Review: Califia Women: Feminist Education Against Sexism, Classism, and Racism, by Clark A Pomerleau

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Califia Women: Feminist Education against Sexism, Classism, and Racism traces the lifespan of the Califia Community, a grassroots feminist education movement that emerged in Los Angeles in the late 1960s through the 1980s. Using archival and oral history research, Pomerleau elucidates the strengths and limitations of activist practices like consciousness raising and consensus, and investigates the important role Califia played in feminist culture- and institution-building. He situates the development of Califia in the context of post-World War II inequalities, radical community education praxis, and the proliferation of feminist organizing in order to offer a dynamic illustration of U.S.-based feminist politics and debates of the times. Contrary to stereotypical depictions of 1970s feminists as essentialist, separatist, antisex, racist, and classist, Pomerleau argues that Califia women actively debated these issues and learned about oppression from each other. Historicizing Califia and illustrating its complexity, Pomerleau avoids characterizing it as a “wave” of feminism. Through this intervention, the author provides a nuanced depiction of this movement and feminist politics of the times. As the book asks what lessons contemporary feminist organizers might learn from Califia’s history, it is useful to activists as well as historians, social scientists, and other feminist scholars.

Califia Women broadly historicizes the movement’s development and details how participants experienced it. Pomerleau prioritizes narrating Califia’s story over theoretically analyzing it. Thus, although it asks analytical questions, the book is largely descriptive. Pomerleau traces how two feminist scholars formed Califia to reach women outside universities, creating women-focused separate spaces in summer camps. Califia organizers adopted critical peer education pedagogy to promote shared responsibility and encourage participants to question conventional knowledge, value every woman’s personal experience, analyze oppression, and devise actions for resistance. Facilitators used nonhierarchical, interactive teaching strategies to co-investigate issues and to examine participants’ differences. Califia’s consciousness-raising practices were thus both coalitional and self-revelatory. Women mobilized around sexism in education, health, body oppression, and mental health, creating a feminist culture that fostered feminist music, spirituality, collectives, skill-sharing groups, businesses, and activism. They created new vocabulary and behavioral norms and explored friendships, sexual experiences, nudity, recreational activities, and spiritual and natural health practices. Lesbians, fat and poor women, and women of color found sanctuary and empowerment in countercultural values. Although Califia was often life-changing, personal, practical, and political conflicts often arose. Eventually, members’ differences and 1980s neoliberal conservatism contributed to Califia’s decline. With the rise of the AIDS epidemic, the dismantling of the welfare state and resulting economic hardship, and the attack on women’s studies programs and women’s services, Califia’s academic founders pulled away in order to defend their careers, and remaining members divided over divergent political priorities.

Pomerleau’s book thus illustrates consciousness-raising and consensus decision-making’s strengths and limitations but engages a cursory analysis. He contends that identity-based political logics were not flexible enough to work in solidarity for social change and points to the limits of experiential, identity-focused approaches. Although
Pomerleau suggests trust-building political strategies, he strikingly does not consider future coalitional orientations around structural concerns and/or policy changes.

Pomerleau claims that engaging with issues of sexuality, class, and race transformed the lives of many women in the movement. He persuasively illustrates personal and social sexual liberation, arguing that Califia’s lesbian-feminist culture, which offered lesbianism as a feminist practice and ultimate solution to patriarchy, instrumentally established rape crisis services, self-defense training, speak-outs against rape, and feminist health clinics and counseling. However, Pomerleau’s evidence that Califia’s class and race education was transformative is less convincing. Califia women examined their experiences of interpersonal class dynamics but avoided socialist engagement. Pomerleau does not analyze how, in avoiding socialist analysis, these women also failed to develop a class consciousness based on shared experiences of labor alienation, which may have led to a deeper class resistance. Although participants came to understand and critique class oppression, they did not ultimately change their class status or the socioeconomic system. In addition, Califia’s early antiracist efforts consisted of largely white facilitators teaching a majority of white women about racism. This practice did not prioritize fostering healing and political resistance in women of color or changing larger racist social structures. However, in the late 1970s, more women of color joined Califia, took leadership roles, and provided more complexity, force, and a broader antiracist focus, reshaping Califia of and for women of color and bringing anti-racist education into the broader community. So, Califia’s antiracist later years had greater impact than earlier years. A deeper analysis may clarify how oppression persists in the midst of resistance. Nonetheless, Pomerleau does show how Califia made significant changes within the context of the political climate of the times.

Pomerleau stresses Califia’s multi-issue, collaborative approach, but the book leaves unexamined how activists successfully worked across their differences. What coalitional strategies helped them build this movement? What enabled these strategies to succeed? What coalitional strategies can contemporary feminists take from this history? How might we apply these strategies today? Additionally, as the author investigates a feminist movement, it is surprising that he does not socially locate himself or address how his positionality impacts his analysis.

With that said, Califia Women provides an important historical perspective on the development and course of U.S.-based feminist politics in the 1970s and 1980s. The text brings understanding to how and why this movement took the trajectory it did, how larger political contexts shaped it, and how it was revolutionary for its time, thus raising important questions for teaching, research, and feminist organizing.

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The city of Bristol, England, like many cities around the world, has many stories to tell about the point at which international migration patterns intersect with localized institutional structures and practices. When these institutions are slow in responding to their changing communities, educators, psychologists, mental health workers, and social workers react by producing content-specific research and resources relative to their