

Coarse offerings: Lessons from the Cambridge Women's School for today's radical education alternatives

Say Burgin

In 2009, a group of students and faculty from the University of Leeds created the Really Open University (ROU) in an effort to 'transform' the U.K. system of higher education; rather than 'reproduc[ing] the elite of society', the ROU believes higher education must be open and accessible to everyone. Their answer to the austerity: Transform the university. Create an educational system that is free and open to all. Forty years ago across the Atlantic, a group of women with a similar vision started the Cambridge Women's School (CWS) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The CWS turned out to be the longest-running US free school of its kind, and throughout its history, organizers strove to create a site for learning that reflected the interests and needs of a range of women. Wanting the School to provide a more inclusive and accessible education than the academe, the largely white, middle-class women who ran the CWS tried to attract local women of varying races, ages, sexualities, and education backgrounds. Despite this democratic vision, however, the CWS continuously struggled to attract a student body that was not largely white and middle-class. Why? What stunted the CWS's attempts at inclusivity? This paper explores these questions and asks how contemporary projects, such as the ROU, might learn from the 'coarse offerings' of the CWS, its uneven attempts to create inclusive educational experiences.

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Introduction: what the past may teach

Since 2010, cuts made to the United Kingdom's higher education system have begun to bleed universities of funding, faculty and staff, particularly within the arts and humanities. It has become clear that the tuition increases, produced by

this climate of cuts, will work to impede access to university education, especially for working-class students, students of colour, and students who would be first-generation university educated (McLeod and Percival 2010). Aside from the usual obstacles (such as high tuition and accommodation costs), first-gen-

eration students – who are disproportionately working-class students and students of colour – will face the additional difficulty of competing for a decreased number of university placements (McLeod and Percival 2010). Moreover, as Williams and Vasagar reported in the UK-based newspaper the *Guardian* on 18 November 2010, increases in tuition fees will undoubtedly have a greater impact on poorer students, who will be less likely to enrol as the higher tuition fees climb. The resistance that students, lecturers and others have mounted against these cuts is also well-known, if somewhat fading in memory. Several campuses witnessed occupations, as students at universities like Edinburgh, Bristol and Kings College London took over buildings for days, sometimes weeks. The University and College Union, which represents higher education staff throughout the UK, organised strikes over proposed changes to pension schemes. Students and university employees marched into the streets of most major UK cities. Images from the massive December 2010 and March 2011 marches in London still linger in the public's memory: the thousands that took to the streets brandishing placards that decried both the return of Thatcherism and Liberal-Democrat Nick Clegg's betrayal of his promise not to support tuition increases.

Less public forms of resistance also cropped up: endeavours that

challenged the very culture of higher education. The Really Open University (ROU), with whom I share an academic home – the University of Leeds, represents one such effort. It was founded by a group of students and educators in Leeds, who had become frustrated with the increasing marketisation of higher education in the UK. They founded the ROU as a vehicle through which they might strive to transform this system. Rather than 'reproduc[ing] the elite of society', they envision a system of education that is open to all and does not bend to the whims of the market economy (Really Open University, undated). The ROU began amidst the threat of deep cuts at Leeds, as Vice-Chancellor Michael Arthur announced an initiative aimed at stripping £35 million from the university's budget over a two-year period. As the *Times Higher Education* reported on 29 October 2009, this 'economies exercise' meant the loss of hundreds of jobs at Leeds and coincided with similar austerity measures at other universities. The UCU at Leeds readied itself for strike action the following February and March, and the ROU, which fully backed strike action and tried to foster mass student support for it, became embroiled in anti-cuts debates and action. ROU activists wrote, in their newsletter '*The Sausage Factory*', that the 'economies exercise' indicated more than just a crisis in the system of higher education. It also indicat-

ed a larger crisis in the system of the market economy, one that was ‘international in its scope’ (ROU, 8 Feb 2010). Yet, it sees the problem at the heart of both the global crisis and the coinciding crisis in education as one and the same: ‘a system that exploits daily life in the name of “profit”’ (ROU, 8 Feb 2010). Rather than valuing the process of learning and the creation of critical knowledge, the university commodified knowledge and created customers out of students.

Through both the publication of *The Sausage Factory* and the various events it has hosted, the ROU has done much to challenge the very culture of the university – raising questions about who the university serves and benefits, the kinds of knowledge it (re)produces and privileges, and its privatisation. Its newsletter’s tag-line – ‘Strike, Occupy, Transform’ – makes explicit two kinds of actions (in order to ‘transform’ the university) that the ROU advocates in pursuit of education transformation. Aside from consistently supporting strike action and action short of striking by the UCU, the ROU urged students to occupy parts of Leeds University campus, and played a key supportive role in the days-long occupation of a lecture theatre in November and December of 2010 (Occupied Leeds 2010). Yet, the ROU has also promoted critical reflection of these tactics. In both its blog and *The Sausage Factory*, it has sought to stretch conceptions

of ‘occupation’ and ‘striking’ within university settings. ‘Occupying’, for instance, must include more than (brief) takeover of university spaces. In fact it begins, as the ROU have written, with the realization that the tools we need to transform our education system ‘are littered around us’, and it is up to those who would enact this transformation to re-think these tools and appropriate them to these ends (ROU 16 Feb 2010). A lecture theatre, for instance, may be reconstituted as a free school, as students strive to realise their vision of a free education for all.

Questions of accessibility to, and inclusivity within, education have been central to the work of the ROU since its inception. As ROU activist Daniel has said:

One of the earliest aims of the group was to definitely broaden it out so that it wasn’t just a student struggle and so that [the ROU] broke down the walls of the university so that education wasn’t just something that was applicable within those institutions and all within a certain...demographic.¹

Part of the project of the ROU was to extend the education that was happening inside universities to the communities beyond campus borders, and to link the struggle to create a more open education system to wider struggles happening outside the university. What connected these struggles, the ROU asserted, was exploitative, capital-

ist forces. The October 2010 issue of *The Sausage Factory* laid out the neo-liberal rationalisation of the cuts and concluded, 'within an already profoundly unequal education system, the privatisation of degrees and the raising of fees will mean that only the rich and a token handful of the disadvantaged will be granted the status of degree-holders.'

Amidst these very heartening efforts of the ROU, and in the interest of their continued impact, it is crucial to reflect on the challenges and successes of similar efforts. Radical education activism has a rich, international history that is ripe for the current moment. In an effort to think through how we all might continue to struggle against cuts to higher education and how the ROU (and the rest of us) might work to transform the university into a more inclusive place, I want to offer here the story of an alternative education project that also wrestled with questions of inclusivity. The Cambridge Women's School (CWS) opened in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near Boston, and like the ROU, it attempted to prefigure the kind of entity that it believed educational institutions should be. When the CWS was founded in 1972, it represented the vanguard of Boston feminism (Breines 2006). It was opened in order to offer an alternative – feminist – education for women in the area. Unlike the ROU, the CWS did not aim to directly change higher education systems. However, like the creators

of the ROU, those who started the CWS had grown disenchanted with traditional academia (Cambridge Women's School, undated-a, undated-c). The founding of the School was, moreover, a challenge to the very elitism that its feminist founders deplored in the academy; its establishment defied the notion that an education was something people, women in particular, could not create themselves and freely offer to one another. Despite its vision of democracy in education, the School perennially faltered in its attempts to attract a diversity of women.

Much like the CWS, the ROU's vision for wider access to education in the UK has not been signalled through a diversity of participation in the group itself. Recently, the ROU have reflected on their history, their current situation and hopes for the months ahead, and along with other concerns and aspirations, inclusivity within the project has remained central. As Adam, an ROU activist, claims wider participation in the ROU has been a 'constant...underlying anxiety that has run throughout the ROU since the beginning'. Despite its desire to go 'beyond' the university, it has yet to garner a mass of support or participation from communities outside of the university. Moreover, some ROU activists feel that the group's overall political stance and some of the activities they have planned (such as an occupation) have worked to bar participation in some ways.² More

than just an average ‘outreach’ problem, the demographics within the group seem to play a key part in the group’s frustrations around membership diversity and inclusivity. Daniel flags the dominance of ‘male voices’ in the group as a persistent issue, and claims that throughout its history, the ROU has intermittently wrestled with issues of class and gender privilege within the group. What’s more, he states, the ROU ‘is very, very white dominated’. Both of these radical projects – the CWS and the ROU – have thus struggled to create the kind of accessible education enterprise that they would like to see in existing education systems. Given these overlaps, my aim here is to highlight important and relevant insights from the history of the CWS and its struggle to become inclusive. Though the ROU does not currently operate as a free school (as the CWS did), members have considered developing such a project.³ Moreover, what I will offer here are insights that are applicable to radical education alternatives of all kinds.

Establishing the Cambridge Women’s School

On International Women’s Day in 1971, Boston feminists took over a disused Harvard building and converted it into a women’s centre. Women activists throughout the city had been discussing the need for such a site for some time, but their action was also motivated by a sense

of solidarity with the building’s adjacent low-income community, into which Harvard had been encroaching for years.⁴ The occupation lasted 10 days and, without support from the university, eventually resulted in the establishment of what would be the US’s longest-operating women’s centre, the Cambridge Women’s Centre (DeVries 2000). The year after its establishment, feminists at the Centre, (which moved off campus after the occupation), established an alternative education project called the Cambridge Women’s School. The CWS also turned out to be the longest-lasting free school of its kind. Operational for two decades – from 1972 to 1992 – the CWS ran hundreds of courses by, and for, thousands of women in the greater Boston area (Cambridge Women’s School 1972-1992). Course offerings changed over the years as the school gradually moved away from staunch socialist-feminism, and began to incorporate cultural feminist ideals. The CWS aimed to operate as a port of call for Boston’s feminist community – a place for women to come together to learn, away from both men and established learning institutions, and a place for women with little or no knowledge of feminism to learn about it and become involved in feminist projects (Breines 2006).

For some who were involved in the CWS, the School’s founding was linked to the decline of socialist-feminism in the Boston area (Breines

2006, 2002; Cambridge Women's School, undated-a). Organisations and projects that had begun at the end of the 1960s had died out or were losing steam, particularly the city's leading socialist-feminist organization, Bread and Roses. Mirroring the situation of largely white feminist organizations across the country, Bread and Roses divided over the different approaches to feminism developing all over the country (cultural versus socialist feminism, for example), as well as class and race tensions. Amidst this instability, some CWS organisers wrote that the Women's School:

[W]as seen as one means to plan the future direction of the women's movement in Boston, develop a better analysis of women's oppression and of the society we live in, involve new women in the movement, and help women gain some of the necessary skills (both intellectual and manual) to change their conditions in themselves. (Cambridge Women's School, undated-a)

Notwithstanding its remarkable tenure and the new life it breathed into Boston's white feminist movement in the early 70s, the School operated in ways that precluded participation from a range of women. It operated within a specific (perhaps cliquish) feminist enclave and continually struggled to garner participation from working-class white women and women of co-

lour (Cambridge Women's School, undated-b). However, as a project that withstood the test of time and provided feminist organizing experiences and education for numerous Boston women, the CWS did have a huge impact on the Boston feminist community.

Moreover, the School's creators had aims beyond the revival of Boston feminism (Cambridge Women's School, undated-c). Its founding represented a profound critique of the academic world that many of the (female) founders, who had been afforded college educations, had recently emerged from. Utterly disaffected with the academy, Women's School founders described their effort as the pursuit of 'our own *real* education' (Cambridge Women's School, undated-c). They felt that their own institutional education had not been 'real' in the sense that it had not taught them about themselves as women, and as it operated through the patriarchal values of competition, hierarchy, and the separation of thought and action. School organisers sought to challenge the conventions of the academy, as they perceived them, by creating a radical feminist-education alternative. Women, they believed, could strip largely male faculties of their teaching roles and take on this responsibility themselves. They could create courses that spoke to them and their needs, and teach in non-hierarchical ways. After a few years' experience, CWS

coordinators wrote of their hopes and experiences:

We want classes to be collective experiences which will lead to concrete analysis and projects, breaking down the gap between “students” and “teachers” and eliminating competition among students. We have found that most women want to learn in a non-authoritarian way, in a friendly and comfortable atmosphere, where a flexible structure allows them to talk about their own lives in relation to the material studied in the class. (Cambridge Women’s School undated-a, 16)

The CWS was thus an innovative response to the frustration and marginalization that many women felt in traditional education. Its founders believed that an education by and for women (a feminist education) could thrive outside of the academy, if there was not room for it within. At the same time, it is important to note the privileged position from which these white feminists were critiquing the higher education system. Their objections to that system were informed by their participation within it, not their exclusion from it.

Contexts of retrenchment

Of course it was not only Boston students who had reason to rail against the traditional education system. CWS founders were part of a generation of young people who participated in anti-racism, anti-

imperialism and anti-war struggles both in and out of university settings (DuPlessis and Snitnow 1998; Evans 1980; Carson 1981; Miller 1994). In the course of these struggles, the university was hit hard with criticism – for its role in the perpetuation of war, for clamping down on freedom of speech, for its outmoded teaching techniques and paternalistic policies (Evans 1980; Cohen and Zelnik 2002). In addition, the US’s system of public education – from grammar to high school – had been a key target of black freedom efforts for some time, even after the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision officially outlawed segregated schooling, as a result of the many ways schools were still failing black children (Knowles and Prewitt 1969). It was a time, as now, when students, parents and teachers everywhere were re-thinking education.

University systems, however, often proved unyielding, and they sometimes reacted to protests with violent defensiveness. In the spring of 1970, students on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio had been demonstrating against the US’s invasion of Cambodia, and protests took an incendiary turn when some of the demonstrators burned Kent State’s Reserve Officer Training Corps building. By May 4th, the Ohio National Guard had been called in to safeguard the campus, and they opened fire on students, killing four and paralyzing or other-

wise injuring nine others (Hariman and Lucaites 2001). The Kent State Killings sparked widespread protests on university and college campuses all over the country. Many federal and state government officials, however, showed no regard for these protests and little sympathy towards the protesters who had been at Kent State. Ohio's governor at the time, James Rhodes, had said he brought the Guard in to 'eradicate' the protestors, while President Nixon remarked that "this should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence, it invites tragedy" (quoted in Karnow 1983, 626).

To date, higher education protests in the UK have not been deadly. However, student protesters did endure physical attacks by the police, while a number of politicians maintained a similarly unsympathetic stance towards student protests. In the wake of the November 2010 protests in London, for instance, video footage emerged that showed officers in the Metropolitan Police (the Met) charged into crowds of protesters on horses, though they had previously denied such accusations. At the same protest, the Met engaged in the controversial police tactic of 'kettling' – forming a ring of police officers around protesters in an effort to 'contain' the protest. Aside from inciting further anger on the part of activists, younger participants in the demonstration have also filed a case against The Met, arguing that

their use of kettling had infringed on their safety and right to protest. The Met were eventually forced to admit their poor handling of the demonstration; Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson told *Guardian* reporters (Lewis and Dodd, 10 November 2010) that the police's conduct had been an "embarrassment". This statement was not an admission of wrongdoing, however. Rather, as Lewis and Dodd noted (*Guardian*, 10 November 2010), Stephenson stated the problems lay with, first, the fact that the National Union of Students had not anticipated such a high turnout at the march and, second, the 'thuggish, loutish behavior by criminals' at the protest. A number of politicians were also quick to defend the Met's forceful tactics and deny that they played a part in escalating the violence that took place. Prime Minister David Cameron, for example, stated in an interview with the BBC (11 November 2010), 'I could see a line, a thin blue line, of extremely brave police officers trying to hold back a bunch of people who were intent on violence and destruction.' The 'problem', in other words, according to public officials, in both Kent (Ohio) in 1970 and London in 2010, was with the students themselves – their lack of foresight and inclusion of violent individuals – and not with any provocative or violent tactics of the police.

Though the Kent State Massacre was certainly a more extreme reaction, counter-attacks by universities

and state officials verified that education systems would not change readily. Rather than heed the anger of student protesters, politicians quickly justified dangerous policing practices in both contemporary London and 1970s Ohio, and this only worked to further shield systems of higher education from the demands of those it supposedly existed to serve. A number of activists in the 1970s came to the conclusion that if education in the US was going to be different, entire systems would have to be upended and made anew. As radical education activist Jonathan Kozol (1972, 13) wrote that those who sought to transform the ways people in the US taught and learnt came to be mired 'above all, in the reconstruction of the metaphor and symbolism of the *school itself* as something other than a walled and formidable bunker of archaic data and depersonalised people in the midst of living truth'. Efforts across the nation aimed to revitalise education, to make it exciting and relevant to students (Kozol 1972). By the time the CWS had been set up, free schools and adult community education classes had been set up by grass-roots activists and social change organizations all over the country, including other women's schools in San Francisco, Chicago and elsewhere. Likewise, in the aftermath of attacks on student demonstrators in the UK, radical education projects and organisations (similar to the ROU) have

cropped up in every corner of the country. These include the Radical Education Forum in London and the Social Science Centre in Lincoln.⁵ The creation of projects that seek to fundamentally alter the character of higher education, therefore continue to serve as an important point of resistance for students and educators attempting to create more democratic and accessible institutions for learning, particularly when established institutions and governments exhibit clear unwillingness to meet or even listen to students' demands.

The CWS's struggle to include

In all of these endeavours, individuals attempted to reconcile their grievances with the traditional education system in various and localised ways. For the CWS, especially during its earliest years, the key to a meaningful and transformative feminist education lay, first with an emphasis on action and, second, by using education as a way of bringing more women into the women's liberation movement. The first of these principles hit at the assumption that education was a purely intellectual exercise, that it exercised only the mind, and was concerned only with abstract theory. At the CWS, organisers wrote that they strove 'to achieve a workable balance in transmitting knowledge and allowing space for personal discussion [in order] to break down the traditional barrier between these two aspects of learning' (Cambridge

Women's School, undated-a, 16). CWS students' personal experiences became part and parcel of class material. Many classes were structured like consciousness-raising groups, where individual women would become (further) politicised by discussing their personal experiences with sexism.⁶ Furthermore, School organisers encouraged the development of 'courses designed to stimulate concrete political action'. '[I]f the school is a means toward building the women's movement,' the founders wrote, 'then the things we are learning should lead to action. (We've all learned, anyway, that real education is more than just study and talk.)' (Cambridge Women's School 1973, 2). Some classes did indeed lead to specific projects, such as an abortion counselling service. A particularly successful and recurring course on 'Women and Their Bodies' led to the publication of the iconic, second-wave feminist text *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Breines 2006, 103). The School's orientation towards an active or experiential education, thus, often worked to link both the individual and the School to the larger feminist movement.

The CWS's efforts to create a diverse and inclusive feminist school proved much less successful than its attempts to create a politically engaged student body, despite the fact that it was founded in a deep understanding of the ways in which the women's liberation movement had

been undemocratic. The School's original organisers understood that, despite its frequent calls for universal 'sisterhood', the larger women's liberation movement was failing to reach working-class white women as well as women of colour. The assumption embedded within these critiques was that all women *should* gravitate towards the women's liberation movement, because the feminist agenda was not 'raced' or 'classed', but spoke to the needs of all women. In contrast to these assumptions, CWS founders seemed to recognise the ways in which the race and class background of most of women's liberationists influenced the movement: its membership, its agenda, its culture and principles. The founders were also cognizant of their (collective) race and class positioning. They often spoke quite self-consciously as white middle-class feminists, and they argued for a more spacious movement, saying for instance, 'We also have to find ways of opening the movement to many more women, of making women's liberation accessible to women whose needs and backgrounds are different from our own' (Cambridge Women's School 1973, 2).

Importantly, 'opening the movement up' in this way was envisioned as a two-way street. It involved creating a feminist agenda that resonated with different populations of women, but just as important, it meant creating a community of women who were conscious and en-

gaged with non-feminist struggles. To both of these aims, the School offered classes, (all of which were free or inexpensive), on 'Black History', 'Marxism' and 'Revolutionary Movements in Europe'. They also held workshops on class consciousness and racism awareness, and over the years the School came to offer other courses that they felt would engage various populations of women – courses such as 'Older Women's Lives', 'Native American Women: the Red Roots of White Feminism' and 'Black and White in Literature'. Several of these courses ran during the CWS's earlier years and re-appeared only intermittently from the late 1970s onwards, reflecting an overall shift in course offerings. Many of the founders had envisioned the School, (as organiser and steadfast anti-imperialist activist Laura Whitehorn has put it), as a place where women could, 'become more analytical and more able to articulate and create strategies... [for] a revolutionary anti-imperialist women's movement'.⁷ However, this original emphasis on developing a comprehensive political strategy that connected with other liberatory struggles faded. The School's earlier years were not marked by great racial and class diversity amongst School participants. They were, however, distinguished by race and class cognizance.

Despite these efforts, the CWS never garnered a critical mass of participation from the groups of women

it had hoped to attract (Cambridge Women's School 1973, 1981). School organisers often lamented the low enrolments of women of colour, particularly black women, and women who had not graduated from university.⁸ In 1981, after nearly a decade of existence and, importantly, after the racial separatist ideology of Black Power had begun to decline, women of colour made up less than 10 per cent of CWS students, while women who had no university education comprised a mere three per cent of enrolments (Cambridge Women's School 1981). In other words, the CWS's student body was not diverse in terms of race, class and education background.

Although the racial and class composition of the CWS undoubtedly impacted upon its ability to become the inclusive entity that it hoped, my interest here is not in guessing at why working-class white women and women of colour did not enrol in the School in greater numbers, or the role of feminist demographics in this. As I am a next-generation, white, middle-class feminist (from the US) who has not had the opportunity to talk with women who chose not to attend the School, I think this would be problematic. Besides, other scholars of US feminist movements have already provided in-depth analyses aimed at understanding why many women of colour and working-class white women did not participate in women's liberation (Combahee River

Collective 1982; Breines 2002, 2006; Roth 2004; Springer 2001, 2005; Thompson 2002). Winifred Breines, a retired feminist sociologist, was among the ranks of white, middle-class socialist-feminists in Boston in the early 1970s. Gaining class and race diversity within women's liberationist projects was fraught, she writes, because:

Women of color and white working-class feminists could not help but notice that the movement was composed primarily of middle- or upper-middle-class white women or women who were highly educated. Often higher education divided women, and college graduates frequently became the unofficial leaders, people whom the media anointed, or who seemed to gravitate to leadership positions. It was not uncommon for working-class and lower-middle-class women to feel uncomfortable or unacknowledged. (Breines 2006, 106)

Of course, the women who founded the CWS had hoped to circumvent this problem through their course offerings. However, it seems that this did not work. Breines (2002, 2006) has speculated that, because of racial tensions that had been building within several movements, black and white feminists organised separately during the early and mid 1970s, but began to create cross-race coalitions towards the end of that decade. With regard to racial exclusion within the feminist

movement, I have found Kimberly Springer's argument more convincing than that of Breines. Springer (2001, 2005) maintains that black women had to develop 'interstitial politics' because neither the black freedom, nor women's liberation movement, engaged their needs. This political organizing happened 'in the cracks' of these movements in ways that reflected the multiple oppressions black women faced (Springer 2001, 155). Like Springer, scholars Benita Roth (2004) and Jennifer Nelson (2003) have drawn attention to the ways in which key efforts within the white feminist movement – the fight to legalise abortion, for instance – alienated many women of colour because of their inherent white, middle-class perspective.⁹ While access to abortion might have been the driving reproductive concern of young white women, for many women of colour in the 1960s and 70s, widespread sterilisation abuse posed a far graver concern (Nelson 2003). Springer, Nelson and Roth thus argue that despite the democratic intentions of many white women's liberationists, the priorities of their organizations worked to push women of colour and working-class white women to the margins of the movement.

Without making claims on the motivations of the many women who never attended the CWS, what I aim to do here is to examine the ways in which the School hindered its own attempts to be inclusive of a

diversity of women. I want to do so while bearing in mind the important arguments of Springer, Roth and Nelson. What I offer below are brief observations about the actions of those who were running the School, about their attempts at inclusivity and the ways in which their understanding of inclusivity impeded their very efforts to be accessible.

First, it is significant that the only time the CWS seems to have been able to attract greater numbers of women of colour and white working-class women was when organisers deliberately set about building connections with local groups and black feminist organisations (Cambridge Women's School, undated-a). During this time, the CWS began to meet regularly with a black feminist group to discuss racism and exclusion within the women's liberation movement and, in response to critiques from this group over teaching techniques, the School changed its offerings to include a greater number of shorter workshops rather than longer classes. These measures, School organisers said, helped to garner 'a much greater age range and mix of class and race background among the women taking the classes' (Cambridge Women's School, undated-a, 8).

Importantly, these efforts came about during a period of overall restructuring at the CWS. At this point – the latter part of 1976 – organisers re-evaluated their outreach efforts, teaching methods, and the women's

movement in general because student numbers for the fall 1976 term had declined dramatically. Whereas the School typically ran between ten and fifteen classes, that autumn only five courses had sufficient numbers to proceed (Cambridge Women's School, undated-a, 7). Not coincidentally, this restructuring also occurred at a time when Boston's black feminist communities were taking their white counterparts to task (Cambridge Women's School, undated-a). Though feminists of colour had been calling attention to racist practices and patterns throughout the movement's history, in the mid-70s these voices reached a crescendo as black feminist organisations in the city and around the country proliferated. The Combahee River Collective, arguably the most famous US black feminist group of the 1970s, was established in Boston in 1974. In its now-famous *Combahee River Collective Statement* of 1977, collective members, which included Beverly and Barbara Smith, wrote about the barriers and goals of black feminism, highlighting the racism within the larger white feminist movement:

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which re-

quires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue. (Combahee River Collective 1982, 21)

Amidst these demands for accountability, the School began to act. Implying that the CWS had recently become disconnected from racial justice struggles, School organisers wrote that in 1976 they 'began internal discussions centered on the need of reaffirming the commitment to deal with the issue of racism within the women's movement' (Cambridge Women's School, undated-a, 7).

It is important to recognise that, despite the School's attempts to rectify its relationship to racial justice struggles, it was in fact reacting in something of a crisis mode and not pro-actively engaging with feminists of colour or working-class white women. Such a reactionary move meant that, once the feeling of crisis subsided and the sense of urgency waned, organising with feminists of colour and white working-class women took a lower priority. As mentioned previously, by 1981 enrolments of women of colour and women who had not been to university had plummeted again.

Coalition-building only worked to open up the CWS to a broader base of women for a short period of time, when it was implemented in an urgent, responsive manner. As Becky Thompson (2002, 349) has written, one of the lessons of multiracial feminism was that attention to race and a commitment to racial justice could not be 'added on' but must be 'initiated from the start'. I would argue that the same must be true for other kinds of commitments, to economic justice, for instance. Without such sustained and sincere engagement, the sort of broad-based coalitions that create inclusive projects cannot survive.

Second, and connected to this first point, these 'other struggles' that the CWS organisers tried to include in their courses seem to have been envisioned as precisely that; as 'other' or 'separate'. They were not seen as primary functions of the feminist movement itself. For instance, CWS founders wrote:

We believe the women's liberation movement, as an independent movement, will help to shape and to lead the struggle for revolution in this country, but we also think the revolution will be made by all oppressed groups of people. As women, we need to understand both the basis and the limits of our interests in common with other oppressed groups (poor and working people of both sexes, black and third world people in the U.S. and abroad). This is why

the school includes courses that do not deal exclusively with women. (Cambridge Women's School 1973, emphasis in original)

This sentiment rather perfectly captures both the CWS's intent to be inclusive, and the frustrations inherent within its attempts to include. In not insisting on the primacy of the feminist movement over other struggles, these women broke with a noxious pattern within the white women's liberation movement that worked to prohibit working-class white women and women of colour participating. Indeed, particularly in the movement's earlier years, in their zeal to promote 'sisterhood' a number of white women, such as Robin Morgan, editor of the foundational US second-wave text *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970, xxvi), sometimes expressed sentiments that worked to minimise any identity other than gender. 'We share a common root as *women*, much more natural to both [black and white women] than the very *machismo* style of male-dominated organizations, black, brown and white.' The CWS offered courses that did not 'deal exclusively with women' in an effort to distance themselves from this strain of feminist thinking.¹⁰ They recognised the need for feminists to learn about similar struggles against oppression. However they failed to recognise the connection between feminist and other struggles for liberation; to recognise that systems of oppres-

sion were actually, as Combahee (1982, 113) referred to them, 'interlocking'. Being inclusive – casting a wide feminist net – meant to CWS feminists that they just needed to be knowledgeable of 'other' oppressive systems and 'other' liberation-based struggles; that they should educate themselves on the history of slavery in the US or the struggles of contemporary Vietnamese women. Identification with these other struggles, in the sense of recognising shared history and stakes, would have required that these feminists understood these struggles as feminist struggles and this knowledge as *feminist knowledge*. Without doing this, the CWS organisers could never do what they had hoped: to create a feminist movement, and a women's alternative education project in particular, that was relevant and meaningful to a range of women.

Conclusion: coarse offerings

The CWS provided an important outlet for white feminists' energy throughout its tenure, and it offered a crucial critique of the higher education system in the US. It did so whilst universities, police and the state fought hard to maintain the status quo and suppress dissent. In the end, however, for the communities with which they meant to connect, the CWS had rather coarse offerings. Attempts to develop links with feminists of colour, in ways that would create sustained con-

nections and foster inclusion, were coarse in the sense that they were uneven. More ‘stop-start’ than ongoing, these efforts signaled a lack of commitment to the communities that CWS organisers hoped to reach. The CWS’s efforts were also coarse in terms of their understanding of the connections between feminist and other liberatory struggles. These struggles were not seen as connected or cohesive, as struggles that mutually benefited from each other, but rather as large and disparate entities. In failing to understand the feminist dimensions of racial and economic justice – and the racial and economic justice inherent in feminist knowledge – the School precluded the involvement of those for whom these ‘other’ struggles were crucial.

How might these lessons translate for today’s radical education alternatives, like the ROU? For one, it seems necessary that all of us involved with these projects must engage in sustained and proactive coalition-building from early on in our projects. Higher education has always been farther out of reach for working-class white students and students of colour than for white, middle-class folks, and current austerity measures only compound this reality. Greater inclusion must be measured along the lines of those who have traditionally been left out. Radical efforts that aim to transform higher education into a truly inclusive realm must work diligently to

build relationships with groups already working to gain greater access to higher education for people of colour and working-class people. Alongside this is the need for alternative education projects to recognise the multidimensional nature of educational justice. If those of us within these projects are committed to fighting for justice within higher education systems, this struggle must involve more than economic justice. It must also struggle against the university’s patterns of discrimination and injustice along other axes (particularly gender, race, nationality, and age) (Reay, Davies, David and Ball 2001; Fogelberg, Hearn, Husu, Mankkinnen 1999; Davies and Guppy 1997).

I offer these modest insights at this pivotal time in the world of education in the UK. As the ROU states, ‘a really open university is possible’ (Really Open University, undated). This possibility is exciting, and I maintain that its realisation is dependent on our understanding of the ways in which efforts to create inclusive and just education systems have been frustrated and unfulfilled in the past. For me, the ROU and other alternative education projects prove that, on the edge of cuts, resistance is thriving. In this climate of austerity, many students and educators are more than anti-cuts; they support educational justice. The trials of our predecessors teach us that we must understand this justice in the broadest and most

inclusive of terms.

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Endnotes

¹ Interview with author. 5 August 2011. Leeds, UK. Hereafter, all quotes from Daniel are from this source. Daniel is a pseudonym.

² Interview with author. 4 August 2011. Leeds, UK. Hereafter, all quotes from Adam are from this source. Adam is a pseudonym.

³ Interviews with Daniel (5 August 2011) and Adam (4 August 2011).

⁴ Laura Whitehorn. Interview with the author. 27 July 2011. Leeds, UK, and New York, USA.

⁵ On the Radical Education Forum, see Nabil Ahmed, 'Radical Education – Radical Education Forum' on He who says Zero / He who says one [Online program] (20 April 2011). Available at <http://www.no-w-here.org.uk/index.php?cat=1&subCat=docdetail&id=263>. On the Social Sciences Centre, see its website, Social Sciences Centre, Lincoln. Available at <http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/>.

⁶ Laura Whitehorn. Interview with

the author. 27 July 2011.

⁷ Interview with the author. 27 July 2011.

⁸ Higher education often served as a primary indicator for enrollees' socio-economic status. See Cambridge Women's School 1973, 1981.

⁹ Breines does not entirely overlook these biases. Her overarching argument, however, does relegate them to a certain, finite period with the women's liberation movement, rather than understanding race and class biases as ongoing problems. See Breines 2006, chapters 3-5.

¹⁰ Laura Whitehorn. Interview with the author. 27 July 2011.

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