and anti-prostitution feminists.³⁰ In examining the rise of carceral feminism in Rhode Island, this thesis therefore features the stories and voices of women with relative power and access: white, middle-class, and often university-based feminists.

The focus on these women should not be taken to suggest that other voices are less important to this history, or that carceral feminist beliefs extended to all corners of the feminist movement. On the contrary, feminists with carceral leanings—a narrow subset of the greater movement—had disproportionate influence because of the way in which their priorities aligned with the state. Crucially, the critique of carceral feminism that informs much of my writing was developed by organizers with much less access to mainstream narratives, namely imprisoned people and feminists marginalized by racism and classism in addition to sexism. As noted in the section above, scholars like Emily Thuma have taken up the important project of tracing abolitionist feminist movements across this period, detailing histories which feature the stories of women less likely to be catalogued in institutional archives. This thesis often refers to efforts to advance an abolitionist feminist politic as a means of illuminating, in Ahmed’s words, “what we are for,” while describing carceral feminism as “what we are against.”³¹

The central figures in this thesis have not only had the relative power to be heard over other voices, but also remembered. As scholars and activists have noted for decades, the production of history is hardly neutral, and always influenced by power: power determines which

²⁹ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 149.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) 4.

materials arrive in the archive, what those materials say, and how they are interpreted.³² Many of the white feminist activists whose papers feature in this history were able to donate their materials to institutional archives as a result of connections to Brown University, a measure of their access and privilege. While I spend much of this thesis examining these women and their political beliefs and strategies, in moments across all three chapters, I slow down to illuminate the stories of women mentioned briefly, sparingly, or not at all in the many white feminist collections I examined, including Stella Mae Young, organizers involved with the Combahee River Collective, and RI sex worker rights activists.

The histories included in this thesis were compiled through an investigation of feminist archives held at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, located at Brown University's John Hay Library. Over the summer and fall of 2021, I examined several collections in this archive, including the Jodi Glass Papers (1978-2002) and the Leslie Doonan Activist Files (1968-2003). Both collections were compiled by Jodi Glass, who worked personally with archivists at the Pembroke Center to bring her and Lesley Doonan's papers to Brown University. Throughout my research, I also made visits to the Rhode Island Historical Society, where I examined the Women's Liberation Union of Rhode Island Records (1970-1984) and the Mark Toney Papers (1977-1986). From newsletters and meeting minutes to flyers, newspapers and pamphlets, the papers contained in these four collections document many aspects of the feminist movement throughout the end of the 20th century. Finally, the digital archive of *The Providence Journal* was also essential to my work; newspapers, as you will see, provide crucial context for feminist demonstrations. I also had the chance to speak with Jodi Glass, the feminist organizer

³² Here, I am invoking Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), in which Trouillot teaches that "history is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots."

who opened this introduction, twice throughout my research process. Glass generously answered my questions regarding her activism and its legacies, and parts of our conversation are recorded in this thesis, especially in Chapter II.

Finally, a few notes on language. Throughout this thesis, I often refer to mainstream feminists as “white feminists.” This is because the feminist groups which feature in this history—those that had the greatest access to the public through relationships with government, features in publications, etc.—had predominantly white memberships. In addition, as I will describe, these groups prioritized white women’s experiences as the basis of their political analyses, an essential factor in their turn to carceralism. Further, in Chapters II and III, I often use the historically-specific term “dominance feminism” to refer to a certain strain of the mainstream feminist movement which, I argue, precipitated the “carceral feminism” we know today. Finally, when I use the term “woman” and “gender justice” in my own writing, I am referring to all those who travel under the social sign “woman” and justice for people of all marginalized genders. When I am referring to dominance feminists in particular, and their fight for “women’s liberation,” it is important to note that these feminists often saw “womanhood” as biologically determined, excluding trans women from their formulations.

A Roadmap

The chapters that follow sink into the ideas introduced above. Chapter I describes the beginnings of the second wave feminist movement in RI, tracing the history of the Women’s Liberation Union of Rhode Island (1970-1984) which, I argue, embraced a more radical feminist politic than later mainstream feminists. I start here for several reasons. First, I find it essential to demystify a common narrative of the second wave movement, that feminist organizers were able

to change cultural understandings of gender violence, but failed to transform institutions. This thesis, in direct opposition to this notion, argues that certain feminist beliefs were instrumental in the transformation of carceral institutions in RI through this moment.³³ As such, I find it essential to trace the early values of the feminist movement to understand how these ideals, salutary in themselves, were mobilized in support of carceral measures later in the 20th century.

Chapter II examines the emergence of “dominance feminism” in the mainstream feminist movement of 1980s RI. Discussing dominance feminism’s pursuit of crime-based recognition for acts of gender violence, I frame this chapter by setting RI TBTN protests in contrast to the Boston TBTN coalition of 1979, which was influenced by the intersectional organizing of the Combahee River Collective. This chapter concludes with an analysis of Jodi Glass’ feminist career, examining her anti-pornography organizing, her work to outlaw gender-based hate crimes, and her involvement with TBTN in the context of dominance feminism and its politics of recognition.

Chapter III deals with the consequences of these alliances in the context of the rise of broken windows theory and punitive crime control measures in RI. Returning to local TBTN organizing in the context of concurrent campaigns to make the city of Providence more accessible to white, middle-class families, this chapter demonstrates the ways in which feminist protest strategies were mobilized to justify the expansion of law enforcement into Providence neighborhoods through community policing initiatives. I conclude by describing dominance feminism’s interaction with calls to rid the city of prostitution, arguing that legislative efforts to expand sexual policing and incarcerate sexually-profiled women were passed under the guise of protecting women.

³³ Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History.”

I. Embracing Dimensions of Gender Justice: The Radical Beginnings of Rhode Island's Second Wave

On the morning of August 17th, 1982, Stella Mae Young arrived at the Providence County Courthouse to surrender to the state and begin a three-month prison sentence. Convicted of welfare fraud for accepting \$1,200 in welfare payments while employed at a jewelry factory, Young—a 52 year-old Black woman and mother of six—had fought long and hard to avoid incarceration.³⁴ In an appeal to the state Supreme Court to reduce her sentence, Young maintained that she had never intended to break the law and that her actions were informed by the financial and emotional pressures of motherhood. “What they say I did,” she expressed to a *Providence Journal* reporter, “I did because I didn’t know the rules... I was trying to be both a mother and a father to my kids.”³⁵ Framing her actions as both necessary and just, Young asserted “if I had to do it again, I’d do it again.”³⁶

While her arguments struck a chord with members of the public and the press, the court was wholly unsympathetic to her claims. Judge Eugene G. Gallant—who oversaw Young’s surrender and transfer to the state’s maximum security prison that day in August—cited her “unrepentance” as cause enough for her incarceration, even after she offered to pay back the \$1,200.³⁷ Depicting Young as a deceitful criminal stealing taxpayer dollars, Gallant told the press that she was “defiant during the trial [and] defiant during the sentencing,” going further to allege that Young had “lied on the witness stand.”³⁸ In his refusal to reduce her sentence, Gallant

³⁴ “Mother of six begins jail term for welfare fraud,” *The Providence Journal*, July 18, 1982.

³⁵ Phil Kukielski, “Three Month Term for Fraud.” *The Providence Journal*. August 18, 1982.

³⁶ Kukielski, “Three Month Term for Fraud.”

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

conjured up the anti-poor, anti-Black myth of the “welfare queen,” a potent stereotype of the Reagan-era.³⁹ In spite of the state’s effort to vilify her, Young’s lack of remorse made a powerful political statement: by refusing the notion that she had broken the law, she indicted the criminal legal system for imprisoning poor Black women for simply surviving and taking care of their families.

Young’s incisive political message reached organizers across Rhode Island who mobilized to sustain her cause. As she was taken away from the courthouse en route to the women’s prison that day, a crowd of 30 demonstrators chanted “Free Stella! Free Stella!” after her. The protestors hailed from varied social movements with connections to her case, including local socialist organizations, a welfare rights group known as the Workers Association for Guaranteed Employment (WAGE), and the state’s leading feminist organization, the Women’s Liberation Union (WLU) of Rhode Island. These organizers continued to fight for Young’s release throughout her incarceration; at a rally at the statehouse in September, advertised through fliers like Figure 1, members of WAGE, feminist organizers, and concerned community members alike protested the “harassment of a welfare recipient” through a working group called the Stella Mae Young Coalition for Justice. At rallies throughout Young’s incarceration, organizers continued called on Governor J. Joseph Garrahy to intervene and release Young immediately.⁴⁰

³⁹ For more on the racialized trope of the “welfare queen,” see Josh Levin, *The Queen: The Forgotten Life Behind an American Myth*, (Little Brown and Company, 2019).

⁴⁰ In late September, following this demonstration, Governor Garrahy agreed to review Young’s three-month sentence in a major win for the Coalition. Though Garrahy refused to commute her sentence, he allegedly promised to look into the situation, stating “There may be some sense here that maybe there’s been a harsh sentence on Stella. If we see there is some resource to correct a misreading of an attitude, we will try to find some way to be helpful.” See “Sentencing of Welfare Mother to Be Reviewed,” *The Providence Journal*, September 24, 1982.

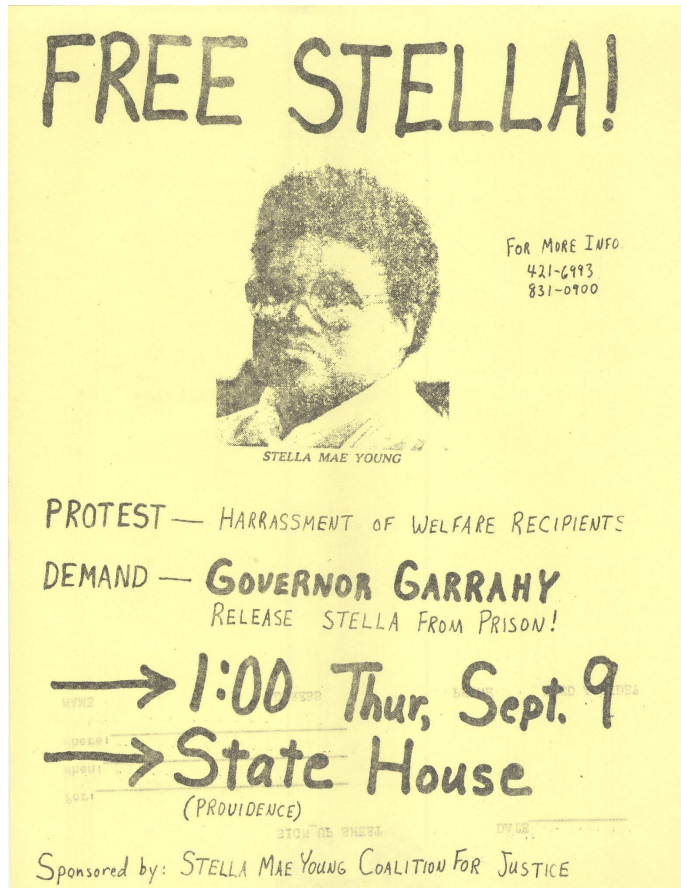


Figure 1: “Free Stella!” Flyer, September 1982. Mark Toney Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society. Series 1, Box 1, Folder 12.

In tandem with these efforts, the WLU provided a feminist political analysis of Young’s experience, and encouraged union members—primarily white middle-class women—to join the Stella Mae Young Coalition for Justice at meetings and rallies. As the group contended in a 1982 newsletter, women like Young were victims of a “feminization of poverty” that primarily targeted single Black mothers.⁴¹ Referencing several cases in which Black women had been

⁴¹ “WLU Newsletter,” December 1982, Box 1, Folder 38, Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

In 1982, 40% of the families eligible for Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) were led by single Black mothers, while Black women comprised only 12% of the general population.

taken from their families and incarcerated for minor welfare infractions, the WLU took up Young's framing of her actions as necessary and just, remarking: "God forbid... women try to retain their pride and dignity...[or] complain about the hand that feeds them."⁴² As the leading voice of the RI feminist movement from 1970 to the mid 1980s, the WLU's vocal support of Young's cause raises questions about the early movement's priorities and political orientation. If mainstream white feminists in RI would eventually envisage the criminal legal system as an ally in the fight for women's liberation, how can we understand the WLU's involvement in the campaign to protest carceral violence and "Free Stella"?

As this story suggests, in the early years of the second wave feminist movement, white middle class organizers with the WLU embraced a more capacious definition of gender injustice than the mainstream movement would subscribe to in later years. The union's early vision of women's liberation encompassed multidimensional struggles for economic redistribution, bodily autonomy, and equitable representation, goals that could not be achieved without a total transformation of dominant notions of gender and sexuality. By imagining liberation through a critique of several interlocking sites of women's oppression, the WLU approached what Marxist feminist theorist Nancy Fraser calls a "two-dimensional" analysis of gender justice.⁴³ Fraser's formulation—introduced as a reflection on the failures of the second wave movement from her vantage point in the 21st century—contends that a later fixation on issues of cultural recognition would displace the early movement's transformative vision of a total social restructuring. Rather than reducing the movement to its failures or describing the carceral turn as inevitable, this historicization asks us to acknowledge the liberatory origins and potential of the second wave movement. Moreover, Fraser's formulation can help historians clarify exactly how feminist

⁴² "WLU Newsletter," December 1982, Box 1, Folder 38, Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

⁴³ Nancy Fraser, "Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition," in *Fortunes of Feminism: From State Managed-Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Verso, 2013), 219.

ideals, “salutary in themselves,” later served to legitimate transformations in society that ran directly counter to earlier visions of a feminist future.⁴⁴

To understand how the second wave feminist movement’s own principles would later betray its radical origins, we must begin by asking: what were these origins? How did mainstream white feminists originally conceive of their work? This chapter takes up these questions by examining the WLU as the founding organization of the RI second wave movement. In the first section, I examine the WLU’s early goals, its interest in deep social change, and the union’s socialist leanings. Arguing that the union embraced a more capacious analysis of gender justice, I describe how WLU activists often saw economic justice as essential in the fight for liberation. Although the WLU incorporated class-based analyses of gender injustice into the union’s activism, in the second half of the chapter, I trace the union’s failure to conceptualize racial justice as one of the many dimensions of women’s liberation. In the context of the WLU’s anti-rape and anti-violence organizing, I examine the organization’s promotion of what sociologist Beth Richie calls the “everywoman” narrative: that is, a white feminist rhetorical strategy contending that sexual violence is experienced universally by all women, irrespective of race and class.⁴⁵ To conclude, I analyze how the union’s acceptance of the everywoman narrative allowed organizers to ignore raced, classed, and gendered experiences of carceral violence.. This shift, I note, made it possible for WLU activists—who had at one point embraced radical, anti-authoritarian politics—to view law enforcement as a friend of the movement, a transition that would be taken up in full force in the following decade.

⁴⁴ Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review*, no. 56 (April 1, 2009): 97–117.

⁴⁵ Beth E. Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation*. NYU Press, 2012.

The Women's Liberation Union of Rhode Island - The Early Years

On August 26th, 1970—National Women's Strike Day, and the 50th anniversary of the passing of the 19th amendment—the WLU of RI held its first public demonstrations in Rhode Island shopping centers, downtown streets, and beaches. Founded just two weeks prior with the goal of coordinating liberation efforts across the state, the 200 member organization spent the day passing out roughly 8,000 leaflets, engaging in heated public debates with disgruntled pedestrians, and advertising teach-ins to learn more about feminism.⁴⁶ In the leaflets, the WLU contended that society and its public institutions had failed to meaningfully improve conditions for women at work, at school, and at home over the past decades. Citing issues of economic, reproductive, and social justice, the union's critiques spanned various dimensions of gendered oppression, as they declared that:

“[Women] haven't won the right to equal job opportunities. Or to equal pay for equal work. Or the right to arrangements that make it possible to be a mother and have a career too. Or the right to control our bodies. Or the right to obtain a truly equal education.”⁴⁷

Altogether, the union argued, these many facets of injustice meant that “[women] haven't won the right to be dignified individuals, the right to be our own women.”⁴⁸

At the beginnings of feminism's second wave, the WLU articulated several strategies for achieving women's liberation: the pursuit of material changes to women's lived reality, alongside a battle against the cultural strictures of gendered hierarchy. In leaflets distributed on National Women's Strike Day, the union argued that the public could afford women the right to be “dignified individuals” through material improvements to their lives, including: free 24-hour community controlled child-care centers, free abortions on demand, and equal pay for equal

⁴⁶ Michael Madden, “Leaflets Feature RI Lib.” *Providence Journal*, August 27, 1970. From America's Historical Newspapers, Readex.

⁴⁷ Madden, “Leaflets Feature RI Lib.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

work, to name a few of the demands described in the leaflets.⁴⁹ The effort to gain more resources and opportunities for women was inextricably linked to efforts to challenge and subvert notions of gender that subordinated women to a narrow set of social roles. In addition to questions about women's pay and access to child care, pamphlets asked readers, "Have you ever been bothered by the way that women are portrayed in advertising? They're either feather-brained child types...or they're sex objects,"⁵⁰ levying a critique that degrading representations of women in media normalized the conditions of physical threat that were commonplace in women's lives.

The WLU's public demonstrations in August 1970 were one small part of a national chorus of liberationist organizing that day, with thousands of feminists participating across the country. Officially organized by the National Organization for Women (NOW) and prominent feminist activist Betty Friedan, the "Women's Strike for Equality March" was envisioned as a nation-wide work stoppage to demonstrate the strength and solidarity of the second wave. In Washington D.C., 1,000 women marched down Connecticut Avenue behind a banner reading "We Demand Equality!"⁵¹ In New York City roughly 50,000 marchers paraded down Fifth Avenue proclaiming "equal pay for equal jobs!" while 30,000 people looked on.⁵²

With so many women drawn to the second wave, the movement contained a plurality of local groups, activists and strategies with varied political approaches to liberation. Emerging from a tumultuous political era of social and economic upheaval, defined by the spectre of the Vietnam War, the new feminist movement encompassed these degrees of radicalism, just as civil

⁴⁹ Madden, "Leaflets Feature RI Lib." Liberation organizers were already attempting to make these demands a reality; on the day of the demonstrations, socialist feminists at Brown University who were part of the Union attempted to use campus spaces as community child-care centers to give women the freedom to strike and protest on behalf of liberation. In response, the university changed the locks to Sayles Hall, where students had hoped to establish a make-shift day care, demonstrating the lack of institutional support for the women's efforts.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "Women Seek Equal Rights Across Nation," *Providence Journal*, August 27, 1970.

⁵² "Women Seek Equal Rights Across Nation."

rights activists ranged from NAACP members to Black Panthers. Sociologist Nancy A. Matthews makes sense of the political diversity within the second wave by placing organizers into two camps: as she argues, groups of women taking up the feminist fight from within the radical, counter-cultural movements of the 1960s made up a “collectivist strand” of the second wave, which saw the struggle for women’s liberation as a fight to upend and destroy systems of patriarchal power.⁵³ Many of the groups involved with this grassroots arm, including RI’s WLU, emerged out of leftist sensibilities of anti-authoritarianism, and a deep skepticism of “the Man”: that is, the war-supporting state.⁵⁴ The older, bourgeois strand—exemplified by NOW, founded in 1966 by Friedan and other women entrenched in mainstream politics—saw equality, or affording women the same rights as men, as the central goal of liberation.⁵⁵

The WLU, established officially in the summer of 1970, was envisioned as a space to coordinate and make sense of the national explosion of feminist thinking and protesting of the 1960s. In the fall of 1969, a year before the union was founded, university-based feminists at Brown University—including graduate students, professors, and many members of a socialist, New Left group called the New University Conference (NUC)—began meeting informally to read and talk about feminism, according to a history of the WLURI co-authored by Anne Fausto Sterling and Christina Simmons.⁵⁶ These women, the majority of whom were white, highly educated, and middle-class, brought their institutional ties to the university and its intellectual legacies of feminist thinking to the WLU. By the spring of 1970, ten or so “consciousness raising” groups, spin-offs from the group founded at Brown University, existed across the state in

⁵³ Nancy Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State* (Routledge, 1994), 9.

⁵⁴ Aya Gruber, *The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Mass Incarceration* (UC Press, November, 2021), 42.

⁵⁵ Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State*, 9.

⁵⁶ Anne Fausto and Christina Simmons, “Women’s Liberation Union - Written History,” 1976, Box 4, WLU Collection, RI Historical Society.

places like North Kingstown and Newport.⁵⁷ One weekend in early July, members of these groups convened in a Providence apartment to discuss a statewide women's liberation organization, and the WLU was born.⁵⁸ As "the seed from which most feminist groups in Rhode Island grew," to quote founding member Joanne Rongo, the WLU offered a proving ground for local feminist strategies, and trained up feminist leaders of the later movement.⁵⁹

Building a Feminist Consciousness and Grasping at the Roots

Much like grassroots feminist organizations across the country, the WLU emerged out of regular consciousness-raising meetings which constructed a collective feminist analysis of gender injustice. The dates and times of these meetings were regularly advertised in the group's monthly newsletters as "feminist counseling," and could be attended by any RI woman, regardless of their membership in the union.⁶⁰ As organizer Lesley Doonan wrote in the union's November 1972 newsletter, consciousness-raising sessions helped women "striving to be whole individuals in a sexist society" by giving them the opportunity to share in supportive "sisterhood."⁶¹ Beyond the emotional support that these spaces offered, consciousness-raising served as a powerful political tool that could connect individual women to the broader struggle for liberation, and ground personal experience in theories of gendered subjugation.

The notion that gender injustice was a structural, material condition, visible in the operations of powerful institutions as well as interpersonal relationships, was forged in these consciousness-raising sessions. Although a more systemic critique of gender injustice was

⁵⁷ Fausto and Simmons, "Women's Liberation Union - Written History."

⁵⁸ Fausto and Simmons, "Women's Liberation Union - Written History."

⁵⁹ Mary Ann Sorrentino, "'The Tests Never Stop' for battling Joanne Rongo, state worker and pioneering feminist," *Providence Journal*, May 1 1998.

⁶⁰ Lesley Doonan, "WLU Newsletter," November 1972, Box 1, Folder 28, Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

⁶¹ Doonan, "WLU Newsletter," November 1972.

diffused over the next decades, Nancy Fraser points out that many feminist activists of the early second wave movement—influenced by their experiences with consciousness-raising—agreed that the fight against women’s subordination required a radical transformation of “the deep structures of the social totality.”⁶² In a retrospective account of the early years of the movement, Kathie Sarchild of New York Radical Women, the organization which coined the strategy of consciousness-raising in 1967, described the depth of radical feminist organizing in these early years: “The dictionary says radical means root, coming from the Latin word for root. And that is what we meant by calling ourselves radical. We were interested in getting to the roots of the problems in society.”⁶³

In parsing out personal experiences of systemic gendered oppression in these women-only discussion groups, second wave feminists prioritized lived experiences as the foundation of the movement’s politics, connecting personal instances of gendered violence into societal patterns and affirming the need for feminist community. Galvanizing support for collective struggle, radical feminists built a shared understanding that gendered oppression had structural, institutionally sanctioned roots and “no individual solutions,” all through a deep respect and care for women’s experiences.⁶⁴ Under the slogan “the personal is political,” radical feminists interpreted social inequalities—previously tolerated and rationalized— as injustice, drawing people into the movement who had not been politicized by a social cause before.

While the WLU’s consciousness-raising efforts reveal the radical, structural critique that the union held dear, documents related to these sessions also elucidate the challenges the union faced to build a common feminist consciousness. For more active, politically savvy organizers,

⁶² Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History.”

⁶³ Voichita Nachescu, “Radical Feminism and the Nation: History and Space in the Political Imagination of Second-Wave Feminism,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 3, no. 1 (2009), 29.

⁶⁴ Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State*, 9.

consciousness-raising was not simply a method of community building within the movement, but was best mechanized as a strategy to politicize women and garner support for the union. Still, some members, including women from within mainstream networks of political activism as well as those with little political experience, were interested in “[getting] together to exchange ideas” but “did not see the Union so much as an activist group” according to Fausto-Sterling’s history.⁶⁵ As one union activist, Barbara Kohler, wrote in a letter reflecting on her consciousness-raising experience in 1971, in the hands of centrist or bourgeois feminists, the sessions had the dangerous potential to become spaces to “to blow off steam and get less militant.”⁶⁶ Adamantly defending the radical potential of consciousness-raising, Kohler argued that the purpose of “raising people’s consciousness is to make them *more militant* so that life can be changed at its roots” (my emphasis added).⁶⁷

Though the founders of the WLU embraced radical threads of the movement, namely socialist feminism, this letter also reveals that the union struggled with political diversity due to its central goal of convening feminist activists across the state. As Fausto-Sterling’s written history of the WLU notes, the union contained roughly three sects in its early years: first, the “apolitical” women who had “never been involved in non-establishment political activity and had little interest in it,” who were “feminist in outlook” but wary of radicalism.⁶⁸ Second, the committed socialists, who saw the WLU as a way to further socialist feminist goals.⁶⁹ And third, Fausto-Sterling describes a caucus of radical “New Left feminists,” many of whom were students and members of the New University Conference who argued for more militant strategies.⁷⁰ The

⁶⁵ Fausto and Simmons, “Women’s Liberation Union - Written History.”

⁶⁶ Barbara Kohler, “Evaluation of Consciousness-Raising Efforts,” 1971, Box 4, WLU Collection, RI Historical Society.

⁶⁷ Kohler, “Evaluation of Consciousness-Raising Efforts.”

⁶⁸ Fausto and Simmons, “Women’s Liberation Union - Written History.”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

tensions amongst these groups—in particular between more centrist feminists and the latter two sects—created fault lines in the RI mainstream feminist movement. Out of these conflicts, bourgeois feminist organizations like the RI chapter of NOW emerged, allowing radical activists involved with the WLU to double down on their commitment to more capacious notions of gender justice.

Socialist Feminism and the WLU

The WLU was never an explicitly socialist organization, particularly because its founding organizers envisioned the union as a central force in convening and streamlining feminist activism in all corners of RI. Though many founding members promoted socialist feminist perspectives in union publications, the group was primarily conceived of as a space to coordinate and streamline liberation efforts across the state, open to women with different political backgrounds. In a 1970 statement on this matter, Anne Fausto Sterling recommended that socialist feminists in the WLU agree to “work within the broader women’s movement with the dual purpose of working with non-socialist women towards common goals... without being untrue... and at the same time working to persuade them of the importance of socialist politics for the women’s movement.”⁷¹ Much like other feminist organizations positioned in the mainstream, the union faced the challenge of aligning its members to a uniform political platform that stayed true to its an agreed upon set of principles.

Even so, many of the loudest organizers of the union were staunch in their belief that the feminist movement must be class-conscious to be successful. In a letter written to the union in 1971, reflecting on her experience of consciousness-raising sessions, Barbara Kohler made a

⁷¹ Fausto, Anne. “On the Role of Socialist Women in a Non-Socialist Women’s Movement,” November 1970. WLU Collection, Box 3. RI Historical Society.

powerful case for a movement that centered the experiences of working class women. Reflecting on the union's middle-class membership and its consequences, she noted: "we are still an exclusively middle class movement and our consciousness-raising groups give strength to women who are financially secure enough to reject the old role and follow new ways."⁷² The privilege of financial security, she contended, blinded middle and upper class women to the need for an expansive struggle by keeping them "content with the little changes in [their] personal lives" and out of touch with women who felt the pressure of gendered subjugation differently and more acutely.⁷³ In her letter, Kohler described her fear that the Union would abandon efforts to establish universal, free child care, for lack of attention to the voices of working class women.⁷⁴ Without a deeper analysis of gendered violence as connected to the struggles of working people, socialist members of the union feared that elements of the fight for liberation that required greater transformations of the status quo would be compromised, with "the whole movement [failing] as it did 50 years ago."⁷⁵

As bourgeois feminists left for more centrist organizations like NOW, the call for economic redistribution and a dramatic reordering of gendered labor roles became an essential platform of the WLU, spurred on by the many socialist feminists involved in the union's founding. Women like Anne Fausto-Sterling and Carolyn Accola were eager to center the struggles and concerns of working class women, and shaped the initial demands and trajectory of the WLU accordingly. Recognizing that women's relationships to gendered and classed oppression could not be universally defined, and critiquing middle-class white feminists' willful ignorance of class-based issues, Accola asserted in a statement to the union in 1971 that: "our

⁷² Kohler, "Evaluation of Consciousness Raising Efforts."

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

position as middle class people is, in relation to the proletariat, comparable to the relationship men have to women.”⁷⁶ Depicting capitalism and patriarchy as parallel oppressions, Accola and other socialist feminists in the WLU defined women’s liberation capaciously and centered their demands not only on issues of recognition but also on economic justice.

The WLU’s stated demands, which were first published in a 1971 pamphlet titled “the RI Women’s Liberation Union: What we are and what we want,” were deeply focused on material concerns facing working women. Demands ranged from free 24-hour community led child-care centers to the establishment of women’s centers at all universities, to “advance the physical and intellectual well-being of women.”⁷⁷ The union strongly advocated for free public services to ensure women’s bodily autonomy, including free abortions upon request, free birth control, free divorce, free quality education on sexual health and pleasure, as well as free access to critical feminist histories.⁷⁸ As Lesley Doonan, WLU coordinator and long-time feminist activist expressed years later in a 1977 pamphlet titled “Women, Welfare and Poverty,” the state’s lack of support for low-income people was inherently a “women’s issue,” with the average median income of female heads of household at just 47% of their male counterparts and many women working full time but earning less than the poverty level.⁷⁹ The state, Doonan argued—much in line with socialist feminist thinkers organizing the international Wages For Housework campaign—ought to value domestic labor as a “wage” instead of “welfare,” provide a universal basic income to all people, and make poverty obsolete for all in order to truly achieve women’s liberation.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Carolyn Accola, “Statement to the WLU,” RI 1971, WLU Collection, Box 3, RI Historical Society.

⁷⁷ “The RI Women’s Liberation Union: ‘What We Are and What We Want,’” 1971, Box 1, Folder 27, Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

⁷⁸ “The RI Women’s Liberation Union: ‘What We Are and What We Want.’”

⁷⁹ Lesley Doonan, “Women, Welfare, Poverty,” June 12, 1977, Box 1, Folder 4, Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

⁸⁰ Doonan, “Women, Welfare, Poverty,”

In extending the purview of gender injustice to encompass the structural devaluing of reproductive and domestic labor in the socially private space of the home, feminists like Doonan made evident gendered asymmetries of power made possible by the reification of heterosexual family structures. The WLU newsletters, published throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, offered material support to women who experienced economic and social harm due to the state's stringent prescription of a two-parent, heterosexual household. For lesbian and queer women who wanted children and needed free legal advice to defend against homophobic courts, the WLU was also a crucial resource and support network. Up until the WLU produced its final newsletter in 1983, these monthly publications connected women looking for low cost housing and child care to helpful connections, pointed people to legal aid and health care resources, and suggested new methods of collective care to fill in the gaps left by the state. Informed by socialist principles, the WLU embraced what might be contemporarily called an ethic of mutual aid, building community systems of support as opposed to relying on state agencies like social services and the legal system.

“Sex Takes Precedence” — Toward the Everywoman Narrative

While the WLU centered women's complex relationships to patriarchy and oppression along the lines of class, union materials reveal that the group was quick to argue that “sex discrimination takes precedence” over a woman's racial identity, to use Anne Fausto-Sterling's words.⁸¹ In 1971, Fausto-Sterling, a union founder and university professor, gave a lecture on “Topics in Human Sexuality” that expressed her perspective that gender had the greatest impact, in the realm of wage discrimination, on women's marginalization. Explaining that women were

⁸¹ Anne Fausto, “The Woman's Role, a Women's Liberation Point of View,” November 3, 1971. WLU Collection, RI Historical Society.

the lowest paid of all workers, “even when other factors in wage discrimination, such as race [are] figured into the picture,” Fausto concluded that “sex discrimination takes precedence over race” because Black men and men of color made more annual income on average than white women.⁸² Despite referring to several statistics in her lecture which illustrated that Black women were earning almost half that of white women annually, Fausto subsumed the complexities of racialized marginalization to that of sex discrimination.⁸³ Though this lecture referred to the specific issue of wage inequality, Fausto-Sterling’s narrow analysis of the conditions of gender oppression—and her preference for a formulation that minimized racial marginalization—indicates the union’s overall failure to incorporate struggles for racial justice in their confrontation with the patriarchy.

⁸² Fausto, “The Woman’s Role, a Women’s Liberation Point of View.”

⁸³ *Ibid.*

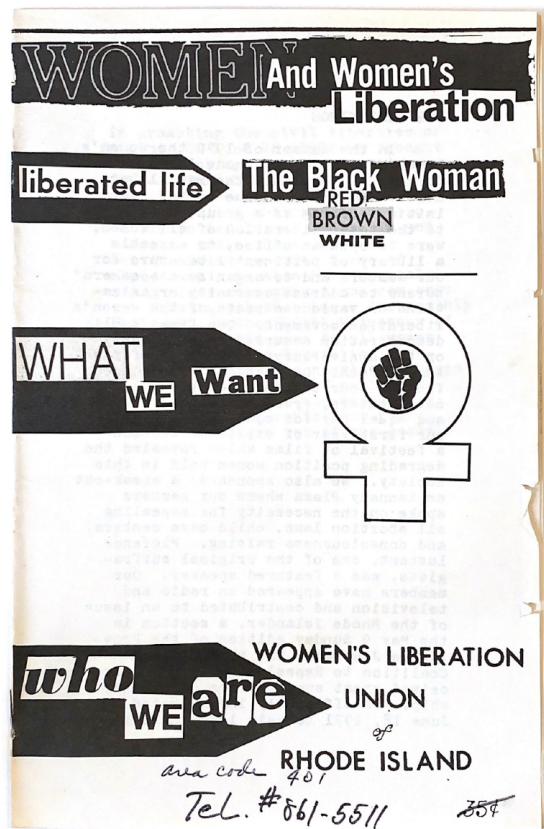


Figure Two: “The RI Women’s Liberation Union: ‘What We Are and What We Want.’” 1971. Box 1, Folder 27. Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

In subsuming the particular experiences of non-white women under those of the union’s white middle-class membership, the WLU essentialized gendered oppression to a set of grievances that ignored the entanglements between racial and gender injustice. In the group’s early publications, the WLU outwardly described itself as a space for “all women” of any racial and class identity, but despite these superficial assurances, union organizers wrote about and analyzed gender injustice through a lens of whiteness. For example, the front cover of a 1971 zine titled “Women’s Liberation: What we want and who we are,” stated that the group’s ultimate goal was a “liberated life” for women of all racial identities: “[for] the Black, red, brown, and

white woman.”⁸⁴ While the cover referred to the many experiences encompassed by the category of womanhood, inside, the zine failed to refer to the ways in which racial identity might exacerbate or augment women’s experiences with issues like abortion rights, child care, or wage inequality.⁸⁵ In outwardly claiming to speak for all women while functionally ignoring racial injustice as a dimension of the gender liberation struggle, the zine inadvertently argued that if white women’s demands were met, the feminist fight would be over. Notably, as described in the first section of this chapter, these demands were somewhat attuned to the particular needs of working women, in response to socialist feminist influences. Despite the proliferation of class-based analyses, the WLU’s publications—including this zine and its monthly newsletters—rarely noted the ways in which the fight for gender justice was simultaneously a battle for racial justice. With the exception of references to the RI Black Women’s Alliance, a discussion group on “racism within our ranks,”⁸⁶ and the statistics offered in the context of the Stella Mae Young case on Black women’s acute experiences with state violence under the welfare system, the union rarely wrote about racial justice, and never with the same vigor as it did economic justice.

The tendency to subsume the particular experiences of Black women and women of color to a “universalized” vision of gendered violence—that is, a white experience of gendered violence—is especially plain in the WLU’s treatment of sexual harm, which followed the guidance of other mainstream white feminist organizers across the country. Framing sexual violence in structural terms, the union grappled with individual experiences of harm in consciousness-raising sessions and hosting “speak-outs” in public locations like Kennedy Plaza,

⁸⁴ “The RI Women’s Liberation Union: ‘What We Are and What We Want.’”

⁸⁵ “The RI Women’s Liberation Union: ‘What We Are and What We Want.’”

⁸⁶ “WLU Newsletter,” October 1981. Box 1, Folder 37. Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

a central hub in the city of Providence.⁸⁷ These “speak-outs,” the first of which was organized by the New York Radical Feminists (NYRF) in 1971, publicized experiences of private terror as women spontaneously shared stories of abuse, building off of other women’s statements.⁸⁸ Placing these experiences in political context, the second wave developed the thesis that the prevalence of sexual violence was a result of culturally and institutionally entrenched demonstrations of masculine power and intimidation. Rejecting the idea that women were themselves to blame for experiences of harm, the second wave put the onus on society and public institutions to ensure women’s safety.

In an effort to represent male violence against women as pervasive and structural, white feminists often flattened variations in social identities, strategically framing women’s experiences with violence as similar across racial, ethnic, and class lines. The aforementioned, “everywoman” narrative, theorized by Beth Richie, was not simply an unintentional rhetorical consequence of white feminists writing from and through their own narrow set of experiences. Rather, the everywoman narrative stemmed directly from racist beliefs that gendered oppression superseded forms of racial oppression, and that racial analyses of patriarchy were unnecessary to liberation.⁸⁹ Claiming that “every woman” experienced the same threat of sexual violence, feminist activists asserted that if the risk of sexual violence did not depend on factors like what a woman was wearing, her location, her behavior, etc., it did not depend on variations in social identity either. Under this formulation, white women, Black women, women of color, and women of any class were equally at risk of sexual violence.

⁸⁷ “The RI Women’s Liberation Union: ‘What We Are and What We Want.’”

⁸⁸ Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State*, 9.

⁸⁹ Beth E Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation* (NYU Press, 2012), 93-94.

The everywoman strategy ignited fears of the constant threat of rape, drawing powerful white women into the feminist fight and elevating the issue of sexual violence as a national feminist priority. In her introduction to the bestselling book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, published in 1975, Susan Brownmiller described the moment that she realized she too could be a victim of rape as the origin point for her involvement in the feminist movement. “I learned that victims of rape could be women I knew,” she noted, going on to argue that this discovery opened her eyes to the fact that rape could, in fact, also happen to her.⁹⁰ Although this framing might be understood as a coming to feminist consciousness, or even more generously, as an opportunity for solidarity building, Brownmiller’s broader understanding of violence minimized material differences in women’s experiences of sexual harm. Echoing Anne Fausto-Sterling’s assertion that “sex discrimination takes precedence” over racial oppression, Brownmiller contended that “sexual intimidation knows no racial distinctions” and “that the sexual oppression of white women and black women is commonly shared” in a blatant display of the everywoman narrative.⁹¹

Black feminist activists were adamantly opposed to this narrow white feminist analysis of sexual violence. As renowned Black feminist theorist bell hooks described in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, although the everywoman narrative could be framed as an “impulse towards unity and empathy,” it allowed “privileged women...to ignore the differences between their social status and the status of masses of women.”⁹² In so doing, white feminist activists leveraged white supremacy to make their interests “the focus of the feminist movement, [employing] a rhetoric of commonality that made their condition synonymous with

⁹⁰ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 8.

⁹¹ Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, 171.

⁹² bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Routledge, 1984) p. 6.

oppression.”⁹³ In failing to center the experiences of the most marginalized, white feminists left non-white, non-affluent women behind, compromising the security and safety of the many for the needs of the few.

In the context of the rise of carceralism within the feminist movement, the everywoman narrative made alliances with carceral actors more attractive for white women who saw the criminal legal system as a tool for accessing justice. In the same year that Brownmiller published *Against our Will*, Angela Davis published her groundbreaking essay “Joann Little: The Dialectics of Rape.” The article, published in *Ms.* magazine—Gloria Steinem’s mainstream feminist publication, targeting a very white audience—pressed white anti-rape organizers to abandon the everywoman narrative in their activism. In reference to the ongoing case of Joann Little, an incarcerated Black woman facing the death penalty for an act of self defense against rape while in prison, Davis implored white feminists to join the fight for Little’s freedom and understand the “socio-historical context” of her situation.⁹⁴ Little’s perpetrator, Clarence Alligood, Davis explained, attacked her on the basis of her race *as well as* her gender, influenced by legacies of white male violence against Black women in chattel slavery and throughout the carceral system.⁹⁵ A narrow analysis of Little’s experience and the experiences of other Black women and women of color, Davis contended, would have dangerous consequences for the future of the feminist movement. If white feminists continued to examine sexual violence through the lens of male supremacy alone, ignoring white supremacy, she argued, they would put their weight behind expansions of law enforcement and stronger laws to target perpetrators without considering the consequences for people wrongfully victimized by this system.⁹⁶ In so doing so,

⁹³ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Routledge, 1984), 6.

⁹⁴ Angela Davis, “Joan Little: The Dialectics of Rape,” *Ms. Magazine*, 1975.

⁹⁵ Davis, “Joan Little: The Dialectics of Rape.”

⁹⁶ Emily Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 31.

white feminists would doubly fail to stop rape, and exacerbate the harms of the carceral system that ensnared and violated Joann Little. Predicting that the anti-violence movement could be dangerously co-opted to reinforce systems of carceral violence that abused Black women and women of color, Davis demanded that white feminists consider the dire consequences of allying with the criminal legal system for the feminist fight.

Anti-rape Efforts and the WLU's Carceral Turn

While Davis' prediction ultimately came to fruition, her appeal intimated that a carceral turn in the second wave feminist movement was by no means inevitable. In demanding that white anti-violence activists take up Joann Little's cause, Davis expressed hopes for a movement that could understand and challenge the interlocking systems of racial and gender oppression that made Little vulnerable to violence. Notably, for the WLU and other feminist groups engaged in anti-rape efforts, the everywoman narrative did not immediately translate into alliances with the criminal legal system. In fact, these efforts originated in the most radical feminist wing of the second wave, among young collectivist and socialist feminists, who took up an oppositional rather than reformist ideology toward institutions of public safety like the police and prisons.⁹⁷ Fueled by actions like public speak-outs, these feminists argued that violence against women served as a means of social control, and could only be remedied by a total transformation of gender relations. As such, these radical feminists also agreed that a "reliance on the state for solutions risked co-optation."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Marie Gottschalk, "Not the Usual Suspects: Feminists, Women's Groups, and the Anti-Rape Movement" in *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 122.

⁹⁸ Gottschalk, "Not the Usual Suspects: Feminists, Women's Groups, and the Anti-Rape Movement" in *The Prison and the Gallows*, 122.

Throughout the 1970s, feminists involved with the WLU and other grassroots groups across the country argued that the criminal legal system, like all of society's patriarchal institutions, could not protect women without the precondition of expansive social change. As the anti-rape movement gained momentum in the early 70s, survivors of violence often condemned the criminal legal system for its failure to provide justice or redress. Women spoke out about brutal and humiliating responses to their reports of violence, in which police asked questions like "Did you enjoy it? Are you a virgin?" and, of course, "What were you wearing?" suggesting that women were ultimately at fault for their own rape or assault. Feminists in the anti-rape movement, sociologist Nancy A. Matthews describes, began to call such treatment "second rape," framing police as perpetrators of gendered violence in their own right.⁹⁹ With these experiences in mind, organizers asserted that "rape is not a law-and-order issue," as the New York Radical Feminists (NYRF) wrote in a widely circulated publication, *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*. Outlining the priorities of the anti-rape campaign, and rejecting a reactionary politic involving the criminal legal system, NYRF contended that "Women are not demanding castration, nor are women demanding capital punishment...we do not want to make rape laws more punitive."¹⁰⁰ Instead, as NYRF outlined, many feminists were fighting for "a transformation of the family, of the economic system and the psychology of men and women" in order to make sexual violence "unimaginable."¹⁰¹

Pending these structural transformations, anti-violence organizers recognized a need to provide networks of support for survivors of sexual violence, and took up different strategies to do so. In 1972, Bay Area Women Against Rape (BAWAR) began distributing information on

⁹⁹ Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State*, 11.

¹⁰⁰ New York Radical Feminists, *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*, in Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 164.

¹⁰¹ New York Radical Feminists, *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*, in *The Right to Sex*, 164.

safety suggestions and medical information about rape that might not be provided to women otherwise in hospitals or by police.¹⁰² Stressing strategies of “self-help” for women who had been raped, BAWAR also posted flyers describing rapists and their patterns, pursuing a model of community aid as opposed to encouraging women to file reports with police.¹⁰³ Other feminist groups, including the WLU, pioneered the “rape crisis center” model to provide women options and support after experiencing sexual violence. As historian Marie Gottschalk describes, the founders of these centers typically “envisaged them as social change organizations that would express the new feminist politics, self-consciously [maintaining] a distance from law enforcement agencies, hospitals, and conventional social services.”¹⁰⁴ While these centers boasted liberatory origins, Gottschalk explains that some rape crisis groups found it challenging to avoid entanglements with state agencies; as feminist organizers lobbied the state to attend to issues of sexual violence, public funding—with strings attached—became increasingly available, and rape crisis efforts were folded into state social services.

While the WLU initially took up the radical approach of many anti-rape organizers across the country—establishing a rape crisis center and advocating for community networks of survivor support—the union eventually embraced relationships with law enforcement to further their cause. In 1972, the WLU established the Rhode Island Rape Crisis Committee, which, two years later, created the RI Rape Crisis Center (RIRCC) to offer survivors of sexual violence an alternative to the humiliating experience of making a police report.¹⁰⁵ In partnership with the local YWCA, the RIRCC offered a 24-hour telephone service Thursday through Sunday, volunteers to accompany people to the police, and a counseling program to address the emotional

¹⁰² Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State*, 10.

¹⁰³ Gottschalk, “Not the Usual Suspects: Feminists, Women's Groups, and the Anti-Rape Movement” in *The Prison and the Gallows*, 124.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ “WLU Newsletter,” May 1973, Box 1, Folder 29, Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

needs of women who had experienced violence.¹⁰⁶ Though newsletter blurbs described ongoing antagonism between local police departments and the RIRCC, the union also reported attempts to “break the ice” between law enforcement and feminists.¹⁰⁷ Within the first year of the RIRCC, for example, feminist organizers met with RI Attorney General Richard Israel, who allegedly “promised to contact police departments in Providence, Pawtucket, Warwick and Newport requesting that they appoint a liaison person within the department with whom the Rape Crisis Committee can deal.”¹⁰⁸ By liaising with police departments, the RIRCC reduced efforts to build “self-help networks,” opting instead for an effort to teach police how to support survivors. The RIRCC also applied for and accepted public funding; in the 80s, the RIRCC was officially incorporated as a non-profit, now known as Day One, which continues its activities to this day. Efforts to institutionalize the anti-rape movement in conjunction with the state and law enforcement became increasingly popular in the 1980s as RI white feminists increasingly fought for state-based recognition, as opposed to the sweeping changes of the early movement.

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In November 1983, a year after Stella Mae Young was released from the ACI, the WLU published its final monthly newsletter. By 1984, the union had officially ended its operations.¹⁰⁹ Celebrating the growth and diversification of the women’s movement in its final message to its members, the union encouraged women to involve themselves with the many social justice groups fighting for liberation, including WAGE and an organization known as RI Working

¹⁰⁶ “WLU Newsletter,” May 1974, Box 1, Folder 30, Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

¹⁰⁷ “WLU Newsletter,” September 1973, Box 1, Folder 29, Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

¹⁰⁸ “WLU Newsletter,” September 1973.

¹⁰⁹ While the union did not provide explicit reasons for shutting down, it seems as though many of the original organizers were involved with new feminist groups and initiatives, such as the local Take Back the Night movement and smaller grassroots groups like Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), to be described in Chapter II. Strained for time and energy, union organizers believed there was no longer a need for a coordinating body like the WLU.

Women, in support of new efforts to combat the feminization of poverty.¹¹⁰ As Chapter II will discuss in more detail, women who had been introduced to the feminism through the union would also go on to organize with dominance feminist campaigns such as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), and the local Take Back the Night movement.

Crucially, the WLU embraced a more capacious definition of gender justice throughout the 1970s than the later mainstream white feminist movement would accept. Influenced by more radical socialist politics, the union often conceived of justice as “two-dimensional,” involving deep transformations of economic and cultural systems. Despite the union’s radical leanings, the WLU’s mobilization for economic justice did not translate into mobilizations for racial justice. Rather, the WLU’s primarily white middle-class membership easily reduced issues of racial justice as insignificant, prioritizing a critique of male supremacy over a critique of white supremacy in their visions of women’s liberation. Accepting and promoting the everywoman narrative in their anti-rape efforts, white feminists in the union were largely ignorant of Black and women of color feminisms in this period and beyond, which prioritized particularity and centered marginalized women’s experiences.

As Angela Davis predicted in 1975, the everywoman narrative played an essential role in mainstream movement’s burgeoning carceral turn. Broader changes in the US in this period, such as increasing anxiety about violent crime—to be discussed in more detail in Chapter III—also engendered faith in bigger, tougher law enforcement agencies and local police departments.¹¹¹ Finally, as I will explore in the following chapter, the carceral shift within the RI feminist movement was also facilitated as white feminist organizers began to focus their energies on

¹¹⁰ “WLU Newsletter,” November 1983, Box 1, Folder 39, Lesley Doonan Activist Files.

¹¹¹ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 165.

issues of crime-based recognition, as opposed to the more expansive feminist platforms of the early movement.

II. Analyzing “The Night and Danger”: Crime-based Recognition, Take Back the Night, and Dominance Feminism’s Narrow Vision of Safety

In August 1979, the Boston Take Back the Night (TBTN) coalition held its second nighttime march against violence, culminating in a rally at the South End’s Blackstone Park. There, organizers addressed a crowd of 5,000 people, reading a collectively authored statement that condemned recent acts of sexist and racist violence in nearby communities.¹¹² The message of the march was twofold. First, organizers mourned the deaths of dozens of Black women and girls who had been killed that year in Boston’s adjacent neighborhoods of Dorchester, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, and the South End.¹¹³ On top of decrying these acts of violence, the coalition demanded that Willie Sanders—a Black man falsely accused of several rapes in Brighton, a predominantly white and middle-class neighborhood—be released and cleared of all charges.¹¹⁴ In pairing these aims, the coalition drew a direct link between the racism of the criminal legal system and endemic gendered violence.

The Boston TBTN coalition that marched that August was heavily influenced by the work of the Coalition for Women’s Safety (CWS) and the Combahee River Collective, an ideological beacon for intersectional feminist coalition building. Founded in 1974 by Black, lesbian feminists striving to create a more radical organization than the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), Combahee centered their feminist politics on the lived experiences of Black women and pointedly took aim at the racism of contemporary white feminist organizers.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Emily Thuma. *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*. University of Illinois Press, 2019. 137.

¹¹³ Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*. 125.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 138. For more on Willie Sanders’ case, see Emily Thuma’s chapter “Intersecting Indictments: Coalitions for Women’s Safety, Racial Justice, and the Right to the City” in *All Our Trials*.

¹¹⁵ Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 125.

The group also explicitly identified with socialism.¹¹⁶ Their 1977 manifesto “A Black Feminist Statement”—a canonical text in the archive of Black feminist thought—epitomizes a multifaceted analysis of gendered violence. Contrary to the narrow focus of mainstream white feminist groups, Combahee wrote: “the most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression.”¹¹⁷ In order to create an “integrated analysis” of violence that attended to all of these oppressions in tandem, Combahee emphasized that these “major systems of oppression are *interlocking*” rather than distinct (my emphasis).¹¹⁸ Rejecting the essentialism of the mainstream feminist movement, Combahee warned that white feminist understandings of gendered violence that disregarded the heterogeneity of women’s experiences would lead the movement away from a just, feminist future.

That same year, just 50 miles away in downtown Providence, Rhode Island feminists held the state’s first annual TBTN march, targeting gendered violence through a very different political analysis to that of Combahee and the Boston coalition. On May 19th, 1979, several hundred women—many of whom had been introduced to the feminist fight through the RI Women’s Liberation Union (WLU)—marched to draw attention to “violence against women in the streets, the home, and in the workplace.”¹¹⁹ Organized by Jodi Glass, a feminist hailing from New York and Joanne Rongo, a longstanding member of the WLU, the RI TBTN march was primarily attended by middle-class white women and students from nearby universities like

¹¹⁶ Handhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, 125.

¹¹⁷ Combahee River Collective, “Black Feminist Statement,” April, 1977. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2002), Robin D. G. Kelley argues that this statement is “one of the most important documents of the black radical movement in the twentieth century” (148-150).

¹¹⁸ Combahee River Collective, “Black Feminist Statement.”

¹¹⁹ Mary Ann Rossoni, “Take Back the Night: An Interview,” *The Third Wave*, October 1990, Box 1, Folder 14, Jodi Glass Papers.

Brown and the University of Rhode Island.¹²⁰ Unlike the Boston TBTN coalition, the RI march was not oriented around a critique of gendered violence as simultaneously racist and classist, nor did it extend a critique to the criminal legal system which Combahee framed as both violent and detrimental to efforts to maintain safe communities. While organizers in Boston declared that “the state cannot be relied upon to provide women’s safety,”¹²¹ feminists in RI expressed only that their TBTN march was intended to “to demonstrate the need for community involvement in [the] effort” to end violence against women.¹²²

The dissonance between these two approaches to TBTN organizing in Boston and Providence, two cities in such close proximity, is the subject of this chapter. The story of Combahee and its intersectional politics and coalition-building has held a special place at the heart of abolitionist feminist thinking, and the group’s writings remain preeminent examples of the transformative project of Black feminism.¹²³ This chapter will not retrace Combahee’s important history. Rather, in line with this thesis’ focus on the rise of carceral feminism in RI, I aim to understand how RI feminist organizing against gendered violence remained disconnected from the feminist analyses of the carceral state that Combahee, among others, mobilized through TBTN activism. If RI feminists were not looking to Boston, where were their beacons of feminist thinking? How did their understandings of violence against women shape their activist strategies and relationships to the carceral state?

In Chapter I, I described the beginnings of the RI women’s movement through a discussion of the WLU’s principle values and organizing strategies. Drawing from Nancy

¹²⁰ Rossoni, “Take Back the Night: An Interview.”

¹²¹ Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*. 125.

¹²² Becca Pack and Helen Howe, “Civilian Witness Statement Re: Civilian Complaint against the Providence Police Department,” June 1, 1979.

¹²³ For more on Combahee and the coalitional organizing around the 1979 Boston murders, see Breines; *Trouble Between Us*; Grant, *Who’s Killing Us?*; Barbara Smith, “Black Feminism: A Movement of Our Own,” *Sojourner* 10, no. 4 (December 1984); and Taylor, *How We Get Free*.

Fraser's argument that early generations of the second wave movement fought for deeper transformations of the social order, I traced how the WLU embraced efforts to restructure the political economy, all the while ignoring racial justice as a dimension of the struggle for women's liberation. Following this analysis, this chapter examines the ways in which mainstream white feminists in RI took up "less material aims" in the 1980s, turning toward questions of state recognition as opposed to more complex notions of gender justice.¹²⁴ Here, I consider how a feminist fixation on the culture of sexual violence was consolidated in this decade, dovetailing with narratives that disassociated violence from other systems of oppression—namely, race- and class-based oppression. Rather than singularly critiquing a lack of intersectionality on the part of RI's mainstream white feminist movement in this chapter, I instead intend to trace how a shift in feminist priorities—nonetheless initiated by narrow-minded, white feminisms—allowed for the movement to approach law enforcement as a natural ally in the fight for women's liberation.

Though this chapter began by setting the 1979 Boston TBTN march beside the first TBTN in RI, it is not concerned with reductively comparing these two protests. Rather, in foregrounding a discussion of Black feminist anti-violence organizing, I intend to demonstrate the concurrence of these histories: that is, Combahee's effort to forge an intersectional political analysis of violence, and RI white feminist movement's turn to carceralism. I begin my analysis through a discussion of the competing definitions of "safety" staged in various TBTN protests, introducing the concept of dominance feminism, which came to determine the messaging of the RI TBTN movement. Following the idea that varied notions of safety dictated organizers' protest strategies and messages, I recount the history of the Boston TBTN march in 1979 and

¹²⁴ Nancy Fraser, "Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition," in *Fortunes of Feminism: From State Managed-Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Verso, 2013), 217.

Combahee's focus on incorporating analyses of racist state violence in their imagination of a safe feminist future. Building from this discussion, I outline white dominance feminists' narrow construction of safety and violence, which prescribed a "universal" experience of domination for all women, echoing Richie's "everywoman" narrative discussed at length in Chapter One. This construction, I argue, led RI feminists like Jodi Glass—the founder of the RI TBTN movement—to fixate on transforming cultures of patriarchal violence and abandon visions of deeper structural change. Through her alliances with dominance feminism, Glass came to see crime-based recognition as the ultimate goal of her organizing, and took up the task of translating feminist ideals into the language of the law. As a result, the RI TBTN movement increasingly represented the growing relationships between law enforcement and feminism.

Competing Discourses of Safety: The Origins of Take Back the Night

The second wave's framing of gendered violence as a public problem requiring structural solutions was made powerfully plain in TBTN marches, which began in Europe and the United States in the late 1970s. Often organized by feminists involved in the work of rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters, TBTN protests formed a potent direct action arm of the movement to combat violence against women, and symbolically represented the restrictive threat of sexual violence on women's public lives. Though TBTN marches varied according to geography and the priorities of their organizers, most took the form of women-only processions through city streets at evening or at night, to physically reclaim spaces in which women felt threatened by violence. In RI and elsewhere, TBTN extended the consciousness-raising efforts and rape speak-outs of the 1970s, carrying forward the emotional significance of these prior actions for survivors of sexual violence. The public memory of the TBTN, historian Anne Valk

writes, is an essential part of late 20th century feminist consciousness; this memory has been invoked time and time again as TBTN marches continued through the early years of the 21st century.¹²⁵ For feminists of this era, the marches came to be seen as “representative of feminist protest culture” and today, the symbols of TBTN—a crescent moon and stars, paired with the venus symbol—are well-recognized.¹²⁶ As TBTN protests extended over decades of the feminist movement in the late 20th century, these marches are also useful sources for tracing transitions in feminist theory and practice over time.

In transforming and “regendering” public spaces, TBTN marches attempted to temporarily construct “safe” environments for women who might typically experience the public as un navigable or antagonistic.¹²⁷ Necessarily, these protests made claims as to what safety looks like and feels like, often in competing or contradictory ways. In her research on gay and lesbian campaigns to protest street violence, Christina Hanhardt argues that terms like “security,” “comfort,” and “threat” are polysemic, connoting variable meanings for organizers situated differently in our social world.¹²⁸ As such, she notes that the quest for safety which is “individualized” can never achieve safety for all, whereas the more transformative “collective” quest for safety requires the challenging and necessary work of collaboratively interrogating “who or what constitutes a threat and why.”¹²⁹ Essential to Hanhardt’s analysis is the way in which white- and class-privileged people’s relationships to the state can be leveraged to the

¹²⁵ Anne Valk and Deborah Gray White, “Remembering Together: Take Back the Night and the Public Memory of Feminism” In *U.S. Women’s History: Untangling the Threads of Sisterhood* (Rutgers University Press, 2017) 189.

¹²⁶ Valk and White, “Remembering Together: Take Back the Night and the Public Memory of Feminism,” 189.

¹²⁷ Elizabeth Currans, *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts, and Concerned Mothers: Women Transforming Public Space*, (University of Illinois Press, 2017), 2.

¹²⁸ Handhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, 3.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 30.

detriment of groups differently positioned in relationship to the state.¹³⁰ This analysis lends essential context to the question posed in the introduction to this chapter: while TBTN organizers in Boston saw state violence and sexual violence as compounding threats, white feminists in Providence defined safety simply as safety solely from interpersonal harm, and strategized accordingly.

Discourses of safety in TBTN marches also had the potential to constrain and limit nonnormative ways of relating, Elizabeth Currans writes in *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts and Concerned Mothers: Women Transforming Public Space*. In her exploration of feminist protest culture and strategy, Currans describes how calls for “safety from violence”—as opposed to calls for the more capacious and abstract concept of “freedom”—could be used to demonize nonnormative behaviors and relations such as “unsafe sex...promiscuity, and dangerous, non-committed relationships.”¹³¹ Quoting scholar and creative writer Samuel Delany, Currans writes that “when interactions among strangers are coded as dangerous” by social movements like TBTN, these movements widen the opportunity for classed and raced notions of “danger” to enter the discourse.¹³² As a result, these movements become constrained and limited at best, and at worst, detrimental to their original cause.¹³³

This consequence of the “safety from” narrative is especially evident in TBTN marches associated with dominance feminism, which I describe at length in the second half of this chapter. Despite the wide geographic reach of the TBTN movement and its liberatory potential, TBTN protests were often associated with dominance feminists—elsewhere referred to as radical feminists—so-called because they identified biological sex as the founding source of men’s

¹³⁰ Currans, *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts, and Concerned Mothers: Women Transforming Public Space*, 27.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

domination of women.¹³⁴ This predominantly white-feminist camp saw the threat of sexual violence as the ultimate force of patriarchal power, and the sex industry (from pornography to prostitution) as its handmaiden. Though the date and location of the first US TBTN march is disputed, several accounts of the history of TBTN attach early protests to dominance feminist organizing in 1978 San Francisco.¹³⁵ According to second wave activist Laura Lederer, the first TBTN march was organized by a group called Women Against Pornography and Media—the first feminist anti-porn group, founded in 1976—and staged through San Francisco’s red light district following a conference titled “Feminist Perspectives on Pornography.”¹³⁶ By associating early iterations of TBTN with the burgeoning movement against pornography, a front of the dominance feminist fight, Lederer placed TBTN in relation to a strain of the women’s liberation movement often associated with thinkers like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, and organizations like Women Against Pornography (WAP).¹³⁷ Lederer would go on to name her 1980 anthology of feminist anti-porn writings *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, reflecting the ties between TBTN and dominance feminism at the start of the 1980s.

¹³⁴ Anne Gray Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification*, (UNC Press, March 2022), 267.

¹³⁵ Currans, *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts, and Concerned Mothers: Women Transforming Public Space*, 23.

¹³⁶ *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* edited by Laura Lederer (William Morrow and Company, 1980) 15.

¹³⁷ Following Anne Gray Fischer in *The Streets Belong to Us*, I will be referring to this strain of feminism—elsewhere called “radical feminism”—with the term “dominance feminism” for two reasons; first, this particular feminist politic does not seek to uproot dominant state structures, therefore in Fischer’s words, “I find ‘radical feminism’ to be a misnomer;” second, “dominance feminism” attaches this feminist thread to feminist legal scholars such as Catharine MacKinnon. While this feminist strain would evolve into “carceral feminism” as we know it, “dominance feminism” is more historically specific. Note, the dominance feminists I describe in this chapter would not have referred to themselves as such.

Understanding Racist State Violence as Gendered Violence: The Combahee River Collective and Boston's Take Back the Night Coalition (1979)

Though TBTN would become increasingly tied to dominance feminism throughout the 1980s, dominance feminists did not totally monopolize this type of protest. In contrast, coalitions of Black feminists, feminist of color, and white feminists organized TBTN marches that promoted a more comprehensive vision of safety that encompassed the experiences of women with different racial and class identities. The 1979 Boston TBTN march—organized by Combahee, the Coalition for Women's Safety, and women from different corners of the city's feminist movement—is a useful example of these efforts.

While dominance feminists argued that sex was the original theater of women's oppression, Combahee rejected this approach as “reactionary,” grounded in a reprehensible “biological determinism” that subsumed the unique feminist struggles of queer, gender non-conforming people and Black women to those of white cisgendered women.¹³⁸ Fixating on sexual violence absent of the myriad social conditions which allowed for its perpetuation was impossible for Combahee; the group was positioned at the intersections of socio-historical violence, battling “racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression” through an “integrated analysis” that acknowledged how these systems created the conditions of Black women's lives.¹³⁹ In their Black Feminist Statement, Combahee feminists argued that fighting for Black women's liberation meant fighting for everyone's liberation, because “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”¹⁴⁰ Unlike dominance feminists, who flattened

¹³⁸ Combahee River Collective, “Black Feminist Statement.”

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

material differences to create their political analysis of gendered violence, Combahee saw particularity as the key to ending gendered injustice in all its forms.

In the months before the 1979 TBTN march in Boston, Combahee concretized these political theories in publications and actions in response to the serial murders of Black women in Boston's adjacent neighborhoods of Dorchester, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, and the South End.¹⁴¹ Between January and May of 1979, twelve Black women and girls were killed, and the Boston Police Department remained slow and apathetic to the crimes; police accounts of the murders poured salt on the community's wounds, insinuating that women's sexual promiscuity and involvement in the sex industry caused the violence.¹⁴² In a pamphlet written after the sixth woman was found, *Six Black Women: Why did they Die?*, Barbara Smith—one of Combahee's founding members—insisted that the murders be understood along the lines of gender, race and class, exemplifying the group's "integrated analysis."¹⁴³ "Our sisters died because they were women just as sure as they died because they were Black," Smith wrote, affirming the need for multi-faceted approaches to ending this violence. In response to the Boston Police Department's blatant inability to support grieving communities or protect women, Smith included a list of strategies for mutual aid and self-protection in the pamphlet, and encouraged women to organize with Combahee and the newly formed Coalition for Women's Safety (CWS).

Leading up to the August TBTN march, CWS and Combahee were also deeply involved in the defense campaign for Willie Sanders, a Black man falsely accused of several counts of rape facing life in prison in Massachusetts. As Emily Thuma describes in *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* the Willie Sanders' Defense

¹⁴¹ Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*, 125.

¹⁴² Ibid, 126.

¹⁴³ Barbara Smith, *Six Black Women, Why Did They Die?* April, 1979, quoted in Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*, 126.

Committee and the campaign for women's safety "unfolded alongside and in relation to each other" over the course of 1979. At an August event in the Jamaica Plains City Life Office featuring presentations on both the murder crisis and Sanders' fight for freedom, Barbara Smith explained to visitors that linking mobilizations against racist police violence and those for women's safety was "what Black feminism is all about."¹⁴⁴ According to Smith, both the serial murders and the framing of Sanders represented racist and sexist attacks on the Black community, illustrating a structural disregard for Black life and safety. Moreover, placing Willie Sanders' case alongside the fight to protect Black women against violence helped the Defense Committee and CWS to draw out the racism of the criminal legal system, arguing that carceral violence not only took the form of apathetic neglect (in regard to the serial murders of Black women) but also direct, racist violence.

The 1979 TBTN march was heavily influenced by the ongoing campaigns of CWS, Combahee, and the Sanders Defense Committee, staging a complex and expansive call for freedom. Though the Boston TBTN coalition was comprised of several feminist organizations from across the city—including the Prostitutes Union of Massachusetts, the Coalition to Stop Institutional Violence, the Alliance Against Sexual Coercion, and more—CWS informed much of the protest's organization.¹⁴⁵ As such, the tone of the march and rally reflected CWS and Combahee's desire to simultaneously condemn racist policing and the prosecution of Willie Sanders alongside the horrific gendered violence of that year. Organizers passed out flyers with Combahee's self-help tips, the event specifically endorsed the Sanders defense campaign, and at the rally itself, activists argued aloud that "scapegoating an innocent Black man is no protection against rape."¹⁴⁶ Embracing Hanhardt's "collective" quest for safety, the march adamantly

¹⁴⁴ Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*, 134.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 137.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 137.

opposed calls for state-based recognition and resolutely argued that the racism of the criminal justice system must be addressed for the feminist anti-violence movement to succeed.¹⁴⁷ Willie Sanders was finally acquitted in October 1980, in large part due to the organizing of the Defense Committee and the determined work of Combahee and CWS.

Dominance Feminism's Foundations

In contrast to Combahee's "integrated analysis" of the path to liberation, dominance feminism espoused a narrow vision of justice that, in Nancy Fraser's terms, fixated on questions of recognition as opposed to other measures of social transformation. Dominance feminists' primary understandings of what caused and constituted gendered violence relied on what they saw as the ubiquitous threat of sexual violence on women's lives, a reality materially and culturally sanctioned by pornography. TBTN marches associated with dominance feminists circulated these analyses en masse. At a 1979 TBTN march in New Haven, Connecticut, attended by roughly 2,000 women, prominent activist Andrea Dworkin outlined the basic principles of dominance feminist thinking in a speech titled "The Night and Danger": one, that male sexuality, "drunk on its contempt for all life, but especially for women's lives" is the basic instrument of gendered oppression; and 2) that all women, regardless of race, constantly navigate the impossible choice between "danger or confinement" due to the immutable risks posed by male sexuality.¹⁴⁸ With this speech, Dworkin assembled a worldview in which male domination

¹⁴⁷ The Boston TBTN coalition was, however, predominantly white, and members of Combahee later reflected on the risks of having so many white women marching through primarily Black communities that day with the rallying cry "Stop Rape." Over the next years, as Combahee continued to have a relationship with the TBTN coalition, the group encouraged white feminist organizers to emphasize their support for the Willie Sanders defense campaign in order to platform racial justice as gender justice, and to combat the overwhelming narratives associating Black men with the rape of white women. Thuma, *All Our Trials*, 138.

¹⁴⁸ Andrea Dworkin, "The Night and Danger" in *Letters From a War Zone: Writings, 1976-1989* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 13.

was women's universal condition, arguing that Black women "are used as all women are used," though allowing that "they are singularly and intensely punished by law and social mores."¹⁴⁹ Fixating on sexual violence as a universal truth for all women, feminists like Dworkin augmented the "everywoman narrative" discussed in Chapter One, even as they made reference to the acute experiences of non-white women. As critical feminist theorist Donna Haraway has argued, the dominance feminism of thinkers like Dworkin and MacKinnon enforced a "theory of consciousness" that constrained "what can count as 'women's' experience—[that is] anything that names sexual violation."¹⁵⁰ In arguing that the category of "woman" is constituted by another's power, dominance feminism introduced an uncompromising theory of gender that limited the possibilities for attending to difference.

By flattening the unique experiences of women to a universal narrative of domination, dominance feminists also conflated the actions of individual men with the violence of sexist institutions. In so doing, dominance feminism ignored the extensive critique of the carceral state promoted by Black feminist thinkers in these years, and inadvertently bolstered racist notions of sexual threat by invoking white fears of the "Black rapist." Collapsing state violence and individual violence in "The Night and Danger" in 1979, Dworkin argued: "the policemen of the night—rapists and other prowling men—have the right to enforce the laws of the night: to stalk the female and to punish her."¹⁵¹ By aligning "policemen" with "rapists," Dworkin critiqued the ways in which institutions of public safety enacted cultures of sexual harm. Still, by collapsing the individualized threat of "rapists and other prowling men" with carceral actors in a speech delivered to a crowd largely populated by white women, Dworkin's words invoked racialized

¹⁴⁹ Dworkin, "The Night and Danger."

¹⁵⁰ Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

¹⁵¹ Dworkin, "The Night and Danger."

and classed white feminist fears of city spaces, and avoided a feminist analysis of state power itself.

Though dominance feminists like Dworkin acknowledged the ways in which the law acutely harmed Black, brown and poor women, these details were, time and time again, subordinated to a thesis of male domination. By ascribing violence to a single casualty, dominance feminism was positioned in direct opposition to the Black feminist theory forged by organizers involved with Combahee in these same years. Rather than essentializing the fight for women's liberation, Black feminism embraced a multidimensional analysis of violence that required political organizing along many lines of difference. Crucially, this approach led organizers with Combahee to describe law enforcement as a multiplier of harm for people most vulnerable to state violence, especially working class Black women. As historian Anne Gray Fischer writes in *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification*, though the many legal scholars involved in dominance feminism were cognizant of the power of the law to inflict harm on women, for dominance feminists, "law enforcement was just a footnote to male supremacy."¹⁵² According to thinkers like MacKinnon, the law did not multiply, but rather enforced the harms of patriarchy: "Getting the criminal law off [women's] backs may keep the state from reinforcing their subordinate status," Catharine MacKinnon argued at a Michigan Law Symposium in 1992, "but it does nothing to change that status."¹⁵³ With such profoundly dissonant analyses of the state's power to cause harm, dominance feminists and the organizers involved in protesting the serial murders of Black women in 1979 took up strikingly different activist strategies.

¹⁵² Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification*, 188.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Jodi Glass' Activism: Teaching Law Enforcement a Feminist Lesson

When asked whether or not she was in touch with the Boston TBTN coalition in 1979, Jodi Glass—the primary organizer of TBTN RI from the first march to the final march—answered: “We weren’t connected with Boston at all. We were—and maybe it’s because I’m from New York—connected with New York and Women Against Pornography.”¹⁵⁴ When I brought up Combahee and CWS in an interview with Glass in November, 2021, she asserted that she had not heard of either group when she was planning the first TBTN march in RI in 1979.¹⁵⁵ Rather, she was concerned with the battles that dominance feminists saw as most crucial to women’s liberation: namely, the fight against pornography and prostitution. Embracing the dominance feminist vision of safety from her perspective as a white, queer woman engaged in the fragmented and messy landscape of feminist activism in the 80s, Glass imported organizing strategies to RI from groups like WAP and thinkers like Dworkin and MacKinnon.

Jodi Glass moved to RI in 1978 from New York, and quickly found fellow feminists and friends in the local liberation movement. Eager to lend her energies to a specific cause, she was encouraged by Joanne Rongo—one of the founding members of the WLU—to organize the state’s first TBTN march as a way to “‘get [her] feet wet’ in the RI feminist community.”¹⁵⁶ Alongside her TBTN organizing, which extended for more than two decades, Glass founded a chapter of a grassroots feminist group known as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), which advocated against the use of violence against women in media and advertising. Throughout the late 70s to the early 80s, she organized with WAVAW and later, with Andrea Dworkin’s New York City based Women Against Pornography (WAP) to raise awareness

¹⁵⁴ Jodi Glass and Lillian Pickett, Personal Interview, November 14th, 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Glass and Pickett, Personal Interview.

¹⁵⁶ Jodi Glass, “Speech, TBTN 2000,” 2000, Box 4, Folder 4, Jodi Glass Papers.

around what dominance feminists identified as the material harms of pornography and the sex industry.

Mobilizing dominance feminist views on the universal harm of male sexuality against women—which, in their view, informed acts of individual and state violence alike—Glass and other RI white feminists involved with groups like WAVAW and WAP focused their efforts on two simultaneous organizing strategies: one, attacking the misogynistic culture that sanctioned violence against women and two, employing legal means to support the former mission. Glass, like other dominance feminists, approached the criminal legal system as one of many institutions governed by societal logics of misogyny and rape culture. Accordingly, law enforcement’s failure to protect women could be transformed if the broader culture supporting rape and gendered violence could be transformed. In fixating on the limited scope of sexual violence as opposed to the uniquely gendered, raced, and classed impacts of the carceral state on working class non-white women, white dominance feminists were convinced that the movement for women’s liberation need not reinvent the wheel of public safety. Moving toward what Nancy Fraser calls a politics of “recognition,” dominance feminists took up a strategy of making identities visible and comprehensible to the law, in an effort to transform its capacity to protect women. Appealing for crime-based recognition, dominance feminists argued that “teaching law enforcement a feminist lesson” could bring about a just and safe feminist future.¹⁵⁷

According to Glass and other organizers with WAVAW, the criminal legal system’s failure to protect women was in large part a result of the proliferation of glamorized portrayals of violence against women in media. As individual actors involved in law enforcement—police

¹⁵⁷ In *The Streets Belong to Us*, Anne Gray Fischer uses this phrase to describe dominance feminists’ “faith” in carceral systems, arguing that dominance feminists believed “that the state, the courts, and the police could be taught a feminist lesson that would make all women safer.”

officers, judges, juries—internalized misogynistic images, survivors of sexual violence would be viewed as solicitous and rapists as innocent. WAVAW argued that in “bombarding” people with degrading images of women—like the notorious Rolling Stones “Black and Blue” album cover, which depicted a woman tied up and beaten up with the caption “I’m black and blue from the Rolling Stones and I love it!”—corporate media companies condoned domestic violence, rape and assault, and so did dominant culture.¹⁵⁸ As the WAVAW RI chapter wrote in a 1983 pamphlet advertising the group, depictions of sexual and gendered violence in media perpetuated the “destructive myth” that “women want, like, and ‘choose’ to be raped, battered and murdered.”¹⁵⁹ These myths, which permeate interpersonal relationships and institutions, the pamphlet noted, prevented women from accessing justice through the judiciary system. As the pamphlet described, male judges across the US notoriously made judgements and comments reflecting the belief that women provoked sexual violence against them—in one example, WAVAW described a case of a young girl who had suffered incest, in which the judge said “how many of these girls really enjoy it?”¹⁶⁰ Extending the theory of the “second rape”¹⁶¹ discussed in Chapter One, WAVAW RI returned to this touchstone critique of the criminal legal system. Still, the group’s lack of engagement with concurrent discussions regarding the pervasive myth of the licentious Black woman reflects again dominance feminisms’ disinterest in attending to particularity.¹⁶² Rather than attending to the very real differences between claims of sexual promiscuity levied at

¹⁵⁸ “Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) Newsletter, 1983,” Box 1, Folder 19, Jodi Glass Papers.

¹⁵⁹ “Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) Newsletter, 1983.”

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ The term “second rape” was used by feminists to describe the humiliating and violent experience of reporting sexual violence to police departments; this term framed police as perpetrators of gendered violence in their own right.

¹⁶² For more on white perceptions of Black sexuality and associations between Black women and promiscuity, see Davis, *Women Race and Class* (1981) and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2004).

white women versus Black women and women of color, WAVAW painted a “universal” picture of women’s experiences with the criminal legal system.

To remedy the disjuncture between what misogynistic courts and judges deemed criminal and the real violence experienced by survivors of rape and assault, groups like WAVAW and WAP turned to campaigns of crime-based recognition that relied on white women’s access to the law. In an effort to translate dominance feminist theories around the material harms of pornography into something legible to the law, organizers like Jodi Glass described porn as a *crime against women* that needed to be prosecuted. In RI, Glass’ WAVAW chapter plastered stickers that read “This is a crime against women!” onto any “offensive merchandise or advertising” as a means of raising awareness around the material harms of pornography in the language of the law.¹⁶³ However, convincing women themselves, let alone legal authorities, that porn was a crime proved challenging for WAVAW RI and WAP. With the goal of raising awareness around the harms of pornography and violent media, WAVAW RI presented a slideshow titled “Pain for Profit” at universities and institutions across RI, accompanied with a series of questions that coaxed audiences toward the thesis of porn as criminal.¹⁶⁴ At one presentation in the 1980s, Glass recalled, a community group of Southeast Asian women in RI seemed skeptical. “They looked at us cross-eyed,” Glass told me. “They said, this is not violence. We’ll show you real violence.”¹⁶⁵ Despite these reactions, which ultimately made WAVAW “irrelevant” according to Glass, throughout the next few decades, dominance feminists continued to pursue recognition from the law.

Perhaps the most notorious conflict of the mainstream women’s liberation movement at the end of the 20th century, the battle over anti-pornography ordinances reflects dominance

¹⁶³ “Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) Newsletter, 1983.”

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Glass and Pickett, Personal Interview.

feminists' faith in the prospect of legal solutions to gender violence. In 1983, Dworkin and MacKinnon were invited to draft an anti-pornography ordinance for Minneapolis, a piece of legislation that would give women the right to bring civil suits against pornographers for the harm caused to them by porn.¹⁶⁶ Forwarding a vision of law enforcement as a neutral protector of women, equally accessible to all, these ordinances were staunchly opposed by feminists who were skeptical of creating a legal provision that would allow the state to adjudicate on what constitutes obscenity. In a 1991 article published in RI's feminist newspaper, *The Third Wave*, one activist emphasized that women were not all equal in the eyes of the law, and therefore anti-pornography ordinances risked the safety of many for the security of the few, presumably affluent and white women who might be able to make use of the law to their benefit. They wrote, "as lesbians, we cannot afford to stand with those censors who find our very existence as gay people pornographic," addressing the concern that the law would be coopted by a homophobic, misogynistic system to harm queer people.¹⁶⁷ Although campaigns to pass these ordinances failed across the country, dominance feminist efforts to make feminist demands legible via the criminal legal system persisted.

In RI, dominance feminists channeled their faith in civil legal remedies into "hate crime" legislation, which created a new legal category to refer to gender violence. After a divisive meeting between with Catharine MacKinnon and several RI feminist groups in 1986 went spectacularly wrong—Glass remembers the date based on when she "lost a lot of friends"—the fight for anti-porn ordinances came to a close in RI.¹⁶⁸ But rather than give up on their appeal to

¹⁶⁶ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 51. For a more complete discussion of this history, see Chapter Two, "Talking to my Students About Porn" in *The Right to Sex*.

¹⁶⁷ "Pornography: A Change of Positions" *The Third Wave*, January 1991, Box 1, Folder 15, Jodi Glass Papers.

¹⁶⁸ Glass and Pickett, Personal Interview.

crime-based recognition, Glass and Dworkin decided to pivot toward a more palatable issue to target gender violence; as Glass recalls, “when [the anti-porn movement] failed—and it failed—Andrea said to me: go the route of hate crimes.”¹⁶⁹ If gender prejudice were to be included in laws outlawing hate crimes across the country, Glass and Dworkin discussed in a 1990 interview with the *Third Wave*, the law could be used to target not only pornographic media as “hate crimes,” but also domestic violence, rape and sexual assault.¹⁷⁰ In 1990, WAVAW RI lobbied for a bill that would include “gender prejudice” in RI General Law on Hate Crimes, which already covered “racial, religious, ethnic, handicap, or sexual orientation prejudice.”¹⁷¹ Glass’ vision—realized in 1993 when the addendum to the General Law was passed—was to establish a hate crime report system within local police departments, and train police officers to recognize gender-based hate.¹⁷² Once again encasing gendered violence in the language of the law and appealing for visibility and recognition, dominance feminists illustrated their faith in law enforcement to recognize and enforce feminist ideals. Operating under the staunch belief that law enforcement could be taught a feminist lesson, Glass began to give hate crime trainings to new recruits of police officers herself, a job that she continued through the 2010 and into the 2020s.

¹⁶⁹ Glass and Pickett, Personal Interview.

¹⁷⁰ Marcia Blair and Jodi Glass, “Andrea Dworkin: An Interview,” *The Third Wave*, January 1991, Box 1, Folder 15, Jodi Glass Papers.

¹⁷¹ Ruth Horton, “RI Hate Crime Legislation,” *The Third Wave*, October 1990, Box 1, Folder 14, Jodi Glass Papers.

¹⁷² In the opening to his book *Freedom With Violence* (2011), Chandan Reddy notes that the widely celebrated Shepard-Byrd Hate Crimes Prevention Act—which expanded the federal definition of hate crimes to include those motivated by the perception of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity in 2010—was tacked onto a piece of legislation that increased the Department of Defense budget to \$680 billion. Arguing that the racialized and sexualized contours of the sovereign, rational, and liberal citizen and nation are regulated by violence, Reddy acknowledges the liberal state’s willingness to pass legislation against hate crimes as a symbol of “counter violence,” as a means of masking an immense expansion of state power to institute violence. Reddy’s analysis raises questions around the symbolic versus material consequences of this type of legislative advocacy, which can also be applied to the passage of the RI addendum in 1993.

Protesting for Recognition: Take Back the Night Rhode Island

As Jodi Glass developed her alignments with dominance feminism through WAP, WAVAW, and legislative advocacy throughout the 1980s and beyond, the annual TBTN RI protests became a venue for broadcasting dominance feminist messages and developing relationships with law enforcement. After a bad experience with the Providence Police Department at the first Providence TBTN march in 1979—the same year that organizers in Boston denounced alliances with the racist criminal legal system—white feminist activists like Glass sought to extend a feminist conscience to local law enforcement. Reflecting on the first TBTN protests in a 1990 interview with *the Third Wave*, Glass recalled how protestors were harassed and endangered by police escorts at the very first TBTN march; officers patronizingly called them “girls,” refused to follow the route that the women had decided upon, and drove threateningly close to marchers over the course of the night.¹⁷³ In response, organizers filed a formal complaint demanding that officers be more respectful to protestors in the future, and continued outreach with the PPD to build connections and sympathy for their cause.¹⁷⁴ Glass described the effort as overwhelmingly successful—over the decades that TBTN marches took place in Providence, police and feminist organizers developed a friendly relationship, and by the 2000s, the Providence Honor Guard, a special unit of PPD intended to march in parades, escorted the protestors.¹⁷⁵ “[Police] have gone out of their way to be supportive, even in finding female officers,” Glass noted in 1990. “They have been wonderful. [Now,] the women officers march in

¹⁷³ Rossoni, “Take Back the Night: An Interview.”

¹⁷⁴ Pack and Howe, “Civilian Witness Statement Re: Civilian Complaint against the Providence Police Department,” June 1, 1979.

¹⁷⁵ Daren Delaney, “RI State Police Honor Guard,” September 26, 2005, Box 4, Folder 8, Jodi Glass Papers.

the front.”¹⁷⁶ Following the 1979 march, the RI TBTN protests became public displays of the growing relationship between law enforcement and mainstream white feminists in the state.

For Glass, TBTN marches were also tightly associated with the fight that she and other organizers were waging against cultures of “gender hate” in tandem with the state and law enforcement.¹⁷⁷ As her relationships with local police blossomed, Glass’ TBTN protests became a symbolic manifestation of her work to teach law enforcement and legislators to view “rape and domestic violence as crimes against women, as hate crimes.”¹⁷⁸ By the early 2000s, crowds had dwindled and the voices of survivors which had led and animated early protests were replaced by a lineup of public officials and social service providers, including police officers, legislators, the mayor of Providence, the governor, and the attorney general.¹⁷⁹ The messaging of the marches shifted accordingly to fit this audience; in the 2000s, for example, TBTN speakers focused primarily on legislative changes, public funding, and other measures of state and crime-based recognition. At a small TBTN march in downtown Providence in 2000, Glass focused on promoting her hate crime advocacy, telling the crowd that since her efforts to pass hate crime legislation in 1993, “RI has had a total of three hate crimes reported on gender bias.”¹⁸⁰ The lack of reporting, Glass contended, was due to a range of factors, including: a persistent social ignorance to the notion that gendered violence was a hate crime, the potent myth that women provoked or deserved harm, and finally the dearth of resources for state measures to end violence.¹⁸¹ Glass demanded: “we need to insist that funding be made available so that we can continue to expand police trainings” so that the work of building a feminist conscience in local

¹⁷⁶ Rossoni, “Take Back the Night: An Interview.”

¹⁷⁷ Glass and Pickett, Personal Interview.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Jodi Glass, “RI’s 25th Annual TBTN March Flyer,” September 13, 2003, Box 4, Folder 6, Jodi Glass Papers.

¹⁸⁰ Jodi Glass, “Speech (Jodi Glass) - TBTN 2000,” 2000, Box 4, Folder 4, Jodi Glass Papers.

¹⁸¹ Glass, “Speech (Jodi Glass) - TBTN 2000.”

police departments could continue.¹⁸² Rounding out her speech with her vision for a feminist future, Glass asked protestors to “imagine if every police officer truly integrated a [feminist] mindset into every day... Imagine a totally celebratory Take Back the Night.”¹⁸³ With this line, Glass espoused the narrow vision of “safety” that dominance feminism clung to; for her, a truly safe world would be one in which police officers accepted and promoted feminism.

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In a 1990 interview with the Rhode Island feminist newspaper *The Third Wave*, Jodi Glass asked Andrea Dworkin, “What do you think should happen to the violent men?” Dworkin’s response, grounded in dominance feminisms’ overall indifference to questions of state violence, painted a pessimistic vision of the possible solutions to gendered violence. Dworkin told Glass:

“I don’t understand anything that will help, from my experience, *other than jailing them or killing them*. I’m not saying that because I like it, because there’s anything in it for me... I don’t understand any other way, and if there is any other way, I haven’t seen it. *And I keep hoping that somebody who has some other experiences that aren’t my experiences will find another way*. But all that I see is, my own emotional response is: they should be executed...and my humane rendering of that is *you put them in jail, and keep them there forever*, and beyond that I don’t know what to say” (my emphasis added).¹⁸⁴

Dworkin’s statement, emerging from a moment of reflection with a fellow activist and friend, reflects just how difficult it can be to imagine solutions to violence that are both possible and just. Reading her words, especially with Combahee’s transformative organizing in 1979 as context, I am struck, yet again, by the total disconnect between dominance feminism and the concurrent organizing of Black and abolitionist feminists. Her comments bring to mind the

¹⁸² Glass, “Speech (Jodi Glass) - TBTN 2000.”

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Blair and Glass, “Andrea Dworkin: An Interview,” 7.

injustices done unto Black men like Willie Sanders, and Combahee's adamant call to avoid a reliance on carceral mechanisms in efforts to achieve feminist justice.

In describing the foundational theories of dominance feminism, its fixation on issues of culture and state recognition, and the consequences of this strain of feminist thinking for TBTN organizing strategies in RI, this chapter has proposed one method of understanding Dworkin's words. While Black feminist organizers mobilized to defend Black women's lives from state violence, for feminists like Dworkin, appealing to police for support appeared as a viable and necessary step in furthering the feminist cause. Her words exemplify the limited approach that dominance feminists took to their anti-violence organizing; in lifting up "jail" and "execution" as the best means of redress for sexual violence—albeit reluctantly—she and feminists who adopted her cause gave fuel to the fire of raced and classed practices of policing which were strengthened and augmented in the very period of her activism. In Chapter Three, I take up the project of examining exactly how feminist ideals were mobilized in support of broken windows policing measures in RI, jeopardizing the safety and security of Black women and sex workers, and consolidating discretionary police power over the lives of women across the state.

III: Taking Back the City: Feminist Protest, Broken Windows Theory, and Sexual Policing

“On the front stoop of an apartment at the Tonomy Hill housing project they stood last night, laughing at the marchers who walked by,” the Providence Journal reported on March 2, 1989. “Sporting untied hightop sneakers, oversized jackets and flattop haircuts, they are—some project residents say—the suspected drug dealers, rabble-rousers and malcontents the marchers want out of their neighborhood.”¹⁸⁵ Painting a scene of social delinquency and urban blight in the North End of Newport, the article described one of several “Take Back the Night” marches that took place at Tonomy Hill and throughout Rhode Island at the end of the 1980s. Much like the feminist Take Back the Night (TBTN) movement that annually took over the streets of downtown Providence, these neighborhood crime prevention protests were staged after dark and often involved police escorts, neighborhood crime watch units, and chants like “Get them out of here!” or “Drugs are for losers!”¹⁸⁶ Mobilizing racist and classist myths of criminality—and identifying individual “drugdealers, pimps, prostitutes, and thieves” as the source of violence and crime—the marches promoted a vision of community policing that justified increased measures of surveillance and mass-misdemeanor arrests.¹⁸⁷ In line with the theory of broken windows policing, which dominated crime prevention measures in the late 1980s and 90s, these “Take Back the Night” marches were part of a national tough-on-crime movement that used fear and thinly veiled racial rhetoric to garner support for punitive public policies.

A quick search for “Take Back the Night” in the Providence Journal archives between 1979-1989 reveals that several of these neighborhood protests took place toward the end of the

¹⁸⁵ Karima Haynes, “Marchers declare war on crime in Tonomy Hill” *The Providence Journal*, March 2, 1989.

¹⁸⁶ Haynes, “Marchers declare war on crime in Tonomy Hill.”

¹⁸⁷ “Elmwood to Hold Anti-Vice Vigil,” *The Providence Journal*, July 17, 1987.

decade, in places like Tonomy Hill in Newport, and in communities like Reservoir Triangle and Elmwood in Providence. Targeted as fronts of the “war on crime,” these communities were increasingly populated by lower-income immigrant families and Black residents as the city’s demography shifted at the end of the 20th century.¹⁸⁸ As several accounts of the protests illustrate, neighborhood “Take Back the Night” marches framed these communities as spaces plagued by the behaviors of certain delinquent people, who fell under the catch-all terms of “rabble-rousers” and “trouble-makers.” In order to reclaim the neighborhood from rampant crime, the articles argued, residents were teaming up with local police departments to “shed light” on criminals and “drive out the illicit operations.”¹⁸⁹

Marchers at these neighborhood marches often used the language of illumination and expulsion to describe their goals. Protest techniques literally mobilized the rhetoric of ‘illuminating the streets’: residents and police would turn on porch lights, carry flashlights, and bring along cameras to catch “criminals” in the act and to “take snapshots... of drug dealers.”¹⁹⁰ According to Robert Kells, one vigilante crime watcher in Reservoir Triangle—who drove around the neighborhood in a “Crime Watch car” donated by the city—“high visibility” deterred criminal behavior and drove out “undesirables.”¹⁹¹ In line with the broken windows theory of policing that pinned “urban revitalization” on the arrest and incarceration of racially and sexually profiled people, these marches embraced a solution of mass expulsion and incarceration rather than focusing on the conditions of state-sanctioned material deprivation that caused social unrest.

¹⁸⁸ The disparity in income between the East Side of Providence and the West Side, Elmwood, and Reservoir areas has continued to widen since 1980. See this report for more information: Fay Strongin, “‘You Don’t Have a Problem Until You Do’: Revitalization and Gentrification in Providence, Rhode Island,” (*Housing Works RI Scholar Series*, May, 2018) 5.

¹⁸⁹ “Elmwood to Hold Anti-Vice Vigil.”

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Robert Correia, “Reservoir Triangle neighborhood plans to light up the night for crime prevention,” *The Providence Journal*, August 3, 1988.

The adoption of feminist protest techniques by community crime watch groups across RI provides a concentrated example of the ways in which feminist ideas and strategies were folded into mobilizations for broken windows policing in this era. Though neighborhood crime prevention marches under the name of “Take Back the Night” never explicitly aligned their protests with ongoing feminist versions of these protests, the similarities are undeniable: under the same name, feminist and crime prevention protests momentarily transformed public spaces using commonly held visions of “safety,” demanding public action to eliminate ambiguously defined dangers. As this chapter will demonstrate, from the first to the final march, the RI TBTN movement delivered a legitimizing veneer to broken windows policing measures.

In Chapter II, I examined the principles and strategies of dominance feminism, a strain of the second wave feminist movement concerned with achieving crime-based recognition for gender violence. In conclusion, I described how the RI TBTN movement, led by dominance feminist Jodi Glass, sought out relationships with law enforcement and pursued legal remedies to achieve a narrowly-defined conception of gender justice. This chapter builds from this analysis to consider the consequences of this collaboration in the context of the now-infamous “war on crime.” To begin, I consider how feminist TBTN marches related to the city of Providence in a historical moment marked by questions around urban renewal in the wake of deindustrialization. In this section, I examine how TBTN RI developed and encouraged white fear related to urban space by constructing two flexible symbols of women’s oppression: the racialized “proowler” and the “down-trodden prostitute.” Following my analysis of the symbolic potency of these dominance feminist TBTN marches, I outline the rise of broken windows theory at the beginning of the 1980s and its influence on the Providence Police Department’s adoption of community policing initiatives. In conclusion, I build upon the rhetorical alliances of dominance feminism

and broken windows theory to analyze how a feminist veneer was applied to the expansion of discretionary mass-misdemeanor policing, particularly in the realm of sex work criminalization.

Recapitalizing Providence: Urban Renewal and White Anxiety

In recent decades, communities in Tonomy Hill and the North End of Newport have experienced campaigns to rebuild, reshape and gentrify in pursuit of “urban revitalization.”¹⁹² These crusades to “revitalize”—which white feminist organizers latched onto in their protests to “take back” city streets—emerged in full force during the 1980s as a result of building social, economic and political pressures. In the wake of deindustrialization across the nation in the decades after WWII, RI saw the closure of several manufacturing plants and mills, including Brown and Sharpe Manufacturing, the Silver Spring Bleaching and Dyeing Company, the Wanskuck Company, Rhode Island Locomotive Works, and the Nicholson File Company.¹⁹³ Thousands of jobs were lost and never replaced, and neighborhoods which relied on these companies were devastated. Providence—where many of these entities were located—saw severe changes as a result; between 1950 and 1960, the city’s population fell by 16.6%, from 248,674 to 207,498, as many white residents flocked to nearby suburban communities.¹⁹⁴ By 1980, only 156,804 residents called Providence home.¹⁹⁵ In the mid-1970s, with the election of Vincent “Buddy” Cianci as mayor, the city embarked on several significant downtown redevelopment projects to respond to the flight of industry and white families. In 1974, the Providence Foundation—a non-profit conglomerate of CEOs and managers from companies

¹⁹² Elizabeth Abott, “Replacing a Troubled Neighborhood in Newport,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 2006.

¹⁹³ Marion Orr and Darrell M West, “Citizens’ Views on Urban Revitalization: The Case of Providence, Rhode Island,” *Urban affairs review (Thousand Oaks, California: 2002)* 401.

¹⁹⁴ Orr and West, “Citizens’ Views on Urban Revitalization” 401.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

across the state—was formed with the purpose of “[providing] focused corporate involvement and resources to the short-term and long-term challenges facing the city’s downtown area.”¹⁹⁶

Though the city was plagued with municipal government corruption and mayoral office scandals in the following years, the interest in “cleaning up” Providence accelerated in the 1980s and 90s.

Narratives and policies of urban renewal in this period were directly attached to white, middle-class anxieties around access to public space and the city. As historians and social scientists have argued, housing policies as well as city redevelopment projects in this era often relegated Black, brown and immigrant communities to city spaces that did not experience the benefits of public money.¹⁹⁷ Neighborhoods occupied by Black and immigrant residents, in RI and elsewhere, were often framed as “wastelands bereft of humanity” rather than sites of “organized state and capital abandonment,” writes Anne Fischer in *These Streets Are Our Streets*.¹⁹⁸ In RI, the 1970s also marked a period of transition in the city’s demography—beginning in these years, Providence experienced an influx of new residents, with many people immigrating to Rhode Island from Puerto Rico, and increasingly Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia.¹⁹⁹ In addition, communities of Southeast Asian immigrants—largely from Cambodia and Vietnam—have grown over the decades.²⁰⁰ The population of Black residents also grew dramatically toward the end of the century, from 8,304 in 1950 to 23,828 in 1990, an increase of 187%.²⁰¹ The city’s demographic changes are an essential backdrop to the rhetoric of renewal and safety explored in this chapter, as white

¹⁹⁶ Orr and West, “Citizens’ Views on Urban Revitalization,” 402.

¹⁹⁷ See Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: The Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (2017) and Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of an Underclass* (1993).

¹⁹⁸ Anne Gray Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification*, (UNC Press, March 2022), 156.

¹⁹⁹ Orr and West, “Citizens’ Views on Urban Revitalization,” 401.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

residents' racist anxieties and perceived criminality of communities of color motivated both the theory and practice of broken windows policing.

Feminist Protest and Specters of Urban Threat

This was the political environment of downtown Providence when white feminist activists began marching through its streets in order to “Take Back the Night” in 1979. While urban planners, politicians, and police were involved in reclaiming downtown for the middle-class white families that had fled Providence in the period of deindustrialization, feminists also laid claim to the streets, rhetorically “taking back” the city from the “problers,” “predators,” and “vampires” that Andrea Dworkin so theatrically depicted in “The Night and Danger.”²⁰² These side by side efforts to reclaim Providence, though qualitatively different, were easily allied as RI feminists gradually directed their TBTN organizing at the targets of dominance feminism—individual male criminals, pornography, and prostitution—and away from the multifaceted demands of the early movement.

In *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*, Leslie Kern argues that cities have long been a useful venue for engaging and staging feminist struggles. For centuries, Kern points out, urban spaces have represented a measure of opportunity and freedom for women, and particularly for working class and marginalized women.²⁰³ Though gender injustice—in acts of public violence, gender-exclusionary infrastructure, economic dispossession, etc.—has shaped the development of the modern city, Kern notes that feminist thinkers have often described urban environments with a “tangled up sense of excitement and danger, freedom and fear, opportunity

²⁰² Andrea Dworkin, “The Night and Danger” in *Letters From a War Zone: Writings, 1976-1989* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 13.

²⁰³ Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*, (Verso, 2019) 11.

and threat.”²⁰⁴ At the start of the RI women’s movement, organizers with the Women’s Liberation Union (WLU) approached the city as a space of opportunity, marching in the streets to assert themselves as public actors and demanding measures of economic and social justice on National Women’s Strike Day. Likewise, early feminist TBTN marches across the country responded to the ongoing fight to assert women’s claims to far more than the streets themselves: access to the city meant access to work, transportation, politics, and justice in material terms. Painting a hopeful picture of a just and feminist Providence, RI feminist demonstrations in the early 1970s—like the march on Women’s Strike Day—qualified the city as a space of possibility and liberation, intimately tied to multifaceted demands for economic and social justice. The RI TBTN marches of the 1980s-90s, in contrast, relied primarily on narratives of threat and fear to animate their protests, leaving behind earlier feminist demands that conceived of gender justice in the city as more than just the absence of sexual violence.

Stewarded by Jodi Glass and dominance feminism, the RI TBTN protests increasingly argued that women’s relationships to the city were always constituted by the specter of sexual domination. Moreover, as outlined in Chapter II, dominance feminism posited that a culture of male domination uniformly influenced both state violence and individual acts of male violence against women. In conflating the violence perpetrated by individuals and that of law enforcement, all the while fixating on the threat of sexual violence as opposed to issues of economic or racial justice, dominance feminists vilified individual bad actors and disassociated violence from its roots in state-sanctioned poverty. In her TBTN speech “the Night and Danger,” Andrea Dworkin referenced the “problers,” “predators” and even “vampires” of the night, inadvertently augmenting racist and classist myths that identified perpetrators of violence as non-white and poor. Despite the overwhelming evidence that sexual assaults perpetrated by

²⁰⁴ Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*, 11.

strangers were (and continue to be) statistically rare,²⁰⁵ TBTN marches associated with dominance feminism suggested otherwise; made up of mostly white women and parading through neighborhoods home to Black and brown communities, these marches enacted a perception of the constant, unknowable threat of male violence in settings that were already saturated with white fear.

It should be noted that dominance feminists were not blind to the racist overtones of this rhetoric. In “The Night and Danger,” Andrea Dworkin referred directly to the historic entanglements between accusations of rape and racial violence, arguing: “The black male... hunted at night to be castrated and lynched, becomes in the racist US the carrier of danger, the carrier of rape.”²⁰⁶ Rather than refuting this narrative directly, however, Dworkin forwarded the argument that Black men are often “scapegoats” for the violence of *all men*, again flattening difference to fit the mold of universal male domination.²⁰⁷ Dworkin’s conclusion—that all men are equally violent—sidestepped the critique that one’s racial identity impacts how they might experience, perpetrate, or be associated with sexual violence. Again, Dworkin reverted to the dictum of dominance feminism: that male domination, meted out by all men in the same way, is the universal condition of womanhood.

In framing the streets of Providence as a space of universal male threat, TBTN marches associated with dominance feminism also left little space for the complex experiences of non-white, working class women and sex workers situated differently in relation to the city. Marching through red light districts across the country to draw attention to the sex industry as the

²⁰⁵ According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), 8 out of 10 rapes are committed by someone known to the victim (2017). Of course, it is important to acknowledge that though acts of sexual violence committed by strangers are statistically less likely than those committed by family and acquaintances, the “imagined” or “perceived” fear of violence can subject women to anxiety and stress in public settings.

²⁰⁶ Dworkin, “The Night and Danger,” 15.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

ultimate space of women's degradation, TBTN protests framed by dominance feminist thinking drew largely unwanted attention to women involved in these industries, leaving them at risk of state violence. By downplaying the impact of the state on women and emphasizing prostitution as a degrading, un-feminist activity, these marches offered up a vision of "the prostituted woman" in need of protection through law enforcement. Pushing the early movement's critiques of the economic condition of women aside—as mobilized in the activism of the RI WLU, for example—dominance feminists adamantly opposed visions of sex work as one form of employment among many exploitative forms of work available to women under conditions of gender oppression. For dominance feminists, the economic structures that led women to solicit on the street were of little importance compared to the violence of prostitution itself. This rhetoric, which was shared and distributed by organizers like Jodi Glass at TBTN RI marches across the 80s and 90s, easily translated into aggressive public campaigns to clear the streets of sex workers "for the good of all women."

White feminist organizers involved with TBTN RI physically mobilized these myths by staging their marches in downtown Providence, as opposed to, for example, the streets of affluent College Hill. While Black feminists in Boston marched through the communities in which they lived and worked to protest the serial murders of Black women in 1979 (see Chapter II) white feminists in Providence protested through the city's urban center, where very few white women actually lived. Over the decades that TBTN marches took place, the route was rarely adjusted: protestors typically began near Kennedy Plaza, the state's hub for public transportation, and walked down any number of the nearby streets, marching down Washington Street, Weybosset Street and others.²⁰⁸ Though these spaces were mostly non-residential, downtown was and

²⁰⁸ Mary Ann Rossoni, "Take Back the Night: An Interview," *The Third Wave*, October 1990, Box 1, Folder 14, Jodi Glass Papers.

continues to be home to many public offices with services for low-income people; moreover, up to the present day, people experiencing homelessness have occupied Kennedy Plaza and the streets of Providence as a means of staying close to these services and transportation. By situating the threat of violence against women in spaces occupied by working class people, feminist organizers made a raced and classed claim that it was these spaces that posed the greatest threat to women.

The Providence Police Department (PPD) quickly identified commonalities between the rhetoric of TBTN RI and its own efforts to increase the presence of police in certain Providence neighborhoods. In 1979, following the first TBTN RI march, white feminists organizers received a strong endorsement of their efforts from the PPD. In response to a complaint filed by feminist activist Helen Howe of the TBTN coalition, which argued that the police escorts of the march had been antagonistic to protestors, Captain Edward Collins of the PPD responded: “There is no doubt that we in the police profession feel that a group of people marching in an effort to make the streets safer is certainly in line with our own goals, and they can expect nothing but the utmost cooperation from the police.”²⁰⁹ Describing a common goal of “[making] the streets safer,” Collins aligned law enforcement’s visions of “safety” with that of mainstream white feminists. This early acknowledgement of the possibility of natural relationships between feminist organizers and police departments foreshadowed the use of feminist framing to justify the expansion of police activity in the following decade. In the era of broken windows policing in RI, dominance feminist visions of the racialized “proowler” and the “victimized prostitute”

²⁰⁹ Edward Collins, “Providence Police Department, Hearing Officer’s Report Re: Civilian Complaint,” September 28, 1979.

dovetailed with policies that increased the vulnerability of non-white and poor people to state surveillance and arrest.

Policing Poverty: The Broken Windows Theory

Marching through parts of the city that were often occupied by non-white, working class people and people experiencing homelessness, white feminist TBTN organizers in RI mobilized these twin symbols of women's oppression: the racialized "proowler" and the "victimized prostitute." In the context of plans to "revitalize" Providence, these fictive characters were powerful specters of non-white urban criminality as understood by white policymakers and residents of the city. In order to "transform" Providence and encourage white, middle-class access to the city, public officials did more than invest in exclusionary urban redevelopment plans—they also turned to law enforcement to "maintain" city streets. In the early 80s, with a growing reliance on James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling's theory of broken windows, public officials spoke of a need to expel "criminal" or "unseemly" characters from "law-abiding" society. Published in *The Atlantic* in 1982, Kelling and Wilson's infamous article provided that minor forms of social disorder, embodied in the public presence of "panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, [and] the mentally disturbed" would result in neighborhood decline and encourage more serious, violence offenses.²¹⁰ Interchangeable with these "disreputable people" were visible objects of decline, such as graffiti, untamed weeds, litter, and broken windows.²¹¹ In order to address violence, Kelling and Wilson contended, police

²¹⁰ George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," *The Atlantic*, March 1, 1982.

²¹¹ Kelling and Wilson, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety."

ought to target social disorder—that is, the people and objects they associated with disorder—by increasing misdemeanor arrests and embracing zero-tolerance policies for minor offenses.²¹²

In the midst of building concerns around the changing demography of Providence and questions around how to recapitalize the city, Kelling and Wilson’s theory confirmed white anxieties by blaming urban deterioration on behaviors that offended white middle-class sensibilities. According to broken windows theory, Providence’s revitalization relied on the policing of offensive behaviors and aesthetics, as opposed to addressing conditions of material deprivation. At a conference at Brown University sponsored by *The Providence Journal* in 1985, James Wilson spoke alongside the mayors of two large midwestern cities and the secretary of the U.S. Department for Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to a group of Providence residents on his theory. Asked how to “revitalize... central cities and urban neighborhoods,” Wilson emphasized that crime reduction efforts in the form of “private initiatives” and “neighborhood and community groups” were of the utmost importance.²¹³ These were the solutions, Wilson argued, to what he called the “[unabated] crime wave that began in the 1960s.”²¹⁴ On the other hand, efforts to create jobs and address poverty, the panel almost uniformly contended, could be folded into the Reagan administration’s economic policies, which had lifted market regulations and cut expenditures on social welfare.²¹⁵ As HUD Secretary Samuel R. Pierce Jr. noted to attendees, “an economy free of government regulation is the only salvation for cities.”²¹⁶

Combining trickle-down economic theory with the new broken windows prescription to ending

²¹² Bernard E. Harcourt, *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing* (Cambridge, Mass; Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.

²¹³ Doane Hulick, “Conference on urban ills produces no ‘quick fix,’” *The Providence Journal*, 1982.

²¹⁴ Hulick, “Conference on urban ills produces no ‘quick fix.’”

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

crime, cities like Providence began to invest in policing while defunding social programs, a deadly formula for Black and immigrant families moving into the city.

At the federal level, the notion that social welfare could be addressed through policing was mobilized in the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), established in 1968 as a means of redirecting federal funds to local law enforcement programs in the midst of mass protests against state authorities. As sociologist John Crank noted in a 1994 reflection on the LEAA, the administration was intended to improve the public perception of police following anti-authority protests in the 1960s and 70s.²¹⁷ The LEAA was instrumental in the creation of community policing initiatives in the 1980s.²¹⁸ LEAA money continued to flow to cities as other social welfare sources dried up; as a result, federal funding for the expansion of policing became the primary source of federal money for cities. By 1980, RI had received \$4.6 million in federal grants from the LEAA to expand local police departments and respond to community concerns over crime.²¹⁹

The combination of these national trends had dramatic impacts on the discourse and function of policing in Providence and cities like it, pushing public officials to advocate for more localized, community-based measures of policing. In 1982 *The Providence Journal* reported that the Providence Police Department (PPD)—led by Police Chief Anthony J. Mancuso—would institute a new “Community Oriented Policing” plan to respond to what he called “the citizen apathy which has allowed crime to flourish” in the city.²²⁰ Promising to make the law enforcement presence *more* visible in neighborhoods across the city, the plan divided Providence

²¹⁷ John P. Crank, “Watchman and Community: Myth and Institutionalization in Policing.” *Law & Society Review* 28, no. 2 (1994): 325–51, 327.

²¹⁸ Crank, “Watchman and Community: Myth and Institutionalization in Policing,” 327.

²¹⁹ “Rhode Island Report on the Judiciary 1980-1982” (1982). Library Archive. Paper 40. <http://helindigitalcommons.org/lawarchive/40>

²²⁰ “New partners: Police and the Neighborhood,” *The Providence Journal*, April 29, 1982.

into four districts, “downtown, East Side, South Providence/West End and the North End,” and assigned officers accordingly.²²¹ Influenced by the broken windows theory and the growing political pressure from white residents to get tougher on crime, this effort by the PPD increased the number of officers in Black and brown neighborhoods under the guise of building connections between police and people.

Like the Tonomy Hill article that opened this chapter, many of the reports on the PPD’s “Community-Oriented Policing” effort described scenes of “urban disorder” in Providence’s public housing projects. One article, for example, opened with a police captain driving by “rows of gaping doors and windows in the Chad Brown housing project” in the North End of Providence, under the “flinty” gaze of young men “lounging in the midmorning sunshine.”²²² These racialized depictions of people deemed threatening functioned to distract from the conditions of material deprivation and racist urban housing policy that defined places like Tonomy Hill and Chad Brown. As Bernard Harcourt argues in *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing*, police departments increasingly pitted “orderly citizens” against a catch-all category of troublemakers “in a continual struggle of good versus evil.”²²³ Drawing an inflexible line between these “criminals” and “law-abiding citizens,” these depictions set communities against young Black men and increasingly, Black women, who were deemed responsible for the city’s problems.

While broken windows policing is often associated with the targeting of Black men, the sexual policing of Black women in the city was also a hallmark of the “mass-misdemeanor enforcement regime” set in motion in these decades.²²⁴ “Promiscuous and scantily clad

²²¹ “New partners: Police and the Neighborhood,” *The Providence Journal*.

²²² Gina Macris, “Policemen, public, seek to reforge old alliance,” *The Providence Journal*, July 14, 1982.

²²³ Harcourt, *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing*, 25.

²²⁴ Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification*, 12.

prostitutes”—often sex workers soliciting clients on the street—were prime among Wilson and Kelling’s list of symptoms of urban decay.²²⁵ Framed as irksome barriers to the economic recovery of the city and harbingers of violent crime, sex workers and women deemed as “sexually threatening” were targeted by broken windows policing efforts in Providence and elsewhere. Just as racist myths associated Black men with sexual violence, as described in the previous chapter, enduring myths of Black women’s “violent sexual criminality” were also mobilized in the broken windows era to justify the policing and arrest of women of color simply occupying city space.²²⁶ Though feminist organizers in Boston and elsewhere were quick to condemn police crackdowns on sex workers as gendered violence carried out by the state, white feminists in Rhode Island—engaged in dominance feminist thinking—had little to say about the issue. Instead, capitalizing on white anxieties related to the city and emphasizing their stance against male domination, in the form of sexual violence and prostitution, white feminists in RI handed police a feminist justification for policies that encouraged the arrest and incarceration of sexually profiled women.

Policing Sex: Enforcing Criminalization and the Lie of Protection

At the start of the 1980s, white city residents, neighborhood councils and public officials expressed serious concern that police departments were not taking prostitution in the city of Providence seriously. In 1979, an article in the *Providence Journal* raised fears that police were turning a blind eye to the “thriving business” of prostitution downtown, with several officers accused of visiting hotels known for sex work.²²⁷ To conclude, the author implored police to step

²²⁵ Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification*, 12.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, 11.

²²⁷ “A City’s Seamy Side,” *The Providence Journal*, March 20, 1979.

up their response in order to reduce the visibility and incidence of sex work, arguing that “prostitution, like most organized vice activities, thrives in inverse proportion to the diligence that police employ in combatting it.”²²⁸

Later that year, *The Providence Journal* reported that soliciting had become a “serious social problem” in the West End, Elmwood, and South Side of Providence—less wealthy neighborhoods often occupied by Black and immigrant families.²²⁹ Quoted extensively in the article, Councilman David Dillon of Ward 8 connected the problem to the common narrative of urban deterioration laid out in broken windows theory. The “biggest victims of the crime,” Dillon argued, were the law-abiding citizens who saw their property values decrease as a result of prostitution.²³⁰ “It’s one more link in the chain of decay in our neighborhoods,” Dillon expressed, emphasizing again a common belief in the threat of sexual delinquency, and therefore racialized sexual delinquents, to the economic security of the community.²³¹

At the same time that many local officials were speaking to concerns about the presence of sex work in their neighborhoods, Rhode Island sex workers themselves were engaged in a dire fight to decriminalize prostitution in the state. In 1979, several local members of the sex worker rights organization Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE), in tandem with founder and activist Margot St. James, were involved in an ongoing lawsuit against the City of Providence and the State of Rhode Island—*Coyote v. Roberts*.²³² The suit claimed that the current law criminalizing prostitution was unconstitutional on the grounds that it unlawfully prohibited

²²⁸ “A City’s Seamy Side,” *The Providence Journal*.

²²⁹ Doane Hulick, “New measures urged against prostitution: Two councilmen say soliciting has become a serious problem in their neighborhoods,” *The Providence Journal*, September 21, 1979.

²³⁰ Hulick, “New measures urged against prostitution: Two councilmen say soliciting has become a serious problem in their neighborhoods.”

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² Karen Ellsworth, “Call girl asks judge to legalize her trade,” *The Providence Journal*, September 26, 1979.

consensual sexual activity between adults and that it was unequally enforced against women. In September 1979, “Jane Doe,” a 30-year old sex worker, testified to police ineptitude in protecting and supporting women engaged in the sex industry. Speaking from personal experience, she noted that sex workers could rarely find support from police or the courts in instances of violence against them, because they are “laughed out of the police station.”²³³ In support of Doe, Margot St. James spoke to criminalization’s misapprehension of the problems facing women; she emphasized that prostitution laws were unjustly enforced “along racial, class, and age lines” in an attempt to keep women “economically dependent” by “[criminalizing] their attempts to survive.”²³⁴ In the midst of a public assault on women involved in the sex industry, this lawsuit demonstrated the robust network of feminist sex workers in RI, who had to work against dominance feminist theorys manifested in state law.²³⁵

In order to mobilize support for more stringent prostitution laws in the wake of the social liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s—and in the midst of a powerful movement by COYOTE to decriminalize sex work in the state—white residents and public officials could not merely rely on narratives of delinquency and social disorder to convince communities that “unseemly” actors needed to be removed en masse from the city. Rather, public officials like Dillon spoke in the language of delivering justice to distressed neighborhoods and to “prostituted

²³³ Ellsworth, “Call girl asks judge to legalize her trade.”

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ *COYOTE v. Roberts* was resolved following the passage of a 1980 law reducing prostitution offenses to the level of petty misdemeanor, as described later in this chapter. The law responded to several of the lawsuits concerns, adding the phrase “for pecuniary gain” to criminalize only certain preparatory actions like soliciting, and deleting language that prohibited consensual sexual relations behind closed doors, even for pecuniary gain. These amendments have often been framed as the RI legislature “accidentally” decriminalizing prostitution, when in fact legislators made these changes to appease all concerned parties in 1980. For sex worker right’s advocates, certain indoor activities were decriminalized; for community groups concerned about prostitution in their neighborhoods, police were given greater license to arrest women under the petty misdemeanor offense as opposed to the felony offense.

women” in order to validate the expansion of police power.²³⁶ Dominance feminism offered a powerful slate of rhetoric for this very task, in direct opposition to St. James and other sex worker rights activists’ claims to feminism. Historian Anne Gray Fischer writes that on the national level, the legal scholars associated with dominance feminism forwarded their vision of the law as a neutral protector by arguing, on the whole, that criminalization of prostitution should remain intact as a more humane and ethically sound position, despite the many voices arguing that criminalization put women involved in sex work in harm’s way.²³⁷ Florida State University professor Margaret Baldwin defended criminalization in a 1997 law review article by arguing that “arrest and incarceration can play an important role in the repertoire of prostituted women’s survival strategies.”²³⁸ According to Baldwin, jails could offer “temporary respite from violence, hunger, and the prostitution itself.”²³⁹ Further, Baldwin noted that the criminalization of prostitution sent a symbolic message to a women that “the violation and despair she feels is real.”²⁴⁰ Police departments routinely adopted this language of protection to justify the arrest of sex workers, appealing to dominance feminists and the mainstream movement for support.

Through these rhetorical alliances, and in response to organized efforts on the part of West End neighborhood associations throughout 1979 and into 1980, public officials in RI managed to pass legislation in the 1980 legislative session that made it easier to arrest and incarcerate sex workers. In the context of the rising complaints about the presence of sex workers in the city, then House Speaker Matthew J. “Matty” Smith made it a priority to “help rid [the

²³⁶ Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification*, 189.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Margaret Baldwin, “Public Women and the Feminist State,” *Harvard Women’s Law Journal* 20 (1997), 125, quoted in Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification*, 189.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

West End] of prostitution.”²⁴¹ His ally, state District Court Chief Judge Henry J. Laliberte, had formulated an amendment to the current statute criminalizing prostitution, which at the time labeled the sale of sex a felony and, as a result, required greater evidence and longer hearings to actually prosecute women.²⁴² According to Judge Laliberte, reducing prostitution charges to petty misdemeanors with maximum penalties of a \$500 fine and six months in prison would speed up the process by giving jurisdiction to less clogged District Courts.²⁴³ Moreover, Laliberte argued that the amendment would make it easier to arrest women, noting: “police can arrest women whom they viewed making solicitations, rather than requiring tape recordings or other evidence of the transactions themselves.”²⁴⁴ That year, with massive support from city residents and policymakers, the amendments to the statute passed easily. As a result, police departments gained even more discretion to sexually profile and arrest women deemed “threatening” across the city.

By reducing the level of prostitution offenses to make it easier for police to arrest and prosecute sexually suspect women, the state of RI foreshadowed and endorsed the rise of mass-misdemeanor policing efforts that would be justified through the broken windows theory. In a 1987 article reporting on the effort to “get-tough on prostitution” in Elmwood and the West End, a *Providence Journal* reporter iterated the belief that aggressive campaigns to arrest hundreds of women each year were “successful” in making the community safer.²⁴⁵ Conceding that the law seemed not to deter women from engaging in sex work—citing several hundred arrests each year with the vast majority of women returning to sex work following release—the

²⁴¹ Lynn Arditi, “How R.I. opened the door to prostitution,” *The Providence Journal*, November 14, 2014.

²⁴² Michael Hiltzik, “West end residents told the law is part of the prostitution problem,” *The Providence Journal*, January 9, 1980.

²⁴³ Hiltzik, “West end residents told the law is part of the prostitution problem.”

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Robert Correia, “Get-tough policy slams the door on prostitution,” *The Providence Journal*, February 19, 1989.

reporter argued that, most importantly, “sending prostitutes to jail gets them off the streets.”²⁴⁶ In reference to dominance feminist beliefs that criminalization could offer a semblance of stability for sex workers framed as abject and victimized, the article offered up the patronizing notion that women involved in the sex industry could expect nothing better than jail. Privileging the comfort of residents framed as “respectable”²⁴⁷ at the cost of hundreds of women’s safety, the reporter pessimistically concluded that sending sex workers to prison, over and over again, was the best solution for communities and for sex workers themselves.

Battling “Sexual Slavery:” A New Front for Dominance Feminism

At the 27th annual feminist TBTN March in 2005, keynote speaker and dominance feminist Donna Hughes spoke to a crowd of women, legislators, public officials, and law enforcement officers about what she called the ongoing “battle...against sexual slavery.”²⁴⁸ Invoking Andrea Dworkin’s memory and writings, and drawing a direct line between this campaign and legacies of dominance feminism, Hughes dedicated the march “to the memory of Andrea Dworkin, that fearless, feminist campaigner against all forms of sexual violence, including rape, pornography, and prostitution.”²⁴⁹ Invoking Dworkin’s activism, Hughes demanded a renewed effort to address “the violence of prostitution,” which, she argued, was the epitome of “pure hatred” against women.²⁵⁰

Nearly three decades after the passage of the 1980 amendments to prostitution laws, dominance feminists like Donna Hughes and law enforcement collaborated again to argue for an

²⁴⁶ Correia, “Get-tough policy slams the door on prostitution.”

²⁴⁷ Ibid. For instance, one woman in Correia’s article deplored the fact that men often mistook her for a sex worker on the street as “an attack on [a woman’s] self-esteem.”

²⁴⁸ Donna Hughes, “Speech at Rhode Island’s 27th Annual Take Back the Night March,” September 30, 2005, Box 4, Folder 8, Jodi Glass Papers.

²⁴⁹ Hughes, “Speech at Rhode Island’s 27th Annual Take Back the Night March.”

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

more punitive law to ensure the criminalization of indoor prostitution. At issue for Hughes in the early 2000s was the presence of massage parlors in Providence, which she labeled “sexual gulags in our midst.”²⁵¹ Despite the many consequences that further criminalization would have for the migrant women employed at these parlors—namely, the risk of deportation and detainment—and the preponderance of evidence that criminalization put women involved in the sex industry in harm’s way, Hughes argued that a stronger law would put “the perpetrators” of sex trafficking “in jail where they belong,” while “[liberating] vulnerable victims.”²⁵² Despite Hughes’ narrative that such a bill would “liberate” women, so-called “victims” of trafficking would not be spared from arrest or incarceration under the new legislation. In fact, her legislative supporters argued that detaining “trafficked” women was a needed “tool” to force their cooperation with police.²⁵³ Extending Margaret Baldwin’s paternalistic argument of the 1990s—that incarceration might be desirable for women involved in the sex industry—Hughes and her coalition pushed forth this cruel public policy.

Sex workers and their allies strongly opposed the passage of such stringent criminalization policies. Beyond the argument that the law would fail to “free” women as Hughes described, those opposed pointed to the unfair provisions tacked onto the legislation; for one, the bill allowed for the seizure and forfeiture of any property—including money—that a woman owned if police could claim it was derived from the proceeds of prostitution.²⁵⁴ This measure of discretionary police power meant that women could lose all they had if arrested, exacerbating the conditions of material deprivation that often led women to the sex industry, and

²⁵¹ Hughes, “Speech at Rhode Island’s 27th Annual Take Back the Night March.”

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Steven Brown, “Presentation Before the Special Legislative Commission to Study Ensuring Racial Equity and Optimizing Health and Safety Laws Affecting Marginalized Individuals,” RI ACLU, February 28, 2022.

²⁵⁴ Brown, “Presentation Before the Special Legislative Commission.”

leaving women even more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.²⁵⁵ In addition, ACLU attorney Steven Brown argued that police officers had no trouble making arrests for so called “sex crimes”—Brown noted that in 2009, prostitution constituted “the most common offense for which women were incarcerated at the Adult Correctional Institutions both pretrial and following conviction.”²⁵⁶ Still, public officials were overwhelmingly convinced by Hughes' moralizing arguments, and after a five year legislative battle, the law was passed in 2009. In spite of this loss, the fight for sex worker rights continued in full force. Bella Robinson, a RI sex worker and activist, called the local COYOTE chapter back into action in response to the bill’s passage, and has been deeply involved in the movement to decriminalize sex work in the state ever since.²⁵⁷

As this story illustrates, the collaboration between dominance feminists and law enforcement in the late 20th century has had consequential resonances in our current moment. The narrative that women involved in the sex industry are vulnerable victims in need of protection in the form of arrest persists to this day. As of spring 2022, the 2009 laws are still on the books, in spite of powerful local organizing to affirm sex worker’s rights over the past decade. And while broken windows theory has been widely debunked as anti-poor, anti-Black, and functionally unsuccessful in producing safer communities, racialized and sexualized symbols associated with urban disorder—that of the Black “proowler” and the “down-trodden prostitute”—continue to shape discourse around public safety and policing. In examining the ways in which dominance feminist protest strategies and critiques were mobilized in support of the expansion of broken windows theory and mass-misdemeanor policing in the 1980s, this chapter has attempted to elucidate the interactions of race, class and gender that underpin campaigns purportedly aimed at making Providence and cities like it safer. By asking “safer for

²⁵⁵ Brown, “Presentation Before the Special Legislative Commission.”

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ See the website of COYOTE RI at coyoteri.org for more information on this group’s history.

whom?” this chapter has revealed the truly violent impacts of discretionary mass-misdemeanor policing and surveillance on sexually profiled and racialized women occupying public space.

Conclusion

As a result of tireless organizing by Rhode Island sex worker right's activists, in the fall of 2021, the RI state legislature began to reconsider the punitive policies passed in 2009. In a legislative study commission tasked with reviewing and providing recommendations on current laws criminalizing sex work, advocates like COYOTE's Bella Robinson, legislators, academics, public health officials, and law enforcement officers assemble monthly to analyze research on the positive impacts of decriminalization on public safety. While the study commission represents a measure of success for the local sex worker rights movement and abolitionist feminists seeking an end to the use of carceral apparatuses in the name of women's rights, there are many reasons to be skeptical of the efficacy of such an appeal to state lawmakers. Even if the commission eventually recommends total decriminalization, would the RI General Assembly actually pass a bill to make decriminalization law? With sex work legalized in only ten Nevada counties across the United States, it seems highly improbable that RI would be the first state to decriminalize.²⁵⁸ Moreover, as this thesis has described, public officials and governments often appropriate feminist anti-violence rhetoric to serve the ends of the neoliberal state, expanding surveillance and control as opposed to safety, and jeopardizing the security of many marginalized women under a veil of justice. Though the study commission reflects the fact that some legislators are listening to sex workers, how might the state dilute or reshape demands to decriminalize?

²⁵⁸ Sex worker rights activists often promote a framework of decriminalization over legalization, arguing that legalization reinforces state surveillance and control over control over sex workers' lives through the use of regulations, licenses, and other bureaucratic measures. Total decriminalization, on the other hand, allows sex workers to practice sex work as they choose.

This thesis has expressed the limits and dangers of these kinds of state-based appeals, especially those focused on crime-based recognition. In conclusion, I want to return to Sara Ahmed's directions for constructing feminist dwellings, considering how the history presented here illuminates some small part of the path forward for feminism. By examining the RI feminism movement's turn to a narrow, one-dimensional analysis of gender injustice, I hope to have expressed that this shift was by no means inevitable; rather, it was brought about by the social identities of white, class-privileged women with access to levers of power, in response to the advancement of neoliberal systems of governance and policing on the local level. In reflecting on the specific moments and the conditions under which this transition occurred, feminists of the present can protect against the appropriation of feminist ideals and interrupt trajectories of violence framed as inescapable.

The early second wave feminist movement in RI embraced a more multi-valent vision of gender justice. This vision was ultimately compromised as white feminists turned to a politics of crime-based recognition, embracing carceral solutions to violence. By centering the people that carceral feminism has excluded—Black women, women of color, poor women, trans women, and women most vulnerable to state violence—the contemporary feminist movement can reinvolve earlier transformative visions, which have been sustained in the organizing of abolitionist feminists. Abolitionist feminist groups—including Survived & Punished, Communities Against Rape and Abuse, INCITE! Gender non-conforming and Trans People Against Violence, the Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse, the Audre Lorde Project, Critical Resistance, and Sista II Sista—are currently theorizing and enacting solutions to gender-based violence that are grounded in visions of justice as collective

and compassionate, rather than individual and punitive.²⁵⁹ These feminists frame the carceral state as a perpetrator of gender violence in its own right. By implementing better ways of responding to harm and ensuring safety, they build power toward a truly feminist future. In support of these efforts, feminists with relative power must reckon with their own entanglements with violence, turning to follow.

²⁵⁹ One of the essential frameworks for groups advocating for alternatives to the criminal legal system is “transformative justice,” which proposes a series of strategies and practices for addressing violence at the structural level. Most basically, transformative justice seeks to transform the conditions that enable harm, at the same time facilitating repair. See Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s book *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* for more.

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