

Feminist Periodicals and the Locations of Feminism

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In August 1970, Rena Szajman wrote a letter to *Female Liberation*, a Cambridge-based feminist collective, asking if they knew of a place where she could read and borrow women's liberation literature.¹ Such a request was not unusual. The newsletter published by *Female Liberation* includes an editorial in 1971 that hints at the volume of these requests

Women who are in groups in different areas of N.E. please send in information on your group, description of aims and members, where you meet, how often and phone number to contact. Women call us all the time saying "I am moving out to . . . , who can I contact about getting into a women's group?" Therefore, we are starting a file on suburban groups. Thanks for your help.²

What makes Szajman's letter noteworthy, then, is that she wrote it from Toronto, a city about 900 miles away from Cambridge, MA, and is asking for information about feminism in that city. Coming across this letter in the archive not only gave me pause, it also led to questions about what conditions would cause someone from Toronto to seek information about the city where she lived from women in another country?

Letters like Szajman's and editorials like that in the *Female Liberation Newsletter* reflect

¹ Folder 9, box 1, *Female Liberation: A Radical Feminist Organization Records, 1968-1974*, M122; University Libraries, Archives and Special Collections Department, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts

² *Female Liberation Newsletter*, September 6, 1971, 7.

the structure of the US women's liberation movement in the 1970s and the concomitant role that periodicals played in holding that structure together. At that time feminism was primarily informal, grassroots, and highly localized. There were many small groups operating in relative geographic isolation and few institutionalized communication networks. In 1971 the *L.A. Women's Liberation Newsletter* explains, "We certainly don't have any sense of a Women's Liberation MOVEMENT being built in L.A. many of the women, even though active in small groups, feel a sense of isolation and frustration."³ *Distaff*, a New Orleans feminist newspaper, echoes these challenges: "The movement here still labors under a distressing lack of unity. There is no clearcut identity, actions are isolated and frequently ineffective."⁴ While certainly not the only resource, feminist periodicals provided a vital medium for connecting women, spreading information, and, importantly, locating feminism.

I can't help but call upon an anecdote in Anne Enke's book, *Finding the Movement*. A woman Enke was interviewing stated,

I remember being twenty-one and looking in the *phonebook* in Minneapolis, and I was looking through it trying to find the *woman's movement*. . . . I couldn't find it in the phonebook: What do I look under? Where do I go? (quoted in Enke 2007, 1)

Enke describes this as a seemingly paradoxical situation when she asks, "How does one locate a movement that could reach a woman in her home and at the same time seem utterly inaccessible to her? A movement that was 'everywhere' and yet nowhere the same?" (2007, 2). That is, while the *existence* of feminism in the 1970s could be taken for granted, the *locations* of feminism could not.

In this paper I draw from a sample of feminist newsletters and newspapers published in

³ Ethel Herring, "Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going?" *L.A. Women's Liberation Newsletter*, January 1971, 4.

⁴ Mary Gehman, "N.O. women's movement: A comprehensive Herstory," *Distaff*, March 1974, 9.

Los Angeles, Iowa City, New Orleans, Northampton, MA, and Cambridge, MA, to explore the ways that feminist periodicals spatialized the women's liberation movement. They gave feminism a space to exist (physically, imaginatively, and metaphorically), they located feminism for readers, and they reveal the ways in which space was important on a daily basis.

Periodicals show that feminism's success was, in part, due to success in occupying spaces. Certainly, space and place have been and are central to a range of social and revolutionary movements. Occupy Wall Street most recently captured the US imagination and media outlets, but we can see the importance of taking space through events like marches on Washington; the civil rights movement's sit-ins—and the LGBT kiss-ins; and Black Panthers' theatrics.

Though by now it is a cliché, feminism needed a room of its own. Women needed to take and make space for their activism. And periodicals were one medium through which room for the women's liberation movement was created and made visible to a feminist and broader public. I spend the rest of this paper examining how periodicals located feminism for readers in two ways. They gave feminism a *place* in a very pragmatic way, telling readers where to find feminism. And they created *space* in which feminism's existence could be imagined. Considering the “place” of space in the US women's liberation movement in the 1970s, I argue, ultimately allows us to conduct a more nuanced analysis of power within social movement politics.

The somewhat muted antagonist in this paper is the literature that analyzes how New Social Movements focus their politics on discourse and representation (Melucci 1996, 2003; Polletta and Jasper 2001). In his review essay, Nelson Pichardo cites two of the primary characteristics of New Social Movements as their attention to identity, and their self-reflexive questioning about the meaning of their politics (1997, 414-15). Feminism has certainly

manifested these qualities, and, thus, the language of and about feminism needs to be considered. However, what can get lost in the attention to representation and identity is the fact that activism had to happen *somewhere*. Feminist periodicals, because of the kind of publications they were, offer many opportunities for us to understand the ways in which space was necessary to feminism's existence and politics (and, more generally, the role that space plays in challenges to representation).

Through news briefs, calendars, announcements about upcoming events, and articles, periodicals gave feminism a concrete, specific existence (see figure 1). In November 1972, the *Valley Women's Center Newsletter* lets readers know that the Everywoman's Center has opened at the University of Massachusetts.⁵ *Female Liberation* includes a flyer in their April 2, 1971 issue informing readers about their program about the Women's Movement (figure 2).⁶ This series included a showing of the film *Sometimes I Don't Know Who I Am* (a film about a young married mother) and discussions titled "Black and Third World Women and Feminism," "Gay Women and the Women's Movement," and "Self-Defense and Crimes against Women." And *Distaff* published a "Guide to Women's Organizations in New Orleans" that includes the Council of Black Women, the ERA Coalition, the Rape Crisis Clinic, and the National Organization for Women.⁷ Additionally, three of the periodicals in my sample were produced through women's centers or offices, so these places become an important location for feminism.

We can also see periodicals radicalizing seemingly "non-feminist" locations. For example, the September 1972 issue of the *Valley Women's Center Newsletter* tells readers about a multi-media show about women in the arts, which is shown Wednesdays at noon at the

⁵ Announcement, *Valley Women's Center Newsletter*, November 1972, 7.

⁶ "Women's Movement," *Female Liberation* April 1971, n.p.

⁷ "Guide to Women's Organizations," *Distaff*, January 1974, 12.

Danbury [CT] Public Library through the end of October (figure 3).⁸ Even advertisements can gain political connotations. *Sister* (Los Angeles) includes a full spread of ads in its September 1974 issue: whether the business is explicitly feminist (The Feminist Wicca and Sisterhood bookstore) or not (The Apple Room [a batik store] and a mountain retreat), it becomes a place in which the idea of feminism might be realized (figure 4).⁹ Yes, activism through consumerism requires our critical analysis. And my point here is not to idealize businesses as sites of feminism but to highlight them as significant as sites of feminism in the 1970s. At a time when finding feminism was unpredictable, these articles, advertisements, and announcements were important for more than the information they provided. They located feminism as a “real,” material entity in the world.

In these examples I’ve shown how feminist periodicals thus ground feminism in a particular local area. Most feminist newsletters and newspapers published in the 1970s circulated primarily in the regions where they were published. This range was an effect of the two primary factors: the lack of resources for gaining a wider audience and a focus on politics, issues, and activities in the local area. As a result, readers learned about sites of feminism that they, in all likelihood, could actually experience. They could attend a class or film at the women’s center, see a speaker at the YWCA or university campus, and spend their money at a feminist bookstore.

This locative function allowed women to connect with feminists and feminist groups where they lived, and it also contributed to the sense that one was part of a movement that expanded far beyond these local groups. They gave feminism a national and international space, showing the expanse of feminist activism. *Distaff*, for example, contains a recurring column called “Les Femmes en Marche” which is described as “a selection of quotes and news items

⁸ Announcement, *Valley Women’s Center Newsletter*, September 1972, 4.

⁹ Advertisements, *Sister*, September 1974, 18-19.

from recent issues of feminist journals, magazines, and newspapers that reach our office.”¹⁰ In the August 1973 issue this column excerpts periodicals from New York City, Denver, Minneapolis, Mississippi, and Paris about topics including activism on a college campus, the closing of a rape crisis center, and a French law affirming pay equality. The *Valley Women’s Center Newsletter* announced that they sent a telegram to Norwegian women recently elected to city councils in Norway in the fall of 1971.¹¹ And the *L.A. Women’s Liberation Newsletter* tells readers that “4 sisters from the SELF-HELP CLINIC started traveling to cities across the country to exchange information with and to bring the concept of SELF HELP to other sisters.” Two of the women are staying on the west coast, planning to visit San Francisco, Berkeley, and Santa Cruz. The other pair boarded a bus to Wichita, Kansas, and would continue on to the east coast.¹²

To understand the significance of these kinds of announcements and articles, it’s useful to remember Benedict Anderson’s conceptualization of imagined communities. For Anderson, the increased circulation of print publications in the same language allowed people to see themselves as part of a community that not only extended beyond their specific locales but that extended beyond anything they could ever experience. Yes, this community of feminists across the globe was a discursive one; they extend beyond a reader’s concrete experience in both space and time (since some events have already occurred and thus cannot be experienced). But these communities are nonetheless connected to actual, tangible, political events and individuals. Because many women, especially those in rural areas, were isolated from other feminists, periodicals provided an important medium for being and feeling connected to others.

After all this description—about how periodicals spatialized the women’s liberation movement I’d like to take a step back and offer a few words about why such an analysis matters.

¹⁰ “Les Femmes en Marche,” *Distaff*, August 1973, p. 9.

¹¹ Announcement, *Valley Women’s Center Newsletter*, November 10, 1971, p. 3.

¹² Announcement, *L.A. Women’s Liberation Newsletter*, November 1971, p. 3.

A focus on space, first, adds to what we know about a social movement. It brings our attention to place/space as a social movement resource and allows us to examine the successes and challenges of the women's liberation movement from another perspective. We can shift our attention from a primary focus on representational interventions and the practices that constituted feminism to this other significant facet of feminism. Place and space have a living, dynamic existence. Not only did feminists occupy places, they transformed them. Feminism made places *feel* different and gain different meanings. And we can also attend to the relationship between space, place, and activist practices. Through guerrilla tactics and through processes of institutionalization, feminist activists in the 1970s occupied different spaces and occupied places differently.

Place and space are important, as well, for the ways they illuminate how power works. The tactical and strategic uses of places reveal how feminists negotiated their marginalization within economic, political, and social structures as well as their own access to power. The vast majority of feminist politics occurred tactically. As theorized by Michel de Certeau, those with little institutional power, rely on tactics to gain advantage and to claim space for themselves. He writes, "the place of the tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety. . . . It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to its circumstances. . . . Whatever it wins it does not keep" (1984, xix). Those without a proper place—without a place that is secured in some way—are thus relegated to a position in which they temporarily take a space (e.g., a street, a living room, a place owned by someone else) and use it as best they can to meet their needs. These tactics are manifest in Susan Rivo's documentary about the takeover of the Harvard building at 888 Memorial Drive, *Left on Pearl*.

Ain't I a Woman? also offers somewhat extensive coverage of the feminist community's attempts to create affordable daycare, part of which also involved taking over a university building.¹³ Thus, existing precariously, feminist collectives sustained themselves by making do (de Certeau 1984, 66), using what tools they could grasp at a particular time and place and with what financial resources they could garner.

Yet, we also see the establishment of places like women's centers, feminist non-profit organizations, and feminist businesses. These places are not occupied *only* tactically and evidence some stability and predictability, albeit to varying degrees and with varying degrees of success. Having feminist places that exist through time is not something to be taken for granted in the 1970s, as evidenced by the difficulties women experienced when trying to find feminism. Importantly, feminism institutionalized itself in particular ways and in particular places. Attending to place highlights not only the ways in which feminists were working to manifest their visions of a future but also the forces against which they were pushing as well as what resources they had access to.

To conclude I want to return to the periodicals themselves. In this paper I don't have the time to analyze periodicals as material entities that were produced in places, take up physical space, and move through space. Their significance thus moves beyond their discursive and symbolic interventions and can be understood through a spatial analysis of the life cycle of a periodical. But what we can see through my discussion here is that the content of periodicals reveals that much of the work of feminists in the 1970s involved daily and quotidian work to create and sustain places for the women's liberation movement. While the grand and spectacular gestures were important activist moments, they were also anomalies. Because periodicals track feminism at a micro scale, they offer a vision of the movement that likely reflected a use of space

¹³ See the special issue of *Ain't I a Woman?* with a childcare theme (February 1973).

that was much more common in feminism at the time, and also that may not be visible to scholars mapping feminism at a national scale.

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Figure 1
L.A. Women's Liberation Newsletter, April 1971, back page.

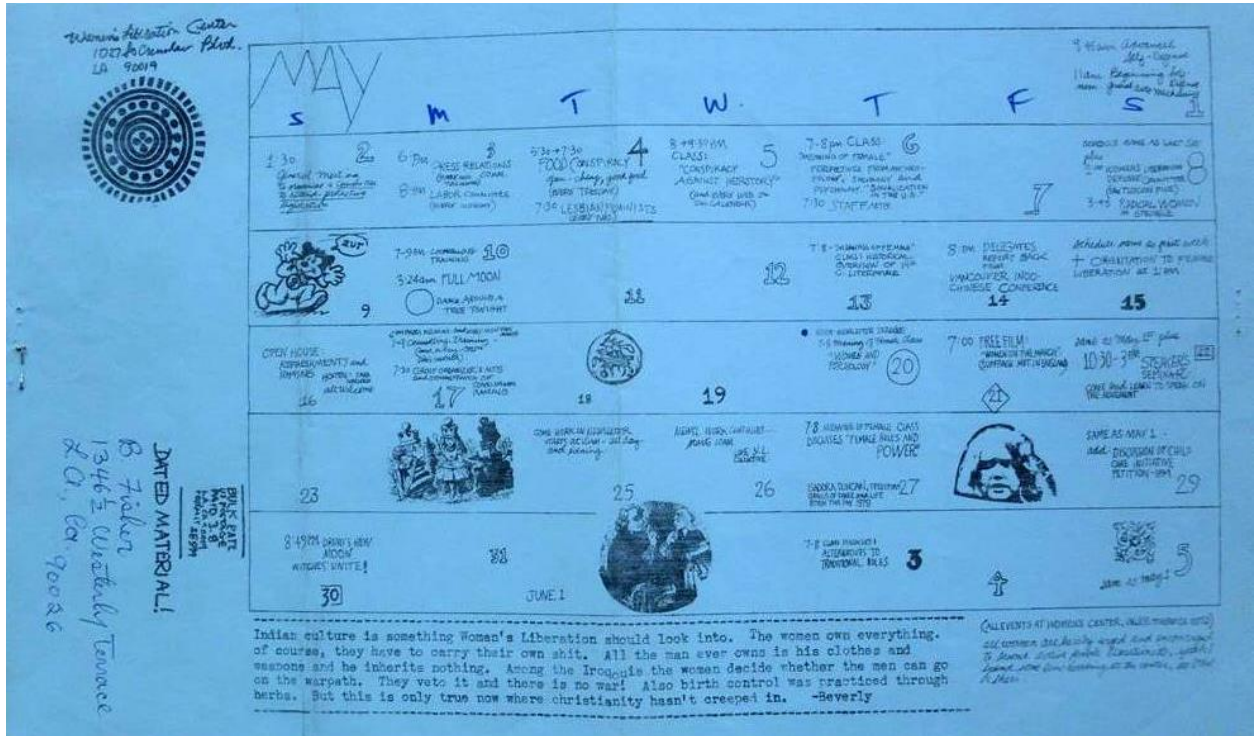


Figure 2
Female Liberation Newsletter, April 2, 1971, back page.

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Figure 3

Valley Women's Center Newsletter, September 1972, p. 4

Newsletter, Page 4

ANNOUNCEMENTS

REGISTER TO VOTE. Women newly moved to this area or to Massachusetts may register to vote between now and October 7 in order to vote in the national election on November 7. Because the state has reduced its residency requirement to 30 days before elections, and because registration closes 30 days before election, there is in effect no duration of residence requirement anymore. All you need is some item showing your local address-- a lease, bill, license or other identification. Some registrars even accept a piece of mail addressed to you at home as proof of residence, but better check first as policy varies on this. In Northampton one registers at City Hall, Monday thru Friday 9-5; in Amherst at Town Hall M-F 8-4:30. In other towns call your town clerk to check the days and hours. Most towns will also register voters on Oct. 7 from noon to 10 pm. DO IT NOW!

A notice from the Feminist Women's Health Center, Los Angeles. On October 12-15, there will be a National Planning Meeting for Self-Help regional workshops/conferences, in Iowa City, Iowa. The regional workshops/conferences will be scheduled a few weeks after the planning meeting. The organizational meeting in Iowa City will give us the opportunity to get together to provide input, develop ideas, and come away with concrete ideas and plans to carry to regional workshops. Anyone interested contact VWC for more info.

A multi-media show of women in the arts is being held now through Oct. 30, at the Danbury Public Library, 170 Main St., Danbury, Conn. Films shown on Weds. at noon.

The AMAZON QUARTERLY is a new lesbian-feminist arts journal coming out this Fall with stories, plays, essays, reviews, poetry, black-and-white drawings and prints. Send your manuscripts and graphics to: 554 Valle Vista, Oakland, Ca. 94610...1 yr. sub. \$4., bulk order rates.

SOJOURNER, a magazine of women's writing and visual arts is now accepting manuscripts for publications in fall. 5,000 max words for poetry and prose. 8x10 format for photography and graphics. Include self addressed envelope c/o Florence Epstein, 336 Central Park West, N.Y. PLEASE WRITE FOR DETAILS ON ADVERTISEMENT SPACE.

New bibliographies from the Cambridge-Godard Graduate Sch. The first is on Women in Literature. It is .50 plus .25 for mailing. Write: Cambridge-Goddard Feminist Studies, att: Ann Kautzmann or Liz Fenton, 1878 Mass. Ave., Cambridge, Mass. 02140. The second is an annotated bibliography on Psychology and Women, 25¢ and mailing cost. Write to Shell Wortis, Feminist Studies, Cambridge-Godard, etc.

Non-Sexist "Nursery" Group- We have space in the Northampton Unitarian Church for a three morning a week nursery program for 3-4 year old children. Our wishes are simple--we want male/female parent participation, a flexible program with plenty of room for creative exploration and a warm, loving environment. At this point we need people to continue (and to be ready to open this fall). We need parents, 10 to 12 children, volunteer workers, a permanent paid coordinator, a "local" fire alarm, equipment, clay, paints, paper, etc. and support. For more information call Jeanne Fonda (584-3479) or Carrie Hemenway (268-3382).

Figure 4
Sister, September 1974, p. 18-19.

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