In the now received history of feminism, a much repeated criticism is that second wave feminists did not pay any attention to race or class. For a good decade now, countless student essays rehearse what has almost become a mantra, that feminist theory divided into the three ‘strands’ of liberal, socialist/Marxist, and radical/separatist, and that the young white middle-class feminists who peopled the 1970s and early 1980s women’s liberation movement in the USA and UK ignored and excluded black, Asian, ethnic minority and migrant women. It was only in the late 1980s and 1990s, the story goes, that a new focus on identity and difference facilitated recognition of differences between women, including those associated with race and ethnicity. Post-structuralism and postmodernism are presented as contemporaneous and often as linked with this recognition, since both developments emphasize heterogeneity in contrast to the presumed earlier monolithic homogeneity. A trawl of introductory texts (e.g. Beasley, 1999; Freedman, 2001; Tong, 1992) undertaken for this article confirms the prevalence of this received interpretation.

Of course, history is always written from the standpoint of the present. At a distance of 30 years, it is entirely understandable that the emergence of ideas over a half or even a whole decade can no longer be appreciated and instead become assimilated into a static position or strand of thought. The view of successive, if not progressive, ‘waves’ is now being effectively challenged (Hemmings, 2005). A metaphor of multiple skeins and twisting threads may be more appropriate. In writing the history of thought, each new generation is prone to stress its difference (‘advance’) from the one immediately preceding it, while relying on it for information about the one before. Reconstructing the past is hence a continuing dialectic of erasure and recuperation, and it is to recuperation and recovery that I now turn.
I want to suggest that this received history distorts the reality of the women’s movement in the 1970s, its involvement and support for anti-colonial struggles across the world and its concern for the unequal and subordinate position of migrant women in Britain. The relative absence of working-class and migrant women from the movement was considered a problem at the time. Even if such politics was not always reflected in feminist theoretical texts of patriarchy or re/production, it was evident in the pamphlets and conference proceedings of the time, and in many publications and research monographs, including ethnographies.

This contention relies on personal knowledge gained as a participant in the British Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) from its early days. And as the author of a workplace ethnography that centred on migrant and minority ethnic women (Women on the Line published under the pseudonym of Ruth Cavendish [1982]) I have a vested interest in correcting misconceptions! Although published in 1982, this ‘research’ was conducted in 1978–9 as an attempt to understand why and how the women’s movement failed to involve migrant and working-class women by engaging with their experiences. The analysis of cross-cutting divisions between and among women of different ethnic groups, women and men, and people at different positions in the employment hierarchy could easily be rewritten in terms of intersectionality. By the time I went to work in the factory, I had already taught women’s studies in three universities, and my surviving course notes include sessions on the situation of Afro-Caribbean and Asian women in Britain (their diverse histories and cultures, the specific circumstances of their migration as well as their position in Britain vis-à-vis white women and black or Asian men); the history of slavery and women’s resistance to it; maids and madams in South Africa; the continuing impact of colonialism on family structure and gender relations. The important point is not my teaching but that source material and a growing literature were available to me (and others) to draw on, and that the content resonated with ongoing debates. My experience was not unique and I mention it only as an example.

Indeed, many of the young women who formed the WLM, especially those on the Left, were already familiar with questions of race and colonialism from their prior support for anti-imperialist struggles. The Vietnam movement preceded the WLM, and we knew about the crucial role of women in the National Liberation Front. Similarly the importance of women fighters to the liberation struggles of Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau and to resistance against US-backed military dictatorships in South and central America were well publicized. We were familiar with Fanon’s (1965) comments on the revolutionary potential of the veil in the Algerian fight for independence, and with Angela Davis’s (1971) essay on the forms of slave women’s resistance to their masters and mistresses. In 1967, Stokely Carmichael had appeared at the Politics of Liberation conference in London and dismayed many women by his vicious sexism that undermined an otherwise sympathetic support for the US Black Power movement. In this way, the emergence of the WLM occurred within, and was coloured by, a context
where questions of racial domination and opposition to colonialism were central to the political agenda. At the same time, cultural and political/material issues were not counter-posed to each other. A political liberationist perspective was inextricably linked to understandings of cultural difference and appreciation of the burgeoning black feminist literature of the time (e.g. Merle Collins, Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, Gloria Naylor and Jamaica Kincaid as well as the better known Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, and see Evans, 1983).

Many of the early campaigns touched on the situation of black and Asian women in Britain. The long running Grunwick strike for union recognition for Asian women workers is probably the best-known example. But I have a clear memory of campaigns around immigration issues, notably where British-born women had gone to India, had children and returned with them to the UK only to be subjected to intrusive physical examination and racist allegations that the children were not theirs and denied entry. The Women’s Movement (WM) demand for ‘Free abortion and contraception on demand’ was altered to the ‘Right to control our own bodies’ in the light of evidence that black women were being forcibly sterilized and in opposition to the use of the injectible contraceptive Depo-Provera on migrant women in the UK and in developing countries. A collection of writings from the WLM 1969–72 includes two pieces on black women (Wandor, 1972), Amrit Wilson’s widely read book Finding a Voice, about Asian women in Britain appeared in 1978, and in the same year the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) was formed. (This was also the period of IRA bombings in Ireland and the British mainland and Irish feminists in Britain began to organize on their own account). Ethnic minority women engaged in self-organization from that time, culminating in the sustained critique of white feminism and fleshing out of the contours of black feminism in the early 1980s. Hazel Carby’s essay ‘White Woman Listen!’ (1982) and the Feminist Review special issue ‘Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives’ (1984) had a major impact on the course of the WLM. The trenchant critiques of feminist theory’s preoccupation with production and reproduction, and implicit universalizing of the western nuclear family structure, female dependency and male power were powerful and well targeted, uncovering an unrecognized racism within the movement.

Many other examples could be adduced to show that race and ethnicity were issues for feminism many years before our contemporary texts would acknowledge them. The black critiques of white feminism also preceded the shift to identity politics and post-structuralism by a good few years, and were not simply the outcome of the espousal of ‘difference’ as a theoretical construct (e.g. hooks, 1981; Hull et al., 1982; Lorde, 1984). The black critique was influential and effective and my argument is not about that. The charge that the women’s movement ignored or excluded minority ethnic women hit many targets, and responses to it were an integral part of the history of the time.

So my argument is not with the black critique but rather with the later selec-
tive history, and feminism’s silencing of its own past. The vehicle for doing this is the continuing use of categories (the ‘strands of feminist thought’) that become more reified the more they are reproduced, and the equation of ‘difference’ with diversity and heterogeneity. But why the airbrushing out of race and ethnicity from 1970s and early 1980s British feminism? Possible reasons include the shift to identity politics and the ‘academicization’ of feminism from the late 1980s and 1990s. The politics of the time had been to transcend given identities inherited from histories, social or individual, in the belief that we were working towards a more inclusive and transformative future of greater but not uniform equality. The focus was on what you were aiming at, the political goals you were pursuing rather than your origins and where you came from. Naïve and utopian as this now sounds, it echoed the wider international politics of the time. Another reason for the erasure is that histories of feminist thought concentrate overwhelmingly for their historical sources on feminist theory and ignore almost completely the campaigns and practice and political activities of the women’s movement. While the latter were concerned with class and race, and with the lives of working-class and migrant women, the former centred on more abstract theorizing of the relation between capitalism and patriarchy, and how this affected social institutions and people. In so doing, it tended to universalize what was specific to white western experience, especially American and western European.

In the WLM theory and practice co-existed, even if not always happily or in agreement! Histories of feminism would be truer to the past if they accorded attention to practice as well as theory. I have relied on my own memory and experience in making the case, but there are good archives with collections documenting the campaigns and political activities of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. To recuperate the past from its current silencing may require different kinds of research and exploration.

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