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Wini Breines Speaks on The Trouble Between Us

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MYRNA HANT SPOKE ON "TELEVISION'S MATURE WOMEN,
A CHANGING MEDIA ARCHETYPE" ON NOVEMBER 7

CSW update

DECEMBER 06

REVIEW BY MIGNON R. MOORE

Wini Breines Speaks on *The Trouble Between Us*

EXAMINING WHITE AND BLACK FEMINIST RACIAL
POLITICS IN THE LATE 1960S AND 1970S

WINI BREINES, you are a brave woman." I shared this sentiment with her during the Q&A portion of the talk she gave on her November 6th visit to UCLA. Dr. Winifred Breines, Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at Northeastern University, had come to speak about her new book *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*. The crowd in Royce Hall that afternoon was a diverse mixture of students, young faculty, more

seasoned feminist scholars, and older activists who had directly participated in the movements about which Breines had written. Women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds had come to hear Breines share her perspective on how race influenced the development of the women's movement. Her book analyzes a mixture of archival data, memoirs, primary and secondary accounts, interviews, and conversations to construct a story of white and black feminist racial politics in the late 1960s and 1970s.

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NEW!!

Out of the Shadows: Contributions of Twentieth-Century Women to Physics



Edited by Nina Byers
and Gary Williams

This new volume by two UCLA professors provides an accurate and authoritative description of the women who made original and important contributions to physics in the twentieth century, documenting their major discoveries and putting their work into its historical context. Each chapter concentrates on a different woman, and is written by a physicist with considerable experience in their field. The book is an ideal reference for anyone with an interest in science and social history.

<http://www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521821975>



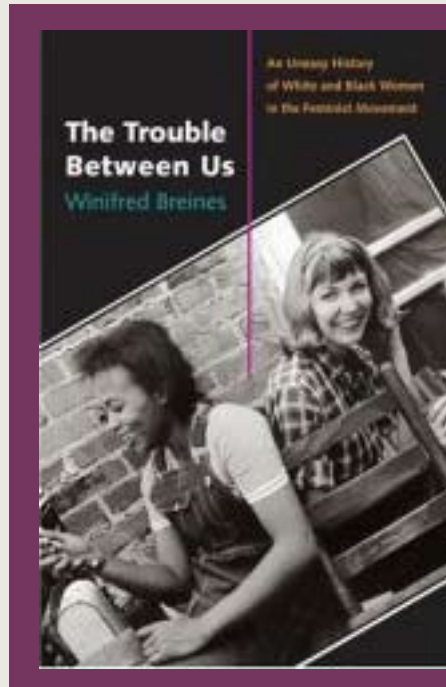
SHADYA

FREE SCREENING: December 10, 3 pm, Fine Arts Theatre

Seventeen-year-old Shadya Zoabi is a world champion in karate. Despite her father's support, her brothers and other members of their small Arab village in northern Israel feel that karate is not an appropriate pursuit for a young Muslim woman. This documentary tells the story of a girl who strives to succeed on her own terms—while remaining committed to her life in her community. Patti Giggans (Peace Over Violence), Gil Hochberg (CSW), and David Pine (Americans for Peace Now) will participate in a Q & A following the screening. The screening is free, but to guarantee admission, you must RVSP via email to lareservations@yahoo.com before 5 pm on Friday, December 8th. Presented by Independent Lens and ITVS Community Cinema. Series sponsored by City of West Hollywood, Fine Arts Theatre, International Documentary Association, KCET, and Shortfuzed.com. Co-sponsored by Americans for Peace Now and Peace Over Violence and CSW.

I told Professor Breines she is brave because her topic is a difficult one to address and is emotionally charged on several fronts. Her work “seeks to answer a highly sensitive question among former participants: Why didn’t a racially integrated women’s liberation movement develop in the United States?” One might have expected women to unite on a mass scale across racial and class lines around the central goals supported by the women’s movement. Educated white women activists, the leaders of that movement, assumed women would “unite around their commonalities and that their differences would not be so critical to their political identities.” “We imagined naively, that our ‘I’ was ‘we’; we thought all women were us, and we were all women. Of course we knew better even then” (p.7). Breines argues that a racially integrated movement did not develop in the 1960s because of differences in the perceptions and experiences of white and black women around race. She says the story of race in the women’s movement “lies precisely in the profound racial distance and tentative reconciliation between women, which is a microcosm of the racial project of American society during the past half century” (p.7).

Becoming interested in this topic in reaction to a charge that the women’s movement was racist, Breines identifies herself as a “white woman and a former activist from this period,” who was “mystified and irritated” about this accu-



sation, made by black women during the height of the movement as well as in writings by second-wave feminists. She and other women who organized and participated in the movement prided themselves on a belief system and political identity that was specifically anti-racist, and a goal of building an interracial feminist movement. She says her position as a middle-class, liberal white person caused her to assume that racial differences between activists were “relatively unimportant.” But she says “I was wrong.” “It was beyond my comprehension that whites who were opposed to racism could be unconsciously racist.”

She says the issue of “feminist racism” is unfamiliar to most people, who identify the women’s movement as being about gender, not race. Few topics bring to the surface such feelings of fear and anxiety than a discussion of racism in the women’s movement.

The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement *Winifred Breines*

Oxford University Press

2006

280 pages

Breines calls it “a raw subject replete with silence, resentment, and uncertainty” (p.15). Many of the leaders of the women’s movement had also participated in the 1960s civil rights movement, and brought fond memories and nostalgia for those first experiences of integration into their assumptions about how black and white women might also unite around gender issues. Breines moves away from a nostalgic portrait to focus on white and black feminists’ political histories as a way to understand the difficulties each group faced in crossing the color line in the late 1960s. She says that both white and black women were

“forced to acknowledge differences they did not know they had, did not want to have, and that nevertheless deeply divided them. Idealistic notions of racial togetherness and community became casualties. White nostalgia had to be discarded.

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Wini Breines, *continued from page 10*

Eventually the problem they faced was to find their way back to each other, to discover and devise political connections.” (p.17)

They learned that in order to be inclusive, they had to lose some of their ideals, to construct relationships based on who they were and not who they wanted to be or wanted others to be. Breines takes us full circle from a goal of integration to a politics of separation to tentative efforts in the late 1970s to reconnect by first acknowledging differences and making a conscious effort to construct an antiracist feminist movement together.

So many of the stories and experiences during the movements of the 1960s have come to be taken for granted by the current generation of young adults. However, her work importantly “recalls how dramatic those years were and how those movements significantly shaped the ways we currently understand gender, race, sexuality, inequality, and other structural features of life.” In her talk as well as in her writing, the language Breines uses is at times powerful and sobering. When she speaks of the way racism operates as a social structural system, the frankness with which she writes makes these sentiments echo loudly, even while her voice is relatively soft-spoken. This system, she says, is really at the heart of the issue.

It is clear that one intended audience for this work is Breines’ compadres in the movement—the white women

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with whom she worked tirelessly for gender and other social equalities, as well as the black women that socialist feminist groups sought to include in their struggle. Several former activists commented during Breines’ talk that they agreed with the way she portrayed their experiences during the movement. As a young African-American scholar, my feelings based both on her talk as well as her book, are that Breines “got it right” in the sense that her representation of black feminists’ critique of how race was dealt with in the women’s movement effectively captured the voices of that group during that time.



Mignon R. Moore is an Assistant Professor in Sociology and African-American Studies at UCLA. Her research interests are in family, gender, racial/ethnic identities, sexuality, urban poverty, and adolescence. She is at work on a manuscript currently titled “Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships and Motherhood among Black and Latina Women.”