Women and the Weathermen

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In 1964, Civil Rights leader and later Black Panther member Stokely Carmichael stated that, "the only position for women in [the movement] is prone."[1] While this statement was perhaps meant in jest, women did struggle to find their place in activism in Sixties America and in the revolutionary protest group the Weathermen, in particular. Despite the fact that a lead role in the Weathermen was held by a woman, Bernardine Dohrn, masculine bravado was the norm in Civil Rights, Vietnam War, and Black Panther Protest movements; their hyper macho attitudes a response to attempts by many to label them as queer or as 'sissies' for protesting the draft. During this politically turbulent time, many radical groups struggled with reconciling women's liberation, race and the broader civil rights movement, and some women, such as Dohrn, adopted what are traditionally thought of as 'male' behaviours in an attempt to find acceptance. After the accidental killing of three of their group in a Greenwich Village townhouse bomb explosion, the remaining Weathermen members went into hiding for many years. In this essay, I will argue that their time underground reveals a changing, more thoughtful approach to women's liberation within the Weathermen's agenda. In this way, women activists within the Weathermen anticipated what scholars in the 1980s began to label as intersectionality: the importance of considering the overlapping of gender, race, and class in their agenda.

[1] Susan Brownmiller. *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. (USA: Random House, 2000) excerpted from www.randomhouse.ca, accessed April 13, 2017.
[2] Michael S. Foley, "The "Point of Ultimate Indignity" or a "Beloved Community"? The Draft

Coming on the heels of World War II, fifties America celebrated the popularity of the heteronormative family and growing nationalism with clearly divided gender roles where men worked and women were housewives with growing families. The generational shift that followed often struggled against this model, in part because of strong opposition by both men and women to the war in Vietnam and the draft that accompanied it. Men who sought to oppose this war by resisting the draft often experienced a societal backlash questioning their masculinity. When some draft evaders in Boston publicized their plan to burn their draft cards in open opposition to the war, hundreds of members of the public attended and taunted them by calling them 'sissies' unwilling to fight for their country. A group of seventy-five high school boys broke away from the protest crowd and attacked the four draft card burners so violently that only police interference stopped the draft resisters from being killed.[2] This was not an isolated incident. The opposition to draft resisters often came from a more strategic source; however, the FBI used "tactical gay baiting" to "undermine anti-war and civil rights organizing," creating and distributing pamphlets targeting specific members of the Students for a Democratic Society as a part of a 'Pick the Fag' contest that attempted to mock their appearance and voices.[3] Activist men responded by cultivating and displaying an "exaggerated… masculinity and heterosexuality….against charges of effeminacy and queerness." [4]

This hyper-masculinity, as captured in the prior Stokely Carmichael quote, became the norm in Sixties activist circles. A popular Vietnam War resisters slogan was 'Girls say yes to guys who say no,' (to the war) and groups like the

[2] Michael S. Foley, "The "Point of Ultimate Indignity" or a "Beloved Community"? The Draft Resistance Movement and New Left Gender Dynamics," in John McMillan and Paul Buhle eds., *The New Left Revisited* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 180.
[3] Ian Lekus, "Losing Our Kids: Queer Perspectives on the Chicago Seven Conspiracy Trial," in John McMillian and Paul Buhle eds., *The New Left Revisited* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 205.
[4] Lekus, ''Losing Our Kids", 209.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were typically male-dominated, with men taking all lead roles, calling each other 'brother' and talking about their utopian vision for a future that included "free grass, free food, and free women."[5] Activists would advertise "huge, incredibly noisy, chick-laden part[ies]….", with "an implicit promise of women as sexual prizes for men who joined the resistance."[6] Despite a growing women's liberation movement, women had not yet organized their own large protest circles and female students and young women who wanted to protest the war were left with few other options than to join these popular groups. Many women who attended meetings felt relegated to secondary roles where they were asked to type pamphlets, make coffee, or clean up, and they struggled to contribute ideas. In studying the Boston Draft Resistance Group, one writer theorizes that "…few women in those days were socialized to master the mass haranguing style needed to make a point in meetings [so] men dominated decision making."[7] Weatherwoman Bernardine Dorhn is one notable exception. Known for her short skirts, leather jacket and masculine attitude, Dohrn had already graduated from law school and was a lawyer when she joined the SDS and became associated with the Revolutionary Youth Movement, its radical splinter group that would eventually split from SDS and become the Weathermen. Dohrn's popularity and outspoken style likely contributed to other activist women adopting similar macho behaviour in hopes of having their ideas taken seriously.

This macho behaviour within SDS and the Weathermen (and women) did not exist only in these student and youth meetings; however, the political climate of the late Sixties was becoming increasingly violent after the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Junior. A younger,

[5] Lindsey Blake Churchill, "Exploring Women's Complex Relationship with Political Violence: A Study of the Weathermen, Radical Feminism and the New Left." (PhD diss., University of South Florida, 2005), 10.
[6] Foley, "The Point of Ultimate Indignity '', 179- 183.
[7] Foley, 186.

"pro-violent action faction" gained popularity after the lack of results that came from hundreds of peaceful protests and sit-ins.[8] In attempting to expand their group member base, the Weathermen, in particular, focused on attracting working-class members and high school drop-outs who they felt might be more used to violent physical behaviour than their current middle-class, white, student members were, and by "fighting local street toughs" as part of their organizing strategy.[9] The Weathermen's attempt to startle the public with their barbarity led to such seemingly useless behaviour as "running up and down the aisle of an airplane taking food from startled passengers" and terrorizing workers in a Brooklyn coffee shop where hippies were not welcome by threatening them with stolen police nightsticks.[10] They attacked secretaries and professors at the Harvard Centre for International Affairs while breaking windows and destroying files and in a 'jailbreak' at a community college in Boston—a protest attempting to 'free' students from the oppression of school—"Weatherwomen invaded a classroom….lectured the students on war and racism, and—using karate moves—blocked those who tried to escape."[11]

For a Weatherwoman, then, this kind of hyper-masculine behaviour was not only encouraged, but it was an integral part of membership in the organization.[12] All members were asked to submit to what they called 'gut checks'—a method many radical activist groups used as a test of solidarity with the group's principles. During a Weathermen 'gut check', a member would be insolently addressed by other members of the group until he or she was willing to

[8] Churchill, "Exploring Women's Complex Relationship", 9-10.
[9] Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2006), 99-100.
[10] Berger, *Outlaws,* 99.
[11] Berger, 101.
[12] Not all behaviour within the Weathermen was hyper masculine, however. The group had a belief that sexual experimentation between both genders in an effort to "Smash Monogamy" would help break down barriers related to ownership in relationships, and both men and women were encouraged to experiment sexually with members of the same sex and the opposite sex. However, it often meant females were expected to be sexually available for male members, according to some accounts. For more, see Berger, *Outlaws*, 291.

admit they were racist and privileged and complicit in the oppression of others. These 'gut checks' could take anywhere between two hours and two days. One former member describes the 'gut check' process as a kind of mental test that asks "are you man enough to stick your head in the lion's den?"[13] Weatherwoman Cathy Wilkerson says she endured a two-day 'gut check' in which she was made to renounce her previously published remarks that were critical of patriarchal attitudes within SDS.[14] Once they were members, however, Weatherwomen didn't entirely ignore the women's liberation movement, although different documents they published show their struggle with what we would eventually call the intersectionality of their concerns of race, class and women's issues and how they felt violence needed to play a part in social change. One notable publication, a piece written by Bernardine Dohrn, criticized attempts at women's liberation, saying "most of the women's groups are bourgeois, unconscious or unconcerned with class struggle."[15] Lindsey Blake Churchill, writing about this issue in her dissertation asserts that

> though the Weathermen….half-heartedly supported women's resistance of the dominant culture, women's liberation was deemed only acceptable if their activism was *part* of what was seen as the more important imperialist movement. As it had been for years in counter cultural movements, women were needed, but only to fight someone else's battle.[16]

A second important piece authored by the Weatherwomen in 1969, entitled "Honky Tonk Women," argued that liberated women should be "changing from passive wimps afraid of blood or danger or guns,"[17] and in yet another separate article about avenging the murder of Black

[13] Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, The Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 93.
[14] Berger, *Outlaws*, 290-291.
[15] Churchill, "Exploring Women's Complex Relationship," 12.
[16] Churchill, 12.
[17] Quoted in Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 133.

Panther Fred Hampton, a Weatherwoman wrote "There can be no life—no culture—without the gun. We can be nothing but scared ass honkies if we can't face the pig and with the power of cosmic consciousness put a bullet in his racist belly."[18] These violent attitudes within the Weatherwomen weren't directed only at authority or race or class issues, however. Another emerging group of female activists in Washington, the radical feminist Redstockings, recall receiving a phone call after giving a speech at a Washington protest that threatened the woman answering that if the Redstockings "ever give[…] a speech like that again, we're going to beat the shit out of you, wherever you are," and despite the caller's attempt to remain anonymous, the intimidating voice was recognized as that of Weatherwoman Cathy Wilkerson.[19] In summing up the attitude of the time, author Alice Echols writes that "[M]ost Movement men trivialized, patronized, or ridiculed women's liberation activists. Some men, like the Berkeley leader who declared 'let them eat cock!' were actively hostile,"[20]—but the same charge can often be levied against the Weatherwomen and their treatment of the fellow women in the women's liberation movement.

Despite some Black Panthers' publicized dislike of the hostile tactics favoured by the Weathermen in their Days of Rage protests in Chicago, Hampton's death was a catalyst for change within the group. In the 2003 documentary *The Weather Underground*, Bernardine Dohrn recalls, "We felt that the murder of Fred required us to be more grave, more serious, more determined to raise the stakes."[21] In March of 1970, some of the Weathermen were staying at Weatherwoman Cathy

[18] Quoted in Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 133.
[19] Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 119.
[20] Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 120.
[21] *The Weather Underground*, Dirs: Sam Green and Bill Siegel, Shadow Distribution, 2003. Film.

Wilkerson's parents' townhouse in Greenwich Village when a bomb they were building in the basement and planning to detonate at an officers' dance in Fort Dix accidently went off and killed three of their members. Wilkerson herself was also home at the time—it is worth noting that as was typical for female members within the Weathermen at that time, she was doing housework, rather than being involved in building the bomb itself—and she remembers "a mountain of splintered wood and brick rose up" around her as the bomb went off while she ironed sheets.[22] She and another female member survived the blast and disappeared to a neighbour's house to clean up and evade police questioning and then along with other members of the group, went underground, because the group's radical plan, although unrealized, made the Weathermen wanted by the FBI. The public criticism of their planned action combined with the loss of three important members made the Weathermen take stock of their activities. They emerged with a new plan to continue to attack buildings and institutions in protest against systemic oppression but not to hurt people in the process.

Throughout the remainder of 1970, 1971 and 1972, the Weathermen continued their radical agenda: to target and bomb institutions and issue typewritten and recorded 'communiqués' to the media that explained their political agenda in each action (Bernardine Dohrn's voice was often used in the recording). There was, however, a change in their political agenda at this time. During a temporary cease fire in the war in Vietnam in 1973, a group within the Weathermen calling themselves "The Women's Brigade" issued a document called "Mountain Moving Day" that shows a changed and more positive attitude towards the women's liberation movement, calling for solidarity

[22] "Former 60's Radical Recalls Days of Rage." *All Things Considered,* NPR. December 27, 2007. Radio.

amongst women's groups, and a commitment to helping build the nascent feminist movement. *Sing a Battle Song*, another Weathermen publication, this one from 1974 and featuring poetry written by the Weatherwomen, attempted to give voice to the "sisterhood [that] was born out of the marginalization of the women's movement."[23] Professor and book reviewer Jesse Lemisch argues, however, that "…the…poems are [just] an attempt to shore up Weather's reputation in an area where Weather itself has acknowledged great weakness—the organization's alienation from the Women's Liberation Movement," and that the poems more often feature subject matter about hijackings and bombings rather than ideals related to the women's movement.[24] One thing these Women's Brigade documents did succeed in doing however is to help officially change the name from the Weathermen to the Weather Underground.[25]

The Weather Underground continued to use violence to try to provoke revolutionary action, although now sometimes it was with a nod towards women's liberation. In 1974, the group bombed the Centre for International Affairs at Harvard University and claimed in their accompanying 'communiqué' that it was in solidarity with recently arrested radical feminist and political activist Angela Davis. That same year, their bombing of the San Francisco Department of Health, Education and Welfare was claimed to have been done in honour of International Women's Day, with the communiqué demanding that women be able to control women's issues like daycare, health care, and birth control. The feminist slant taken in these violent actions was

[23] Mattie Kornetta, "Moving Mountains?: Bernardine Dohrn and the Women of the Weather Underground." (*Historia*, Volume 24, 2015), 122.
[24] Jesse Lemisch, "Weather Underground Rises From the Ashes: They're Baack!", (*New Politics*, Newpol.org, Vol: XI-1 Whole #41, Summer 2006) accessed February 27, 2017.
[25] Kornetta, ''Moving Mountains'', 122.

followed in writing with the 1974 publication *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Imperialism*. The book, co-authored by Dohrn, opens with a letter stating that it was addressed to "women's groups" (among others) and includes six chapters with subsections on topics such as "The Condition of Women", "The Women's Movement" and "Revolutionary Tasks for Women."[26] Rather than dismissing the women's movement as the Weatherwomen had in the past, the book describes the movement as "imbued with a unique spirit and the fierce beauty of masses of women actively claiming our power and our futures."[27] It goes on to acknowledge women's traditional unpaid roles as nurturers and educators and the inequality in pay between men and women, and recognizes the "culture of sexism" women endure.[28] *Prairie Fire* asked that women work together to fight the forced sterilization of poor and Third World women and to rid the west of Imperialism. Ending with a kind of call to arms, it states that, "women have found one another and that has made the biggest difference of all. We begin to learn from and teach each other, to build on the commonality of our experience."[29]

The Weatherwomen's attitude in the five years between the townhouse explosion and the publication of *Prairie Fire* includes a definite positive shift in tone towards women's groups and the tendency to celebrate inclusion may have come from the isolation they experienced in their years underground. By 1980, all former Weather Underground members had come out from hiding, some sheepishly acknowledging their ongoing struggles with a lack of work experience

[26] Bernardine Dohrn, Billy Ayers, Jeff Jones, Celia Sojourn, *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti Imperialism: Political Statement of the Weather Underground,* (Brooklyn and San Francisco: Communications Co, 1974), introduction and contents pages.
[27] Dohrn, et al., *Prairie Fire*, 126.
[28] Dohrn, et al., 128.
[29] Dohrn, et al., 129.

and references during a time of high unemployment, and some with changed attitudes, admitting, like former member Mark Rudd that "violence didn't work."[30] Still other members, such as Weatherwoman Naomi Jaffe, defended the group's past actions in the context of how they may have inspired activism in future generations, saying "I think the world came close to seeing those major changes and I think that that makes a difference in terms of the ability of movements of change to emerge in the future."[31] However leading Weatherwoman Bernardine Dohrn, who attempted to unite the women's movement in *Prairie Fire* in 1974, now appears wistful about how sexism and gender roles were a factor for the group overall, saying in a 2004 interview "I wish that I had bridged the feminist movement and the anti-war movement better than I did."[32] Both Jaffee and Dohrn's modern day takes on their actions as Weathermen—the hope that they inspired others to activism and the regret of not having been more inclusive—are likely influenced by the development of the idea of intersectionality in the intervening years.

[30] Sam Green and Bill Siegel, Interview with Mark Rudd, *The Weather Underground*, 2003.
[31] Sam Green and Bill Siegel, Interview with Naomi Jaffe, *The Weather Underground*, 2003.
[32] Independent Lens: The Weather Underground, Exclusive Interview with Bernrdine Dohrn and Bill Ayers, www.pbs.org, qtd in Kornetta, "Moving Mountains", 119.

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