Chapter 3
Mills, a Women's College of Education in New York City, Fifty Years Later:
Gone but Forgotten

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ABSTRACT

September 3, 1972: The New York Times headlined: "Merger planned by Mills College." The Times went on: "Students … will take their liberal arts courses at The New School for Social Research and their teacher-training courses at New York University." The Mills College of Education, once a progressive exercise in higher education had become a fusty artifact. The presumption that women's education should begin with teacher training was no longer current, and Mills exemplified a bygone era. Nevertheless, as an acquisition, the sixty-three year-old institution offered two appealing academic possibilities. Born out of suffragette ideas and activism, The New School had long shown an interest in women's studies. And yet The New School (as well as New York University) would fail to realize the cultural capital of Mills. Why dissolve Mills? On the fiftieth anniversary of the demise of Mills College, this investigation seeks to tell the story.

1960-1972. Twelve years of student protests on U.S. campuses—for Civil Rights and against U.S. participation in the Vietnam War. In New York City, institutions like Columbia University and The New School were at the epicenter of student mobilizations (Nell, 1970; My God-,1970; My God-, 1970; Earth, 1970).[1]

On July 19, 1972: Jane Fonda gave her first broadcast for Hanoi Radio directly addressing American servicemen:

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“Someday we're going to have to answer to our children for this war. Someday we are going to have to explain to the rest of the world how it is that we caused this type of suffering and death and destruction to a people who—who have done us no harm. Perhaps we should start to do it now before it is too late. Perhaps, however, the most important thing that has to be said about Vietnam is that despite all that Nixon is doing here and that Johnson has done before him, despite all the bombs, the people are more determined than ever to fight” (Jane Fonda, 1972).

America's sweetheart, now “Hanoi Jane,” for the U.S. public, the betrayal was not only political; Fonda had betrayed the paradigmatic American woman. Conventional gender roles were seemingly at stake. Since 1960, some sixty-five U.S. women's colleges (once gateways to education) had gone co-ed, and seven had closed (List of, 2024). And in New York City, August 1972 would usher in the bank heist of John Wojtowicz, who attempted to rob a Brooklyn bank to finance the gender affirmation surgery of his lover, Elizabeth Eden (Bell, 1972). Gender in the United States, and what it was to be a woman in the United States, was under interrogation:

“During the 1960s the ingredients existed for feminism to emerge as a social movement. The basic conditions of contemporary life were shifting. More and more women, at all points in the life-cycle, were spending more and more time in wage-earning jobs. The birth control pill meant that for the first time in history pregnancies could be planned by large numbers of women with relative autonomy and predictability. Ideological certainty was challenged on all fronts. … In ten short years, from the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 until the Supreme Court decisions in Roe v. Wade in 1973, there was enacted a vast amount of legislation aimed at changing the resources and opportunities open to all women. These changes generated an enormous amount of thinking. In North American politics specific actions generally come before general visions. … Public recognition of these developments was swift. The protests at the Miss America Pageant in 1968 and the first mass rally in New York City in 1970 are but two of the well-documented instances of popular support. It is crucial to remember that while official bodies were deliberating these issues and passing laws 'at the top,' people, individually and in groups, in areas from TV production to Sunday school classes, were discussing changing roles for women and acting out many of those changes 'from the bottom up'“ (O'Barr, 1994).

Amid this cultural meltdown, students of Mills College prepared to return to campus. On Thirteenth Street, catty-corner from The New School, Mills was not quite of its time; with blazers and starched white shirts uniforming the male and female professors, and student hairdos cured under the hot blast of domed hairdryers (LINK, 1969; LINK, 1949; LINK, 1942; LINK 1962; LINK, 1958). But this year was different. Students, mostly local to New York or nearby states, received a series of summer letters. The first, sent by Mills's President, Margaret Devine, was