

RETHINKING THE LIBERAL/RADICAL DIVIDE:
THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN IN
MEMPHIS, COLUMBUS, AND SAN FRANCISCO

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This project uses the history of the National Organization for Women (NOW) to explore the relationship of liberal and radical elements in the second wave of the U.S. women's movement. Combining oral histories with archival documents, this project offers a new perspective on second-wave feminism as a part of the long decade of the 1960s. It also makes location a salient factor in understanding post-World War II struggles for social justice. Unlike other scholarship on second-wave feminism, this study explores NOW in three diverse locations—Memphis, Columbus, and San Francisco—to see what feminists were doing in different kinds of communities: a Southern city, a non-coastal Northern community, and a West Coast progressive location. In Memphis—a city with a strong history of civil rights activism—black-white racial dynamics, a lack of toleration for same-sex sexuality, and political conservatism shaped feminist activism. Columbus, like Memphis, had a dominant white population and relatively conservative political climate (although less so than in Memphis), but it also boasted an open lesbian community, strong university presence, and a history of radical feminism and labor activism. San Francisco offered feminists racial and ethnic diversity, a progressive political climate, and a history of gay and lesbian activism.

Most scholarship on the women's movement focuses on the East Coast, with scattered attention to larger cities across the nation, yet it purports to offer a national picture of feminist social movements. As my work suggests, such an analysis can emerge only when we attend to regional variance. Memphis, Columbus, and San Francisco constitute a range of political, economic, and social contexts in which to explore feminist activism. Second-wave feminists in these locations were rarely "liberal" or "radical" exclusively but rather embraced dynamic and multiple ideologies along with accompanying strategies, tactics, and goals to create meaningful feminist change. By attending to the dynamics of feminist activism in different locations, this project reconceptualizes the postwar women's movement in its heyday during the 1960s and 1970s.

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This project is one of studying feminist activism on the ground, in women's day to day lives as they created change in the communities they called home. In very special, and different, ways, each city I studied has been a home for me, not only for the physical space it was and is, but also for the many people who opened their homes to me, allowing me to share their lives and histories. My first and greatest debt will always be to the many feminist women who shared their stories through laughter, tears, anger, pain, and love—they taught me more about history, community, activism, feminism, and life than I could ever possibly read in any book.

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of phrase, shoulders to cry on, righteous anger when necessary, great conversation over food and drink, and so much more. They also raised the bar as scholars and their gifts and talents as historians, scholars, and feminists are many—my heartfelt thanks to Susan Freeman, Basia Nowak, Charlotte Weber, Heather Miller, Renée Lansley, Caryn Neumann, Cherisse Jones, and Anne Collinson.

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While on fellowship, I also spent this past year as a Research Associate at the Five College Women's Studies Research Center, housed at Mt. Holyoke College. There, I have found a joyous feminist community of scholars, and am thankful to Amrita Basu, EB Lehman, Ara Wilson, Dorit Namaan, Danielle Bassett, Anne Thalheimer, Mary Renda, Joyce Follett, Sherrill Redmon, and June Lapidus for sharing their work with me, and for sharing their enthusiasm for mine. I especially

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Jilda and Henry, for doing their best in spite of the circumstances both given to them and created by them. I am especially grateful for and thankful to my sister Suzanne. When we were young, she had cancer and a tutor came to the house to teach her; Suzanne in turn taught me—to spell, write, read, count, add, subtract. In ways I did not realize until adulthood, she also taught me how to be strong, even in the face of impossibilities. Lew and Amy became her family, and in turn, mine, and I am grateful to have them in my life. Margaret Kaminski has opened her home to me and embraced me as a part of her family. I will always appreciate the many stories we have shared at her dinner table. I also thank MargaretAnn, Jennifer, Vincent and Gian Mario, and Zane for sharing their family, and the many ups and downs that accompany family, with me. Although we no longer live in the same duplex or share a backyard, Laura Gates (along with Niki, Amos, Zoe, and now Kita) will always be my neighbor and friend. Over cocktails and cookouts, we talked about feminism, social justice, politics, religion, and love—and even when we didn’t agree with one another, we always listened and kept coming back for more.

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But it is to the family with whom I spend every day that I dedicate this work. My pooches have been integral to my life, happiness, and sanity. Fred has been with me since my first year of graduate school (he wouldn't want me to tell how old that makes him!). Over the years, he sat patiently, listening to me read whole sections of this and other projects aloud, perhaps even comprehending some of it. Raleigh entered my life later, and in a tragic, yet perfect sort of way. As I work through the final version of this dissertation, he comes into my office around 4:30 p.m., throws himself down onto the floor, thrusts his belly in the air, and demands that I call it a day and spend the rest of the evening petting him. Together, they make me laugh out loud and remind me to be silly, sassy, and lighthearted.

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in the night. Come away with me and I'll write you a song." Betsy came away with me; this is our song.

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CHAPTER 1

LOCATING FEMINIST ACTIVISM:
BEYOND THE LIBERAL/RADICAL DIVIDE

“This is what a radical feminist looks like!” With this freckle-faced little girl in a polka-dot dress and matching bow in her hair, the Ohio State University chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) advertised its first meeting of the 1999 autumn quarter.¹ Radical feminist? NOW? In Columbus, Ohio, at one of the largest universities in the United States, it seems to be the case. It may be that this flyer is a product of its time—a third-wave feminist pronouncement of girl/grrl power.² By using this cartoonish *girl* (reminiscent of the infamous “girl” that SDS

¹ “NOW at Ohio State,” meeting announcement, 5 October 1999, in author’s possession.

² For work on third-wave feminism, see Rebecca Walker, ed., *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995); Rebecca Findlen, ed., *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Generation* (New York: Seal Press, 1995); Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2000); Kimberly Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminism?” *Signs* 27, no. 4 (2002): 1059-82; Sheila Radford-Hill, “Keepin’ It Real: A Generational Commentary on Kimberly Springer’s ‘Third Wave Black Feminism?’” *Signs* 27, no. 4 (2002): 1083-89; and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “Response from a ‘Second Waver’ to Kimberly Springer’s ‘Third Wave

men used to mock women in the group) to advertise a meeting geared toward *women*, Stella and Jessica, the presumed designers of the flyer, might have been engaged in a third-wave feminist practice of reclaiming derogatory images of women and using them affirmatively. They might also have been blurring age-based boundaries, using this little girl as a device to attract younger, college-age women to NOW, a group some may have seen as an older women's organization. Or, perhaps, NOW has always been radical—at least at the local level. If this is the case, the announcement may be less aberrant than it appears.

Although Stella's and Jessica's motives are unknown to us, there is an obvious contradiction between this pronouncement and the volumes of scholarship suggesting that NOW is the mainstay of liberal feminism. Founded in 1966, NOW is one of the oldest explicitly feminist organizations.³ Because it has a federated structure of national, regional, state, and local chapters and a history of pursuing legislative change on behalf of women, NOW has been identified as a liberal feminist organization.⁴ At thirty-eight-years old and counting, the organization is thriving

Black Feminism?" *Signs* 27, no. 4 (2002): 1091-94. For an examination of continuities between second- and third-wave feminism, see Stephanie Gilmore, "Bridging the Waves: Sex and Sexuality in a Second-Wave Organization," in *Different Wavelengths: Contemporary Perspectives on the Women's Movement in America*, ed. Jo Reger (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2005).

³ The National Woman Party (NWP) and the League of Women Voters (LWV), post-nineteenth amendment incarnations of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), thrive into the twenty-first century as membership-based feminist organizations.

⁴ Scholars of second-wave feminism follow Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: Longman Press, 1975). General overviews of second-wave feminism include Sara Evans,

structurally with chapters in all 50 states and many chapters within each state. At the turn of the twenty-first century, many in the group still identify the government as the avenue for change, and the organization's leadership favors new or amended legislation over complete political overhaul.⁵ By contrast, radical feminists argue that women's "rights" as the state bestows them are meaningless in a social and cultural system that oppresses people based on gender, race, class, and sexuality.⁶ Radical

Personal Politics: The Roots of the Women's Liberation Movement in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Susan M. Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream: American Women and Politics Since 1960* (New York: Knopf, 1980); Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Action* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess, *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement Across Four Decades of Change* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking Press, 2000); Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002); and Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).

⁵ See Jo Reger, "Social Movement Culture and Organizational Survival in the National Organization for Women," (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1997); Maryann Barakso, "Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women, 1966-2000," (Ph.D. diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001); and Maryann Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). See also the NOW website, <www.now.org> for membership numbers and contemporary issues.

⁶ While the major works on second-wave feminism discuss radical feminism, see especially Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of

feminists historically have pursued feminist issues beyond the confines of the state, using public protest and other cultural strategies to get across their messages of female liberation. Likewise, many self-defined radical feminist organizations put the word “radical” in their group names; this does not mean, however, that they were the only radical feminists. Did NOW members ever identify as radical feminists or embrace radical feminist ideology, strategy, or goals? If so, when and why did they do so? When did they embrace liberal feminist approaches to social change? How did local context affect the ways in which they claimed, assigned, and contested feminist identity, and how does it shape the dynamics of feminist activism?

I answer these questions by analyzing historically the first, and largest, explicitly feminist, membership-based organization of the second wave of the women’s movement—the National Organization for Women. In 1966, when some thirty women gathered at the third meeting of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women and, out of frustration with the Commission, formed NOW, the women’s movement in the United States was moving out of a forty-year era of “abeyance.”⁷ A small group of politically connected and active women, mostly involved in the League of Women Voters, National Woman’s Party, and the Women’s Bureau of the Labor Department, had maintained their commitment to

Minnesota Press, 1989); and Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women’s Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

⁷ Verta Taylor, “Social Movement Continuity: The Women’s Movement in Abeyance,” *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989): 761-75.

women's rights from the suffrage movement that ended in 1920 to the rise of mass feminist mobilization in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁸ To be sure, many of the women who founded NOW in 1966 were a part of this political elite.

Since its creation, NOW has been an important, if controversial, force. Within the women's movement, many radical feminists perceived NOW as too liberal, concerned only with achieving equality with men instead of overhauling the entire social and political system of oppression. From the outside, others perceived NOW as too radical. For example, when NOW took a stand in support of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1968, some union activists felt that this group was too radical and pulled their support from the nascent organization.⁹ NOW risked members in taking this stand, as well as one in favor of legalizing abortion, but in doing so, it also demonstrated its willingness to fight for political causes.

In theory, a national organization for women, as NOW proclaimed itself to be, would represent women across the nation. In fact, however, many factors determined the membership and growth of NOW chapters, as well as their relationship to the national board. From the outset, NOW was a political lobbying group, and its founder, Betty Friedan, as well as many board members, felt it would be most beneficial as such and hoped to continue as a small cadre of feminist activists.

⁸ Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

⁹ See Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975*.

However, chapters began to take off, the first in New York City. By 1970, there were over 3000 women (and men) in chapters across the country, making the “National Organization for Women” a geographically correct moniker. Through its chapters, NOW became much more than a national political force.

After the 1970 “Strike for Women’s Equality,” membership grew at an even faster pace, and feminists in all parts of the country formed NOW chapters in their cities. From its headquarters in Washington, D.C., Betty Friedan announced plans for a strike in 1970 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 19th amendment. However, after this pronouncement, Friedan stepped down as national president of NOW; new president Aileen Hernandez and fellow board members were left to organize the strike. Rather than coordinate one single, massive march, such as a march on Washington, organizers designed this event to mobilize women in their communities to “do your own thing” in protest of women’s unequal status.¹⁰ And they did—women in communities across the country responded to NOW’s clarion call to action. Chapters reported success with strike activities, bringing together feminists, labor organizers, peace activists, civil rights activists—demonstrating not only these obviously overlapping categories but also underscoring potential and real coalitions that feminists had formed in their communities. In spite of the fact that many media outlets considered the strike a “flop” and that the day was marked with “business as usual,” feminists drew critical attention to women’s political and social statuses.¹¹

¹⁰ “August 26 is ‘Do your thing’ day for equality for women!” flyer from NOW national board to chapters, n.d., personal correspondence of Aileen Hernandez, copy in author’s possession.

¹¹ “NOW Acts,” September 1970, copy in author’s possession, courtesy of Aileen Hernandez.

According to Heather Booth, a founder of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, "it was clear" from the 1970 Strike that "this is a movement as opposed to little factional efforts. [The Strike] was a take off, and N.O.W. was going to be a leading edge within this movement."¹²

By creating active task forces on subjects ranging from women's employment and women in the media to rape and violence against women, NOW provided a common umbrella under which many feminists organized to help create and sustain the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Although scholars have commonly discussed and analyzed NOW activism only at the national level, my research suggests that at the local level—where NOW derived its strength in terms of numbers and financial support, and with chapters across the country, offered a real national presence—NOW truly made a difference in women's lives. NOW members acted in concert with one another but were also different from one another in significant ways. Some issues, such as the ERA, may have united NOW women in that all chapters acted somehow on behalf of the amendment. But other matters took precedence when it came to members' daily actions and to defining and raising feminist consciousness in their respective communities. To understand how women came together in their communities to create a sense of belonging and to create feminist change in their communities, and what kinds of strategies and goals they utilized, is the purpose of this study.

¹² Interview, Heather Booth, 7 April 2004.

Aligning one's self with NOW surely meant embracing the group's public, political agenda. When women in various communities formed NOW chapters, it is presumable that they were sympathetic to this agenda. Why did they choose to affiliate with the National Organization for Women? As one feminist suggested conversationally, the short answer to this question is "you had the luxury of being in a lesbian-vegetarian-socialist-feminist cell only if you lived in New York; otherwise you joined the NOW chapter."¹³ But how did women work through NOW to create feminist change at the local level? What factors shaped their activism? To answer these questions, I look not only at the women involved but also the contexts in which feminism, and NOW, emerged in each city. Tracing contemporaneous political and social movement activism in each location yields tremendous insight into how women were organizing and why they chose to affiliate with NOW. Through NOW chapters, feminists in Memphis, Columbus, and San Francisco created a way for others to identify and define them as well as a way for them to define themselves—identities that were shaped not only by the women involved but also by the activist and feminist contexts in which women lived. Within feminist communities, some women were members of NOW, while others remained outside the organization. In each location, NOW was only part of the larger women's and feminist community.¹⁴

¹³ Email correspondence between author and Cynthia Harrison, 25 January 2002.

¹⁴ For more on the definition and development of social movement community from a sociological perspective, see Steven Buechler, *Women's Movements in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); and Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*,

Thus, to understand feminist activism in each location, I examine internal membership of and salient local issues for each NOW chapter. I also discuss how other groups and the NOW chapter sometimes worked together to tackle similar political issues and helped create larger feminist communities in each city. In doing so, I demonstrate that second-wave feminists were rarely “liberal” or “radical” exclusively but rather embraced dynamic and multiple ideologies along with accompanying strategies, tactics, and goals to create meaningful feminist change.

The terms “liberal” and “radical” as ways to understand second-wave feminist activism were made popular in 1975, when political scientist Jo Freeman published a highly influential study, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation*, which conceptualized the women’s movement as composed of two distinct branches.¹⁵ Freeman divided women’s organizations into these two camps based on age of members, structure, ideology, and style. While the “younger” branch included smaller, grassroots organizations with little or no internal hierarchical structure, the “older” branch consisted of federated, formal organizations with branches at the regional, state, and local levels. The latter group was, according to Freeman, “liberal,” concerned with equality within the existing social, political, and economic systems.¹⁶ The younger

ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992): 104-29.

¹⁵ Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation* (New York: Longman Press, 1975).

¹⁶ In addition to NOW, other liberal feminist groups include Women’s Equity Action League and the National Women’s Political Caucus, founded in 1968 and 1971, respectively. There are no

and more radical branch sought to overthrow patriarchal structures, damning them as oppressive to women.¹⁷

Scholars followed Freeman's lead in dividing the movement into two camps, embracing this dichotomy, or some other related, also dichotomous, framework to explain second-wave feminism in the United States. Whether called "small group sector" and "mass movement," "collectivist" and "bureaucratic," "younger women" and "older women," or "women's rights" and "women's liberation," the two-branch model has dominated scholarship on the women's movement.¹⁸

monographs about WEAL or NWPC, subjects I hope other historians will soon address. The first, book-length treatment of black feminist organizations is Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming), in which she discusses such groups as the NBFO beyond the liberal/radical dichotomy, suggesting that race plays a significant, even defining, factor in our understanding of second-wave feminism. For more on this idea, see also Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 28, 2 (2002): 337-55.

¹⁷ In addition to Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, and Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, there are collections of memoirs and primary sources from radical feminists. See Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow, eds., *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998); and Barbara Crow, ed., *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess, *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement* 4th ed. (Boston: Twayne, 2000); Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation*; Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977); and Alice Echols,

Radical feminism and its attributed offshoots, cultural feminism and lesbian feminism, were anomalous, oppositional, challenging—and have been most interesting to scholars. This may well be the result of the fact that scholars who studied second-wave feminism academically wrote from their personal affiliations with radical feminism. Self-identified radical feminists Jo Freeman (aka Joreen) and Sara Evans produced (and continue to write) well-researched works that became the foundational frameworks through which second-wave feminist activism has been studied. In their work, they have unashamedly embraced the political roots that gave rise to their academic work, suggesting that the personal is not only political but is also worth understanding historically.¹⁹ However, by dividing the movement into

Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) are examples of scholarship that, respectively, employ these dichotomous models to explain women's activism.

¹⁹ Many activists also became academics and wrote about the social movements in which they were involved, including SDS member Todd Gitlin (*The Sixties*), SNCC member Charles Payne (*I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Struggle for Freedom*), GLBT activists John D'Emilio (*Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*) and Allan Bérubé (*Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Lesbians in World War Two*), and Alice Echols (*Daring To be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*). Other academics have written powerful scholarly works, tying personal experiences and perspectives to academic research. For example, understanding patriarchy as an overarching force in women's and men's lives, Linda Gordon wrote *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America* and *Heroes of their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence*, while Gerda Lerner penned *The Creation of Patriarchy*, followed by *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*. Others, including Patricia Hill Collins (*Black Feminist Thought*) and Benita

“liberal” and “radical,” scholars have reduced the movement to the places where these terms originated and operated—New York City, Boston, Washington D.C., and Chicago.

As a result, scholars largely have allowed “liberal” and “radical” feminism to stand for second-wave feminism across the United States, suggesting that feminism “in the heartland,” to borrow Judith Ezekiel’s felicitous phrase, in the South, or on the West Coast followed this model.²⁰ Yet the reality, particularly at the local level, is far less neat than scholarship on “liberal” and “radical” feminism conveys. Rather than stretch essentialized and seemingly distinct conceptions of “radical” and “liberal” feminism to fit over the varieties of feminist activism, I argue that we must understand the women’s movement from the ground up, looking specifically at what feminists did, what factors shaped their activism, and how they effected feminist change. NOW chapters grew up in the late 1960s and early 1970s, prior to any real consensus about what the various philosophical forms that “feminism” would take. More to the point, feminists formed chapters in places where feminist activism was rarely qualified as “liberal” or “radical.” Although some groups explicitly identified as “radical”—New York Radical Feminists or Radicalesbians, for example—none

Roth (*Separate Roads to Feminism*), explore feminist consciousness and activism by relaying personal perspective to larger social and cultural questions.

²⁰ Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003); see also Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, which traces the development of radical feminism in Columbus, Ohio, and Anne Enke, “Locating Feminist Activism,” which explores feminist activism, mostly radical, in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

identified themselves as “liberal.” When applied to second-wave feminism, the terms “liberal” and “radical” are theoretically salient, but in practice, this dichotomy obscures the *variety* of feminist practices, goals, strategies, and events. In this study, I step back to see how women in NOW chapters defined and enacted “feminism” for themselves and how it changed over time. By looking at the context of activism in the historical unfolding of second-wave feminism, it becomes clear that this dichotomous framework of “liberal” and “radical” limits, rather than enhances, the ways in which we can understand second-wave feminism in the United States.

To make this point, I take a grassroots approach to the women and men of this feminist organization, which offers a view into the contexts in which feminists created political and cultural change. Rather than explore NOW from the top down, as political scientist Maryann Barakso does in her work, *Governing NOW*,²¹ I seek instead to look at how members created this organization in their local communities and day-to-day lives. In my analysis, NOW is not just the national leadership; instead, its chapters represent grassroots activism, following Temma Kaplan, who defined grassroots movements as “mainly concerned with local issues, with what affects ordinary people every day.”²² As Kaplan points out, “the media and public opinion

²¹ Maryann Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). Although Barakso suggests in her title that hers is a study of grassroots activism, her research studies instead the governance structure of NOW and does not analyze local chapters’ activism.

²² Quotation from Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 6.

are preoccupied with the spectacular, with the activities of celebrities”²³; scholars of second-wave feminism have followed suit, often allowing Betty Friedan and other national leaders of NOW to represent the entire organization. The rank-and-file members of NOW, however, represent a grassroots organization of “ordinary women attempting to accomplish necessary tasks, to provide services rather than to build power bases.” This project highlights their activism, rendering significant the work of NOW feminists in three different communities and bringing to light the various and dynamic ways that members were able to effect feminist change. By exploring these feminist contexts (and feminists’ contexts), it becomes clear that feminism in the United States —much like the *feminisms* that scholars have discussed in histories of Western Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa²⁴—is not homogeneous.

Understanding how the original group of thirty NOW founders became 300 by October of 1966, and how the membership increased tenfold with chapters across the country by 1970, requires analysis not just of what this organization was doing

²³ Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy*, 6.

²⁴ Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Asuncion Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Gwendolyn Mikell, *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); and Rupp, *Worlds of Women*. For contemporary studies, see Nancy Naples and Manisha Desai, eds., *Women’s Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

nationally but also how the rank-and-file members were agitating the waters, creating in their communities the second wave of feminism. Attention to context offers an important way to explore historically the development of this organization, and of second-wave feminism as the largest social movement of the twentieth century.

The history of the United States has been one of cultural, social, and economic fragmentation; understanding these divides, often rooted in geography, is essential to analyzing U.S. history. Scholars are exploring how the “politics of location” re-frames the ways we understand social movement activism in the United States.²⁵ Historians and social scientists have traced how local political and cultural context shapes a variety of movements, including gay and lesbian liberation, African American civil rights, labor, welfare rights, and antinuclear environmentalism.²⁶

²⁵ The concept, “politics of location,” is from Adrienne Rich, “On the Politics of Location,” in *Bread, Blood, and Roses* (New York: Norton & Norton, 1987). Susan Freeman applied “the politics of location” in her article, “From the Lesbian Nation to the Cincinnati Lesbian Community: Moving Toward a Politics of Location,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1-2 (2000): 137-74.

²⁶ Trisha Franzen, “Differences and Identities: Feminism and the Albuquerque Lesbian Community,” *Signs* 18, no. 4 (1993): 891-906; Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, “Women’s Community and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism,” *Signs* 19, no. 1 (1993): 32-61; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); John Howard, ed., *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: NYU Press, 1997); Daneel Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis: Building Communities behind the Magnolia Curtain* (New York: Garland, 1997); Marc Stein, *Sisterly and Brotherly Love: Gay and Lesbian Movements in Philadelphia, 1948-1972* (New York: NYU Press, 2000); and Freeman, “From the Lesbian Nation to the Cincinnati Lesbian Community,” are all studies of lesbian and gay movements in different locations. There is much literature on civil rights activism in

These movements have national significance in part because they create a collective and shared “sense of we” in opposition to political and/or cultural oppression.

Second-wave feminism is no different. While feminists were a part of a national movement—or in many cases, simultaneous movements—local context provides another vital perspective on this movement and allow us to see in what ways and

different locations, but important works include Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland, 2000); and Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryand Simon, eds., *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000). On how labor has been shaped by location, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* (1993); and Gary M. Fink and Merl Reed, eds., *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994). On welfare rights and location, see, for example, Anne Valk, “‘Mother Power’: The Movement for Welfare Rights in Washington, D.C., 1966-1972,” *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 4 (2000): 34-58; and Premilla Nadasen, “Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights,” *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 271-301. A significant study of the importance of location in environmentalism is Byron Miller, *Geography and Social Movements: Comparing Antinuclear Activism in the Boston Area* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

around what issues feminists were able to create and sustain women's movement activism.²⁷

The "politics of location"—used here to explore the activist communities and possible strategies and outcomes available to activists in their respective communities—demonstrates that understanding feminism on the ground offers more than a local variant of a national story because U.S feminism has never had a singular or national narrative. Moreover, it challenges the "hegemony of a U.S. women's history rooted in the lives of eastern elites."²⁸ Such analysis builds on Albert Hurtado's suggestion that "women's history must be understood in all of its particularity, conflict, and complexity."²⁹ Part of accepting Hurtado's implicit challenge is recognizing the importance of location. This study compares cities and

²⁷ Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Judith Sealand and Dorothy Smith, "The Rise and Fall of Feminist Organizations in the 1970s: Dayton as a Case Study" *Feminist Studies* 12 (summer 1986): 321-341; Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2002); Freeman, "Toward a Politics of Location"; Jo Reger, "Motherhood and the Construction of Feminist Identities," and Anne Enke, "Locating Feminist Activism: Women's Movement and Public Geographies, Minneapolis-St. Paul, 1968-1980" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1999) focus on women's movement activity in these locations respectively. See also, Nancy A. Naples, ed. *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing across Race, Class, and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

²⁸ Vicki Ruiz, "Shaping Public Space/Enunciating Gender: A Multiracial Historiography of the Women's West, 1995-2000," *Frontiers*, 22, no. 3 (2001): 22-25, quotation on 22.

²⁹ Albert L. Hurtado, "Settler Women and Frontier Women: The Unsettling Past of Western Women's History," *Frontiers* 22, no. 3 (2001): 1-5, quotation on 5.

regions across the country in order to analyze how women defined feminist goals and worked on their behalf; what factors in their political, cultural, and economic milieus constrained as well as enabled their activism; and how their activism operated across the feminist spectrum of liberal to radical rather than one or the other. The history of these NOW chapters highlights how it is only through both conflict and community that we can understand the nuances of second-wave feminist activism. I build here on Leila J. Rupp's work on the development of transnational feminism from World War I through post-World War II. In this context, Rupp also analyzed both conflict and community "not as opposites but as part of the same process by which women came together ... to create a sense of belonging and to work and sometimes live together."³⁰ In this research, I extend Rupp's analysis to the rise of second-wave feminism among various cities in the United States. By analyzing how feminists came together to create change in their communities and in their day-to-day lives, I explore both the feminist community women built with one another and with their local contexts and the conflicts that separated feminists from one another and impeded change. This analysis extends historian Victoria Wolcott's concept of "malleable discourse." Although Wolcott analyzes the ways in which such concepts as "gender" change based upon the social, political, and cultural settings of women's lives, I suggest that we can also see how "feminism" and "activism" change and are changed by similar contexts.³¹

³⁰ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 6.

³¹ Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 4.

The South, the Midwest, and the West Coast—each region conjures different historical and contemporary images. The South brings to mind such sensual images as the scent of magnolias, the colorful azaleas that add vibrant color to the Gulf Coast, and the kudzu that grows with determined defiance. But it also calls up the brutal history of slavery and difficult relationships between Black people and white people. Indeed, the history of civil rights in the United States is often rooted in the geographic South—Little Rock, Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham are southern cities with national significance in the Civil Rights Movement. Memphis, Tennessee, was the site of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, a calamitous moment that divided both the country and the Bluff City. In this context, then, the Midwest appeared to be a different land altogether. However, as scholars have made abundantly clear, race relations also became famously tenuous in such Midwestern cities as Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis. But the Midwest also gave rise to the labor movement; indeed, many labor unions were founded in Columbus, Ohio. As western territories became part of the United States, tolerance was often written into formal codes, whether outlawing slavery or providing women with the right to vote, but the West was also home to anti-Chinese legislation and a site of oppression for Native Americans. In San Francisco, a place of relative tolerance in the United States, progressive politics have been a historic source of local pride, and San Franciscans “are proud of their city’s nonconformist reputation and take every opportunity to show their colors, celebrate differences, and champion unpopular causes.”³²

³² Richard Edward DeLeon, *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 3.

These regional differences, painted in the broadest of strokes here, also shape women's history and the history of U.S. feminism, and it is within these regional distinctions that women embrace, reject, and contest feminism and feminist identity. Rather than understand women's lives simply as gendered, historians of the U.S. South, Midwest, and West have also started to explore how region has shaped women's lives. In the history of women's and feminist activism, scholars have highlighted the uniqueness of the South as a geographical location as well as the differences between and among Southern women. Whether writing about woman suffrage, club activism, slavery, or formal politics, scholars have understood the nuances of southern women's lives as both a part of and apart from the rest of the United States. The "metalanguage of race" defines much of this history, and white and Black women have often pursued what sociologist Benita Roth identifies as "separate roads to feminism."³³ The history of woman suffrage makes this point abundantly clear. In Tennessee, the final state to ratify the 19th amendment, women and men from both sides of the suffrage issue argued their positions often from a position of race, specifically whether or not Black men should have had the right to vote before white women or if Black people should be able to vote altogether. The overt racism of some white feminists further exacerbated tensions between white and Black women, offering one of several reasons for the impossibility of a singular

³³ Roth, *Separate Paths to Feminism*. The concept of "the metalanguage of race" was developed by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (winter 1992): 251-74.

Southern feminist voice in the later twentieth century.³⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s, feminists of all racial backgrounds confronted a host of stereotypes about racialized Southern womanhoods and about feminism. Rather than choose between womanhood and feminism, Southern feminists blended these concepts, talking and marching publicly about issues that “ladies” should not discuss, such as rape, domestic violence, and pornography. They also continued to fight racism, even if in organizations often separated in terms of race, making the causes of feminism and anti-racism inextricably linked.³⁵

Midwestern women’s history is also marked by a uniqueness of region, but rather than confronting a history of cultural distance from the rest of the country, women of the Midwest have lived life “at the crossroads” of American culture.³⁶ Confronting the “stereotype of the Midwest as drab,” historian Glenda Riley raised a different perspective: “modern Americans also refer to the Midwest as the ‘heartland’ of the United States. Can a region be both things—downright mediocre *and* the

³⁴ For more on the suffrage movement in the South, see Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, ed., *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement* (Troutdale, OR: NewSage Press, 1995); Carol Lynn Yellin and Janann Sherman, *The Perfect 36: Tennessee Delivers Woman Suffrage* (New York: Iris Books, 1996); and Jean H. Baker, ed., *Votes for Women: The Struggle for Suffrage Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁵ Jane Sherron DeHart, “Second Wave Feminism(s) and the South: The Difference that Difference Makes,” in *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Christie Anne Farnham (New York: NYU Press, 1997).

³⁶ Lucy Eldersveld Murphy and Wendy Hamand Venet, eds., *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

essential core of a nation? Apparently so, for many people like to think of a ‘heart’ as solid, sturdy, and basically obscure. But a heart also provides crucial services; it keeps the extremities of New York and California alive.”³⁷ But beyond being the heartland of America, the Midwest witnessed a groundswell of activism that would become the second wave of U.S feminism as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Elizabeth Boyer, Dorothy Haener, Addie Wyatt, and many other feminists came of age in the Midwest but became nationally significant activists who addressed issues of labor, gender, race, and education as second-wave feminist issues. Their movement is not surprising, given that the Midwest as a crossroads region has been “a region of continuous migration” in which “Midwestern women’s efforts were crucial in community building.”³⁸ In Columbus, Ohio, some activists built feminist community, grappling at once with their lives in the heartland and in a national movement for feminist change.

The West, by contrast, is hardly “drab.” Its dramatic topography—from the blistering desert to the snow-capped mountains, the enormous sequoias in the national forests to the sandy beaches—offers a contemplative serenity unlike any other region of the country. In studies of the U.S. West, the lives of Chicana women laborers, Chinese women in San Francisco’s Chinatown, and Native American women all make clear that racial/ethnic communities in the region view “the West” differently

³⁷ Glenda Riley, “Foreword,” *Midwestern Women*, ix-xi, quotation on ix.

³⁸ Wendy Vanet and Lucy Murphy, “Introduction,” *Midwestern Women*, 1-14, quotations on 11.

from one another.³⁹ But rather than operate independently of one another exclusively, feminists in the West, San Francisco in particular, often work in coalition with one another, evincing a public toleration for difference that is less prominent in other regions of the country.

In this study of NOW chapters in Memphis, Columbus, and San Francisco, I explore what women were doing and thinking in different kinds of communities: a Southern city, a Midwestern community, and a West Coast progressive location. In Memphis, black-white racial dynamics, a lack of toleration of lesbians, and political conservatism shaped feminist activism. Likewise, Columbus had a dominant white population and relatively conservative political climate (though less so than in Memphis). But it also boasted an open lesbian community, a strong university presence, and a history of radical feminism. San Francisco offered feminists racial and ethnic diversity, a progressive political climate, and a history of lesbian and gay activism. Although these locations cannot represent what was going on everywhere across the country, they do constitute a range of political, economic, and social contexts. This study, then, offers both geographical diversity and comparative analysis absent in most studies of the women's movement.

³⁹ See, for example, Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Nancy Shoemaker, *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Moreover, these communities offer different contexts in which second-wave feminism, and NOW chapters in particular, emerged. In Memphis, NOW was the only explicitly feminist, membership-based organization during the heyday of the second wave. In this “sleepy little river town,” NOW was everything to everyone because it had to be. San Francisco NOW, by contrast, was part of the city’s progressive and feminist forces. Feminists had a variety of organizational options in this “wide-open town”; those who chose NOW did so to be a part of the forefront of feminist coalition building to create social change. In Columbus, however, NOW existed somewhere between the Ohio Commission on the Status of Women (OCSW), organized women with a history of activism within the liberal establishment, and on the fringe of a wide-reaching radical feminist community that coalesced under the umbrella of the Women’s Action Collective (WAC). NOW feminists focused on material rights for women in this “cowtown,” blending radical feminist analyses and strategies with liberal feminism in a way that OCSW and WAC could not.

To analyze here how feminism and the three NOW chapters took shape and what NOW feminists were doing on the ground, I draw upon sociologist Mary Bernstein’s concept of “identity deployment.”⁴⁰ Using the lesbian and gay movement as a case study, Bernstein suggested that context determines how activists articulate and construct their collective identity, either as contemptuous of and a better alternative to dominant culture or as drawing similarities to the mainstream of

⁴⁰ Bernstein, “Celebration and Suppression;” and Bernstein, “Identities and Politics.” See also Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), esp. chap. 16.

society. Extending this idea to the women's movement, feminists in NOW chapters often expressed their feminist identity and tailored their strategies and goals to the local context in which they operated. At times, their actions appeared to toe the standard liberal feminist line. In the context of the Equal Rights Amendment, NOW activists often stressed their similarities to men, fostering and mobilizing around an identity that suppressed differences. At other times—or perhaps more to the point, in response to different issues—NOW members embraced radical feminist practices and actions. In doing so, they cultivated an identity that celebrated differences and embraced women's values as distinct from men's.

The National Organization for Women provides a vital element of continuity and a solid basis for comparison, but in some ways, it is only by virtue of being affiliated with NOW that these feminists share common ground. Some of their issues were the same but the strategies available to them to pursue feminist goals were driven by the context in which they operated. Rather than explore their feminism simply as “liberal” (which one has come to expect when talking about NOW) or “radical” (the perceived alternative), I look instead to their activism—their motives, strategies, goals, and outcomes—as it was affected by the local contexts in which they lived as feminists. In their actions, the boundaries between “liberal” and “radical” become less significant. What emerges as salient is the ways in which feminists acted within the context of their cities, how they confronted region-based stereotypes, how they worked with other activists within and beyond the women's movement, and how they achieved their outcomes (or, in some cases, why they did not succeed).

This project rests on feminist research, which implies “a perspective...in which women’s experiences, ideas, and needs are viewed as valid in their own right.”⁴¹ In conducting the research for this project, I have relied upon a variety of sources, all of which illuminate the lives of NOW women and their communities—and all with both possibilities and limitations. I interviewed over 40 women involved in NOW at the national and local levels, locating the names of national leaders and rank-and-file members in the archives. Through what social scientists call the “snowball” method, I found the names, and sometimes contact information, for some members during interviews I conducted. Collecting oral histories about feminist activism in general and NOW membership in particular allowed for a different perspective on the organization, the movement, and postwar social and political activism.

Oral history can shift perspective from the organization to the individuals being interviewed, and relying upon them incurs the risk of recording and analyzing selective and non-representative memories (and careful omissions). Still, interviews give insight into events that may not be recorded in organizational records; answer questions about happenings mentioned in passing in such records; or give a different perspective or behind-the-scenes information about notable events. Such research offers a richer picture of the complex conflicts, struggles, and negotiations that take place among activists within organizations. As a feminist historian, I also think it is

⁴¹ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, “Researching the Women’s Movement: We Make Our Own History, But Just Not as We Please,” in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, ed. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 121.

vital to capture the lives and words of individual women who made up this organization—women who were not necessarily national leaders but who made important gains for others in their day-to-day lives. They often shared with me their private motivations for feminist activism—“the personal is political” was not just a slogan for street protests and legislative actions but also provided a personal stimulus for many women to join the movement and their local NOW chapters; the political was also personal.

To supplement interviews, I have utilized chapter newsletters, minutes from meetings, and other archival sources, as well as documents and other ephemera in chapter members’ possession.⁴² Like other historians who work in archival documents, I have been limited by what chapter newsletter editors or recording secretaries documented. These records, however, along with media coverage (newspaper, news and feminist magazines, and television), create a sense of what issues sparked feminists to action and what strategies they employed to remedy

⁴² Archival material is housed in the following places: Ned R. McWherter Library, The University of Memphis (Memphis NOW); The Ohio Historical Society (Columbus NOW); The Bancroft Library, The University of California (San Francisco NOW); The Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, San Francisco (San Francisco NOW, Golden Gate NOW); and The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College (national NOW and chapter records). Audrey May gave me a near-complete set of Memphis NOW newsletters from 1971 to 1986. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon gave me copies of Northern California, San Francisco, and Golden Gate chapters of NOW as well as copies of personal correspondence with various national NOW leaders. Aileen Hernandez also gave me copies of newsletters and personal correspondence. I have also consulted newspaper archives at the McWherter Library; William Oxley Library, The Ohio State University; and The Bancroft Library, The University of California.

undesirable situations. These resources, along with secondary sources, allow me to explore how women created feminist communities through NOW and how they interacted with the larger environments in which they lived.

In order to understand NOW historically and at the local level, I have explored the context in which it emerged. Chapter two explores this context and the creation of NOW. It also provides insight into the early years of NOW. Chapters three, four, and five focus on the Memphis, San Francisco, and Columbus chapters respectively. Each NOW chapter offers a different angle from which to understand how feminists created change at the grassroots level and how and why they used NOW to do so. This format allows me to delve into each chapter's particular history and the nuances that shaped the development of feminism at the local level. It also allows me the opportunity to draw conclusions about this project as a whole, which form the basis of chapter six.

Although many women committed themselves to the national organization and its agenda, their goal was to create feminist change locally. Such change did not come easily, and it is important to see how women grappled with both external and internal impediments. These chapters represented groups of women working out their common interests, highlighting their collective disadvantaged status, and claiming their rights as women to make decisions about how best to improve their conditions. NOW feminists worked within their cities to provide women with understandings of their status within political, economic, and social structures as well as ways to change it. What issues NOW members addressed depended not only on the national agenda but also on their day-to-day experiences and observations. Important issues for NOW

chapters included rape, violence against women, pornography, the “glass ceiling” and other forms of sex discrimination on the job, child care, and media representations of women. However, each chapter employed different strategies and tactics to change the ways their communities responded to these problems. As Aileen Hernandez, former EEOC commissioner and second national president of NOW, explained, chapters would never “look like cookie cutters of each other because the local issues differed dramatically from place to place.”⁴³ Exploring their divergent strategies and goals—the dynamics of feminism in action—reveals the limitations of thinking about NOW exclusively as a liberal feminist organization. It also demonstrates the importance of understanding how local context shapes and is shaped by feminist activism.

⁴³ Interview, Aileen Hernandez, 12 May 2002.

CHAPTER 2

IN THE MIDST OF “THE WORLD-WIDE REVOLUTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS”:
CREATING THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN

We, men and women who hereby constitute ourselves as the National Organization for Women, believe that the time has come for a new movement toward true equality for all women in America, and toward a fully equal partnership of the sexes, as part of the world-wide revolution of human rights now taking place within and beyond our national borders.¹

On 29 October 1966, the National Organization for Women was officially organized; these words open its statement of purpose. With the goal of “bring[ing] women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men,” NOW became the largest, explicitly feminist organization in the second wave of the women’s movement. This chapter sketches a history of NOW as an organization, but also the context in which NOW emerged in the mid-1960s, in the midst of an era of “world-wide revolution for human rights.” It also explores the early years of NOW, the time in which NOW carved out a place for itself in the women’s movement and

¹ NOW Statement of Purpose, in *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present*, ed. Miriam Schneir (New York: Vintage, 1994): 95-102, quotation on 96. All references to the NOW Statement of Purpose will refer to this reprint.

set the course for the organization, both nationally and locally. Rather than offer a complete history of NOW, I seek here to contextualize the rise of this organization within the women's movement and explore the development of chapters within the organization.

"Beneath Those Charred Bras Revolution Smolders": The Cultural Context

In a March 1970 *Washington Post* article, journalist Mary Wiegers opined, "to those who have had their fill of radical movements, the reawakening of a strident women's rights movement is about as welcome as finding out that coffee causes cancer. But reawakening it is."² Had people "had their fill" of social movements by the beginning of the 1970s? Were they ready for a return to normalcy and to turn the world, or at least the United States, "right side up"?³ While Wiegers' article, "Beneath these Charred Bras Revolution Smolders," turns its attention to women's liberation groups in a specific sense, it refers "to a gamut of organizations, from the work-within-the-system reformists like Betty Friedan's National Organization for Women (NOW) to the radical W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell)." In order to make sense of NOW, it is crucial to understand the cultural context of revolution and upheaval in which it emerged.

² Mary Wiegers, "Beneath those Charred Bras Revolution Smolders," *Washington Post* 8 March 1970, G1, G3.

³ Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (New York: Mariner Books, 1996).

Wieger's article suggests that, by 1970, there were two distinct branches of the women's movement—reformist and radical. The historical narrative supports these two distinct tracks in which second-wave feminism emerged as a movement, “radical” feminism from radical elements of contemporaneous social movement activism and “liberal” feminism from confrontations within the liberal establishment. Such a trajectory has firmly entrenched NOW—its roots and its historical development—in the liberal establishment. While this is not completely wrong, it is also not universally right. With all of the revolutionary ferment in the long decade of the 1960s,⁴ it would be impossibly myopic to suggest that the feminists who founded NOW were merely the products of conflict with the liberal establishment. The founding of NOW was, instead, a response to confrontations both within and beyond the postwar liberal establishment. Its roots, identifiable through its founders, included people with histories in civil rights activism, union organizing and activism, government agencies, and religious structures. NOW's history has been bounded by a singular narrative of women's movement activism that ignores the many aspects of

⁴ While they do not necessarily call it the “long decade,” Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin discuss the decade of the 1960s not as numerical but as cultural, “defined by movements and issues that arose soon after the end of World War II and were only partially resolved by the time Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency” in 1974. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), ix.

U.S. culture that gave way to NOW, second-wave feminism in general, and broader cultural and political change.⁵

The 1960s represents in many ways a time of redefining culture in the United States. Although some see the decade as an aberration, historians Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin offer a different perspective, one that examines the decade as an integral part of American history. They importantly draw upon the realities of the era, suggesting that “the insurgent political and social movements of the decade—including civil rights and black power, the new left, environmentalism, and feminism—drew upon even as they sought to transform values and beliefs deeply rooted in American political culture.”⁶ Furthermore, as people advocated social change through pacifism, class equality, democratic politics, and sexual freedom, they built upon a celebration of difference while simultaneously drawing upon common values and beliefs in American culture.⁷ As a society, people in various racial/ethnic communities were situated in an unequal hierarchy in this time of general postwar prosperity. Black and Chicano communities saw the rise of a postwar middle class, but it was an incomplete process, one that people sought to remedy through social movement protest. At the same time, some students on college campuses advocated pacifism, invoking their constitutional right to free speech. Increasing entrenchment in an undeclared war in Viet Nam raised a host of cultural questions ranging from the

⁵ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁶ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 4-5.

⁷ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 11.

United States' role in global imperialism to who, if anyone, should fight this, or any, war. Women were involved in these overlapping movements; from their experiences and interests, they also developed a feminist framework through which to understand these issues as well as those affecting women uniquely or differently.⁸

This context shapes the formation and rise of the National Organization for Women. Its founders advocated both liberal change and radical overhaul—as activists in various ways both prior to the founding of NOW and through the organization itself. While it is impractical (and impossible) to trace the background of each individual involved in NOW, it is unrealistic to believe that as feminism developed among women in NOW, it obliterated their other concerns or disconnected them from contemporaneous social movements.⁹ Instead, founders and members brought a host of issues, tactical repertoires, and goals, all of which they manifested through the National Organization for Women. Before turning to NOW's organized activism, I discuss the 1966 founding of the National Organization for Women and some of the women who led this new feminist organization. Looking at NOW's earliest members and documents—something very few historians do when talking about the rise of second-wave feminism—suggests that NOW was both liberal and radical from the

⁸ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*; Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000); and Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

⁹ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 5.

outset. I then turn to early chapter activism to explore the framework through which NOW feminists expressed themselves and pursued feminist change.

The Feminist “Underground”

Although feminist activism had been underway—especially within the liberal establishment—the federal government helped set the stage for social movement activism in general and feminism in particular.¹⁰ Women in the twentieth century had protested inequalities on the basis of sex, but when the federal government stepped in, especially with important presidential orders, court cases, and legislation specifying equality under the law, there were undoubtedly greater opportunities for success.

In 1961, President John Kennedy attempted to stave off support for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment by creating the President’s Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW). Appointing Eleanor Roosevelt as honorary chair of the commission and selecting various women from the Women’s Bureau, labor department, and Democratic Party to serve on the PCSW, Kennedy charged it with a fact-finding mission on the experiences of American women. After two years of work, the commission presented its report, *American Women*, to the president on 11 October 1963 (Eleanor Roosevelt’s birthday; she died in 1962). This report documented widespread job discrimination against women and recommended guarantees for equal treatment, including a cabinet post to monitor discrimination and

¹⁰ Harrison, *On Account of Sex*; Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream*, Hartmann, *The Other Feminists*; Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); and Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums*.

offer solutions and an executive order tying equal opportunity for women to companies receiving federal funds. Commission members had been selected in part because of their opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and *American Women* argued that a separate amendment was not necessary since equality was already afforded to women in the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The report optimistically suggested that the courts would affirm such an interpretation and urged women to file discrimination grievances in the courts. Furthermore, the commission mandated that each state convene commissions on the status of women at the state level. Although critical, *American Women* was ultimately optimistic in suggesting that the problems of sex discrimination could be remedied.¹¹

In 1963, Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act, which endorsed the principle of equal pay for men and women doing the same work but did not mandate equal access to jobs. As sociologists Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess suggest, this legislation was not simply the result of the PCSW recommendations but was perhaps more to the point a reflection of “union concern that employers not hire women at a lower rate of pay in order to replace men or to drive down male wages.”¹² The following year, the pending Civil Rights Act was broadened to include “sex” in the act’s Title VII, which concerned equal employment opportunities. Some suggest that the addition of “sex” was an attempt on the part of a southern congressman to defeat the act altogether, but

¹¹ The definitive study of the PCSW is Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex*. See also Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream*; Ferree and Hess, *Controversy and Coalition*; and Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums*.

¹² Ferree and Hess, *Controversy and Coalition*, 63.

once it was in, a small group of members of Congress and feminists in the National Woman's Party lobbied for it to stay. Congress passed the act—as amended—in 1964, although President Johnson signed it at a ceremony where no women were present and with no mention of equal rights for women.¹³

The Civil Rights Act also created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and charged it with handling complaints brought under Title VII. Although a high proportion of complaints that came to the EEOC were charges of sex discrimination, the EEOC decided not to deal with sex discrimination cases and handled nearly exclusively complaints of racial discrimination, guaranteeing that the Commission would not take women's rights seriously. So when the state commissions on the status of women convened in June 1966, many women joined Representative Martha Griffiths in charging the EEOC with a failure to take its mandate seriously. It was one thing to recognize that the EEOC had little power to enforce its decisions; it was another thing altogether to make open jokes about sex discrimination and deny claimants with legal recourse—both of which some EEOC commissioners did.

With legislation in place, then, the federal government unwittingly laid the groundwork for further social and political protest. State commissioners were often appointed for the same reasons that Kennedy appointed women to the PCSW—repaying political debts to women who had helped governors win campaigns.¹⁴ But there were many unintended consequences that resulted from the state

¹³ Robinson, "Two Movements in Pursuit of Equal Opportunities."

¹⁴ Ferree and Hess, *Controversy and Coalition*, 63-64.

commissioners' meetings, including many state commissions pushing for state Equal Rights Amendments. The state commissions, which represented networks of community and political leaders at the state and local levels, also created a "climate of expectations that something would be done."¹⁵ At the third meeting on the state commissioners, something rather unexpected happened.

Many scholars gloss over NOW's founding, often suggesting it was the result of the work of one woman—Betty Friedan—and do so to point out the direct line of descent from actions on behalf of women in the formal political arena to the founding of this organization. Giving Friedan the lion's share of the credit, many note that she called for a covert meeting of women who were angered that the 1966 meeting leaders would not condemn the EEOC for its failure to take sex discrimination charges seriously. After this now-famous meeting in her hotel room, she scribbled on a napkin the words "National Organization for Women" and called for an organization that would lobby for women the way the NAACP lobbied on behalf of African Americans. While these events did in fact take place, they are not the whole of the founding of NOW. Indeed, as the PCSW and state commissions—as well as important secondary scholarship—indicate, a broad network of feminists and sympathetic organizations existed well before NOW's founding, and the organization

¹⁵ Jo Freeman, "The Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement," *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973): 792-811, quotation on 798.

drew heavily from this network for its founders and early members.¹⁶ Even in the doldrums and in a time of feminist “abeyance,” organizations persisted and proliferated, including the National Federation of Business and Profession Women’s Clubs (BPW), American Association of University Women (AAUW), League of Women Voters (LWV), National Woman’s Party (NWP), and Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).¹⁷ In addition to such organizational presence, women who would become NOW founders and early members were also in positions of power in the Women’s Bureau, the state commissions on the status of women, and the EEOC. Understanding the breadth of leadership among the founders of NOW sheds necessary light on the many different women who were instrumental in founding and leading this longstanding feminist organization, allowing us, finally, to move beyond the Friedan mystique.

Although it is impossible to trace the biographies and activism of the two dozen founding members—much less the three hundred women and men who would attend NOW’s organizing meeting in October 1966—a glimpse into a select few provides a sample of the backgrounds of the activists who founded NOW. NOW did

¹⁶ Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums*; Harrison, *On Account of Sex*; Hartmann, *The Other Feminists*; and Maryann Barakso, “Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women, 1966-2000,” (Ph.D. diss., Barnard College, 1990).

¹⁷ Verta Taylor, “Social Movement Continuity: The Women’s Movement in Abeyance,” *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989): 761-75; and Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums*. In *Worlds of Women*, Rupp traces the history of the international women’s movement during this era of abeyance in U.S. feminism, which also involved many U.S. feminists.

have initial support from some of the state commissions on the status of women; in fact, NOW's first Chairman of the Board, Kathryn (Kay) Clarenbach, also chaired Wisconsin's Status of Women Commission. But most of NOW's support came from other and diverse avenues. Aileen Hernandez and Richard Graham were EEOC commissioners, both of whom had been pushing against the majority to hear cases of sex discrimination with the legal support of EEOC lawyer Sonia (Sonny) Pressman. Caroline Davis was director of the women's department of the United Auto Workers; Dorothy Haener was also an important union leader, and Hernandez had been a labor organizer in San Francisco. Muriel Fox was a public relations executive who, along with television newscasters Betty Furness and Marlene Sanders, gave important media image and "spin" to the nascent civil rights group.

Other individual women had been making a name for themselves through publications and activism. Dr. Pauli Murray, along with Mary O. Eastwood, published an article in the *George Washington Law Review* entitled "Jane Crow and the Law," which examined the effects of Title VII on women's rights. Shortly before the article appeared, Murray had addressed the National Council of Women of the United States, where she condemned sex-segregated want ads. The *New York Times* reported that Murray urged protest: "If it becomes necessary to march on Washington to assure equal job opportunities for all, I hope women will not flinch from the thought."¹⁸

¹⁸ Toni Carabillo, Judith Mueli, and June Bundy Cisca, *Feminist Chronicles, 1953-1993* (Los Angeles: Women's Graphics, 1993), 47. For more on Pauli Murray, see "Pauli Murray's Notable Connections," *Journal of Women's History* 14 (summer 2002): 54-87. In this symposium, scholars traced different

Giving credit for the formation of the National Organization for Women to Friedan alone elides the participation of these different, and differently influential, women. Friedan herself even acknowledged the broad and diverse group of women and men who founded and joined NOW, indicating that it came to fruition largely because of the feminist “underground” that recruited and cajoled her.¹⁹ She was similarly feisty to her NOW colleagues, encouraging women to resist “the problem that has no name” and find themselves in spite of the feminine mystique that defined (white, middle-class) women’s lives. Although Friedan is probably most well-known for her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, prior to its 1963 publication, she was also a freelance writer who wrote about union organizing and issues. Her contacts and her left-wing associations were invaluable resources for NOW’s early organizing efforts.²⁰ Although Friedan pushed for creation of a new feminist organization, she was also pushed into it by such women as Eastwood and Davis, who feared losing their positions of power in the Labor Department and UAW, respectively. As “suffragettes, dauntless old women now in their eighties and nineties who chained themselves to the White House fence to get the vote” called upon Friedan to “do something about getting Title VII enforced,” they also pushed her into heading up a

aspects of Murray’s political and personal life. See especially Susan M. Hartmann, “Pauli Murray and the ‘Juncture of Women’s Liberation and Black Liberation,’” 74-77.

¹⁹ Betty Friedan, *Life So Far* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 171-72.

²⁰ Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

broad-based civil rights organization.²¹ She and other NOW founders felt a sense of disdain for the state commissioners and recognized that such groups as BPW and AAUW (of whom some founders were members) were not particularly interested in broadening their political base to become a civil rights group for all women. At the June 1966 meeting of state commissions on the status of women, they founded NOW.

The feminist “underground” avoided the spotlight, pressuring Friedan instead to hold a press conference to publicize the EEOC’s lackluster handling of sex discrimination cases. Friedan was a likely candidate to do so—in addition to her fame (perhaps notoriety) after publishing *The Feminine Mystique*, she was in a unique position at the meeting because she used a press pass to attend.²² Since she did not have official business as a commissioner, she was able to charge the government with laziness on sex discrimination. She met with commissioners and other interested people who wanted to bring a resolution to the floor of the meeting demanding enforcement of Title VII and calling for Richard Graham’s reappointment (Graham was the only one of the four male appointees who was sympathetic to women’s claims). When Esther Peterson, chair of the PCSW, informed the women that they could not bring the resolution to the floor, the founders of NOW set out to plan their new organization. Thinking of an organizing conference four months later, they

²¹ Friedan, *Life So Far*, 169.

²² Barakso, “Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women.”

embraced the reality that “such a group would be free to act...and be free to speak out unhampered by official connection with the government.”²³

Over two hundred people attended the organizing conference in Washington, D.C. in October 1966. These women and men—members of government agencies and departments, labor organizers, political party activists, members of such groups as BPW, AAUW, and the National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL)—provided not only revenue at the early, critical stages but also feminist networks. In addition, they brought with them personal experience and differences; they had employed a variety of strategies to draw attention to feminism from outside the formal political system as well as within it. Their networks offered political depth and insight as well as media and professional contacts. Within six months of NOW’s formation, the newly appointed Board of Directors—chaired by Kay Clarenbach and filled out by women from labor unions, religious orders, and universities—held press conferences to broadcast its “targets for action.”

Documenting NOW’s Feminist Philosophy

At that first meeting in October, organizers elected Betty Friedan president and adopted a Statement of Purpose.²⁴ Because of founders’ backgrounds in liberal

²³ Minutes of the Organizing Conference, National Organization for Women (NOW), Saturday, October 29, 1966, National Organization for Women Collection, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²⁴ NOW, “Statement of Purpose,” in Miriam Schneir, ed., *Feminism in our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 95-102.

agencies and structures, scholars have (pre)determined NOW's liberal feminist mission and appellation. With such key phrases as "true equality for all women in America" and purporting to "take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society ... in truly equal partnership with men," it seems that NOW was less concerned with a radical overhaul of American politics and culture. However, this document also suggests the seeds of feminist revolution and, I argue, should not be read exclusively as the documentary broadside of liberal feminism.²⁵

In the "Statement of Purpose," NOW affirms its commitment to "action, nationally, or in any part of this nation, by individuals or organizations, to break through the silken curtain of prejudice and discrimination against women in government, industry, the professions, the churches, the political parties, the judiciary, the labor unions, in education, science, medicine, law, religion, and every other field of importance in American society."²⁶ Aware again of the environment around them, it states that "enormous changes taking place in our society make it both possible and urgently necessary to advance the unfinished revolution of women toward true equality, now."²⁷ By comparison to self-defined radical feminist groups that eschewed partnership with men or identified men as the natural and cultural

²⁵ See also Barakso, *Governing NOW*.

²⁶ "Statement of Purpose," 97.

²⁷ Statement of Purpose, 97.

enemy of women, NOW proposed to work with men, seeing them as “victims of the current half-equality between the sexes.”²⁸

But NOW founders did not reject those issues that radical feminists would soon be credited with bringing to the forefront of American cultural and political debate, particularly the need to change fundamentally the social structure in order to bring about an egalitarian culture. For example, Friedan has suggested that she was rather uncomfortable with the analogy between NOW and NAACP, indicating that the NAACP model was not quite radical enough: “We were talking about a *revolution*, and though the NAACP fought for black people (not like those women’s organizations so afraid of being called ‘feminist’), the NAACP was not considered a radical organization at all.”²⁹ Some scholars have read the Statement of Purpose solely for the demand to become a part of the mainstream and to have input in decision-making, seeing NOW as uninterested in fundamental social change. However, I suggest that this was not exclusively the case. The Statement of Purpose repeatedly acknowledged, for example, that marriage and motherhood have placed the greatest constraints on women’s lives: “it is no longer either necessary or possible for women to devote the greater part of their lives to child-rearing; yet childbearing and rearing—which continues to be a most important part of most women’s lives—still is used to justify barring women from equal professional and economic participation and advance.”³⁰ Further, it states, “we do not accept the traditional

²⁸ Statement of Purpose, 102.

²⁹ Friedan, *Life so Far*, 171. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ Statement of Purpose, 97.

assumption that a woman has to choose between marriage and motherhood, on the one hand, and serious participation in industry or the professions on the other.” The solution as NOW proposed it: “True equality of opportunity and freedom of choice for women requires such practical and possible innovations as a nationwide network of child-care centers, which will make it unnecessary for women to retire completely from society until their children are grown, and national programs to provide retraining for women who have chosen to care for their own children full-time.”³¹ Radical and socialist feminists issued similar calls, suggesting that such patriarchal institutions shackled women.³² Parsing this document, then, suggests that the organization, even in its early years, defies strict categorization, or at the very least, cannot be used as a substitute for “liberal feminism,” given that it offered cultural critiques and solutions to problems that would require a complete overhaul of American society.

Having established itself with a Statement of Purpose, NOW issued its Bill of Rights for Women at the 1967 national conference. As adopted, the Bill of Rights included the following demands that embodied the principles laid out in the Statement of Purpose: 1) the ERA; 2) enforcement of laws banning sex discrimination in

³¹ Statement of Purpose, 100.

³² See, for example, Valerie Solanis, “SCUM Manifesto,” in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 201-22; Redstockings, “Redstockings Manifesto,” in *Radical Feminism*, 223-25; Joreen Freeman, “The Bitch Manifesto,” in *Radical Feminism*, 226-32; and Radicalesbians, “The Woman-Identified Woman,” in *Radical Feminism*, 233-37.

employment; 3) maternity leave rights in employment and social security benefits; 4) child day care centers; 5) tax deductions for home and child-care expenses for working parents; 6) equal and unsegregated education; 7) equal job training opportunities and allowances for women in poverty; and 8) women's unqualified control of their reproductive lives. The membership accepted six of the eight "rights" without controversy, but when the subjects of the Equal Rights Amendment and the call for repealing antiabortion and anticontraceptive laws came to the floor, sides formed. When the two controversial measures were passed, a number of members departed from the nascent feminist organization.

By 1967, the majority of union women in NOW supported the ERA, but the unions to which they belonged did not yet support it. Many labor women, including NOW secretary/treasurer Caroline Davis, who also belonged to the UAW, lobbied their unions to drop their anti-ERA stances, but to no avail. When NOW came out in support of the ERA, some women left NOW; others retained membership but shied away from overt activism. Indeed, the UAW, through Davis's office, had been subsidizing NOW's early printing and mailing costs. When NOW supported the ERA, it had to leave behind its UAW office space. (The irony, of course, is that the UAW became the first major union to endorse the ERA.³³)

³³ Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Dennis Deslippe, *Rights, Not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); and Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

The fight for reproductive freedom proved an even more contentious issue than the ERA. NOW leaders took a big risk coming out in favor of repealing abortion laws, a decision that cost them numerous members. Some, including founder Elizabeth Boyer, an Ohio lawyer, founded the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL). NOW might have retained these members had they called for reform instead of complete repeal, but it did not. However, NOW also lost radical members as a result of its stance on abortion. In 1968, members of NOW's first chapter, New York NOW, proclaimed that NOW was corrupted by its own bureaucratic and centralized structure and called for greater egalitarian decision making. Led by Ti-Grace Atkinson, those making this call were defeated when the measure to change the chapter's structure was brought to a vote; as a result, those who preferred less structure left NOW and founded The Feminists. An interesting sidebar to this story, however, is that The Feminists also believed that because NOW refused to confront churches' oppositions to abortion, especially the Catholic Church, they were simply reformist, a position some women were starting to reject.³⁴

These issues caused the greatest dissent within the organization—and depending on one's vantage point, NOW was either too conservative or too radical. But the greatest struggle surrounding the ERA and reproductive rights emerged outside of NOW as these issues became important legal and cultural ways to separate pro-ERA and pro-choice activists as feminists from anti-ERA and anti-choice

³⁴ Kathleen C. Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1999): 35.

activists as anti-feminists.³⁵ When the ERA passed both houses of Congress in 1972, state ratification seemed a foregone conclusion. A strong and vocal opposition grew up from the grassroots, challenging the threat to “traditional” gender roles that enhanced differences between women and men; in the process, it solidified the conservative ascendancy in the United States. Conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly became the spokesperson for the anti-ERA campaign and used the amendment as a symbol of all that had gone awry in postwar America. She and many people around the nation felt that “equality” would threaten the “natural,” God-ordained (which also meant “white” and “heterosexual”) order of society.³⁶ Through her organization Eagle Forum, she mobilized thousands of Americans to work to defeat the ERA. By 1977, after thirty-five states ratified the amendment (thirty-eight states made up the

³⁵ On abortion, see Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Fay Ginsburg, *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). On polarized language used in the abortion debate, see Dawn McCaffrey and Jennifer Keys, “Competitive Framing Process in the Abortion Debate: Polarization-vilification, Frame Saving, and Frame Debunking,” *Sociological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2000): 41-61. On the ERA, see Jane Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Mary Frances Berry, *Why ERA Failed: Politics, Women’s Rights, and the Amending Process of the Constitution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); and Donald Mathews and Jane Sherron DeHart, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA: A State and a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Ruth Murray Brown, *For a “Christian America”: A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002) discusses both issues in the context of the religious right and conservative ascendancy in postwar United States.

³⁶ Ruth Murray Brown, *For a Christian America: A History of the Religious Right* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000).

necessary two-thirds of states needed to amend the Constitution), grassroots volunteers had mobilized into a highly organized force to ensure that no more states would ratify. As I recount in detail in later chapters, some local NOW chapters fought this growing opposition, albeit in different ways, when the amendment moved to the states for ratification. Pro-ERA advocates, including NOW chapter members, secured a Congressional extension in 1979, but to no avail; in 1982, the ERA failed.³⁷

Abortion and reproductive freedom also became volatile issues in the United States and, like the ERA, one's position in support of or opposition to abortion and reproductive rights determined one's alignment as a feminist. After the Supreme Court affirmed the right to privacy, and in the process a woman's right to abortion, in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), "right-to-life" organizations sprang up, focusing their attention on the single issue of abortion and mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people from across religious, cultural, racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds to defeat the "feminist agenda," of which reproductive rights was the most egregious example. Their organization has also been successful—in part, owing to overlapping membership in anti-choice and anti-ERA groups; in addition to mobilizing masses of people and politicizing the language of the debate ("baby" vs. "fetus," for example), they have supported and applauded the gradual erosion of the *Roe* decision.³⁸

³⁷ Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*; Berry, *Why ERA Failed*; and Mathews and DeHart, *Sex, Gender, and the ERA*.

³⁸ On the polarizing language of abortion and motherhood, see Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

After 1973, the Supreme Court remained an important force in the struggles over reproductive rights, and NOW, especially through its separate Legal Defense and Educational Foundation (LDEF) in the mid-1970s, issued *amici curiae* in every case potentially affecting *Roe v. Wade* that came before the Court. Despite NOW's pleas to retain or extend the reproductive freedoms granted in *Roe*, the Court issued important challenges: *Maher v. Roe* (1977) upheld a Connecticut ban on abortions funded with public monies while *Harris v. McRae* (1980) upheld the Hyde Amendment, legislation that prohibited use of federal Medicaid money for elective abortions. In 1989, the Supreme Court case *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* upheld a Missouri law prohibiting the use of public employees and public facilities for the purpose of performing abortions that were not medically necessary. In *Planned Parenthood of Pennsylvania v. Casey* three years later, the Court upheld many restrictions on accessing abortion services, including requiring parental consent, anti-abortion counseling, and a mandatory waiting period. The Court did invalidate spousal notification for abortion, but many pro-choice advocates, including many NOW members, viewed *Casey* as a near-evisceration of the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Beyond the courts, however, abortion was also an important cultural barometer during the 1970s. During the television "sweeps" month of November 1972 (prior to the 1973 Supreme Court decision), the CBS television character "Maude" had an abortion after birth control failed her. (On the show, when "Maude's" brother "Walter" found out she was pregnant, he blurted, "The gismo! Why weren't you using the gismo?!" She replied, "I was. It didn't work.") Producer

and creator Norman Lear pointed out that television shows often deal with once-taboo subjects “but only with outsiders. A pregnant neighbor or one of Dr. Welby’s patients or a stranger wandering into the series might consider an abortion. But the star of a series herself—never! It’s never done.” Rather than stick with the first draft of the script, which had a pregnant neighbor of Maude’s consider an abortion, Lear and the show’s writers decided to have Maude contemplate and ultimately decide to have an abortion.³⁹

Organizational and individual support for and opposition to abortion emerged, which demonstrated strong divisions among Americans on the issue and foreshadowed the ways that abortion would become a bellwether for feminism. Although Maude openly and comically discussed her situation as a pregnant, divorced woman, many complained that there was nothing funny about this sitcom’s handling of the issue. For example, John McDevitt, chief officer of the Knights of Columbus, indicated that he and the organization he represented did not see abortion as “a laughing matter.” Public pronouncements indicated the gulf of opinion separating pro-choice proponents, such as NOW, and anti-choice advocates, including the Knights of Columbus. McDevitt stated, for example, “Should the advocates of permissive abortion desire to dispense their inducements to barbarity, they should not be given the medium of a popular television program at a prime children’s viewing hour.”⁴⁰ When, in Champaign, Illinois, the CBS affiliate announced its refusal to air the episode, the local NOW chapter filed a class-action suit seeking an emergency

³⁹ “Lady Objects to ‘Maude’ Episode,” *Los Angeles Times* 21 November 1972, part 4, page 16.

⁴⁰ “Notes on People,” *New York Times* 25 November 1972, page 13.

injunction requiring the station to air the show. The circuit court judge denied the case because the chapter failed to demonstrate necessary urgency, but the group continued to fight, seeking an order from the Federal Communication Commission to require the affiliate to air the show. Local station manager James Fielding invoked both his own personal feelings and his interpretation of the law regarding this volatile issue: “We don’t think abortion is a proper subject for treatment in a frivolous way in a comedy program. Moreover, the handling might be in violation of Illinois law,” referring to an Illinois state law that forbade advertising or advocacy of abortion.⁴¹

Such issues as the ERA and reproductive rights defined “feminism” in the public eye; NOW’s unqualified support for both, then, marked them as a leading feminist organization throughout the 1970s. NOW was not alone: according to the oft-cited 1972 “Virginia Slims American Women’s Opinion Poll,” “feminist thinking is gaining strength in virtually every demographic group of American women.”⁴² The ERA and reproductive rights were most often played out in the formal political arena, but it would be erroneous to suggest that the founders and early directors of NOW were attuned only to these areas of activism. As the first “Invitation to Join” stated, the founders sought to build upon the “ripe” political environment: “With so many Americans consciously concerned with full participation of all our citizens, and with dramatic progress at many levels in recent years, the time is ripe for concerted,

⁴¹ “NOW Suit over Maude Abortion Shows Denied,” *New York Times*, 25 November 1972, part 2, page 3.

⁴² “Virginia Slims American Women’s Opinion Poll,” 24 March 1972, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

directed national action.”⁴³ Founders also committed themselves to activism, “not...limited in its targets for action or methods of operation by official protocol.”⁴⁴ As political scientist Maryann Barakso has noted, “independence and activism were the two hallmarks of the group from its inception,” quoting from a letter from Alice Rossi to potential members that NOW was created out of the “conviction that there is a pressing need for an independent organization, free of involvement with political organizations on the state and federal level, which can move quickly to apply pressure when and where it is needed.”⁴⁵

From its origins in June 1966 to its first meeting four months later, founders wrote numerous letters to others who might be interested in joining. Although Friedan debated about whether the group should remain small or whether it should be a mass-based organization, it would become for many a grassroots group that held much sway in many locales as well as at the national level. Alice Rossi and Kay Clarenbach encouraged Friedan to direct attention to increasing NOW’s membership as it offered the greatest flexibility. Rossi wrote to Friedan in August 1966, “I do not think ... that such an organization should be a tiny group of elite persons, since there are so many situations in American society in which what will be politically and socially effective is not just direct personal influence, or quotes from prominent women, but the

⁴³ NOW, “An Invitation to Join,” September 1966, in *Feminist Chronicles*, 164.

⁴⁴ “An Invitation to Join.”

⁴⁵ Barakso, “Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women,” 71.

pressure represented by numerical strength....”⁴⁶ Friedan replied: “My stress against a ‘big bureaucratic organization’ did not mean I want a small select group, but rather an organization directed to action and not to perpetuating its own bureaucracy in the fashion of most women’s organizations, all of which it would seem to me to be completely ineffective, and none of which dare to tackle the problems we want to tackle.”⁴⁷

A National Organization for Women—Early Chapter Activism

This correspondence represents some of the early discussions about developing a mass base for the National Organization for Women, the focus of this project. But what it also suggests is that, from the beginning, NOW sought to be an action-based organization that would target problems women faced. Like the founders, NOW members also reflected many different ideological positions and strategies and targets of feminist activism, and represented, to varying degrees and based upon location, labor unions, business and professional women, leftist activists, women of color, younger women, and lesbians. Even when such women might not have been official members of NOW or one of its chapters, NOW feminists at every level often, but not always, grappled with their (overlapping) concerns.

NOW hoped to represent “all women in America...as part of a world-wide revolution of human rights,” but when it came to the realities of women’s lived

⁴⁶ Letter, Alice Rossi to Betty Friedan, 23 Aug 1966, quoted in Barakso, “Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women,” 72.

⁴⁷ Letter, Betty Friedan to Alice Rossi, 12 Oct 1966, quoted in Barakso, 72.

experiences and philosophies, being everything to everyone was clearly impossible. Many scholars have made this point, often to assert the whiteness and relative conservatism of NOW. To be sure, NOW was composed largely of white women, but this should not suggest that NOW members concerned themselves with feminist issues only as they affected white women. From its founding in 1966, NOW addressed poverty, racism, and inequality, issues and realities that many feminists in the organization witnessed, lived through, identified with, and understood.⁴⁸

Attention to NOW's activism on a broad range of issues may be absent from scholarly analyses of second-wave feminism in part because of what sociologist Benita Roth calls historical "white-washing"—the history of second-wave feminism is generally told from the vantage point of white women's activism; in this representation, women of color are assumed to have articulated different feminist positions only in response to white women's feminism. In addition to the reality that most people in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s were white (thus, it would stand to reason that most feminists were white), the media further whitewashed the movement by focusing nearly exclusively on white spokeswomen, especially

⁴⁸ Some scholars posit that NOW did a poor job of addressing poverty in women's lives, offering little more than lip service. See, for example, Marisa Chappell, "Rethinking Women's Politics in the 1970s: The National Organization for Women and the League of Women Voters Confront Poverty," *Journal of Women's History* 13 (winter 2002): 155-79; in this article, Chappell compares two organizations as they responded to poverty, but does so only from the national level, attributing action only to national leaders instead of the broad base of members in each organization. Others similarly criticize NOW at the national level for being ignorant to the vast and different inequalities in women's lives, but I suggest here and throughout this project that NOW is much more than the national leadership.

Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. Scholars adhered to this model of centering white women and assuming that feminists of color responded to them by embracing or rejecting their feminism instead of tracing feminist activism among women of color. This model also assumes that white feminism happened first, which may not be true.

In this project, I recognize that, relative to its overall membership, few women of color joined NOW. Oftentimes, explicitly anti-racist and feminist groups could and did create unwelcoming environments for women of color, despite real efforts to be aware of racism. However, I also agree with others who assert that it is not exclusively because women of color were hostile to NOW's issues, agendas, and membership (although some certainly were). Women of color were involved in their own organizations and issues, feminist and otherwise.⁴⁹ Indeed, the 1972 Virginia Slims poll indicated that "women's liberation" had a more positive meaning among Black women than among white women and that "Black women express dissatisfaction with their lives as women as well as members of a racial minority."⁵⁰ NOW membership may not have been the vehicle through which they expressed their

⁴⁹ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: WW Norton, 1999); Nancy Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Kimberly Springer, "Black Feminist Organizations and the Emergence of Interstitial Politics," in *Modern American Queer History*, ed. Allida M. Black (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁰ "Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Poll," 24 March 1972, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

feminism, but it does not follow that women of color were not feminists or that they were overtly hostile to NOW as white women's feminism. As Roth states, "Feminists of color saw themselves as belonging to a different movement than white feminists did, a self-perception that should be taken seriously."⁵¹

In light of this perspective, NOW sought to reach as many people as possible and address as many issues as members deemed important. The most important way they did this was through the formation of chapters. Chapters were officially incorporated into the organization's bylaws in 1967 but their potential importance was not immediately recognized: "It was agreed that NOW will basically function as a national organization of individual members, with provisions, however, for setting up local chapters where desired."⁵² Although membership grew rapidly in the first four years of its existence (3000 members in ten chapters by 1970), "local chapters have sprung up almost incidentally, usually through the efforts of local people, not national organizers."⁵³ Jo Freeman has noted that there were tremendous communication gaps between national officers and local chapters, and members were often unable to get basic material about NOW actions and goals; "other people wanted to start NOW chapters, but could not find out how to."⁵⁴ Such board members as Alice Rossi treated membership recruitment as a high priority, but the national organization lacked serious efforts to recruit members. Much of this is likely due to

⁵¹ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 11.

⁵² "Minutes of the Organizing Conference."

⁵³ Freeman, *Politics of Women's Liberation*, 88.

⁵⁴ Freeman, *Politics of Women's Liberation*, 87.

the loss of office space in 1968 along with the reality that NOW relied on volunteers, many of who worked full time and/or were mothers or caregivers who also worked “the second shift.”⁵⁵ Whatever the reason, national board members “feared that momentum and enthusiasm are being lost when there is a delay.”⁵⁶

In 1967, Board of Directors chair Kay Clarenbach suggested that “local chapters...may turn out to be the major action vehicles as well as the route to membership involvement.”⁵⁷ A key way to encourage membership in NOW was through its numerous task forces, ranging in subject from women in the media to religion to child care.⁵⁸ All task forces had a chairperson and issued statements that outlined NOW’s action agenda and philosophy on particular issues. Because “task

⁵⁵ This phrase comes from Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Viking, 1971).

⁵⁶ “Report of informal meeting of NOW members from Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin,” 21 Jan 1967, quoted in Barakso, “Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women,” 82.

⁵⁷ Memo from Kathryn Clarenbach to Board of Directors, 14 June 1967, quoted in Barakso, “Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women,” 85.

⁵⁸ By 1967, seven task forces were formed to address the following issues: equal employment opportunity, legal and political rights, women in poverty, education, image of women, family, women and religion. See Letter, Betty Friedan to NOW Member, 14 March 1967, Carabillo/Mueli Files, archived by David Dinsmore, Los Angeles. David Dinsmore has kept incredibly rich records of NOW activism as recorded in Toni Carabillo and Judith Mueli’s papers and in major newspapers. My thanks to him for generously sharing his archive and commitment to feminist history of the women’s movement.

force statements are basic documents of philosophy and will only reflect total NOW thinking when they become the products of many minds,” Clarenbach insisted on membership participation in the task forces.⁵⁹ However, she recognized that many women could not travel easily in order to meet face to face to generate statements and action policies. Still, it was vital to get word to existing chapters, and the members of the board of directors grappled with how to do so.

In addition to losing the office space (and the gratis postage) at the UAW offices, NOW operated on a shoestring budget and on the volunteer efforts of its members. NOW’s official office moved from Chicago to New York City to Washington, DC, often making interim stops in people’s living rooms.⁶⁰ Moving boxes of files was costly, especially in light of other expenses—court costs, mimeographing, postage, and other necessities that accompany organizational life. In a *NOW Acts* article entitled “Dollars and Sense of Revolution,” the board reminded members of their tremendous expenses in fighting court battles, maintaining communication among NOW members, and staging demonstrations: “any organization needs three things in order to be effective: meaning, members, and money. We have the first two but very little of the third. ... the real struggle, the work stage, is still very much with us.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Memo, Kathryn Clarenbach to Board of Directors, 14 June 1967, quoted in Barakso, “Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women,” 86.

⁶⁰ Interview with Dolores Alexander, 22 July 2002.

⁶¹ *NOW Acts*, “Dollars and Sense of Revolution,” vol. 3, no. 1 (winter 1970).

In spite of difficult starts on the part of the national board, chapters were growing, bringing women into the fold of NOW, feminism, and the “world-wide revolution for human rights.” Over time, NOW became an important first stop for women who moved from one place to another, offering an immediately familiar space for feminism. As members moved, they brought with them their own issues, styles, and tactics, offering greater organizational dynamics among members on the ground than would be reflected on the national board. As the national board implored members to give as much as they could, then, it also had to grapple with the myriad ways that members gave to NOW. As a national feminist community of chapters developed, so did internal diversity and, sometimes, conflict. This was most apparent in the national board’s conflict with its first and largest chapter, New York City NOW (NYC NOW).⁶²

NYC NOW grew quickly, its presence enhanced by its location in a city that is a national center of activism and politics. This chapter experienced a number of internal conflicts over strategies, structure, and goals. In 1968, for example, one faction within the chapter objected to the formal hierarchical structure the local (and

⁶² Sociologist Jo Reger has written extensively on New York City NOW. See

Jo Reger, “Social Movement Culture and Organizational Survival in the National Organization for Women,” (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1997), Jo Reger, “More than One Feminism: Organizational Structure, Ideology, and the Construction of Collective Identity,” in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*, ed. David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Jo Reger, “Organizational Dynamics and the Construction of Multiple Feminist Identities in the National Organization for Women,” *Gender and Society* 16, no. 5 (2002): 710-27.

national) leadership attempted to impose. Because some members abandoned the chapter for other groups, NYC NOW leaders quickly introduced and embraced such non-hierarchical philosophies as consciousness raising (CR) within the organization.⁶³ CR focused on the social construction of women's problems and their relationships to and in society, and it became widespread among chapters in the early 1970s. As Jo Freeman argues, it was initially the members who demanded CR in their chapter meetings, "It was with great reluctance that many NOW chapters set them up to 'cater' to the needs of their newest members. The idea...was contrary to NOW's image of itself as an action organization."⁶⁴ However, for many members in New York City and across the country, CR was a necessary action and chapter members wholeheartedly supported it.

Although NYC NOW overcame some differences by merging various feminist styles of organization under the umbrella of NOW feminism, other issues divided the New York chapter and the national organization. The "lavender menace" episode is perhaps the most noted highly recognized episode in NOW's early history. Although there had been lesbians among the national founders and earliest members (including Dolores Alexander, a NOW secretary who did not come out to Friedan

⁶³ Reger, "More than One Feminism," and Jo Reger, "Organizational 'Emotion Work' Through Consciousness-Raising: An Analysis of a Feminist Organization," *Qualitative Sociology* 27 (summer 2004): 205-22. Reger indicates that, as of 2000, the Consciousness-Raising Committee was still the largest and most active task force in the NYC NOW chapter.

⁶⁴ Freeman, *Politics of Women's Liberation*, 86.

until years later⁶⁵), it was not until the recalcitrant NYC NOW began to discuss lesbianism that Friedan started muttering about the lavender menace—although the issue quickly became significant among women across the many chapters.

In 1968, NYC NOW leader Ivy Bottini organized a CR session to address the question, “Is Lesbianism a Feminist Issue?” Bottini claims that because she brought lesbianism to the table, she was purged from the group through an active campaign to prevent her reelection to chapter office. She moved to Los Angeles and started many CR groups there, including some in NOW. But unrelated to Bottini’s west-coast activism, other lesbians started raising questions about lesbians’ issues as feminist ones. Daughters of Bilitis founders Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon recalled when they joined NOW: “It was 1967, and we heard this wonderful woman, Inka O’Hanrahan, talk on the radio about feminism and this group she’d helped to start called NOW....We sent in our money to join, sight unseen, and became members of NOW at the national level. It was not until the next year that we joined Northern California NOW.”⁶⁶ When it came time to renew their memberships in NOW, they decided to do so at the national level—for a reason. At this time, NOW offered discounted memberships to married couples—defined explicitly as husband and wife. Martin and Lyon, who had been together 15 years (and who celebrated their 51st anniversary by getting married in San Francisco in 2004), sent their membership forms to Inka, who was a national officer at the time, with a note: “I am sending these application forms to you as national treasurer inasmuch as I suspect this is a rather unusual request.

⁶⁵ Interview with Alexander, 22 July 2002.

⁶⁶ Interview, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, interview by author, 22 March 2002.

However, as a matter of principle, we feel that if you are going to allow a discount for husband and wife memberships, you should also allow the same for Lesbian liaisons. Phyllis and I have been together for fifteen years. As a couple or partnership we are denied tax breaks, but in the case of a civil rights organization we feel this courtesy should be extended.”⁶⁷ O’Hanrahan replied: “There is no reason why we should not allow the husband and wife reduction to apply to any other form of living together or homosexual liaison. I suppose the board will approve. ... Unless you hear to the contrary your joint membership fees are accepted as paid up for 1968.”⁶⁸ Martin and Lyon did not hear to the contrary, but in 1969, NOW dispensed with the joint membership altogether, and the issue has not come up again.

The question of whether or not lesbians would threaten NOW’s political clout, however, came up repeatedly, and more people within NOW were aware of Friedan’s unease with the “lavender menace.” In 1970, Friedan issued a memo to NOW chapters encouraging coalitions with “all groups seeking equality and other vanguards of the human revolution.” Martin pleaded with Friedan directly to encourage NOW to embrace lesbians as members, sisters, and comrades in the feminist struggle. Writing in a letter to Friedan, she suggested that “Fear of the Lesbian taint and refusal to cope with it is what can be disastrous to the women’s movement. It is an issue that cannot be denied, and NOW should take the lead in getting it into proper perspective before

⁶⁷ Letter to Inka O’Hanrahan from Del Martin, 18 March 1968, from personal files of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, copy in author’s possession.

⁶⁸ Letter to Del Martin from Inka O’Hanrahan, 20 March 1968, from personal files of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, copy in author’s possession.

it gets out of hand.” Ending her letter with a realization that lesbians and feminists share concerns about sex discrimination, child care, protections on the job, and many other issues, Martin stated, “this is not an unholy alliance.”

Martin also raised the issue of personal freedom in the context of sexual orientation with the NOW board in 1970. She beseeched Kay Clarenbach to support sexual autonomy for women, including decriminalizing same-sex sex. In response, Clarenbach, a NOW founder and board chairperson, wrote to Martin:

it is my serious conclusion that to amend our position statement at this time on rights of control of reproductive life to add ‘and sexual life,’ and to take a stand on ‘repeal of all laws penalizing sexual activity between consenting adults in private’ would be a disastrous blunder. I believe it would provide the ammunition not only to destroy NOW, but indeed to destroy the decade of advance in the women’s movement. The struggle is to be taken seriously, to persuade both women and men that women are second-class citizens has at least been successful. To present gratuitously a sure-fire weapon to the wavering or to the opposition would be foolhearty.

Even more telling that the issue of lesbianism was causing tremendous concern to many on the NOW board, Clarenbach went on to suggest that “such a step would be carte blanche to any NOW chapter which so elected to address itself primarily to this cause. This would be every bit as deflative from our reason-for-being as an organizational position against the war or in favor of environmental control. ... NOW

is committed to bringing women into the mainstream; this organization is not a vehicle for the homophile movement.”⁶⁹

When Martin and Lyon set about writing their landmark book, *Lesbian/Woman*, they encountered tension among NYC NOW members, especially individual fears that talking about lesbians in the movement would lead to an exposé. Martin and Lyon intended to address Friedan’s and Clarenbach’s homophobia but “as members of NOW who have worked closely with the political scene, batted out press releases and handouts for the picket lines, we certainly have a stake in preserving the image of the organization as a whole.”⁷⁰ While they—and many others—were lesbians, they were also feminists working on a variety of issues, suggesting that “us” and “them” within NOW as a social movement organization was not always clear.⁷¹

For others, however, inclusion under the rubric of “feminist” was too difficult, and they publicly challenged NOW’s—or, more to the point, Friedan’s—position on the “lavender menace.” In response to this epithet, forty lesbians, many from NYC NOW, stormed the stage at the 1970 Congress to Unite Women—a meeting that NOW co-sponsored to bring feminists from different groups together. The protesters

⁶⁹ Letter from Kay Clarenbach to Del Martin 6 March 1970, personal files of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, copy in author’s possession.

⁷⁰ Letter from Del Martin to Dolores Alexander, 29 July 1970, personal files of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, copy in author’s possession.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Kaminski and Stephanie Gilmore, “The Paradox of Collective Identity: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Lavender Menace,” paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association, Chicago, November 2004. See also Gilmore, “Beyond the Lavender Menace.”

wore purple shirts bearing Friedan's words and insisted that lesbians' rights were women's rights.⁷² This powerful public display was also a moment in which Friedan and others had to recognize that the "lesbian issue" would not simply disappear.

But it was not only internal dynamics that challenged feminists to embrace or reject lesbians as a part of the movement and of NOW. In 1970, *Time* magazine featured a story on author Kate Millet, who, while discussing her recent book, *Sexual Politics*, had disclosed her sexual identity as bisexual. This article created a media frenzy, prompting NOW and other organizations to defend Millet's decision to come out and linking issues of sexual orientation to feminism. NOW president Aileen Hernandez, elected to office in 1970, issued a press release on 17 December 1970 to be read at a public event supporting Millet at Washington Square Church in New York City. In it, she stated that while NOW had no formal statement on lesbianism because "we do not prescribe a sexual preference test for applicants," members worked "for full equality for women and ... they do so in the context that the struggle in which we are engaged is part of the total struggle to free all persons to develop their full humanity."⁷³ After condemning "frightened, unethical individuals in the media" for "linking all its leaders to lesbianism (and all that word connotes in the minds of the public)" as "despicable and diversionary," she addressed the greater issues facing both NOW and society as a whole: "Let us—involved in a movement

⁷² Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Rita Mae Brown, "Reflections of a Lavender Menace," *Ms.* (July/August 1975): 40-47; and Evans, *Tidal Wave*, esp. 48-50.

⁷³ NOW Press release, 17 December 1970, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

which has the greatest potential for humanizing our total society—spend no more time with this sexual McCarthyism. We need to free all our sisters from the shackles of a society which insists on viewing us in terms of sex.”⁷⁴ (Friedan later suggested that lesbians promoted “sexual McCarthyism” by making lesbianism a feminist issue.⁷⁵)

In this context, then, it is not surprising that just two years after Friedan’s grouching about the “lavender menace,” NOW passed a resolution acknowledging lesbians’ rights as women’s rights. Taking “the struggle seriously,” as Clarenbach suggested to Martin, became a matter of recognizing lesbians and the different issues they faced as such within the organization while respecting the organization’s national structure. In 1969, the Los Angeles chapter of NOW passed a resolution supporting lesbians’ rights. Members then used NOW’s federated structure and procedures to support lesbians’ rights as women’s rights, moving the resolution to the state chapter, the western regional conference in early 1971, and then to the national conference. When it passed by an overwhelming majority, the resolution and NOW members formally acknowledged “the oppression of lesbians as a legitimate feminist concern.”⁷⁶

Its success likely prompted some people to leave NOW. It encouraged at least one former member to rejoin NOW: “I have recently experienced a wonderful confirmation of my lifelong faith in women. ... I was a member of NOW in 1969 and

⁷⁴ NOW Press release, 17 December 1970, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

⁷⁵ Betty Friedan, “Up from the Kitchen Floor,” *New York Times Magazine*, 4 March 1973, 32.

⁷⁶ NOW, “NOW Acts,” Fall 1971.

1970, but dropped my membership in disgust with its prissy, lily-heterosexual policies.” Because of NOW’s “momentous about face” with the 1971 resolution, she wrote, “I would like to rejoin NOW and join your vigorous [LA NOW] chapter.”⁷⁷

Implementing inclusivity, of course, was another matter altogether, and in the three NOW chapters I study here, each grappled differently and to different results with issues of sexual orientation and what constituted feminist sex. But recounting this episode in detail here sheds necessary light on one of the most important and oft-cited moments in NOW’s history. Scholars have used the “lavender menace” in a variety of ways—to expose NOW’s conservatism and homophobia, to trace an important step in the rise of lesbian feminism, or to provide an early example of dissension among feminists and further support for the narrative of feminism’s decline. But I posit a different interpretation: it illustrates how NOW’s history is not just one of the national board members. Instead, chapter members from different locations worked diligently to discuss lesbianism in a feminist context, to advocate on behalf of their friends and fellow feminists, and to topple the notion that Betty Friedan represented and spoke for the entire organization.

NOW members, however, were largely unsuccessful in keeping the media, and consequently other feminists and scholars who study second-wave feminism, away from Betty Friedan as the spokesperson of NOW and feminism in general.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Letter, Rita Laporte to Jean Stapleton, Los Angeles “NOW News,” October 1971.

⁷⁸ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 5; Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Kaplan points out that the media often pursues the “stars”

Her influence was important—in reference to the 1970 Women’s Strike for Equality, Susan Brownmiller noted, for example, “let’s face it, if any other woman had called a strike press conference, she would have been talking to herself. Without the name of Betty Friedan, the strike would never have happened.”⁷⁹ And Friedan’s presence was legendary. She captured the media’s attention with such seemingly radical ideas as the fact that, as she wrote in *The Feminine Mystique*, women did not have orgasms waxing the kitchen floor, or that women should demand nothing less than full equality with men. She held press conferences in her Victorian-style parlor, decked out in suits with fur-lined collars, and after talking openly with her African American maid about the evening’s dinner, she turned to the press to insist upon women’s full and equal place in society.⁸⁰ She gave tough interviews; her agent at Norton, Tania Grossinger, (who worked with her to promote *The Feminine Mystique*) recalled: “I can remember her confronting Virginia Graham on ‘Girl Talk’ and screaming, ‘If you don’t let me have my say, I’m going to say orgasm ten times.’”⁸¹

of a movement, but activists often focus on the day-to-day work of activism and the pursuit of progressive change.

⁷⁹ Paul Wilkes, “Mother Superior to Women’s Lib,” 1970, reprinted in *Conversations with Betty Friedan*, ed. Janann Sherman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 21.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Lisa Hammel, “They Meet in Victorian Parlor to Demand ‘True Equality’—NOW,” *New York Times*, 22 November 1966, 44. I acknowledge that publishing such details about Friedan’s home and surroundings was likely an attempt to discredit her and would not have been an unusual journalist ploy. See “article.”

⁸¹ Paul Wilkes, “Mother Superior to Women’s Lib,” 1970, reprinted in *Conversations with Betty Friedan*, ed. Janann Sherman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 17.

With just a couple of examples, then, it is clear to see how and why Friedan captured the media's attention. But one must wonder if this attention becomes part of the reason that NOW has been portrayed so conservatively in scholarly work on second-wave feminism. When Friedan called for the Women's Strike for Equality on her way out of office as NOW president, she could not have predicted its success (despite many media outlets' suggestion to the contrary). It drew attention to local activism and the fact that feminism was emerging from coast to coast. After leaving office, however, Friedan stated that feminists should not be so concerned with public protest and demonstration; instead, they should focus on electing feminists (especially women, but also feminist men) to office. With this goal in mind, she joined Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, and Shirley Chisholm in founding the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971. She never really stayed out of the media spotlight, and sometimes in ways that promoted damage and dissent in the women's movement, such as charging Steinem and others with "female chauvinism" and sexism, indicating that lesbians came to NOW with the explicit purpose of seducing her and sabotaging the movement, or suggesting that the Watergate scandal and efforts to defeat the ERA were linked.⁸² But as she discouraged the "feminist" mystique that glorified careers for women in the same way that the "feminine" mystique glorified family life for women, she continued to call for more attention to formal politics and maintained her insistence that women and men must work together for feminist

⁸² "Friedan Scolds Steinem, Abzug," *Los Angeles Times* 19 July 1972, p. 7; Friedan, "Up from the Kitchen Floor;" "Betty Friedan Links Chauvinists, Scandal," *Los Angeles Times* 28 August 1973, p. 16.

change. NOW never abandoned these goals nationally or locally, but they focused on a variety of issues and engaged in a variety of strategies and tactics to meet their goals.

Although this project charts the activism of three NOW chapters, chapters across the country fomented feminist revolution wherever they saw fit. National NOW set the tone for demonstration and protest when, in 1967, it challenged the EEOC to do away with sex-segregated help-wanted advertisements in newspapers. After setting 14 December 1967 as the “National Day of Demonstration against the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission,” Friedan and leaders of the national board encouraged members to join demonstrations against the EEOC in Washington, DC, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, and San Francisco to protest the commission’s inattention to their demand. In a letter to board members and chapter conveners, she stated that in “areas where we have active chapters but no EEOC regional offices, such as Wisconsin, might send delegations to join the demonstration in another area,” encouraging cross-chapter collaboration and recognizing the potential strength of members in various locations. Moreover, she encouraged “you all to be imaginative in deciding what form the protest in your city should take. Efforts should be made toward maximum effectiveness and maximum publicity. ... Try to get as many NOW members and sympathizers as you can to take part in the demonstration; but even if you have only 10 members, a dramatic protest with clearly visible signs carrying out

our message can have an impact, especially as it will coincide with other NOW demonstrations around the country.”⁸³

Whether intentional or unwittingly, the Board encouraged feminists in NOW to take charge of their own situation and to protest creatively. In Washington, DC and Chicago, NOW members marched with placards protesting EEOC policies; in San Francisco, Aileen Hernandez joined Northern California NOW members who presented EEOC regional director Frank Quinn with a large basket of red tape and “the scissors to cut through it.” In Worcester, Massachusetts; Dallas; and Pittsburgh, NOW members contacted the local media to register their complaints.⁸⁴ In New York City, NOW members from three states carried bundles of newspapers to the regional EEOC headquarters, but, perhaps as to be expected, twelve members (who, in a dramatic display, chained themselves to typewriters) also used this opportunity to suggest that “women’s roles” as wives and mothers amounted to little more than “a sort of socially acceptable whoredom.”⁸⁵

Such divergent actions likely led NOW leaders to debate and pass a “Public Relations Guidelines for NOW Members and Chapters.” This 1968 document, passed after the EEOC pickets, indicated that “the press does not always take the trouble to

⁸³ “National Day of Demonstration, December 14,” memo from Betty Friedan to board members and chapter conveners, 1 December 1967, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

⁸⁴ NOW Press Release, 14 December 1967, Carabillo/Mueli Files; and Marilyn Bender, “The Feminists are on the March Again,” *New York Times*, 14 December 1967, p. 56.

⁸⁵ Martha Weinman Lear, “What do these women want? The second Feminist Wave,” *New York Times Magazine* 10 March 1968, 22.

differentiate between the official positions of NOW and the personal views of NOW officers as individuals.” The solution, according to this document, was simple: “NOW officers or official spokesmen [sic] may not publicly express views which they know to be contrary to NOW policy. A NOW official who disagrees with NOW policy should resign from his or her position before publicly expressing views on the subject.”⁸⁶

Although the National Board of Directors attempted to quell dissent within the ranks of the organization, the reality was that members used a variety of tactics to pursue feminist change. The Board continued to sanction street protests: NOW orchestrated pickets against Colgate-Palmolive in 1968 for discriminatory hiring and promotion practices. NOW also supported the Poor People’s Campaign “Fast to Free Women From Poverty” day in May of that year. Although NOW did not support the Miss America Pageant protest in Atlantic City, the protest clearly garnered media attention—from this event, feminists were dubbed “bra burners” because protestors threw lipstick, girdles, and other instruments that represented “the chains that tie us to these beauty standards against our will.”⁸⁷ Sometimes confrontations over dramatic

⁸⁶ “Public Relations Guidelines for NOW Members and Chapters,” Passed by the National Board of Directors, 15 September 1968, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

⁸⁷ Quotation from Charlotte Curtis, “Miss America Pageant Picketed by 100 Women,” *New York Times* 7 September 1968, 81. On Colgate-Palmolive strike, see NOW, “Colgate-Palmolive Boycott,” *NOW in the News*, 2, in Carabillo/Mueli Files. On the Miss America protest, see Curtis, “Miss America Pageant Picketed by 100 Women;” and Judith Duffett, “WLM vs. Miss America: Atlantic City is a Town with Class—They Raise Your Morals While They Judge Your Ass,” *Voice of the Women’s Liberation*

protest style resulted in leaving NOW altogether, as Ti-Grace Atkinson did in 1968 when she and other dissidents organized “the young, the black and the beautiful” into the October 17 Movement.⁸⁸ Atkinson’s irreconcilable differences with Friedan over organizational structure and style as well as salient women’s issues—abortion, marriage, family, oppressive class structure—meant, to her, that she could not accept NOW’s policies and, following the directive, she resigned. Many other times, however, NOW members stayed in the organization, embracing a variety of tactics—from letter writing to sing-ins and speak outs—to protest the issues most salient to them as individuals and members of a local (as well as a national) feminist community.

For example, San Francisco NOW (SF NOW) member Mimi Kaprolat promoted a sing-in at local newspaper offices of the San Francisco *Chronicle and Examiner* Building. In further protest of sex-segregated want ads and support of a recent judicial decision that upheld the illegality of sex-segregated classified under Title VII, she offered revised lyrics to Christmas carols to bring attention to her December 19 action, including (to the tune of “Jingle Bells”) “Jingle Help, Jingle Help, Help, Help, All the Way. Oh what fun ‘twill be to read, Help Wanted-Equal Pay” and (to the tune of “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen”) “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, let something you dismay. Remember “Title Seven” was meant for no delay. To save us from the presses’ power when they go all astray. Oh Tidings of

Movement, (October 1968): 1. On the fast and support for the Poor People’s Campaign, see Memo, Kay Clarenbach to NOW Chapters, 18 May 1968, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

⁸⁸ “‘Young, Black and Beautiful’ Organize,” *Los Angeles Times* 31 October 1968, part 4, page 4.

fairness is joy.”⁸⁹ In New York City, NOW chapter members held a “death watch” outside of the New York headquarters of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, which filed an appeal to reverse the recent judicial decision determining sex-segregated want ads were illegal under Title VII. Women dressed in black veils and carried coffins, tombstones, and signs protesting the “murder of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.”⁹⁰

In other places, NOW members demonstrated against overt sexism. In Beverly Hills, for example, members held a sit-in at the Polo Lounge bar of the Beverly Hills Hotel, where management prohibited women from drinking. Although the women were served without incident, they made important statements about perceptions of women, including the prevalent notion that unescorted women who sit at a bar “are prostitutes coming into the bar to solicit.” Of course, they encountered other women who felt that the demonstration was frivolous. As one patron said of the protesters, “This is the most ridiculous thing I have ever seen. It’s really rather degrading. Why would a woman want to sit at a bar? I’d say it’s because she’s looking for something.” Another woman commented, “I don’t think a woman would want to go into a bar unescorted.” But the male maitre d’ offered no complaints: “the more girls I have, the more sunshine in my heart.”⁹¹ In another example, NOW members in

⁸⁹ Letter, Mimi Krapolat to Aileen Hernandez and the Western Regional Division of NOW, 6 December 1968, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

⁹⁰ NOW News Release, 10 December 1968, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

⁹¹ Nancy Baltad, “Women Stage Protest Demonstration in Bar: Claim Female Discrimination,” *Hollywood (CA) Citizen-News*, 19 February 1969.

Atlanta, Chicago, New York, Pittsburgh, and Syracuse joined a “Freedom for Women” week that culminated in an anti-Mother’s Day Protest. In Los Angeles, members tied “mother’s day” to other examples of exploitation and demanded living wage for all women, equal pay for equal work, free child care centers, rehabilitation programs for imprisoned women, ending “special oppression of black and brown women,” and “a world without wars.”⁹² These examples, just two of many, illustrate how NOW members were creatively targeting episodes of sexism, merging them with other forms of oppression, and demanding full equality for all people. Whether or not the NOW board disapproved of or supported these actions is unclear as there is no record of official board response. However, it is clear that NOW members spoke both for themselves and for their chapters, and they may have been less concerned with pleasing and appeasing the national board as they were fighting sexism on the ground.

Restructuring NOW

By 1970, chapters were affiliated with the national organization, but there were breakdowns in communication from the local affiliates to the national board of directors. The national board could pass demands regarding press coverage, but it could not stop the local chapters from pursuing their own goals and tactics. To promote intraorganizational communication (and increase financial solvency), the national board restructured the organization in 1970 along regional lines and appointed regional directors from the South, East, Midwest, and West. These

⁹² “A General protest against hypocrisy which celebrates ‘mother’s day’ one day a year and exploits her year round,” flyer advertising protest on 11 May 1969, Los Angeles, CA, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

directors, along with vice-presidents for fundraising, public relations, legal activities, and legislative activities, made up the new Executive Committee.⁹³ Some of this restructuring was clearly a result of poor management of an organization that was attracting thousands of members. However, external cultural and social factors, including the waning of the civil rights movement, increasing violence in the anti-war movement, and the influx of feminists from a variety of social movements and philosophies also shaped the organization. In 1969, for example, organizers of the Atlanta conference in 1968 raised questions about modeling the women's movement after the civil rights movement: "NOW's struggle, particularly in the areas of protest, legislation and litigation, has leaned heavily on the experience of the black civil rights struggle.... [W]e in NOW must realize that the black struggle has accomplished no real revolution, that in some ways it is only discovering itself, that we must not be trapped in the same pitfalls, and that we are at a point of departure from it and from all others. Thus, the need to develop new, more effective strategy."⁹⁴ Part of this "new, more effective strategy" was to strengthen internal communications; it also involved coalition building with other feminist groups, which led to inevitable overlap in style, strategies, and goals.

NOW members also embraced protest politics and coalition building, most evident in the groundswell of support for the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality. This strike commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the 19th amendment, but at the

⁹³ Barakso, "Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women," 91-92.

⁹⁴ "Highlights of NOW's national membership conference, 7-8 December 1968," *NOW Acts*, 1969.

grassroots level, brought women from a variety of backgrounds and neighborhoods together, if only for a day, to consider the cause of women's rights. From the Strike, NOW membership grew and chapters sprung up across the nation.⁹⁵ But some national NOW board members also saw women's liberation as the "competition": "If we in NOW are to stay in the vanguard of this revolution, we are faced with the responsibility of developing an ideology for the future. Our task is to venture beyond that 'primitive' stage, break new ground, formulate unprecedented policy: visionary [and] undogmatic...."⁹⁶ Such a statement suggests that the overlap between "liberal" and "radical" feminism was quite dynamic. Some of the ideas that new liberationist groups advocated were partially embedded in NOW's Statement of Purpose and Bill of Rights. Moreover, NOW's protest politics were already a part of the group's tactical repertoire,⁹⁷ often making quite public displays about gender segregation and women's relative disadvantages to men.

By 1971, NOW boasted between four and five thousand members in approximately 150 chapters. With little communications infrastructure and no educational program in place, chapters and members were often left to their own devices and forged feminist space in their own cities. Chapters toed the national NOW line and worked on the ERA and electing feminists to political office, but in

⁹⁵ Freeman, *Politics of Women's Liberation*, 85.

⁹⁶ Dolores Alexander, "An Editorial," *NOW Acts*, 1969.

⁹⁷ Verta Taylor and Nella Van Dyke, "Get Up, Stand Up: Tactical Repertoires of Social Movements," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David Snow, Sarah Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (New York: Blackwell, 2004).

very different ways and to purposes beyond conforming to national directives and agendas. More often, they directed their energies toward issues in their own communities, confronting the local environments in which women lived, worked, raised children, faced sexual harassment and job discrimination, were victims of myriad forms of abuse, and found common ground with other feminists. In doing so, they altered NOW locally to fit their needs and to respond to their own communities rather than simply reflect the national organization.

It is not surprising, then, that when members disagreed with the board, such as the Memphis NOW delegates to the national convention in Philadelphia in 1975, they continued to make NOW their own rather than conform to national style or disaffiliate from the national group. Chapter president Carole Hensen indicated that “mindless block voting” (a reference to NOW’s organizational design of nominating an entire slate of officers to fill all board positions rather than nominate individuals for each office) “was a grave disappointment [that] cost me a great deal of respect for the women and men in NOW who claim to be independent thinkers.” Member Holly Peters made clear that the issues were greater than the structure of voting for the national board: “we see an ongoing quest for sisterhood that can overcome political power plays. And we see specifically in NOW’s history, tension between national and local priorities.” Rather than dividing and polarizing chapters from the national, Peters suggested self-empowerment: “we must take responsibility as feminists for the future of our organization. ... Once we lose perspective and follow patriarchal political models we endanger not only the future of NOW nationally, but the creative thrust of the entire feminist movement.” She suggested that chapters should question

the conservatism of the board, whose actions, in her view, did not always match its rhetoric. Moreover, chapter members should develop a sound feminist philosophy to “provide a theoretical base for our choices.”⁹⁸ If NOW nationally did not align its actions with its rhetoric, rank-and-file members clearly felt empowered to do so.⁹⁹

In October 1966, Betty Friedan reflected on the founding of NOW; indeed, just three months after the Third Conference on the Status of Women, the organization had over two hundred charter members in states across the nation. In her reflection, she wrote, “Many people have asked how NOW got started. The real question is why it didn’t happen 20, 40 years ago. The absolute necessity for a civil rights movement for women had reached such a point of subterranean explosive urgency by 1966, that it only took a few of us to get together to ignite the spark—and it spread like a nuclear chain reaction.”¹⁰⁰ Studying NOW at the national level provides a sense of national politics and resonance; I have offered little more than broad strokes here and look forward to more scholarly research placing national NOW in the fuller context of the culture in which it emerged. But the local contexts in which chapters grew up also shed important light on the ways in which feminists set out to create feminist change in different locations. Whether the chapter was the only explicitly feminist, membership-based group in town, the feminist flank of a

⁹⁸ Memphis NOW Newsletter, November 1975, 4-6.

⁹⁹ See also Barakso, *Governing NOW*, which suggests that NOW members held the national board to its governing principles.

¹⁰⁰ Betty Friedan, “How NOW Began,” a background memorandum on NOW from Betty Friedan, President, 29 October 1966, Carabillo/Mueli Files.

large and varied progressive community, or a group that operated between and beyond pre-existing liberal and radical feminist organizations, these chapters, when studied in depth and analyzed together, illuminate the vitality of NOW and the dynamics of second-wave feminism from a grassroots perspective.

CHAPTER 3
STRUGGLING TO BE EVERYTHING TO EVERYONE:
THE MEMPHIS CHAPTER OF NOW

In November 1970, the Memphis chapter of the National Organization for Women called for a “reorganizational meeting” to take place the following month. This “crisis!” is rather unusual: the chapter was only two months old and members felt it already needed restructuring. The first meeting’s agenda, in September, promised an in-depth discussion on day care centers and the possibilities of establishing a committee on “the Abortion issue” as well as a discussion of the ERA, defined as “the political scene.”¹ But, were these issues Memphis feminists wanted to address in 1970? This second chapter newsletter calling for reorganization pleaded with local feminists: “If you really care about equal opportunity for women in Memphis, please come to the reorganizational meeting. If you find meetings boring, say so. If you just want to ‘rap’, say so. If you want a specific goal or project to work on, say so. EACH INDIVIDUAL should decide what steps she wants to take (if any)

¹ Newsletter, National Organization for Women, Memphis Chapter (hereafter Memphis NOW), 27 September 1970, Box 1, folder 6, Memphis NOW papers, Special Collections, Ned McWherter Library, University of Memphis (hereafter Memphis NOW papers). My tremendous thanks to Amy Shope for her assistance in getting copies of these newsletters.

to end discrimination. Whether you want a stronger or a more flexible structure, speak out at this meeting!”²

Whatever the reasons for this early reorganization, it is clear that from the very early days of its existence, Memphis NOW was an organization of its members. Even when chapter conveners Mary Sullivan, Sally Mace, and Linda Cowden offered the program for the December meeting—Peg Cherry spoke about “Sexists: Are you one too?”—they hoped it would “serve as ground work or a starting base for a general group discussion on what you want to do – as a group or as individuals.”³ In a nod, perhaps, to NOW’s “Do your thing” motto for chapters to follow on the Women Strike for Equality, members consciously sought to make NOW their own organization from the beginning.

This chapter explores the growth and development of Memphis NOW from its inception in 1970 until 1982, when the ERA was defeated and the chapter split apart. Memphis, once characterized as a “sleepy little river town,”⁴ has a unique past as a hotbed of civil rights activism. However, as this chapter demonstrates, it also has an interesting feminist past, one that many scholars have overlooked, in part because the South as a region and Memphis as a major city in it have been defined historically as the place to see racial tensions and divisions play out in American history.

² Newsletter, Memphis NOW, 16 November 1970, Box 1, folder 6.

³ Newsletter, Memphis NOW, 16 November 1970, Box 1, folder 6.

⁴ Daneel Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis: Building Gay Community behind the Magnolia Curtain* (New York: Garland Press, 1997), 17.

Forming a feminist organization in Memphis occurred in the wake of the Civil Rights movement; sustaining one meant interacting with a less-than-sympathetic political and religious culture. Historian Dewey Grantham observed that “Southerners continue to be profoundly conscious of their regional identity,” no doubt a factor of their political, economic, and cultural history, all of which intersects with the history of race relations in the United States. The political and religious conservatism that defines the region has been buttressed by racialized notions of womanhood and the need to protect Southern (white) women.⁵ The racial, and racist, concept of “Southern womanhood” exacerbated political disunity among black and white women and men as it was used to justify rape of black women alongside physical protection for white women. Studying feminism in the South allows for a greater understanding of the ways in which women maneuvered around such overarching concepts that shaped and defined their histories as well as their own lives. I start here with background on the city of Memphis to provide a context in which to understand the rise of second-wave feminism in Memphis. I then explore both conflict and community between national

⁵ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Campaign against Lynching* (1979; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

NOW and the Memphis chapter, between NOW and the larger community, and among members in the chapter.⁶

Cultivating Feminism behind the Magnolia Curtain

Scholars have spilled a great deal of ink to illustrate the ways in which second-wave feminism emerged out of and in response to the Civil Rights movement. As I have discussed in chapter two, this is not wholly the case, and much scholarship suggests that the rise of second-wave feminism emerged also from conflict within the liberal establishment as women pressed for equal rights from within the “system” rather than from a position of legal racial discrimination. Historians and social scientists have maintained that the Civil Rights movement gave way to “radical feminism,” of which, according to the literature, NOW is decidedly not a part. Studying the history of Memphis NOW, where the Civil Rights movement was so prominent, calls into question the simplicity of such claims. Tracing the nuances of Memphis’ political and cultural history has been the task of other historians, but

⁶ Much of the data presented in this chapter has been published in my article, “The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminism in Memphis, 1971-1982: Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide,” *NWSA Journal* 15 (spring 2003): 94-117. Few scholars write about second-wave feminism in the south, but they include Jane Sherron DeHart, who co-authored, with Donald Mathews, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA: A State and a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), and who wrote “Second Wave Feminism(s) and the South: The Difference that Differences Make,” in *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Christie Anne Farnham (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 273-301.

offering a broad sketch here invites a different perspective for understanding the different paths to feminism in the Bluff City.

Resting on bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, the city has managed to avoid serious flooding in its nearly 200-year history. However, the Bluff City has been flooded with a host of social woes, making it a target of (often unwanted) national and international attention. In the 1890s, Memphis claimed national and international renown when anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells charged city leaders with complicity in the lynchings of three black men and used this heinous event to expose lynching as the ghastly state of race relations in the city, the South, and the nation.⁷ Wells developed a compelling analysis of race, gender, economic control, and sexual power relations. At the same time, Alice Mitchell murdered Freda Ward, a provocative story that revealed an added twist—Mitchell wanted to marry her victim and she decided to kill her rather than live apart from her.⁸ Although Mitchell and Wells lived in the same city, their contemporaneous stories illustrate how people occupied space in the same city yet were increasingly segregated by race—a reality in Memphis even into the twenty-first century.⁹

⁷ On Wells, two important studies of her life and activism include “Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice,” prod. William Greeves; Washington, DC: PBS Video, 1989; and Patricia Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁸ Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001): 11.

⁹ “Profiles: A Report on Women and Girls in Greater Memphis,” published by the Center for Research on Women, University of Memphis, 1997.

Throughout the twentieth century, race relations defined the political environment of this “sleepy little river town.” During the Reconstruction era, the Jim Crow system of legalized segregation inhibited black political development. When African Americans attempted to participate in the formal political process, they were harassed, threatened, and sometimes killed. From the early 1900s into the mid-1950s, political boss E.H. Crump encouraged black bloc voting to elect his machine’s candidates—although he refused to allow the black community to elect black candidates. Memphis was one of the few Southern cities with a large population of enfranchised African Americans—a consequence of the yellow fever epidemic that drove middle-class whites out of town and killed a disproportionate number of poor whites. With the city’s 50 percent African American population at the turn of the twentieth century, Crump had the choice of allowing African Americans to participate in the political system or face continuous social upheaval and the unyielding threat of rioting.

The machine era was crucial in the city’s political development because both the black and white communities recognized the power of their respective voting blocs. To complement their formal (if abridged) political opportunities, African Americans formed civil rights and political organizations, filed lawsuits, nurtured community and political leaders, and pursued other political activities. These activities were race-segregated throughout the first half of the twentieth century; however, when other cities across the south—Atlanta, New Orleans, and Baltimore, for example—witnessed the development of black and white coalitions in the 1960s, Memphis politics, formal and informal, remained segregated. Crump’s death in 1955

exacerbated these divisions as it “broke [African Americans’] main tie with the white community, and in this their experience differed from that of Houston and Atlanta, where at this time Negroes were either part of a coalition or in the early stages of developing one.” Emphasizing “independent power politics,” black women and men in Memphis mobilized their votes for black candidates rather than the machine’s white candidates.¹⁰

At the same time, the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) raised challenges of de jure segregation in the city. Since the U.S. Supreme Court had handed down landmark decisions striking down various forms of segregation, the fight for desegregation in Memphis, as elsewhere in the South and the nation, turned into a clash between whites and African Americans.¹¹ Many whites resisted African Americans’ efforts toward political representation and desegregation of public facilities, public transportation, and institutions. As the NAACP continued to file class-action suits on behalf of the black community, many citizens realized that desegregation, now court ordered, was inevitable. Interracial groups organized to implement voluntary desegregation, including the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance (IMA) and the Greater Memphis Race Relations Committee (GMRRC). The GMRRC had a difficult time

¹⁰ Harry Holloway, *The Politics of the Southern Negro: From Exclusion to Big City Organization* (New York: Random House, 1969), 280; quoted in Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland, 2000), 41.

¹¹ See, for example, Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

sustaining itself as an interracial community organization. Many whites in the city opposed such an organization and did not support political candidates who openly encouraged interracial activism; within the organization, some white members refused to meet with black members. Two subcommittees—one white, one black—were formed, ultimately defeating the purpose of the organization, which dissolved three years after its inception.¹²

White opposition to desegregation-based organizations grew in this era. A number of white citizens organized Pro-Southerners, a segregationist group that capitalized upon the mood of McCarthyism by accusing integrationists of being Communists.¹³ Religion played a factor in this organization, but to the opposite goal of the IMA—the group objected to “race-mixing” because segregation was supposedly ordained by God. In addition to Pro-Southerners and the Ku Klux Klan, which experienced a resurrection in the 1950s and early 1960s across the South and the nation, other local white supremacist groups included Citizens for Progress, the Association for Citizen’s Council, We The People, and the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government. Negative white views of African Americans was so commonplace in Memphis that the local newspaper printed daily anecdotes of “Hambone,” a caricature of a lazy, uneducated black man—it was not until the 1970s that the newspaper ceased this cartoon, and with much dismay among newspaper subscribers.¹⁴ Through the twentieth century, Cotton Carnival parades celebrated the

¹² Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*.

¹³ See, for example, Catherine Fosl, *Southern Subversive*.

¹⁴ Sandra Frink, “thesis,” (M.A. thesis, The University of Memphis, 1996).

city's history as a cotton capital. The week-long festivities culminated with a parade that featured black men dressed as horses, pulling the carnival's white "royalty" through the streets of downtown Memphis. (By the end of the twentieth century, Cotton Carnival merged with the African American countercelebration, Jubilee Carnival and formed "Carnival Memphis," but even in 2002, white men in Confederate soldier uniforms rode horses through the lobby of the Peabody Hotel while "Dixie" rang out from the piano during Carnival—an unofficial but recognizable feature of the event.) Such overt racism prompted a new moniker for the city: "decaying river town."¹⁵

Such an account is not to suggest, however, that peaceful protest did not function in Memphis. Indeed, peaceful demonstrators desegregated lunch counters, bus stations, and public facilities. Throughout Memphis and the South, the movement allowed many people to follow the nonviolent, interracial cooperation that Martin Luther King, Jr. preached, and they worked across racial lines for transcendent goals of equality and justice. And indeed, women led early interracial efforts in Memphis that resulted in de facto integration, both prior to and after legislative mandates to desegregate. In the Memphis YWCA and United Council of Church Women chapter, black and white women worked together in integrated committees as early as 1935, and developed common ground through their "shared roles as mothers

¹⁵ Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 56.

and homemakers.”¹⁶ In 1963, a handful of women in the city began to work toward voluntary desegregation of private facilities, including movie theaters and restaurants. As restaurants gradually desegregated, they decided to “test” seating policies at restaurants. Starting at the private Wolf River Club, six white and six black women plotted to visit restaurants as small, integrated groups to see if they would be seated and served—this gathering became the “Saturday Luncheon Club” and quietly integrated Memphis restaurants.¹⁷

By 1968, however, when King went to Memphis to negotiate with city leaders about the local sanitation workers’ strike and the apparent racial issues that accompanied this crisis, Memphis was also feeling the pressure of more militant groups vying for “Black Power.” King and local church officials organized a march in the city to bring attention to the plight of sanitation workers, but they also hoped to ameliorate tensions between adherents of passive resistance and the rising militant groups in the city.¹⁸

When King was shot at the Lorraine Motel on 4 April 1968, most African American in Memphis felt that “the shooting...was a direct and open attack on the

¹⁶ Gail Murray, “White Privilege, Racial Justice: Women Activists in Memphis,” in *Throwing off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004): 148.

¹⁷ Murray, “White Privilege, Racial Justice,” 149-50.

¹⁸ Joan Turner Beifuss, *At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Press, 1985); and “At the River I Stand,” prod. David Appelby, Allison Graham, and Steven John Ross, San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1993.

black community itself. He had come to help them and now he was dead.”¹⁹ In the aftermath of the assassination, cities across the nation erupted into violence, and Memphis was no exception. Riots continued in defiance of police-mandated curfews as many in the city mourned the loss of one of their own. By 7 April, however, Memphians were trying to repair their city and heal themselves by continuing the march King had planned. A group of people, both Black and white, identifying themselves as “Memphis Cares,” staged gatherings across the city to “express the anguish ... many Memphians were feeling.”²⁰ However, African Americans were neither blind nor deaf to the sentiments that many whites expressed, especially those who indicated that the *real* tragedy of the shooting was that it took place in their city and would cause their hometown to be “misjudged.”²¹

In this context of a growing discourse about race, discrimination, and equality—and using both legislative means and street protests—feminism emerged in the Bluff City. In some instances, white and African American women organized for themselves as women together. For example, the Memphis Volunteer Women’s Roundtable formed in the early 1970s as a group of Black and white women who worked for “women’s rights, the fight against racism, and black/white unity.”²² Similarly, an interracial group of women formed the Panel of American Women (PAW) in the aftermath of King’s assassination to talk freely about racial tensions in

¹⁹ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 401.

²⁰ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 434.

²¹ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 406.

²² Memphis NOW Newsletter, April 1974, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

Memphis. PAW organized panels with representatives from the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant faiths, with at least one African American woman among them. The women presented panels at churches, city council meetings, school board meetings—anywhere they could get a platform from which to speak.²³

One PAW organizer, Jocelyn Wurzburg, was also an early member of Memphis NOW, demonstrating the overlap between social movements in the city. Although she, a white Jewish woman, linked her feminist activism directly to the cause of African American civil rights, many African American women in Memphis were not necessarily drawn to local feminist organizations. Most politically active African American women in the city focused their political energies on issues of race; if they focused on women, it was specifically and explicitly for African American women, forging what Benita Roth has called a “separate road to feminism.” Several scholars have highlighted the national tenor of racial divides among feminists,²⁴ but it also resonated locally in Memphis and would continue to resonate in the NOW chapter.

Race and Feminism in Memphis

In Memphis and across the South, feminist activism was caught in the local political “protection” of Southern womanhood, a racialized code for ensuring social

²³ For more on the PAW in Memphis, see Jocelyn Wurzburg’s papers, (hereafter Wurzburg Papers) Special Collections, Ned R. McWherter Library, The University of Memphis.

²⁴ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*; Deborah Gray White, *Black Women in Defense of Themselves*; and Hartmann, *The Other Feminists*.

and cultural distance between white people and African American people. This code is also a powerful example of how the “metalanguage of race” operates in people’s daily lives.²⁵ The image of Southern womanhood was not lost on NOW members in the South. The first Southern Regional Director, Judith Lightfoot, addressed this image as something with which NOW women in the South grappled and sought to overcome. Realizing that “nowhere else in the country” has the “pedestal image ... been so forceful and so false,” Lightfoot encouraged NOW members to revamp the image of the Southern woman into a strong feminist. She invoked such examples as Lorena Weeks, “that genteel, brave little woman who defied and defeated the mighty Southern Bell,” to encourage “those who scorn us or take us lightly” to “look beyond the false image” because “it is ill-advised to be our enemy.”²⁶ Moreover, she noted that “Southern women know how to organize for church, League of Women Voters, against pollution, for civil rights. This time we are organizing for ourselves.”²⁷

Early in the chapter’s history, NOW simply was not attractive to many African American women because of their overt suspicions of white women.²⁸ That NOW had an African American national president held no sway with Black women in Memphis; as one African American housewife commented, “I really don’t think

²⁵ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* (winter 1992); see also Hall, *Revolt of Chivalry*.

²⁶ Memphis NOW Newsletter, October 1972, Box 1, folder 6, Memphis NOW Papers.

²⁷ Memphis NOW Newsletter, August 1973, Box 1, folder 6, Memphis NOW Papers.

²⁸ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*; Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*; White, *Black Women in Defense of Themselves*; and Springer, *Living for the Revolution*.

black women will ever be treated the same as white women are treated.”²⁹ For her, equality was less an issue of sex and more an issue of race; quite likely, personal experience indicated that, as Toni Morrison wrote in 1970, “racism is not confined to white men.”³⁰ And if newspaper columnist Art Gilliam is at all representative, Black men in Memphis agreed. In comparison to being black, Gilliam suggested in 1971, the exclusions that women face are minor.³¹

Rather than glom onto a feminist agenda white women in NOW set, African American women created and sustained their own organizations and workshops, continuing their own “separate path to feminism.”³² For example, Dot Smith and Helen Duncan, directors of the Southwest Mental Health Center, offered a six-week workshop on “Problems of Being Black and Female” in 1978. Both for and by African American women, this workshop addressed African American women’s history, family issues, and images of beauty. One group, United Sisters and Associates (USA), formed with the intent of addressing Black womanhood in Memphis and nationwide. In attempting to establish unity among African American women, resist the exploitation they suffered, and provide an arena for emotional and spiritual development, USA directed its energies toward Black femininity and beauty. To this end, it worked with *Essence* magazine to develop the Miss Essence of

²⁹ Art Gilliam, “Few Black Faces in Women’s Lib Crowd,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 7 June 1971.

³⁰ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 307.

³¹ Gilliam, “Few Black Faces in Women’s Lib Crowd.”

³² Roth, *Separate Paths to Feminism*.

Tennessee beauty pageant, bringing “national attention to Black women, to the city of Memphis and by example present an image of Black womanhood in a manner that renders more respect and appreciation.”³³

The evidence does not indicate whether or not the local NOW chapter took issue with USA’s promotion of beauty standards for women; what is clear is that many African American women felt that they did not have much to gain by affiliating with the local NOW chapter. Some women felt that they had little to learn from white feminist consciousness-raising. Although Memphis NOW’s minority task force leader Merle Smith applauded NOW for its activism on behalf of feminism and women’s equality and stayed with the organization “to keep black women visible in the movement,” she also understood why many women of color would not be attracted to NOW. Drawing fundamentally different cultural distinctions between white and Black women in the South, Smith stated, “you see, we come from a strong matriarchal society and were raised to be feminists, something white women found out about later.”³⁴

The Civil Rights movement clearly affected both white and Black women, but they tended to organize separately and concentrate on different issues. Women forged alliances across racial lines within feminist organizations when local issues demanded them—PAW is one important example in Memphis.³⁵ Sustaining alliances, however,

³³ Press release, “United Sisters and Associates,” 1972, Wurzburg Papers.

³⁴ “Old Doubts Deter Feminists,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 7 August 1973.

³⁵ For other examples of local, interracial alliance-building, see Nancy Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Valk,

was increasingly difficult—the reality was that race had everything to do with capturing the ear of local political leaders. The mostly white membership of Memphis NOW would always have more political voice than African American women in the city.

This reality was not lost on Memphis NOW members. Although chapter membership, more often than not, was all-white, local NOW activists sought to address complexities of race, class, and gender in the city as they related to feminism—and to question racism among themselves. In a 1974 contribution to a running newsletter feature, “One Woman Thinking Things Through,” Memphis NOW member Martha Allen implored her sisters to realize that “it is [not] divisive to have uppermost in our minds the fight against racism in everything we do. Rather, it provides a basis for unity with our black and minority sisters.” She warned: “By being out of touch and not relating enough to our black sisters, misconceptions are developed, even about groups where black and white women work together.”³⁶ She respected that Black women pursued feminist goals through different organizations and suggested that Memphis NOW work through their own group as well as in concert with other organizations to create feminist change in their city.

Moreover, white women in the NOW chapter were aware that racial “protection” hindered their own feminist gains for an equitable society. In January

Separatism and Sisterhood; and essays forthcoming in Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*.

³⁶ Martha Allen, “One Woman Thinking Things Through,” Memphis NOW Newsletter, April 1974, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

1976, for example, Mary Jo Cowart opined that the connections between sexism and racism were all too real in local women's lives: "The Belle on her pedestal might be crying out for her life, but she has been so well protected from You Know Who by her white man that she no longer recognizes her own voice." Rejecting this imagery that perpetuated discrimination across race and gender in the South, Cowart urged women across racial lines to work together for change. After all, "what good is [our liberation] if a majority of our sisters still have the man's foot on their neck?"³⁷

Some members clearly were aware of and sympathetic to the realities of how racism and sexism operated simultaneously in women's lives. But their awareness, which they shared with the larger group through the newsletter, did little to alter the fact that Memphis NOW was a white women's group in both perception and reality. In March 1976, the chapter hosted a program on the "Status of Black Women in Memphis."³⁸ Memphis NOW members faced difficult and important questions: When one NOW member asked why more Black women were not involved in NOW, moderator Andrewnetta Hawkins Hudson retorted with "how many of you go to PUSH [People United to Save Humanity] meetings?" Leathia Thomas, director of Women and Girls Employment Services (WAGES) in Memphis, commented that she did not join NOW because "I view [NOW] as first being white and therefore suspect. Black people have been used to gain benefits for white people, so I don't think black

³⁷ Memphis NOW Newsletter, January 1976, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

³⁸ Memphis NOW Newsletter, March 1976, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

women are going to be found flocking to chapters of NOW or anything that is primarily trying to do something for women.”³⁹

The chapter was aware of its whiteness, a point Nancy Clayton made in the November 1979 newsletter: “Look around you at the next N.O.W. meeting. Is this a middle class white women’s movement? It certainly appears to be so.” But she continued, as others before her had, to reiterate the fact that, however unevenly, all women faced discrimination: “The issues that concern us do not pertain merely to white women. Discrimination in education and employment opportunities is not limited to white women. ... We are working for all women regardless of race.”⁴⁰ Throughout the 1970s, the chapter did work for all women in a variety of ways.

Memphis NOW sought to reach out to Black women in the city, but white and Black women alike operated within a complex racialized political and cultural system that would not allow them to stand together simply as sisters united for the same cause. Some suggest that such an example may prove the exceptionalism of the South, but as many women of color across the country challenged the whiteness of NOW nationally and the women’s movement in general, they illustrated how race is not a matter of Southern exceptionalism but rather one of national experience.⁴¹

Getting off the Ground

³⁹ Michael A. Conley, “Blacks Defend Scant Support of Feminism,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 7 April 1976.

⁴⁰ Memphis NOW Newsletter, November 1979, Box 1, folder 8, Memphis NOW Papers.

⁴¹ DeHart, “Second Wave Feminism(s) and the South,” 283.

After its reorganizational “crisis,” Memphis NOW was underway with twenty-five attendees at the December 1970 meeting at the Half and Half Coffee House. The group embraced a less rigid style and format, building “study groups” to discuss “concrete issues.” Again, the plea went out: “Whether or not you have a particular interest area, please come; join a group, start one, or just ‘float’. We hope this structure will provide an efficient exchange of information as well as a basis for organizing feasible projects.” And they decided—most likely by consensus, based on the wording of their newsletters—to focus on abortion and day care, two of the main issues from the very first meeting.⁴²

Early members ranged in age from 23 to 53, included men and women, and involved people who were affiliated with other local groups in town. The slate of nominees for council membership (which is how the chapter first referred to its officers) included Mike Adler (27, a land officer with the Memphis Housing Authority who was also enrolled in law school); Peg Cherry (29, an assistant sociologist with the Memphis Regional Medical Program); Linda Cowden (23, technical biologist at Dobbs Research Institute); Olgie Deason (30, substitute teacher); Peggy DiCanio (41, assistant professor of sociology at Memphis State University); Marion MacInnes (53, retired Air Force major); and Tanya Miller (23, manager of Carolyn Lacy, Ltd.). In addition to being affiliated with other local groups, each of them held different types of jobs in education (K-12 and higher education), retail, the corporate world, and the city.

⁴² Memphis NOW Newsletter, December 1970, Box 1, folder 6, Memphis NOW papers.

With built-in contacts and initiative, the Memphis chapter would become a formidable presence in the city and would tackle the many problems they identified in their community. They addressed issues that were directed from the national board—the ERA and electing feminists (women and men) to political office. They also grappled with problems women across the country faced—rape, domestic violence, job discrimination, sexuality differences, reproductive rights, and more—that were not necessarily at the top of NOW’s national agenda. NOW certainly endorsed their work on these many issues, which is clear from the breadth and number of resolutions passed at the national meetings. But the way Memphis NOW grappled with these issues differs from the national board. By the early 1970s, the national board turned its attention to formal politics; the national protests of the early days of NOW were eschewed in favor of more dignified tactics. However, the local chapters did not always follow suit. Both the locals and the national were freed by this division of labor—the national board could focus directly on the formal aspects, and the locals could take it to the streets as needed. Each fulfilled a function in the politics of feminist activism, both in the name of women in the United States and under the name of “National Organization for Women.”

Here I turn to look at the issues that Memphis NOW addressed. Across the board, whether working for the ERA or addressing local issues, the chapter always conducted itself in ways different from the national board. Their interest in feminism and feminist change was generated not from national NOW but from local women who needed help or who wanted to create feminist change. This organic approach to

issues offers insight into how local context shaped chapter members' activism—and what changes their activism created in their cities.

“The South will Rise and Ratify!” Memphis NOW and the ERA

Many scholars use the ERA as the most prominent example of “liberal feminism”: the broad language of the amendment that would secure *equality* for women—that neither Congress nor any state would pass a law that would abridge or deny equality for women—did not seem to thwart cultural and social gender roles. But in the South, and indeed everywhere, opposition to this amendment suggested that the ERA did challenge gender roles directly.⁴³ In pursuit of this amendment, Memphis NOW, as did other chapters, utilized the federated structure of the organization, and many of its early actions on behalf of the ERA reflected a firm commitment to equality without attention to regional distinction. But when anti-ERA activists justified their disdain for the amendment through the trope of “Southern womanhood,” Memphis NOW members also employed stereotypes of southern women’s identity to buttress their pro-ERA cause. Although the ERA was a major issue for the national organization, once Congress ratified the amendment, it became a local cause and people fought—for and against—with whatever images they could conjure to create support for their respective sides.

When the Equal Rights Amendment finally passed the House of Representatives and the Senate and went to the states for ratification in 1972 (nearly

⁴³ Mathews and DeHart, *Sex, Gender, and the ERA*; see also Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*; and Berry, *Why ERA Failed*.

fifty years after it was first introduced into Congress), the women's movement, and NOW, was in full swing. Memphis NOW was one of 150 chapters of the organization, and its members, like people across the nation, were certain the amendment would be ratified in short order. Indeed, Hawaii passed it on the same day it went to the states; twenty-two states passed it by year's end.

Tennessee was one of those states, helping set the tone of apparent support for the ERA by ratifying it in April 1972. In fact, within two weeks of Congressional approval, the Tennessee House voted unanimously in favor of the ERA, followed by overwhelming support in the Senate.⁴⁴ With such tremendous support, Memphis NOW seemingly had nothing else to do for the ERA and turned its attention to many other issues that women in the city faced. NOW members did not expect strong and organized resistance after the amendment's state passage. They were unprepared for a groundswell of opposition, or they did not take it seriously until it was too late. As a result, they watched their success unravel.

In Tennessee and other states across the nation, Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum launched STOPERA campaigns, which, supported by other groups sympathetic to this cause, grew up from the grassroots to block passage of the ERA. At bottom, they clung to gender norms that enhanced differences between women and men, charging that the amendment violated women's rights to be mothers and wives and forced women to reject their biological and cultural difference from men.⁴⁵ In

⁴⁴ Tennessee House Journal, March and April 1972; Tennessee Senate Journal, April 1972.

⁴⁵ Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1977); Berry, *Why ERA Failed*; Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*; and Mathews and DeHart, *Sex, Politics, and the*

Tennessee, former Miss America Barbara Walker Hummel led local opposition to the ERA through Memphis-based AWARE (American Women are Richly Endowed). Walker Hummel was a local icon, having won the pageant in 1947. Rather than embark on a potential career in movies or theater (she was offered roles in both venues), she returned to Memphis State University to complete her degree; she said, “I had no ambition to be Miss America when I entered the contest. My interest was in the scholarship to continue my studies.”⁴⁶ After completing her degree (and marrying her husband), she launched a successful career in local television, hosting Memphis’ first local daytime television show, “Miss America Matinee,” in 1953 and the following year hosting “The Lady of the House.”⁴⁷ After these shows went off the air, she became active in many social clubs in Memphis; by 1972, she—a white, Protestant, college-educated “lady”—had the social cachet to be taken seriously in her opposition to the ERA.

AWARE women defined themselves as housewives and mothers who supported the notion that men and women were essentially different; the “equality” that the ERA offered would jeopardize the privilege and protection that women, in their opinion, currently enjoyed. To defend their rights, they presented an anti-ERA skit on the floor of the Tennessee House of Representatives. Upon its completion, Representative W.K. “Tag” Weldon, a Republican from Memphis, asked the General

ERA. See also Brown, *For A “Christian America”*; and Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of Conservative Ascendancy in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

⁴⁶ “Tennessee’s first Miss America, Barbara Walker Hummel, dies,” *Tennessean*, 9 June 2000.

⁴⁷ “Tennessee’s first Miss America, Barbara Walker Hummel, dies,” *Tennessean*, 9 June 2000.

Assembly to rescind the amendment's ratification. The debate over whether or not the state could revoke its support of the amendment raged for two years.

Memphis NOW's response to the rescission measure reveals both the chapter's and the national organization's sentiment toward efforts to rescind and the seemingly laughable notion that the ERA would not succeed. Memphis NOW members waged a letter-writing campaign to state representatives in support of the ERA.⁴⁸ When individual representatives debated the rescission measure in their home communities, Memphis NOW participated in these town meetings, but their contributions spoke more often to the perception that the ERA was a foregone conclusion. In one public forum, members carried signs stating "Case by Case is too slow" and "1776 was for Women Too" to articulate support for the amendment.⁴⁹ When they spoke, it was with a sense of frustration that they had to reiterate what they thought to be common sense.⁵⁰ NOW members wrote letters, organized petition drives, and lobbied—time-honored strategies to support the ERA. These actions ultimately reflected their perception that the ERA just could not be taken away.

This is not to suggest that Memphis NOW lacked creativity in addressing the effort to rescind the ERA. Members, for example, literally gave their blood for the ERA and encouraged others to do so as well in a 1973 chapter-sponsored blood drive

⁴⁸ Jim Willis, "Some Reports Termed False on Equal Rights Amendment," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 6 March 1973; and Memphis NOW Newsletter, January 1974, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

⁴⁹ Women's Rights Supporters Take Floor, 1974.

⁵⁰ Memphis NOW Newsletter, March 1974, Box 1, Folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

to raise money for the NOW Emergency Fund for the ERA.⁵¹ When state representatives from Shelby County met with the public at a Jaycee-sponsored town meeting the following year to discuss the resolution to rescind the state's support for the amendment, NOW members hosted a small demonstration. In an attempt to attract local media attention, one member dressed in a gorilla suit to highlight a parallel between the mentality behind rescission and that of the infamous Scopes "monkey trial." Although some members found this particular protest in poor taste on the grounds that the Scopes trial was a sensitive issue in Tennessee, member Jeri Blake defended the action by pointing out that the ERA, not the gorilla, was the subject of the media coverage received: "Its sole purpose was to draw the attention of the media to an issue, and in this it succeeded exceptionally well."⁵²

Although the Memphis "gorilla girl" succeeded in drawing media attention to the ERA issue, anti-ERA activists were ultimately successful in bringing down the ERA in Memphis. Their creative strategies consisted of skits and performances, including one at the General Assembly of the Shelby County Delegation. At this meeting, designed for legislators to canvass their constituents' sentiments, AWARE

⁵¹ "NOW Women Sell Blood to Finance Campaign," Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 6 April 1973; Memphis NOW Newsletter, January 1973 and March 1973, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers. In January 1973, the chapter raised money for a woman who could not afford an abortion to have one. When the woman changed her mind, the chapter voted to turn the money over to the "blood-money" campaign. In Chicago, where it was illegal to sell blood, the NOW chapter sold Bloody Marys instead at fundraising cocktail parties. Memphis NOW Newsletter, March 1973.

⁵² Memphis NOW Newsletter, April 1974, Box 1, folder 6, Memphis NOW Papers.

members presented an anti-ERA skit that involved a full rendition of “I Enjoy Being a Girl,” complete with piano accompaniment. Evoking popular affectations women supposedly enjoyed—a world of lipstick and hairdos, flowers and lace—AWARE women also used Peggy Lee’s rendition of this popular Rogers and Hammerstein song to reinforce their idea of womanhood: “I’m strictly a female female / And I hope that my future will be / In the home of a brave and free male / Who’ll enjoy being a guy having a girl like me.”⁵³ Through this performance, AWARE underscored the idea that “equal rights” for women meant that they had to give up being traditional “girls.”

Anti-ERA advocates often put pro-ERA activists in a defensive position, and Memphis NOW members were no exception. Carole Hensen, Linda Etheridge, and Lou Farr, the Memphis NOW representatives who attended this meeting, had “no designs of speaking on the ‘dead issue,’” but were forced to offer arguments in response to the demonstration. AWARE women argued that under ERA, women would have to supply one-half of the family income, pay alimony, and subject themselves to the draft and communal bathrooms. Farr rebutted with “logical, truthful, and fact-oriented arguments,” stating that courts could not designate who provides family income; the draft was a moot point since it was not in force; and that everyone uses communal bathrooms in certain situations, including airplanes, but that, as a result of the recent Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the Fifth Amendment protected an individual’s right to privacy. On the issue of alimony, Farr

⁵³ Memphis NOW Newsletter, January 1974, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

conceded that, in divorce, a woman would have to pay alimony if she was able to do so financially, but argued that, for the first time, marriage would be seen as an equal partnership between individuals under the law. Farr and the others in attendance were concerned by AWARE's "apparent success" but only encouraged their sisters to write "at least one more letter" in support of the ERA instead of offering more pro-ERA demonstrations and a visible presence.⁵⁴

Following the national board's lead, Memphis NOW also pursued the amendment to the exclusion of other laws that would grant women equality in particular realms. These stop-gap measures seemed to the Memphis chapter to take focus and energy away from the full recognition of women's equality granted by the ERA, but ultimately AWARE women seemed more willing to work with politicians for piecemeal legislation to alleviate specific problems women faced. For example, Hummel reported that her organization supported two national bills sponsored by Republican Senator Bill Brock that would make it easier for women to obtain credit in their own names. Memphis NOW did not endorse these bills; as a result, they and other NOW chapters around the state and country appeared rigid, unwilling to endorse this or any other legislation in favor of the broader amendment.

In the state legislature, post-ratification debate over the ERA—ultimately a debate over womanhood—culminated in rescission, which finally passed in February 1974 (Tennessee Senate January 1974; February 1974; April 1974). When the measure came to the House of Representatives, legislators debated the issues of the

⁵⁴ Memphis NOW Newsletter, January 1974, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

ERA from restrooms to religion in front of “500 sign-waving and baby-toting women” divided on the measure.⁵⁵ At the end of the deliberation, the house rescinded its ratification by a vote of 56 to 33. That the state Attorney General’s office ruled that the resolution was unconstitutional became a sidebar to this story in Memphis and nationally. At bottom, Memphis NOW could not compete with the idea of protected traditional womanhood couched in Southern fears of federal encroachment on states’ rights, and they did not work very hard to do so.

After this setback, Memphis NOW abandoned the ERA until 1977, when Congress extended the amendment’s ratification deadline. At this time, national NOW concluded that the ERA could not be ratified by its 22 March 1979 deadline, and support from all levels of the organization emerged to fight for an extension. In July 1978, 100,000 activists marched on Washington to illustrate both continued and renewed support for the ERA. Memphis NOW sent ten members to the march and engaged in yet another letter writing campaign to their legislators urging their support for House Joint Resolution 638, the measure that would extend the life of the ERA campaign. Their efforts were again countered by anti-ERA forces, many of whom drove from Memphis to Washington to meet with their representatives directly and give them homemade bread, a symbol of woman’s appropriate place in the home.⁵⁶ Pro-ERA forces were able to win what would become a moot victory, though, with the extended date of ratification set at 30 July 1982.

⁵⁵ “Legislators Vote to Rescind ERA Ratification,” Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 24 April 1974

⁵⁶ “Loaf of Bread, Talk with Senators Aim at Keeping Women in ‘Place,’” Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 10 August 1978.

When Eleanor Smeal, president of the National Organization for Women, rallied the troops with the call that “women should be outraged that there must be a vote to determine whether there will be equality for women,” Memphis NOW responded. They raised money—specifically, the newly minted Susan B. Anthony dollars—for the ERA through parties and flea markets and pushed for ratification in neighboring Arkansas and Mississippi. Chapter president Betty Sullivan encouraged Memphis NOW members to join the national ERA Message Brigade, a nationwide computer bank service that notified members when a state legislature was scheduled to vote on the ERA. The brigade reinforced the political tactic of letter writing, something Memphis NOW had practiced since the beginning of this debate.

Memphis NOW also took the message of the ERA to the local airwaves. For example, on 30 June 1981, the day signifying one more year to ratify the ERA, Memphis NOW broadcasted a series of public service announcements on the necessity of the amendment and held a press conference on the importance of the ERA for women nationwide. In addition, members gave the ERA increasing attention on their radio and public access cable television shows, “Women NOW.” Former member Lynda Dolbi recalled one experience on the talk radio show. After speaking for a short time, she fielded questions from the radio audience. One man called into the show, voicing his opinion that supporters of the ERA amounted to “a bunch of lesbians who wanted to go to the bathroom with men.” According to Dolbi, this call was the one she was waiting for: “I said, ‘you know, what strikes me as odd is that you would even say that. Think about it. Why would a lesbian want to go to

the bathroom with a man? Don't you think lesbians would want to go to a women's room?" Answering this man's challenge was "one of life's high points" for Dolbi.⁵⁷

In many instances, however, high points would be the exception to the rule. As time wore on, women were spurred to increased activity as it became more and more apparent that the ERA was losing ground. In a desire to see the ERA become the law of the land, the Memphis affiliate sent delegates when NOW hosted demonstrations in Illinois and Florida, states with the greatest possibility of ratifying the amendment. Outside of the South, they invoked powerful stereotypes of the South. In Chicago, "a busload of Memphis women [promised to] bury the image of the helpless, stay-in-your-own-backyard Southern belle." Carrying a banner proclaiming "The South Will Rise and Ratify," thirty-seven women from Memphis NOW joined a sea of thousands of ERA supporters in a lakefront march urging Illinois legislators to ratify the amendment.⁵⁸ Two years later, members of Memphis NOW geared up for the final ERA battle in Tallahassee, Florida. Forty-one members made the overnight trip to the Florida capital for the rally. One member recalled the high emotions and desperate zeal of the participants:

Memphis NOW was one of the last groups to move out marching the 'last mile' to the Capitol so we were able to count and feel the fervor and grassroots power behind equality for women. Marching ten abreast, each unit with its gold, purple, and white banner in the lead, the chanting line stretched

⁵⁷ Interview with Lynda Dolbi, 6 March 1996. Unless otherwise noted, the author conducted all interviews.

⁵⁸ "Memphians Go To Illinois to Urge ERA Ratification," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 10 May 1980.

down the valley and up the hill to the Florida Capitol a mile away. No media report or picture yet has captured the intensity of those women, men, and children.⁵⁹

At the height of passion for the ERA, Memphis NOW carried its struggle to the bitter end, but no amount of commitment could save the amendment. Just months before the deadline, Florida, like Illinois, failed to ratify the ERA. Despite the letter-writing and public demonstrations of NOW women at every level, the ERA died on 30 June 1982.

Although it replicates much of the literature on the fight for the ERA, Memphis NOW's story provides nuances and different voices to the national story. These subtleties illustrate how the Memphis chapter followed the national lead, utilizing the federated structure to the best of its abilities. But the Memphis chapter also forged its own way with creative protests and demonstrations to fight the statewide rescission efforts. At bottom, its members were no match for the AWARE woman, but it is less, in some ways, about the actors involved. At stake, on both sides of the issue, were fundamental issues of gender; debates throughout the country centered on the new roles women would have and how they would affect men.⁶⁰ In the South, and beyond the walls of Congress in Washington, DC, the trope of Southern womanhood shaped the debates about the ERA. Southern women such as Walker Hummel and her AWARE comrades fought alongside one another and with anti-ERA women around the country to retain their status as different from and not

⁵⁹ Memphis NOW Newsletter, February 1982, Box 1, folder 8, Memphis NOW Papers.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Sherron and DeHart, *Sex, Gender, and the ERA*.

“equal” to men. That it was a position only white women could possibly enjoy, irrespective of wealth, did not factor into their verbal presentations and actions; it did not have to be addressed because the Southern womanhood they invoked had always been reserved for white women. Because AWARE women shaped the debate locally, Memphis NOW members not only had to defend the amendment but they also had to deny categorically associations with their Southern heritage. When Memphis NOW did summon images of the South, it was to “bury” them in favor of a region, and nation, that supported equal rights. When faced with AWARE’s appeals, many politicians and citizens in Memphis were uncomfortable with the idea of relinquishing the Southern womanhood that had “protected” them. This southern identity, then, not only intersected with the struggle over the ERA but also provided a framework for this debate.

Although NOW nationally sought to elect feminist leaders to office, the Memphis chapter devoted relatively little time to elections and the individuals seeking political office. In fact, only once during the 1970s—March 1979—did the chapter host a meeting program that addressed “local politics and women” that featured local politicians currently in or seeking office.⁶¹ The chapter newsletter listed local politicians usually in the context of the ERA—to acknowledge early support for the ERA, to discourage rescission, and to express disdain for the 1975 rescission resolution. Memphis NOW’s inattention to formal politics, especially relative to the national board, may be a result of the fact that the NOW chapter shared overlapping

⁶¹ Memphis NOW Newsletter, March 1979, Box 1, folder 8, Memphis NOW Papers.

membership with the Memphis Women's Political Caucus (MWPC), which formed a short-lived chapter in August 1972.⁶² With MWPC keeping members abreast of local political primaries and general elections, the NOW chapter was free to focus on issues as they related not to voting day but rather to women's daily lives.

Making the Personal Political in the Bluff City

Debate over formal political issues—the ERA is the most salient example in Memphis—took shape in the context of Southern identity. But local women's concerns and needs did as well. Such volatile issues as rape, wife abuse, and pornography entered the public discourse as a result of feminists' insistence that “the personal is political”; in the South, they stayed there because the rhetoric of “protection” offered them necessary leverage to create change on the ground.⁶³

Most scholars write about the origins of rape crisis centers and domestic violence protection shelters as the projects of radical feminists, many of them self-defined.⁶⁴ In Memphis, however, it was women who did not outwardly define themselves as “radical” who brought these issues to the fore of local politics. This

⁶² Memphis NOW Newsletter, August 1972, Box 1, folder 6, Memphis NOW Papers. NOW records do not indicate how long MWPC lasted in this first incarnation, but it was resurrected when the NOW chapter split in 1982. Interview with Paula Casey, 20 April 1996.

⁶³ “Wife abuse” is the term Memphis NOW members used to describe domestic violence in which a man abused a woman, whether she was a wife or lover. It did not apply to abuse against female children or siblings.

⁶⁴ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*; Whittier, *Feminist Generations*; and Evans, *Tidal Wave*.

suggests that “radical” and “liberal” are context-specific descriptions of feminism, unique to the major urban centers in which they emerged and less appropriate in a Southern regional context.⁶⁵ Rather than categorize Memphis NOW as “radical” or “liberal,” I argue that NOW locally took seriously the opportunity to be everything to everyone who joined. Such an organization is certainly what chapter conveners and early members wanted, and they spent little time debating modifiers; they were “feminists.”

By the mid-1970s, such personal issues were politicized around the country, and Memphis NOW followed suit. However, women in the city also publicized their individual experiences, bringing necessary local attention to crises that were rarely discussed prior to Memphis NOW’s existence. After the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, NOW feminists in Memphis rarely discussed abortion and reproductive rights. In January 1973, the chapter raised money for a woman who wanted to have an abortion but could not afford one. When the woman changed her mind about the abortion, the chapter donated the money to their ERA fundraising campaign.⁶⁶ Beyond this example, information and actions related to reproductive rights appear very sporadically in the chapter newsletters, suggesting that any pro-choice activism in which chapter members engaged spread by word of mouth. It may well be that they thought of the chapter newsletter as a public document; one did not have to be a

⁶⁵ Many authors discuss radical feminism in contrast to liberal feminism but fail to note the ways in which these terms may be location-specific.

⁶⁶ Memphis NOW Newsletter, January 1973 and February 1973, Box 1, folder 6, Memphis NOW papers.

member of Memphis NOW to receive it. As a result, newsletter editors may have elected to avoid “advertising” where they escorted women seeking abortions into clinics or to draw unwanted attention to their pro-choice activities as NOW members. The documentary evidence does not support a firm interpretation of the chapter’s pro-choice activism, but NOW members throughout the 1970s volunteered their time as clinic escorts and many were also members of various pro-choice coalitions in the city.⁶⁷

The chapter, however, discussed rape and wife abuse openly in the newsletter and any public venue they could secure. They also generated facilities for women through the assistance of an umbrella structure of women’s organizations, the Women’s Resource Center (WRC).⁶⁸ Founded in 1974 by Memphis NOW, the local YWCA, and city chapters of Planned Parenthood, Girls Club, Church Women United, Federally Employed Women, and the League of Women Voters, the WRC dedicated itself to “serv[ing] the varied needs of women in the Greater Memphis Metropolitan area not currently met by existing social service agencies and/or local, State, and Federal Government programs.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Interview with Lynda Dolbi, 6 March 1996.

⁶⁸ Whittier and Echols suggest that such coalition or umbrella structures were the province of radical feminist groups. However, NOW has a history, largely untold, of coalition building, especially at the local level but also encouraged and fostered from the national level. See Whittier, *Feminist Generations*; and Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*.

⁶⁹ “The Wheel,” newsletter of the Memphis Women’s Resource Center, March 1974, MVC Periodicals, Special Collections, Ned R. McWherter Library, The University of Memphis (hereafter “The Wheel”).

Over its eight-year existence, basic funding came from its membership organizations, but other sources of revenue included federal Comprehensive Education and Training Administration (CETA) program funds and a grant from the United Methodist Church. Throughout its tenure in the Bluff City, WRC offered a laundry list of community services, including assertiveness training, financial educational programs, and other seminars “contributing to a new perspective for women of our area” as well as support groups for women experiencing the emotional trauma of divorce.⁷⁰ It also provided a speaker’s bureau, a job bank and training program for women seeking employment outside the home, legal counsel, a library of books on women’s history and feminist issues, and programs “designed to focus attention on the changing needs and interests of women as they become more visible and vocal.”⁷¹ Because the WRC was working within the necessary political channels to secure funds for facilities for raped and abused women, NOW women could adopt a more radical approach and actually utilize both liberal feminist and radical feminist tactics. Although members never stated it explicitly in their feminist statements, literature, or other extant sources, they were also able to manipulate the well-documented and racialized notions of womanhood and protection of women’s bodies.

Although NOW passed national resolutions in favor of stronger rape legislation and protection for women’s bodies, the issue of rape took on a personal tone as women confronted their city’s reputation as “the rape capital of the nation.” In 1973 alone, 534 rapes were reported with victims ranging from 18 months to 84

⁷⁰ “Women’s Resource Center of Memphis, Inc.,” June 1977, in Wurzburg Papers.

⁷¹ “The Wheel,” October 1982.

years. Since contemporary FBI statistics relied upon self-reporting and asserted that only about 10 percent of rapes were actually reported, the numbers were likely closer to 5000.⁷²

Frustrated, angry, and determined to confront women's sense of helplessness in the face of such a crime, Memphis NOW sought to address women's concerns about rape. NOW member Pam Hazen coordinated "People Against Rape" to solicit the larger community's aid in exploding myths about rape and pursuing legislation. In her speeches, Hazen decried Memphis's "badge of infamy" and chastised judges and prosecutors for "totally and unethically ignor[ing] the victim," contending that women were doubly victimized by the perpetrator and the justice system.⁷³

By the end of 1974, the crisis seemed to be escalating: Memphis women reported 607 rapes and attempted rapes. What was most shocking, though, was that only 14 percent of the crimes ended in an indictment, and only 19 percent of those resulted in a conviction. Not content simply to work within local institutions, NOW women raised the stakes by taking their cause of protection and safety for women to the streets. Commemorating the fifty-fifth anniversary of women's suffrage, approximately thirty-five NOW members protested rape in their city with a "Take Back the Night" type of demonstration in which local activists in NOW marched around the thirteen-block perimeter of Overton Park in midtown Memphis. Organizer Gail Adkins stated that she chose this location "because of a recent gang rape in an adjacent parking lot and because one of the bars features topless dancers," asserting

⁷² "The Comprehensive Rape Crisis Program," n.d. [1975], Memphis NOW Papers.

⁷³ Alayne Berry Adams, "Memphis' Badge of Infamy," Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 23 May 1975.

the radical feminist connection between rape and the commodification of women. Chanting “Stop Rape Now” and carrying placards bearing such slogans as “Rape Laws are Made for Rapists” and “Dismember Rapists,” these feminists heightened the city’s awareness about rape and protested the notion that, according to participant and NOW officer Marion Keisker, “women are only as safe as civilized man allows.”⁷⁴ This action exemplified their commitment to radical feminist analysis and tactics.

Their radical efforts raised political awareness about rape and propelled the Memphis Police Department to form a Comprehensive Rape Crisis Program and a Sex Crimes Squad. They hired more women to work as counselors, extended their hours into the nighttime, and began using unmarked cars to go to victims’ homes in an attempt to protect privacy and anonymity. Hospitals also worked with the police by providing speedier care for rape victims, examining women in private hospital rooms instead of more public emergency rooms, and processing and upgrading physical tests to obtain evidence for the prosecution of criminals.⁷⁵ At the same time, Memphis NOW established the city’s first rape crisis hotline, staffed with volunteers and managed by the WRC. Mayor Wyeth Chandler appointed chapter president Julia Howell to serve as the director of the city’s first Rape Crisis Program. Under Howell’s direction, the program shifted from a CETA-funded operation to a component of the city government on 1 July 1978, insuring the longevity of public support for the program. Because the chapter both used radical tactics and took advantage of institutional structures in place, what began as Memphis NOW’s

⁷⁴ “NOW Members Protest Violence against Women,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 27 August 1975.

⁷⁵ Memphis NOW Newsletter, September 1974, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

grassroots response to a local problem had become “an integral part of the city government” in the space of five years.⁷⁶

Since violence against women was not limited to rape and sexual assault, Memphis NOW also addressed the problem of wife abuse. While the national organization acknowledged wife abuse as a violent act against women, the impetus for the formation of the local task force did not come from a national directive. Rather, chapter member Angie Russo initiated the effort. In August 1975, she relayed to her fellow chapter members a story of a friend who told her about the latest in what had become a series of fights she had with her husband that, in this instance, resulted in a broken arm, concussion, and black eyes. Devastated and angry that this woman felt she had to stay with her husband out of fear because she had nowhere to go, Russo convinced the chapter to take action against wife abuse and established a public forum to confront the concerns of local women involved in abusive relationships with husbands and boyfriends.⁷⁷

Through the new task force, Russo generated a series of lectures and panels to raise community awareness about wife abuse. Disgusted by the fact that local law enforcement coded wife abuse as regular assault rather than a separate crime, Memphis NOW recognized that women could not turn to the police for help. Operating outside of this restrictive situation, the chapter opened the city’s first wife abuse hot line in September of 1976. The chapter financed the line and volunteers

⁷⁶ “The Wheel,” July 1978.

⁷⁷ Memphis NOW Newsletter, August 1975, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

staffed it for three hours daily.⁷⁸ In addition, members from Memphis NOW and WRC-sponsored support groups converged to provide immediate counseling and helped abused women find therapy and temporary shelters.⁷⁹

As part of their September meeting, Memphis NOW held an open panel discussion for the larger community entitled “Wife Beating: The Crime That Goes Unpunished.” Member Edie Sewell told the story of Marie G. Hamlin, shot to death by her husband after years of abuse. Police knew that Millard Hamlin made threats against his wife twice before that month, but they failed to follow up. Sewell then cited FBI statistics to illuminate the seriousness of the crime: in 1974 alone, 1285 wives were murdered by their husbands. Other abuse victims on the panel admitted to losing confidence in themselves, feeling “emotionally shattered” to the point that “the damage that was done...is irreparable.”⁸⁰ Before long, like self-identified radical feminists in other cities, the chapter decided that a hot line was not enough and set out to design a shelter for abused and battered wives that would give women relief from dangerous situations and safeguard women during the long legal process.

Under the auspices of the WRC, Memphis NOW organized a Wife Abuse Crisis Service in June 1977. Under Russo’s direction, the service opened a temporary shelter in August 1979, the first step en route to a more permanent facility.⁸¹ The shelter offered women safety as well as a separate space to think and discuss options.

⁷⁸ Michael Conley, “Task Force Looks at Wife Beating,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 8 September 1976.

⁷⁹ Anna Byrd Davis, “Memphis Group Offers Help to Wives,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 2 July 1976.

⁸⁰ Conley, “Task Force Looks at Wife Beating.”

⁸¹ Memphis NOW Newsletter, August 1979, Box 1, folder 8, Memphis NOW Papers.

Moreover, the shelter gave women a community of support and care, things evidently missing from their home life. After 1982, the YWCA adopted the Wife Abuse Crisis Center and funded additional and more permanent shelter space. To celebrate the opening of this new and more secure shelter that was seven years in the making, Memphis NOW hosted “An Evening of Feminist Theater” by bringing the Rhode Island Feminist Theater (RIFT) to town. RIFT presented “Internal Injury,” an original play about an abused wife. Integrating feminist theatre with alternative, feminist institutions to help women, Memphis NOW demonstrated that they were not an exclusively liberal organization.

Memphis feminists recognized that abused women often lacked financial resources to enable them to leave, so NOW and WRC established the “Women’s Crisis Loan Service of Shelby County” in June 1978. The loan program began with a \$2000 contribution from WRC-affiliated organizations, but through donations, it gradually accrued funds to empower eligible women to leave abusive situations and start a new life. So great was the need that the fund quickly suffered serious depletions.⁸² Memphis NOW raised another \$2000 at a fundraiser for the loan service, but funds still fell short.⁸³ It is ironic that so many women utilized this service that the WRC was forced to shut down the loan auxiliary the next year. Still, the program illustrates the understanding that a woman’s disadvantaged economic situation perpetuated abuse; economic uplift offered a route to freedom from it.⁸⁴

⁸² “The Wheel,” June 1978.

⁸³ Memphis NOW Newsletter, November 1978, Box 1, folder 8, Memphis NOW Papers.

⁸⁴ “The Wheel,” February 1979.

This service demonstrated how NOW and the umbrella group in Memphis generated alternative institutions at the grassroots level to alleviate women's suffering. Although they could not sustain the loan service, the chapter continued its educational activities, joining with other women's groups to extend awareness of domestic violence to the greater community. In November 1978, NOW along with several other local organizations such as the Democratic Women of Shelby County, WRC, and the National Conference of Christians and Jews, hosted a workshop on "The Problem of Wife Abuse." This two-and-one-half hour assembly illustrated that spouse abuse was not just a domestic problem but rather one of the family and the community. It also spotlighted the shelter for battered women, soliciting financial support and underscoring its importance for Memphis. NOW members also worked to change the current legal system that favored the abuser by placing the entire burden of physical proof on the often reluctant victim without attention to the husband's prior arrest record, previous calls to the police for other instances of wife abuse, or the woman's testimony.⁸⁵

At a public hearing of the Judiciary Committee of the Tennessee legislature, Memphis Legal Services attorneys and chapter members Sherry Myers and Bonnie Ragland discussed the dismal situation of legal recourse for abused women. Family violence in the state was considered a misdemeanor; accordingly, police were unable to make an arrest until the victim produced a sworn warrant for the arrest of the abuser. By defining abuse in these narrow terms, most victims were unable to

⁸⁵ Memphis NOW Newsletter, November 1978, Box 1, folder 8, Memphis NOW Papers.

process immediate complaints because the department would only issue warrants on weekdays from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Given that the majority of domestic violence episodes occurred at night or on weekends, most women were forced to wait hours or days to seek any legal recourse, leaving plenty of time for their husbands to apologize or to continue to beat them. Furthermore, police still often refused to intervene because they regarded domestic violence as a “family matter.” Myers and Ragland insisted that male judges and police officers often minimized wife abuse and humiliated victims through mockery or scorn after they testified. The Tennessee legislature passed a bill in January 1979 that would alleviate this situation by allowing an arrest without a warrant and by not requiring women to file a formal petition. Nine months after the law went into effect, Myers and Ragland urged the legislature to encourage enforcement of the new laws.⁸⁶

Memphis NOW’s efforts to combat rape and wife abuse evince its commitment to employ whatever tactics were necessary to effect change. The same was true in the struggle against pornography. When the most egregious example of the genre, “Snuff,” premiered in Memphis in 1977, lurid advertisements boasted that it was “the bloodiest thing that ever happened in front of a camera!! The film that could only be made in South America—where life is CHEAP!” The finale of this film was a woman’s murder. Members of Memphis NOW attended the movie on its opening night. The next day, several members walked through the rain in front of Towne Cinema, the film’s host, with picket signs, protesting “violence against

⁸⁶ Memphis NOW Newsletter, September 1979, Box 1, folder 8, Memphis NOW Papers.

women [and] a film that advocates killing women for entertainment.”⁸⁷ The chapter picketed the theater and circulated a flyer calling for an end to sexual violence in the media: “Violence for sexual pleasure is portrayed in crime and magazines, TV, police shows, [and] slick publications such as Playboy and Penthouse. ‘Snuff’ films are the missing link between media violence against women and actual violence that women experience daily.” NOW members also expressed outrage at the racist attitudes of “a society which says the lives of non-white people, particularly women, are less valuable and more available for exploitation than European and American women.”⁸⁸

The ensuing controversy over pornography and the degradation of women prodded Towne Cinema owner George Miller to defend the movie as being “no worse than Texas Chainsaw Massacre or a lot of other violent films.” What seemed to anger him the most was white feminists demonstrating at his theater, which historically catered to an African American audience: “People see these white women in front of my theater and they just know they don’t want to be in the middle of it. I have been harassed from the beginning and now I got white folks picketing me.”⁸⁹ Chapter president Jackie Cash denied that the picketing was racially motivated against him in particular, insisting that the inherent and violent racism and sexism of the movie he chose to show demanded their actions. Although no member ever explicitly stated so,

⁸⁷ Thomas Fox, “Acting, Fakery in ‘Snuff’ Should Bring its Well-Deserved Demise,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 27 September 1977

⁸⁸ Chapter newsletter insert, “Enough SNUFF,” n.d. [1977], Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

⁸⁹ Fox, “Acting, Fakery in ‘Snuff’ Should Bring its Well-Deserved Demise.”

it is likely that the ability to take advantage of racist notions of protecting Southern (white) womanhood figured into their tactics and the ensuing fear that the movie owner faced if he “threatened” white women. Memphis NOW was the only organization that protested this movie; any objection among African American women was not recorded in any of the local newspapers. The chapter’s efforts were successful: within days, Towne Cinema pulled the film.⁹⁰

Such activism on issues of rape, wife abuse, and pornography illustrates the impossibilities of understanding Memphis NOW as either liberal or radical; instead, it was both. They worked both within the system and beyond it to make significant change in women’s lives. Their seemingly radical efforts—creating an umbrella structure through which feminist groups in town could help women themselves rather than forcing women into the current and inadequate welfare and human services systems, taking back the night, speaking out publicly about rape and wife abuse, zap actions at the Towne Cinema II—were never defined as such, nor as “liberal”; they were survival strategies. They understood violence as a pillar of patriarchy and sought to create alternative institutions to help women and to live out a feminist commitment to women’s safety. At the same time, they also provided social services and pushed existing civic institutions and local government to accommodate feminist demands for protection under the law. Memphis NOW members responded to local needs through whatever means necessary. By turning their rape crisis activism into an institutionalized component of city government and changing laws to protect women

⁹⁰ Fox, “Acting, Fakery in ‘Snuff’ Should Bring its Well-Deserved Demise.”

from husbands who physically abused them, they permanently altered local structures—government, hospitals, and aid agencies—and provided a safer city in which women could live.

Dividing the Chapter

The standard national picture of lesbians in the women's movement is one of separate activism, typically associated with radical feminism. Moreover, lesbians supposedly either left or avoided NOW in the aftermath of Betty Friedan's infamous stand against the "lavender menace."⁹¹ When, in 1971, NOW adopted a national resolution recognizing lesbians' rights as women's rights, the lesbian issue was theoretically resolved. However, it was not, and exploring the struggle over inclusivity in NOW chapters offers a different dimension by which to understand interpersonal politics in the Memphis chapter of NOW. With out lesbians and straight women in the chapter, they had to address their own feelings about lesbianism face-to-face.⁹² Fear that lesbians would take over the chapter and damage the public

⁹¹ For more on NOW and the "lavender menace," see Stephanie Gilmore, "Beyond the Lavender Menace: The Struggle for Lesbian Rights in NOW after 1971," conference paper, Organization of American Historians, Memphis, Tennessee, 3-6 April 2003.

⁹² Other studies on lesbian communities include Susan Kathleen Freeman, "From the Lesbian Nation to the Cincinnati Lesbian Community," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (January/April 2000): 137-74; Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*; Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Brett Beemyn, ed., *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

image and political reputation of NOW reverberated through Memphis NOW, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Rather than abandon the organization in light of these tensions, however, lesbians remained loyal to Memphis NOW. It may be that lesbians had no other feminist choices; NOW was the only explicitly feminist organization in town and some lesbians clearly did not want to separate their lesbian identities from their feminist ones. As Daneel Buring has suggested, there would not be much room for lesbians' particular concerns in a formal political setting; thus a lesbian feminist organization that would have had many members and political clout in San Francisco or New York City would not have found a comfortable home in Memphis.⁹³ Lesbian and heterosexual women had little choice: work together in NOW or surrender local feminist activism. It was not until 1982 that another option emerged.

Almost four years into Memphis NOW's history, new member and lesbian Johnette Shane penned a letter to the newsletter editor complaining that the previous NOW meeting made her feel "alienated and put down." She asserted that "it is important for us to realize that the whole of women is a diverse group and we must allow everyone to have her place. There are many areas of need and interest." Furthermore, limiting chapter activities to issues of rape or employment discrimination made her feel as if her concerns were incompatible with NOW's goals.⁹⁴ President Carole Hensen responded with an expression of understanding and concern: "I regret your alienation at the May meeting—alienation happens too much

⁹³ Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*.

⁹⁴ Memphis NOW Newsletter, June 1974, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

on the outside—we don't need it at NOW meetings.” While time, commitment, and money forced the chapter to narrow its scope to “the greatest good for the greatest number,” Hensen explained, “this does NOT mean that any endeavor, interest, or need will ever be deliberately discouraged.” Moreover, she wrote, “this is your organization—it exists to do what you or any other member wants it to do.”⁹⁵

Encouraged by this overture, Shane, Mary Jo Cowart, and other members of the group followed the national example and created a Sexuality and Lesbianism task force, publicly merging the identities of “lesbian” and “feminist” in Memphis and shaping NOW to fit their needs. They planned an inclusive environment in which all women could examine their “own sexuality in a supportive, non-threatening atmosphere” and provide consciousness raising as well as address the legal and political issues surrounding same-sex sexuality.

This task force recognized the need to have a space for women outside of the mainstream of the organization, and response to their efforts was “heartening” because the group attracted “an encouraging number” of new members.⁹⁶ Between thirty and sixty women attended its monthly consciousness raising group on sexuality and lesbianism. One participant recalled that although lesbians were in the majority to begin with, “the percentage [of lesbians] increases even as the number of women in CR stays constant.”⁹⁷ This situation made straight women increasingly uncomfortable, especially considering what some viewed as the implication that the

⁹⁵ Memphis NOW Newsletter, July 1974, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

⁹⁶ Memphis NOW Newsletter, December 1974, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

⁹⁷ “Local Task Force,” *Gaiety*, August 1975.

only true feminist was a lesbian. Still, lesbians in Memphis NOW reported feeling a “sense of one-ness rather than the division of ‘us’ and ‘they’” and felt welcome in the chapter during the 1970s.⁹⁸

The task force was also a social and cultural liaison between NOW and the local gay and lesbian community.⁹⁹ In addition to sponsoring gay picnics and women’s dances at Memphis State during gay pride weeks, the Task Force opened Memphis’s first Gay Switchboard, a telephone line that served as a crisis intervention line and also offered information about lesbian and gay community activities, in 1976.¹⁰⁰ Through fundraisers and parties, Memphis NOW sponsored the switchboard until 1979. With the departure of key members, management of the Gay Switchboard was turned over to the Memphis Gay Coalition.¹⁰¹ By the end of the decade, Memphis NOW secured its public identity, at least in part, as a vital part of the lesbian and gay community.

But it was the formation and popularity of a softball team, with its suggestion of informal lesbian solidarity, that caused tensions over sexuality to rise.¹⁰² As Daneel Buring has discussed in her book on gay and lesbian community in Memphis, softball

⁹⁸ Memphis NOW Newsletter, June 1975, Box 1, folder 7, Memphis NOW Papers.

⁹⁹ “Local Task Force,” *Gaiety*, August 1975, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*, 168.

¹⁰¹ Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*, 168.

¹⁰² Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*; and Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) are two scholars who discuss the centrality of softball in terms of lesbian community building. For more on this in Memphis, see Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*.

was an important feature of community development among Memphis lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s. In the mid-1970s, the NOW chapter as well as the women's bookstore Meristem and the delicatessen Bread and Roses sponsored softball teams that played in city leagues.¹⁰³ A former chapter president credited the softball team with "growing the chapter for several years," and indeed many women, lesbian and straight, joined the softball team and ultimately NOW.¹⁰⁴ While NOW members, straight and lesbian, were involved in a variety of political issues—the ERA, anti-rape activism, awareness about violence against women, abortion rights, and more—one team member noted that the team "provided an outlet, other than going to meetings or doing political acts, for us to meet and become friends and create a very strong network."¹⁰⁵

Members stood together when external homophobia pressured the organization. From 1974 to 1976, NOW held its meetings at the First Presbyterian Church in downtown Memphis. When, in July 1976, church leaders told NOW officers that the Sexuality and Lesbianism task force could no longer hold its meetings at the church, members decided to stop using the church for all NOW activities.¹⁰⁶ Yet the softball team became a source of contention internally, a symbol of the growing tension surrounding the reconciliation of lesbianism and feminism. In late 1981—a full ten years after the national organization formally acknowledged

¹⁰³ Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*, 155.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Betty Sullivan, interview by author, 21 October 1995.

¹⁰⁵ Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*, 156.

¹⁰⁶ Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*, 165.

lesbians' issues as feminists' issues—some members called a special meeting to discuss problems openly. Instead, the assembly created “a discernable split...within the chapter between lesbian and straight members.”¹⁰⁷ One member recalled that this rather benign meeting took on a hostile tone when one woman stood up and announced that “she could not stand NOW being represented by a bunch of dykes.”¹⁰⁸

At that point, conversation gave way to conflict. Whereas lesbians wanted to talk about issues they faced in a forum where they felt safe to do so, some straight women thought the overt emphasis on same-sex sexual identity sidetracked their concerns about family, women's safety, and the ERA. They also decried the image of NOW as a lesbian organization. While the softball games were fun and promoted a sense of camaraderie, they were also an avenue for local lesbians to meet and interact. One member recalled that, in her opinion, “softball was the excuse for people who were getting uncomfortable with the fact that those of us who were gay were starting not to be so quiet about it.”¹⁰⁹

Many straight women left Memphis NOW and founded their own organization, a second incarnation of the Memphis Women's Political Caucus, where members focused solely on such formal political actions as elections and public forums. One former member of Memphis NOW and a founding member of the Memphis Women's Political Caucus felt that “NOW never recognized their limitations, trying to be everything to everyone. They were not politically savvy and

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Lynda Dolbi, 6 March 1996.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Lynda Dolbi, 6 March 1996.

¹⁰⁹ Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*, 167.

could not help progressive women or men run for office because they did not know what to do. And I did; so did others.”¹¹⁰ Some women sought this sort of political activity, and the split in the NOW chapter prompted such activists to create their own political network.

That Memphis NOW split apart in 1982 over the “softball” issue gives more evidence to support the idea that the 1971 resolution ultimately resolved very little. But it also offers an opportunity to step back and see what the “softball” issue was really all about. Without a doubt, some women in this NOW chapter were homophobic; others likely felt that the number of lesbians in the chapter had reached the tipping point by 1982. NOW was a “lesbian organization,” a label they resisted. If they wanted to retain political voice in the city and continue to effect political change, they had to distance themselves from NOW. Some members in this chapter had been traveling to ratification states to support the Equal Rights Amendment. They spent their time, money, and physical energy to work for an amendment that ultimately failed, leaving many women feeling disenchanting and dismayed. In the face of defeat, some women likely turned their disappointment and anger inward, and members conflated the ERA’s failure with fears of public association of feminism and lesbianism. Others undoubtedly pursued more formal political actions. As hopes for the amendment diminished, some local NOW members realized how vital the formal political process was—they sought to elect feminist women and men to office and pursued more concrete political gains, joining the national board’s goals in the

¹¹⁰ Interview with Paula Casey, 20 April 1996.

aftermath of the ERA's defeat. But locally, the "lavender menace" that may have been shameful in 1970 was all too real in 1982. When tied to the defeat of the ERA, it becomes impossible to disentangle cause and effect, but it is clear that some NOW members became estranged sisters, abandoning NOW for the MWPC.

Understanding Memphis NOW

As the only explicitly feminist, membership-based organization in the city during the heyday of second-wave feminism, Memphis NOW was everything to everyone, or at least tried to be. It embraced multiple organizational structures, tactics, and issues. From the outset, chapter members opposed a rigid, hierarchical structure; throughout its history, they took the lead in creating an organization to fit their needs or to respond to the greater community. In various ways, they both claimed and confronted images of Southern womanhood.

Rather than pigeonhole this organization, it may be more to the point to understand them on their own terms. At bottom, it matters less if they fall under the category of "liberal" or "radical;" on this continuum, they fall somewhere in between. Memphis NOW created an oppositional community, offering both physical space to challenge normative cultural and political practices and a collective identity that engendered a "sense of we" in direct opposition to those who sought to maintain the status quo.¹¹¹ In doing so, they embraced, rejected, and contested local and regional identity.

¹¹¹ For theoretical development and various studies on oppositional communities and cultures, see Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris, eds., *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social*

What emerges from this historical analysis is a group of dedicated feminists who changed the community in which they lived; as one member put it, “I came to NOW to bitch and stayed to join the world.”¹¹² But this analysis also reveals the ways in which location shaped their activism. In the ten-year battle for the ERA, Memphis NOW members rejected “Southern womanhood” and the protections afforded to women based on this idea. Although they rarely publicly called attention to the racism inherent in this trope, members eschewed this model, preferring instead to create a new notion of womanhood that would offer freedom from the pedestal and guarantee civil protection. Indeed, the only time NOW members embraced their Southernness was when they challenged the South to “rise and ratify” the amendment. This same group of activists fell back on the notion of protecting women’s bodies, relying however silently on local and regional fears of rape and desires to protect women from harm. NOW members built their feminist activism around local political and social conditions—rape and violence against women were not contested in part because these concerns allowed Southerners to protect, rescue, and save women, in spite of the fact that it also meant addressing feminist issues. This NOW chapter most explicitly deployed feminist identity, to use Bernstein’s terminology, in conflict with its location and regional identity as southern; San Francisco NOW did not identify in

Protest. Two studies that explore the creation of oppositional culture in depth are Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003); and Elizabeth Kaminski, “Listening to Drag: Music, Performance, and the Construction of Oppositional Culture” (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 2003).

¹¹² Unattributed “quotable quote,” Memphis NOW Newsletter, August 1975.

the same ways as “western” nor did Columbus NOW as “Midwestern,” although each chapter’s activism reflects the local context in which the chapter and feminism emerged.¹¹³ The context in which feminist activism took place in Memphis, then, was both shaped by and shaped regional identity, suggesting that location plays a more significant role in understanding feminism in the South than fixed, dichotomous models of defining feminism.

¹¹³ Bernstein, “Celebration and Suppression.”

CHAPTER 4
BETWEEN AND BEYOND THE LIBERAL/RADICAL DIVIDE:
THE COLUMBUS CHAPTER OF NOW

On the morning of 4 February 1979, five women from the Columbus chapter of NOW (Columbus NOW) met one another at 5:30 a.m. at the “Great Wall of Gahanna,” a mile-long noise barrier on the east side of Interstate 270. Armed with paint brushes and buckets of paint—and an intense anger over the continual rapes of women in the city—these five women painted anti-rape slogans, including “Dismember Rapists,” and pro-feminist slogans on the wall. The local newspaper published a story about the incident only when the women were officially fined for their actions, and the story ultimately diminished the women’s action as silly “fun.” “The women wanted to have a good time. They planned the painting a week beforehand, over dinner,” the story reported. And Mary Mosley, chapter president, was quoted as saying: “When people ask me ‘why did you paint the wall?’ (I tell them) because it was there. And because it was fun” (Bridgman 1979).

The women were arrested, charged and found guilty of disorderly conduct, and fined \$250 each; Betty Powell, who was charged in Gahanna Mayor’s Court, was

also given a three-day suspended sentence.¹ The incident became “cause célèbre” among Columbus NOW members² and an example of how the local NOW chapter was, in some ways, as radical as the Women’s Action Collective (WAC), a local radical feminist organization in the city.³ For participants, the action was not radical simply because they defaced property with anti-rape slogans. In the words of Barbara Wood, local NOW member and one of the “Gahanna Five,” “The rapes were not being addressed. No one took them seriously. And here all of these women were being raped, beaten, and hurt.”⁴ Feminists had been working to confront the crime of rape in the city. In 1973, NOW chapter members joined some members of WAC and other interested individuals to form Women Against Rape (WAR), and through this group, pursued a variety of strategies both within and beyond the formal system for women who had been raped.⁵ Gretchen Dygert, a WAC member, reported that WAR had a “rape squad” that would follow men who were charged with rape, documenting and publicizing their actions, and “basically harass this guy, letting him know that feminists were watching him because the system wouldn’t.”⁶ And it certainly seemed

¹ Mary Bridgman, “Revolution Proves Costly to ‘Gahanna Five’ Women,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 14 June 1979.

² Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, “Women’s Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism,” *Signs* 19, no. 1 (1993): 32-61; quotation on 39.

³ Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women’s Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

⁴ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

⁵ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, esp. 35-38; Right NOW, October 1973.

⁶ Interview, June Sahara. Whittier (*Feminist Generations*, 38) refers to this action as “courtwatch.”

to be the case: in 1971, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported that the rate (per 100,000 population) of rape in Columbus was 35.3; in the decade from 1970 to 1980, the number of reported forcible rapes in the state went up, from 1700 to 3696.⁷ With reports of rape on the rise across the state, and contemporary analysis that only about 10 percent of rapes were reported, feminists in the state felt that rape was not being addressed in any satisfactory way and pursued extra-legal means to confront the issue.

Rather than continue the watches that WAC started or continue to work within the system, the Gahanna Five took up the issue through graffiti. For Wood, “the issue was public signage. We spent a great deal of time thinking this through. We wanted public notice. Men wrote on bathroom walls that Susie was a good lay. We wanted men to know that we were not going to take it any more. The issue was about making a public display, public signage. So we made our own public signs.” Moreover, “it was completely theory driven, our perspective on rape and our decision to take this action.”⁸ Another participant, Lanna Harris, suggested that the action was a statement “for a lot of women. One of the reasons this is threatening is we are bringing home to Columbus that the (feminist) revolution has begun. If middle-class women are taking

⁷ Angela Taylor, “The Rape Victim: Is She Also the Unintended Victim of the Law?” *The New York Times*, 15 June 1971, 52. On the numbers of rapes in the state, see the FBI, Uniform Crime Reports, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, and 1980, accessible through www.disastercenter.com/crime/ohcrime.htm.

⁸ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

to the streets in Columbus, it will be happening all over the country in the near future.”⁹

That the middle-class white women who made up the “Gahanna Five” took up the issue of rape in a very public, outside-of-the-system sort of way indicates how NOW women in Columbus embraced radical feminism through action and theory. Their action seems aberrant in the historical narrative of second-wave feminism because NOW did not utilize this sort of action (although national NOW never formally condoned it, either). Moreover, by 1979, national NOW’s main focus was the Equal Rights Amendment and the extension campaign. But in Columbus, it makes perfect sense. For some feminists—radical, radicalized, or otherwise—Columbus NOW was the place to undertake radical political strategies and express radical political perspectives.

In this chapter, I begin with the development of activism in general and feminism in particular in Columbus, looking briefly at the rise of feminism in the city. I then turn to the NOW chapter, highlighting its members’ activism and analyzing their theoretical analyses of women’s lives. According to sociologist Nancy Whittier, the radical feminist collective, WAC, emerged as the strongest local second-wave feminist force in Columbus. WAC formed in early 1971, bringing together women’s liberation activists from Ohio State University and other, mostly younger, radical activists in the city. The only other organized feminist group was the Ohio Commission on the Status of Women (OCSW), a group of older, moderate women

⁹ Bridgman, “Revolution Proves Costly to ‘Gahanna Five’ Women.”

who emerged in response to the governor's resistance to creating a formal commission on the status of women in Ohio.¹⁰ NOW in Columbus fell between these two groups. It shared membership with OCSW and with WAC, but it maintained a separate identity. The Columbus chapter was not the only game in town, as Memphis NOW was, nor was it a local political force, like its San Francisco counterpart. However, it was the only NOW chapter of the three that openly embraced radical feminist theory and practice and outwardly eschewed a focus on national issues, such as the ERA, for the bread-and-butter concerns of local women. Thinking about this particular group of feminists invites a consideration of what happens when a NOW chapter exists as the feminist non-mainstream of a vibrant feminist community.

Activism in a "Fragile Capital"

Of Memphis, Columbus, and San Francisco—the three cities under study in this work—only Columbus is a state capital. From its origins, Columbus was a different place: “Unlike other towns in Ohio that were formed by the people living there, Columbus was created in 1812 by the General Assembly.”¹¹ Columbus became the third capital in the state of Ohio, after state politicians moved the seat of power from Chillicothe to Zanesville in 1806 and then from Zanesville to Columbus six

¹⁰ See Whittier, *Feminist Generations*; and Kathleen Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.: The Status of Women Commission and the Rise of Feminist Coalition Politics in Ohio, 1964-1974,” *Ohio History* 108 (spring 1999): 39-60.

¹¹ Andrew C. Cole, *A Fragile Capital: Identity and the Early Years of Columbus, Ohio* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001): 1.

years later. Political leaders sought a place that was central in the newly formed state but had rejected other places, such as Franklinton, Dublin, and Delaware, in lieu of a new capital near the water (but not in immediate danger of flooding, as had happened in Franklinton in 1798). This newly incorporated town on the high eastern bank of the Scioto River offered the ideal spot, and within three years of deliberation in the State House and Senate, several Ohioans had contributed enough land to build a “state house, offices, and penitentiary and such other buildings as the legislature will appoint.”¹² Although there was not universal support for moving the state capital to Columbus, once the State Assembly approved, one local newspaper editor reflected upon the struggle to move: “We believe a more eligible site for a town is not to be found and it must afford considerable gratification that this long contested subject has at last been settled.”¹³ Through the result of major lobbying efforts, Columbus became the permanent state capital.

Columbus did not grow randomly but was rather a product of partial planning.¹⁴ By the end of 1813, some three hundred residents lived in the city.¹⁵ Within its first few decades, the city experienced entrepreneurial development, which

¹² Andrew D. Rodgers, *Noble Fellow William Starling Sullivant* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1940): 66.

¹³ Chillicothe *Supporter*, 29 February 1812; and Cole, *A Fragile Capital*, 8.

¹⁴ Cole, *A Fragile Capital*, 10; for other studies of city planning in the context of western development, see John Reys, *Cities of the American West: A History of Frontier Urban Planning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

¹⁵ Cole, *A Fragile Capital*, 11.

brought in more residents; the introduction of more people, however, also brought disease, including cholera and smallpox. People who survived these epidemiological crises had to deal with sometimes hazardous weather, including, alas, flooding of the Scioto River in 1832, 1834, and 1847. But the city was able to rebuild whenever disaster struck, imbuing it with a sense of newness.¹⁶

Formal politics has always played a dominant role in people's lives in Columbus, and people have mobilized organizationally in this capital city to effect political change. Citizens of Columbus participated in numerous antebellum reform movements tied to evangelical benevolence, including Sunday school reform, temperance, peace, missionary activity, antislavery, and women's rights. Temperance was probably the most popular reform effort in Columbus, which was home to the *Ohio Temperance Advocate*, a large anti-alcohol publication.¹⁷ Although many Ohioans and Columbus residents joined the temperance movement, taverns and the social act of drinking was still popular: by 1841, Ohio had 272 distilleries that produced more than 446,000 gallons of alcohol per year.¹⁸ Women in the city joined and led women's temperance leagues such as the Daughters of Temperance, providing political entrée into efforts to expand women's rights and to abolish slavery. Columbus and Central Ohio were also important stops along the

¹⁶ Cole, *A Fragile Capital*, 22-26.

¹⁷ Cole, *A Fragile Capital*, 181.

¹⁸ Cole, *A Fragile Capital*, 181; and *Ohio State Journal*, 16 June 1841.

Underground Railroad, and from the U.S. Civil War onward, Columbus would boast a strong commitment to social justice campaigns and movements.¹⁹

Columbus was home to important shifts in the national landscape of social movement activism. In early December 1886, thirty-eight trade unionists converged on Druids' Hall in downtown Columbus with the hopes of creating a new, nationwide labor federation. Most delegates had roots in the Knights of Columbus and socialist groups but sought an organization that would place national trade unions at the center of the burgeoning labor movement, so they founded the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL soon eclipsed the fading Knights of Labor, and after merging with the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1955, it became the largest labor union conglomerate in the United States and a force in the twentieth-century labor movement.²⁰

Labor was not the only force in social movement history that developed in the city with notable effect on the national political and social scenes. Indeed, women's rights were an important political theme in the state and its capital city. In 1850, advocates of woman's rights held its second national convention in Salem, Ohio (the

¹⁹ On the Underground Railroad, see, for example, Wilbur Siebert, *The Mysteries of Ohio's Underground Railroad* (Columbus: Long's College Book Co., 1951).

²⁰ For more on the origins of the AFL, see Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917*. See also Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); David Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1895-1925*; and Kevin Boyle, *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994: The Labor-Liberal Alliance* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998).

first convention was in Seneca Falls, New York). Woman suffrage did not become a part of the revised 1851 state constitution, as advocates had hoped, and Ohio women formed the Ohio Women's Rights Association the following year. By 1870, there were over thirty woman suffrage associations in Ohio; through the work of organized women and men in the state, suffragists almost succeeded in amending the state constitution to allow for woman suffrage. In 1912, the Equal Suffrage and Elective Franchise Committee put a referendum to the voters to remove the phrase "white male" from the constitution in reference to voting rights; this too was narrowly defeated. Despite defeat, suffragists in the state continued to pursue women's right to vote. In 1917, voters again defeated a woman suffrage initiative, this time to allow women to vote in presidential elections. Major opponents to woman suffrage included organized labor, in particular, the United States Brewers' Association, which linked woman suffrage and prohibition. However, when Congress finally passed the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Ohio became the fifth state to ratify the amendment.

Voting rights for white women were secure after 1920, but it was another forty-five years before African Americans were granted the right to vote, with the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that finally enforced the 15th amendment, which granted all men the right to vote. In this interim, especially in the aftermath of World War II, Columbus experienced tremendous economic growth as did major cities across the nation, but it also witnessed the rise of civil rights and antiwar activism as citizens faced inequities at the local level.

If the South “boiled with bigotry and violence, Columbus simmered with segregation.”²¹ In public venues such as theatres and restaurants, employment, education, and housing, local practice mandated a separate and unequal social structure and attendant cultural and economic opportunities. Such segregation had a tremendous impact on people’s daily lives. For example, Robert Duncan, who became the state’s first black federal judge in the early 1970s, recalled ordering food in a local restaurant and having it handed to him in carryout containers because he was not permitted to eat inside the establishment: there was, he stated, “a quiet rage within me, having had those experiences in my life. Every day of my life I think about that.”²²

Such de facto segregation persisted, and even though Ohio voters approved legislation to end formal segregation under the law, the letter of the law was not always enforced. In 1937, the state enacted a law prohibiting racial discrimination in public accommodations, but as Duncan’s story suggests, it was rarely enforced. In 1959, the state passed its own Civil Rights Act and created a Civil Rights Commission to investigate allegations of discrimination and employment. Such laws were “toothless,” however: as late as 1963, the local newspapers still carried classified ads for houses and apartments for “whites only.”²³ In 1965, the state passed

²¹ Sherri Williams, “Civil Rights Act of 1964 Culminated Long Struggle,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 2 July 2004, 1A.

²² Williams, “Civil Rights Act of 1964.”

²³ Williams, “Civil Rights Act of 1964”

a fair housing law, one that the Ohio Association of Real Estate Boards protested with a pamphlet entitled “Do You Want to Lose Freedom of Choice?”²⁴

With such laws on the books, however, local civil rights organizations mobilized to have them enacted. In 1938, for example, the Vanguard League, an interracial organization, worked to desegregate restaurants and theatres in downtown Columbus, and in the 1960s, the local NAACP pressured the newspapers to refuse to accept housing ads from those seeking to rent or sell only to white people. Civil rights activists rarely took to the streets, as one activist recalled: “There may not have been overt marches, but black folks, every chance they got, pushed for justice.”²⁵ In addition to Vanguard League and an NAACP chapter, activists mobilized through progressive churches, local chapters of the Urban League, and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), all of which advocated peaceful means to winning equality in the early-to-mid-1960s.

By 1967, however, many activists across the country and in Columbus were becoming increasingly impatient with paeans to peaceful protest and legal means to achieve equal rights. In Columbus, CORE took the lead in harnessing this energy, and from Columbus, helped shift the direction of the movement. Of particular note was the move to engage in more open demonstrations against racism. In September 1967, more than 3000 African Americans gathered in northeast Columbus as CORE protested the refusal of a white landlord to rent a vacant storefront to its organization.

²⁴ Williams, “Civil Rights Act of 1964.”

²⁵ Williams, “Civil Rights Acts of 1964.”

As 200 police officers armed with nightsticks, tear gas, and riot guns converged on the crowd, the protestors dispersed.²⁶

But the shift toward radicalism did not recede. In July of the following year, CORE followed up on this incident by holding its national convention in downtown Columbus. In the aftermath of King's assassination in April 1968, CORE sought to "rebuild the loosely structured organization into a disciplined force that would promote the concept of black nationalism in Negro communities across the country."²⁷ Roy Innis, then director of CORE, reiterated that his organization now embraced black nationalist philosophy and action and sought to develop programs to give African Americans self-determination and community control: "We're talking about a new political subdivision, and as such we [African Americans] would control the flow of goods and services in that subdivision."²⁸ Roy Williams, then executive director of the NAACP, aligned with CORE to promote organizational unity, which he called "a necessity if black people are going to successfully attack the problems that beset them."²⁹

A split erupted as some in CORE saw the move to black nationalism as necessary but CORE's strategy as not going far enough. Robert Carson led some to abandon CORE because the group intended to pursue the goal of "building a nation

²⁶ "Disturbance in Columbus," *New York Times*, 21 September 1967.

²⁷ Earl Caldwell, "CORE to Tighten Its Organization," *New York Times*, 4 July 1968.

²⁸ Caldwell, "CORE to Tighten Its Organization."

²⁹ Earl Caldwell, "Wilkins, in Talk to CORE, Seeks to Close Negro Rift," *New York Times*, 6 July 1968.

within a nation” by working through the system. Carson favored a more radical approach of destroying the system that oppressed African Americans and formed the Black Liberation Alliance, which was dedicated to “basic social, economic, and political change, and not to reform.”³⁰ Other groups in Columbus also promoted alternative structures for African Americans. The Urban League, for example, organized a “black militant arts program” in Columbus, which garnered the praise and support of executive director Whitney M. Young.³¹ Black power was becoming a potent force in Columbus, and more and more local activists, including those involved with more mainstream civil rights organizations, were embracing its militant radicalism.

Shifts in the local terrain on civil rights were contemporaneous with the rise of antiwar activism, and the antiwar movement took on particular significance in central Ohio.³² On 4 May 1970, National Guardsmen fired into a crowd of students and

³⁰ “Alliance is Formed by Ex-CORE Members,” *New York Times*, 21 October 1968; see also Earl Caldwell, “CORE Dissenters Quit Convention,” *New York Times*, 8 July 1968.

³¹ “Youths on Board of Urban League,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1968.

³² More comprehensive studies of the antiwar movement in the United States include Melvin Small, *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994) and Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the 1960s and 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). David Cunningham, *There’s Something Happening Here: The New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), traces a broad range of protest movements in the United States, including antiwar activism; Jo Freeman, *At Berkeley*

young protestors, killing four students at Kent State University. The incident, along with another within days at Jackson State University in Mississippi, set off massive protests and riots at college campuses around the state and the country. However, a week before the incident at Kent State, seven people were injured at Ohio State as students rioted on campus in protest against the war in Vietnam. As a result of the rioting, Governor James Rhodes ordered 1500 National Guardsmen to the university's main campus to assist local police. According to the national press, "the trouble started in the afternoon [of 30 April] with a confrontation between antiwar protestors and Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets. The protestors were picketing eight campus buildings and the cadets tried to prevent them from entering the school's armory."³³ Students threw rocks and held sit-down demonstrations; police hurled tear gas canisters to break up the protestors. Students then blocked intersections, smashed windows, and turned on fire hydrants, prompting even more action on the part of the police and National Guardsmen, leading to dozens of injured people in the aftermath. The National Guard remained a presence on campus for the remainder of the spring quarter of 1970, a symbol to many of the imposition of the state and the curtailing of individual freedoms; the antiwar movement radicalized many on the Ohio State University campus.³⁴ Although these radical turns are reflected across the nation, they took on particular and local significance to citizens in

in the Sixties: The Education of an Activist, 1961-1965 (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2003) provides one autobiographical account of early antiwar activism.

³³ "Seven Shot, Guard Called in Ohio State U. Riot," *New York Times*, 30 April 1970.

³⁴ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, esp. 28-30

Columbus. In this milieu of radicalizing politics, the women's movement took on renewed force and energy in Ohio's capital city.

From Abeyance to Activism: Feminism in Columbus

Not all second-wave feminist activism, however, grew directly out of local radical politics and culture; indeed, Columbus boasted its own history of women's and feminist activism. Over the course of the twentieth century, women in Ohio maintained a strong commitment to social movement activism, including but not limited to feminist activism. Ohio women worked in the General Assembly to secure the right for married women to control their own property, to vote in local school board elections, and to sue or be sued in city and state courts.³⁵ In 1920, the year that women secured the right to vote, the Ohio chapter of the National American Woman Suffrage Association officially became the Ohio League of Women Voters, following the national trend. Feminist activism moved into an era of "abeyance" in which the women's movement did not cease altogether but instead was "elite-sustained."³⁶ Women's activism in Columbus subsided, but did not go away completely.

³⁵ Ann Fisher, "From Clubroom to Network: As women's status has evolved, so have their associations." *Columbus Dispatch*, 26 December 1999.

³⁶ Verta Taylor, "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance," *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989): 761-75. Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Movement from 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). See also Hartmann, *The Other Feminists*, and Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

In the years between suffrage and World War II, many Columbus women faced a poor economic situation. By 1920, 18 percent of the city's workforce was female, mostly working in homes, factories, and offices.³⁷ Although more and more women had migrated to the city, their incomes did not afford them adequate money to live independently. In Columbus, as in cities across the nation, the local YWCA offered a solution, providing day nurseries for children, educational and recreational opportunities for women, and a place to live.³⁸ By 1920, the YWCA operated a separate local branch, the Blue Triangle, and a separate residence hall for African American women. Within the next ten years, the YWCA became an advocate for women laborers, seeking to overhaul state labor laws, work to keep married teachers on the job, and establishing formal job training programs.³⁹ The Y also led the way in terms of ending segregation in Columbus: it integrated its board of directors in the 1930s, and by 1953, it integrated its Downtown swimming pool. In the early 1960s, it closed its segregated branches, joining other civil rights groups in pursuit of racial equality and becoming a local model for integration and interracial advocacy.⁴⁰

While the YWCA was a vanguard advocate for women in the city during the “doldrums,” other women's organizations also grew up at this time and maintained a female, if not explicitly feminist, presence in debating contemporary issues. For

³⁷ Fisher, “From Clubroom to Network.”

³⁸ For more on the YWCA historically, see Nina Mjackij, *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and YWCA in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

³⁹ Fisher, “From Clubroom to Network.”

⁴⁰ Fisher, “From Clubroom to Network.”

example, Zonta International, which had been formed in Buffalo, NY, in 1919, formed a chapter in Columbus in 1929. According to Harriet Bracken, a former Zonta member, the organization provided a women's network within the city, offering "contacts with other women in business, professional women. We were able to talk to each other. It enlarged our perspective. We didn't know the word then, but we were networking."⁴¹ More than networking, however, Zonta members also engaged one another and other women's organizations on such issues as the status of women in the workplace, world peace, and the atomic bomb.⁴²

Bringing these and other women's groups together in Columbus was the Ohio Federation of Women's Clubs. An important coalition and evidence of the entrenched network of women in the city, the Federation addressed such local issues as public libraries, juvenile courts, and fair labor legislation.⁴³ Members also engaged in philanthropy and public works programs tied to the Columbus Symphony, Children's Hospital, and other charities. The Federation thrived into the 1960s, but the rise of various identity-based social movements changed the organization—"fewer meetings.

⁴¹ Fisher, "From Clubroom to Network." For more on submerged networks as a sociological term of analysis, see Taylor, "Social Movement Continuity"; and Carol Mueller, "Conflict Networks and the Origins of Women's Liberation," in *Social Movements*, ed. Doug McAdam and David Snow (Los Angeles: Roxbury Press, 1997).

⁴² Fisher, "From Clubroom to Network." On feminist peace activism, see Andrea Estepa, "Rethinking the Relationship of Feminism, Activism, and Motherhood," paper presented at the American Historical Association meeting, 4 January 2005, Seattle, Washington.

⁴³ Fisher, "From Clubroom to Network."

Shorter, more casual conversations. More than anything, fewer members.”⁴⁴ By the early 1970s, the second wave of the women’s movement engulfed feminists in Columbus. Joining women across the country, Columbus women moved from civil rights, antiwar, and women’s activism into self-professed and self-identified feminism.

One group that emerged was the “self-appointed and self-anointed” Ohio Commission on the Status of Women.⁴⁵ This group of women from Ohio branches of national religious, civil, and service organizations came together in 1964 to create a governor’s commission to study the status of women, following the national lead of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women.⁴⁶ Republican governor James Rhodes refused to form such a commission, suggesting that his philosophy of “limited government did not jibe with the federal activism of Democratic presidents Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.”⁴⁷ In response to the governor’s obstinacy, Columbus women from the League of Women Voters, AAUW, National Council of Jewish Women, YWCA, BPW, and the Ohio Federation of Women’s Organizations came together as the Ohio Status of Women Commission, Inc. to “maintain pressure on state government to formulate policies on women’s issues,” particularly economic issues.⁴⁸ In 1971, they turned their attention to the passage of the Equal Rights

⁴⁴ Fisher, “From Clubroom to Network.”

⁴⁵ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, 28.

⁴⁶ On PCSW, see Harrison, *On Account of Sex*.

⁴⁷ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.,” 40.

⁴⁸ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.,” 41.

Amendment in Ohio. By this time, the NOW chapter had formed, but OCSW members reportedly felt that the NOW chapter was too radical. For example, NOW and the “lib movement” commemorated the 50th anniversary of woman suffrage by staging a “theatrical protest of the midi skirt” followed by a “teach-in on the status of women;” OCSW marked the same date with a fashion and style show featuring the popular midi and miniskirts and advocated “political solutions to ending discriminatory practices against women as alternatives to NOW’s ‘dramatic’ tactics.”⁴⁹

If NOW was too “dramatic” for some, it was far too liberal, even conservative, for others. The “most notable women’s group” of the 1970s was the Women’s Action Collective (WAC), which was a coalition effort of women’s liberation and radical feminists in Columbus.⁵⁰ In this decade, WAC represented the core of feminist activism in the city of Columbus. Formed in late 1970, WAC grew out of women’s liberation groups at Ohio State University, but quickly involved many women from the city. Its members’ commitment to radical feminism meant that, according to one former member, sexism was the primary form of oppression, social revolution was pursued over social reform, and separatism was an instrumental part of feminist consciousness raising.⁵¹ It brought public attention to a host of feminist issues, including domestic violence (often called “wife abuse” at the time),

⁴⁹ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.,” 55-56; and *Columbus Citizen Journal*, 21 August 1970.

⁵⁰ Fisher, “From Clubroom to Network.” The definitive study of WAC is Whittier, *Feminist Generations*.

⁵¹ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, 34-35.

rape, violence against women, and abortion, but more than just bringing the personal into the realm of the political, WAC also created numerous alternative institutions for women in the city, including a battered women's shelter, women-only "take-back-the-night" demonstrations, and a feminist bookstore, Fan the Flames. WAC was also instrumental in the founding of Women's Studies at Ohio State University, and many of the members of WAC were students and faculty at OSU. Some of their efforts, such as the battered women's shelter and the Women's Studies department, have been incorporated into city and state operations; Women Against Rape (WAR), which operated under the umbrella of WAC (and in many ways, was the heart of WAC)⁵² but was a separate institution, still operates in the city, working in local hospitals and with city police to help prosecute and convict rapists. Other elements of this organization, such as Fan the Flames, have vanished from the city's activist horizon (the bookstore was unable to compete with the major chain bookstores and closed in 1997).⁵³ However, as sociologist Nancy Whittier has demonstrated, WAC altered the

⁵² Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, outlines how WAR received CETA funding for the rape crisis center, making it the financial hub of the collective.

⁵³ There are few studies on women's feminist bookstores; on Fan the Flames, see Whittier, *Feminist Generations*; see also Saralyn Chestnut and Amanda Gable, "Women Ran It: Charis Books and More and Atlanta's Lesbian-Feminist Community," in *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 241-84. For more on other cities that incorporated various feminist-generated institutions into the city government, see Stephanie Gilmore, "The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, Tennessee, 1971-1982: Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide," *NWSA Journal* 15 (spring 2003): 94-117; and Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002).

city's political and cultural landscape and formed the mainstay of feminist activism and community in the city throughout the 1970s.⁵⁴

It is in this feminist environment, then, that some women in the city formed a local chapter of NOW. By accounts of members of WAC and NOW, Columbus NOW in the 1970s and 1980s existed in the midst of the large and diverse women's and feminist community that was OCSW and WAC. Part of the reason, according to one former Columbus NOW member, is that NOW nationally "looked" mainstream: "The national leaders were very well dressed, very middle class, mostly white. And you could have put them in front of any camera. They were not radical types."⁵⁵ For some women, looking and being "not radical" by working through formal political channels was essential for creating and sustaining feminist change in the city and the state; for many other women in Columbus, radicalized by antiwar, civil rights, and feminist activism, looking "mainstream" was less important, so many feminists turned to the alternative, which was WAC.⁵⁶ When some Columbus women formed NOW in late 1970, it fit somewhere in the middle of this feminist spectrum between OCSW and WAC, a feminist force in the city but one that belies neat categorization as either liberal or radical.

⁵⁴ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*.

⁵⁵ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

⁵⁶ On the importance of appearance and the "look" among lesbian feminists, see Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization," in *Frontiers of New Social Movement Theories*, ed. Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller.

As membership rosters for OCSW, WAC, and NOW make clear, many members shared their commitments, at least on paper, to two or three of these groups at the same time. Other women (and men) went only to the NOW chapter. For some, age and sexuality were the lines separating these local organizations. The older women in OCSW looked “old,” “and here we [NOW members] were, young and rather green in terms of political activism. We wanted to be active, and they were much more politically savvy.”⁵⁷ By contrast, the women in WAC were of the same age as many NOW members, but, as one NOW member put it, “my impression of them is that they were lesbian. We weren’t.”⁵⁸ Indeed, by all accounts, lesbian identity and lesbian community networks were the dividing line between WAC and NOW.⁵⁹ In Columbus, the NOW chapter undertook many of the same issues and actions and employed the same strategies as both OCSW and WAC. As a separate organization, however, it did offer some feminists an organization through which to engage in local feminist protest and a range of feminist analyses. For many feminists in Columbus, NOW was too liberal and mainstream; others saw NOW as too

⁵⁷ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004. She later became “politically savvy” as an elected member of the Ohio Supreme Court.

⁵⁸ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004. Others corroborated this statement, including many interviewed for Whittier, *Feminist Generations*; Interview, June Sahara (Gretchen Dygert), 11 November 2004; Interview, Susan Bader, 11 November 2004; and Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

⁵⁹ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*; Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004; Interview, Gretchen Dygert, 11 November 2004. Susan Bader suggests that in 2004, many lesbians are active in Columbus NOW. Interview, Susan Bader, 11 November 2004. See also, Taylor and Rupp; Taylor and Whittier.

radical.⁶⁰ However, for some—never more than 100 or so over the course of the 1970s—NOW was a feminist home, even if on the outskirts of a larger, self-identified radical feminist community.

Emerging from “behind the scenes”

In January 1972, Columbus NOW published its first newsletter, entitled “Right NOW.” In it, chapter president Judy Bell chronicled her own move into the women’s movement, recalling how she had seen her mother raise her four children after her husband was paralyzed at age 38: “She did it on a so-called woman’s job [as a baker at a local bakery], actually a man’s job with woman’s status and pay attached to it.” By May 1969, when Bell “first heard the phrase ‘women’s lib,’” she recognized that many were “boldly saying publicly what I had been thinking most privately. I could hardly wait to join!”⁶¹ Some fifteen months after Bell identified consciously with women’s liberation, the NOW chapter was formed: “until this time, the only feminist organizations that existed in Columbus were on the OSU campus.” Bell listed various things that NOW had done or been involved with, mostly presentations about feminism and NOW’s goals to local business groups, classes at local high schools and OSU, and women’s groups. Because “we have been working behind the scenes for months,” the chapter did not start a newsletter until January 1972. With it,

⁶⁰ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*; and Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.”

⁶¹ Right NOW, January 1972. Right NOW is the newsletter for the Columbus chapter of NOW. All newsletters are located in the archives of the Columbus chapter of NOW, Ohio Historical Society.

Bell hoped that “everyone who’s been looking for us...should now be able to find us.”⁶²

For those who were looking, NOW offered a place where feminist women and men engaged in a variety of issues and employed a mix of strategies to create feminist change for women locally. Early on, the chapter drew a mix of women across class lines and of different ages. Janet Burnside, for example, joined when she was in her early 20s and commented that she looked “like a women’s liberation woman” with her long, straight hair and no makeup.⁶³ However, she attributed her later political success as a lawyer and, later Ohio Supreme Court judge, to her political activism in NOW. Likewise, Barbara Wood joined NOW in 1972, when she was in her early twenties and “working at the state welfare department, which was a radicalizing experience in itself. ... I’d been reading anything I could about women’s lives and class issues and the like, and then I found the NOW chapter and got active.”⁶⁴ By contrast, Ruth Browning, who was a founding member of NOW, was considerably older than women such as Wood or Burnside. She came to NOW after a career as an ordained Methodist minister (she was ordained in 1947) and was at the time head reference librarian at the Upper Arlington Library. In the mid-1950s, however, she left the Methodist church because “the church treats its women as second-class citizens....it was a hard choice after having been ordained and after having given so much of my life to it.” She moved into the Society of Friends (Quaker) church

⁶² Right NOW, Jan 1972.

⁶³ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

⁶⁴ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

because it “has a history of treating persons, including women, with equality” and she identified as a lifelong pacifist.⁶⁵ Browning was also a member of the OCSW and the Ohio Women’s Political Caucus. Anne Saunier was also an early member of Columbus NOW who, like other members, was quite interested in forming local coalitions and bridges with women’s groups in the city. (By 1977, Saunier was a self-described “feminist mini-celebrity” as a representative to the IWY Conference in Houston; she later moved to Dayton and joined the Dayton Women’s Center.⁶⁶) In the early 1970s, she and many other women were “looking for” NOW and, as these few examples suggest, found mostly white women who came from different socioeconomic backgrounds, organizational backgrounds and networks, and activist experiences.

Like its counterparts across the country, Columbus NOW joined with others to form a coalition to advocate for the Equal Rights Amendment; it also fought violence against women by speaking and acting publicly against rape and domestic violence and sought to address women’s economic and social inequality in the city through a variety of demonstrations and actions. Unlike its counterparts in Memphis and San Francisco, however, this chapter focused nearly exclusively on women in the city of Columbus. If somewhat provincial, the chapter maintained a strong commitment to

⁶⁵ Right NOW, March 1972, featured an interview with Browning.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Right NOW, April 1972. In this newsletter, Saunier discussed her interest and efforts at bringing women’s groups together in the city to discuss common ground, strategies, and perspectives. For more on Saunier, see Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), esp. 218-20, quotation on 218.

grassroots issues and organizing, never comfortable with toeing a national NOW line or conforming to its appearance as a liberal feminist organization. That it was not the mainstay of the feminist community in Columbus gave this chapter an interesting flexibility and allowed its members to explore the dynamics of feminist activism.

“Are You a Serious Feminist?” Columbus NOW and the ERA

When Columbus NOW formed, the OCSW was already in existence, and it represented a wide variety of women’s groups and communities in the city. OCSW’s president Mary Miller, who also joined the local NOW chapter in the early 1970s, drew upon OCSW’s seven-year history in the city and created the Ohio Coalition for the ERA.⁶⁷ At age 63 and in her capacity as chairperson of the Columbus YWCA’s Public Affairs Committee, Miller brought significant clout and presence to the office of president of the Ohio Coalition for the ERA, a “collaboration of generations within the pro-ERA movement—made up of women ‘representing all walks of life.’”⁶⁸ Unlike Tennessee, where the ERA sailed through the state house and senate with hardly any dissent until the successful rescission movement, and unlike California, where labor marked the only opposition to the ERA, pro-ERA Ohioans faced a two-front battle with labor and a strong STOP ERA.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.”

⁶⁸ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.”

⁶⁹ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.”; see also on Memphis, Gilmore, “The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, 1971-1982”; on North Carolina, see Jane Sherron DeHart and Donald

In Columbus NOW, members identified the ERA as the “most important” issue facing feminists in the chapter and women in the city and state.⁷⁰ In April 1972, chapter president Judy Bell recognized that having the amendment move out of the U.S. Senate was only the start of the battle for Ohio feminists—and the major opponent was organized labor: “Rumor has it that the AFL-CIO is concentrating on sixteen states to block ratification,” Ohio one of them. And the NOW chapter had reason to suspect that the powerful union, with its origins in the city, would block the ERA vigorously in the state; on 15 March 1972, the Ohio Supreme Court struck a blow to labor when it ruled that protective labor laws were unconstitutional “because they were inconsistent with the principles set forth in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” According to Bell, the union did not originally favor repeal of “female labor laws (men are their prime constituents)” but it “apparently decided that some protection might be desirable for everyone—men and women. This, of course is the position NOW was taking long before repeal of Ohio’s antiquated laws.”⁷¹ But local leaders were looking to hold back legislators’ support for the ERA.

By June 1972, the nascent ratification effort was stalled in the Senate Rules Committee. The House State Government Committee planned “numerous marathon hearings” on the amendment but no one expected that the committee would vote on it in the 1972 session. More rumors suggested that “the representatives’ mail is running

Mathews, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of ERA: A State and a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁷⁰ Right NOW, Jan 1972.

⁷¹ Right NOW, April 1972.

anywhere from 5 to 40 to 1 against [the ERA]” and the chapter’s leadership encouraged members to write letters in support of the amendment to local legislators. Unlike its Memphis counterparts who also engaged in letter writing campaigns for the ERA, Columbus activists knew that “fears and emotions are powerful forces not easily dismissed” and testimony before the House elicited “emotional, fearful projections of ‘possible’ interpretations the amendment ‘might’ have. They [testifiers] hardly bother to debate the legal reality of the law.”⁷² Thus, the chapter was aware early of the importance of framing the debate, and members were encouraged to reiterate how the amendment was positive for women, families, and employers.

On 28 June 1972, the chapter agreed on a “plan of attack” and aligned with the Ohio Commission on the Status of Women, which coordinated the efforts of organizations who made up the Ohio Coalition for the ERA.⁷³ NOW members signed on to meet with the various groups in the OCSW, engage in precinct-by-precinct petition campaigns, hold personal meetings with state representatives and senators, and continue flooding legislators’ mail with pro-ERA letters.⁷⁴ Bell reminded her fellow NOW sisters that “all of the above require the strong bodies and sharp minds of all feminists in Ohio,” recognizing the strength of coalitions for such endeavors and likely recognizing that NOW could not go alone on the ERA—and did not have

⁷² Right NOW, June 1972.

⁷³ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.”

⁷⁴ Right NOW, June 1972.

to. Interestingly, Bell defined one's commitment to feminism around the ERA: "If you are not willing to work for the ERA, you are not really a feminist."⁷⁵

Women in the coalition came from a variety of organizations—NOW, YWCA, AAUW, WAC, Women's Liberation—and unaffiliated feminists joined them to work on behalf of the ERA. Leading this coalition was Mary Miller, who had a history of working through city women's organizations as an advocate for women.⁷⁶ OCSW women, Miller among them, thought of themselves as "moderate," and more militant activists labeled them "liberal."⁷⁷ Among NOW members, the coalition was the best approach to work for the ERA—and Miller was integral to the coalition's strategy. According to one former NOW activist, "there were boundaries on how far you would go. And Mary Miller—she was an older woman who was very proper—she was a front person for us, the face of the ERA. For the younger of us, we would have been seen as radicals, bra burners, and all of that. So we fronted a lot of ERA stuff by Mary Miller because she was this lovely, elegant, gray-haired grandmother."⁷⁸ And Miller took control of the image of the Equal Rights Amendment and its supporters. In an interview, she recalled that young homemakers often went to the statehouse to speak to representatives, but if they were wearing

⁷⁵ Right NOW, June 1972.

⁷⁶ Interview, Mary Miller, conducted by Mary Irene Moffitt for Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums*, collection of interviews in process at Smith College; Laughlin, "Sisterhood, Inc."; and Interview, Janet Burnside 26 November 2004.

⁷⁷ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, 28.

⁷⁸ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

jeans, Miller insisted that they leave and return wearing dresses; the younger women complied because looking “the part” mattered. When Coalition women met with legislators, they looked very similar to anti-ERA activists.⁷⁹

Although NOW members continued to work individually for the ERA and updated the chapter via the newsletter about what was going on, the work of the ERA largely fell to the Coalition. After linking with the Coalition, some NOW members joined the local League of Women Voters and participated in a four-part radio series on the ERA on local public radio station WOSU; they also set up a public education booth at the 1972 Ohio State Fair. Member Dorothy Geiger prepared an ERA information packet for legislators to peruse before the fall election. Janet Burnside, who had been an early member of Columbus NOW and led its legislative task force from 1972 to 1974, was instrumental as a liaison between NOW and the Coalition. The chapter took up many other issues, but for Burnside, the “ERA was all consuming, the most important thing and overshadowed everything we did. It caused a bunch of different organizations to come together, and we met and worked with so many women. ... [Through the ERA ratification effort] we made it our business to get to know the mostly men and a couple of women in the legislature, and a couple of women in the legislature did counsel us on how to do this and what would work and what wouldn’t.”⁸⁰ Through this work, “we got into politics and we met people and we learned to go talk to legislators and found out that they were by and large pathetic. They weren’t classy people or particularly smart and yet they were legislators who

⁷⁹ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.”, 39.

⁸⁰ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

made it a point to support or defeat the ERA.” At the heart of the fight in the legislature, according to Burnside, was labor. “The linchpin in this effort [to defeat the ERA] turned out to be head of the state AFL-CIO Frank King. I don’t have a clue why the legislators ceded so much power to this guy but they did.”⁸¹ Laughing at her own naiveté at the time, Burnside continued: “At the time, I was just stupid enough not to wonder what’s in it for this guy. He’d have all of the say on this issue, and many people said that until Frank King said it was ok, the ERA was not going to pass in Ohio.”⁸²

In Ohio, the collective strength of labor and the anti-ERA activists mandated that passage of the ERA was not a foregone conclusion. For some NOW members, the ERA had to be the Columbus NOW’s top priority. Within the chapter, some suggested that perhaps NOW members were not doing enough to support the ERA. Just before a major election in October 1972, for example, newsletter editor Betty Carroll asked, “How many people have REALLY written to their state representatives and senators to encourage passage of the Equal Rights Amendment? If we don’t take our equality under the law seriously enough to communicate with these representatives, we don’t take our ultimate liberation seriously! ARE YOU A SERIOUS FEMINIST? What have you done lately to ensure passage of the ERA? The time is NOW and we need all the support and LETTERS we can write.”⁸³

⁸¹ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

⁸² Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

⁸³ Right NOW, October 1972.

In April of the following year, Nancy Trux asked of her NOW sisters, “are you bored with ERA? Are you biding your time until we can manage to get around to YOUR pet project?”⁸⁴ Rather than encourage chapter members to engage in a variety of issues and actions, Trux invoked yet more “rumor” about the ERA: “Sorry sisters...but rumor has it that if we don’t get the ERA ratified in Ohio THIS YEAR RIGHT NOW we’ll have this albatross around our necks for another SIX!!!”⁸⁵ With the 1979 national deadline for ratification looming on the horizon, Trux reminded her NOW sisters that they would be fighting each year, even implying that other “pet projects” would go by the wayside until ratification was secured. Trux tried to temper her anger by suggesting that she “cares enough to keep pushing because you know that the ERA is the only hope for full personhood for all American women.” Her solution: “why don’t you do everyone a favor? Why not get us off your backs right NOW...get out your ancient typewriter and pound out a few more lines for the ERA?”⁸⁶

A “few more lines” did not help; the Ohio Senate rejected the Amendment in late 1973—a success for the STOP ERA campaign and the resistance of organized labor. However, the Coalition network sustained activism, and when the General Assembly met in January 1974, more than 1000 pro-ERA activists rallied on the statehouse lawn.⁸⁷ NOW member Nancy Mackenzie reminded her sisters in NOW

⁸⁴ Right NOW, April 1973.

⁸⁵ Right NOW, April 1973.

⁸⁶ Right NOW, April 1973.

⁸⁷ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.” 59; and Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, 13 January 1974.

that “we must not be over-confident! Passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in Ohio is NOT a sure thing!”⁸⁸ Although her solution was, again, to write letters in support of the ERA, she acknowledged that STOP ERA forces had been powerful in mobilizing in Ohio. However, she did not discuss the powerful anti-ERA strategy of bringing Ohio legislators loaves of bread tied with pink ribbons—symbols of the femininity that the ERA threatened to demolish, according to its opponents.⁸⁹ In spite of STOP ERA’s intensive lobbying effort, however, Ohio became the 33rd state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment the following year, in 1974.⁹⁰ The STOP ERA forces had been defeated—one of the only times that happened—and organized labor shifted its public position on the amendment.⁹¹ But also, the Coalition maintained its activism in the face of potential defeat.

⁸⁸ Right NOW, January 1974.

⁸⁹ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.” 39; Columbus *Dispatch*, 21 February 1973; see also DeHart and Mathews, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA*.

⁹⁰ Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.” 59; and Columbus *Dispatch* 7 February 1974.

⁹¹ On STOP ERA in Columbus, see Laughlin, “Sisterhood, Inc.” On STOP ERA in a national context, see Ruth Murray Brown, *For a Christian America: A History of the Religious Right* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002); and Marjorie Julian Spruill, “Women for God, Country, and Family: Religion, Politics, and Antifeminism in 1970s America,” unpublished paper in author’s possession; Jane Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and DeHart and Mathews, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA*. On the shift in labor from anti-ERA to neutral or even supportive of the ERA, see Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement*; Hartmann, *The Other Feminists*; and Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement*.

To be sure, some NOW members had been instrumental in the Coalition; however, the amendment was not the only focus of this chapter. The numerous pleas to chapter members suggest that leaders often badgered members into letter writing and advocacy. Unlike the national organization, this NOW chapter did not give its full weight to the Equal Rights Amendment. In large measure, many chapter members turned the work of the ERA over to the Coalition and the NOW members such as Burnside and Trux, who were active in it. Some who were not particularly active on the issue recognized its importance and embraced its potential for change: “NOW attacked the constitution of the United States. That is as to the root as you can get. That is the document that holds this country together.”⁹² But on the whole, this chapter did not focus its energies on the ERA—even in spite of strenuous opposition. Instead, they undertook their “pet projects,” all of which revolved around local women’s material rights.

“Cackling Hens” and “Our Sisters in Blue”: Bringing Equality to Columbus

Although Columbus NOW chapter members needed to be reminded to work on the ERA, they needed no prodding to pursue local causes that had direct meaning and outcomes for women in the city. The ERA certainly would guarantee equality under the law, but while they waited to see if it would be ratified in the state and across the nation, Columbus NOW women addressed tangible discrimination against women. They worked both within the legal system and in the streets to protest

⁹² Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

women's unequal status in local establishments and in employment, indicating a firm commitment to securing feminist equality in both the letter and the spirit of the law for Columbus women.

In June 1972, the young NOW chapter in Columbus undertook one of its first public demonstrations against the Red Door Tavern, a popular lunchtime dining spot for a variety of business people in the city. As Janet Burnside recalled, "they had a businessmen-only room in the restaurant. You could be a woman and sit in the front of the restaurant, but the back room was for business men only."⁹³ Segregation in public facilities nationwide had been overturned under Title II of the 1964 Civil Rights Act; its Title VII broadened the entire act to apply to women. Public facilities in Columbus were desegregated racially under the law since 1959, but sexual segregation persisted, at least at the Red Door Tavern, which boasted a sign designating one section of the restaurant "For Businessmen Only" from 11:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. each day.⁹⁴ Susan Meates, a secretary who worked near the restaurant, sought to have lunch at the Red Door Tavern on 8 June; two of the dining rooms were completely full and Meates went toward the back of the restaurant to be seated. When she was turned away from the men-only dining area, Meates contacted Columbus NOW. When the chapter contacted owner Jack Youngquist about the incident and the "stag room," he replied that he planned to keep the area sex-segregated because "businessmen don't like to eat with a bunch of cackling hens beside them."⁹⁵

⁹³ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

⁹⁴ James Bradshaw, "Questions Hinge on Red Door," 30 July 1972, *Columbus Dispatch*.

⁹⁵ Right NOW, June 1972.

According to Judy Bell, “we had pickets on duty during the lunch hours for the entire next week.”⁹⁶ Janet Burnside recalled that they “went over there at noon and demanded that they be seated there. They were turned away, so they went outside and did a demonstration with pickets in front of the Red Door Tavern. And they got press for it.”⁹⁷ Although the local newspapers did not report the demonstrations (local television news carried the story on the first day of the action), the Columbus *Dispatch* did publish a story when NOW moved from the picket line to the courthouse.

On 30 July 1972, Meates filed charges under the city’s ordinance and Title II of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, both of which forbade discrimination in public accommodations. The city had passed a local ordinance (City of Columbus Ordinance No. 1524-71) banning such discriminatory actions in 1964, but it was not until 1971 that the city government amended the ordinance to include a ban on sex discrimination. When the demonstrations lasted for more than a day or two—and with the threat of legal action—restaurant owner Jack Youngquist posted a smaller note on the original sign that read “Women Served on Request,” but Meates and NOW members found his solution to be insulting: “It would be sort of like marking a bar ‘For Whites Only—Blacks Served on Request.’”⁹⁸ City Community Relations Director Clifford Tyree indicated that the amended city ordinance had never been tested and agreed with the NOW women that “Tavern policy would appear to be in

⁹⁶ Right NOW, July 1972.

⁹⁷ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

⁹⁸ Bradshaw, “Questions Hinge on Red Door.”

violation of the law.” But rather than focus on the issue of discrimination itself, Tyree pointed out that the case might have broader ramifications: “For example, race tracks, ball parks, and bars which schedule ‘Ladies Night’ could be guilty of discrimination in reverse.”⁹⁹ If Tyree obscured the realities of sex discrimination and the point that the protestors were making as they picketed the restaurant and then filed a lawsuit, the courts did not: Youngquist was charged with sex discrimination and the NOW members won the case.

Through such an action, the NOW chapter “acquired a lot of respectability.”¹⁰⁰ In the process, it became a group that women in the city recognized as one that would picket and protest, if need be. According to Barbara Wood, an early member of NOW in the 1970s (and still active in 2005), “it was the only publicized organization. There was WAC in town, but NOW had leaflets and forms and stuff,” a reference to what she saw as a more visible presence.¹⁰¹ Coupled with national NOW’s growing visibility, some women immediately called the NOW chapter when faced with a discriminatory situation because “we did do actions—not only lawsuits but picketing unfair labor practices.”¹⁰² In 1974, for example, NOW member Grace

⁹⁹ Bradshaw, “Questions Hinge on Red Door.” For more on contemporary cases of reverse discrimination, see Dennis Deslippe, “Do Whites Have Rights? White Detroit Policemen and Reverse Discrimination,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 3 (2004)

¹⁰⁰ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004; June Sahara supported this idea, though from the perspective that “respectability” was very important to NOW and not so important to WAC. Interview, June Sahara, 11 November 2004

¹⁰¹ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

¹⁰² Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

Murakami (who ran the NOW telephone line through her home that year) received a phone call from a woman who owned with her husband a Union 76 gas station. According to one member, “Her husband had just died and Union 76 headquarters sent her notification that because her husband was no longer alive, the company would be selling the station.”¹⁰³ She called the NOW chapter in an attempt to find any sort of legal recourse to the company’s actions; within 24 hours, NOW members were demonstrating outside of the gas station, encouraging passersby to honk in support of the woman whose livelihood was threatened. In this particular situation, “you can imagine to the average person having attention called to the fact that a woman is being kicked out of her employment because her husband died, I mean, 99.9% of the people would say that’s outrageous.”¹⁰⁴ The chapter also brought the matter to the attention of Senator Howard Metzenbaum, the then-junior senator from Ohio. Within two weeks, Metzenbaum intervened publicly on behalf of the woman, who ultimately was able to retain ownership and management of the gas station. “She of course was not a women’s libber type,” former member Janet Burnside recalled, but “she knew injustice when she saw it.”¹⁰⁵ She called NOW, which by this point had gained publicity locally for bringing attention to injustices women faced.

According to Burnside, “that’s what was exciting about NOW. You’d find a problem and leap on it and try to solve it. And you’d be noisy. You’d solve it in a

¹⁰³ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

¹⁰⁴ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

noisy way. You were always calling people and having a demonstration.”¹⁰⁶ And it was effective: in the early 1970s, Sanese Services, a local company that packaged sandwiches for vending machines, maintained different dress codes for male and female employees. One former Columbus NOW member recalled that “women wore these short skirts in the factory while men wore pants. Women were being hurt on the job, cut and bruised, and complained to Sanese but the company didn’t listen to them.” Some women workers came to a NOW meeting and Barbara Wood recalled that NOW contacted the company: “We told them, ‘I don’t know how you feel about pickets at your front door but we sure could be there unless we see some changes.’”¹⁰⁷ Reflecting on her activist days in NOW during the 1970s, Wood maintains that Sanese, and other companies, capitulated and changed their policies because of the threat of pickets: “They knew we might actually do it!”¹⁰⁸ June Sahara concurred that NOW would often demonstrate and that people contacted them because they had heard of NOW, but indicates that NOW was always “respectable,” which mattered less to WAC.¹⁰⁹

Over the next several years, the chapter maintained its “respectability” by undertaking legal action on a variety of issues. In coalition with the Ohio Civil Liberties Union, for example, Columbus NOW filed a lawsuit on behalf of an unnamed 17-year-old welfare recipient who wanted an abortion but could not afford

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

¹⁰⁸ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, June Sahara, 11 November 2004; see also Whittier, *Feminist Generations*.

to have one. This lawsuit presented the chapter with a unique opportunity to raise the issue of reproductive rights in the light of welfare and class in the city. The suit charged that while welfare regulations stipulate that “physicians’ services and related hospital costs will be payable for elective abortions for all eligible recipients,” State Auditor Joseph Ferguson had refused to permit state and federal funds to be used to pay for such abortions. The lawsuit stalled in the system, ultimately becoming a sidebar to the history of reproductive rights, abortion, and welfare: in September 1976, Congress enacted a labor-HEW appropriations bill that, with what has become known as the Hyde amendment named for Representative Henry Hyde from Illinois, stated: “None of the funds contained in this act shall be used to perform abortions except where the life of the mother would be endangered if the fetus were carried to term.”¹¹⁰ The amendment effectively denied any welfare funding for elective abortions and represented the first of a growing list of measures to deny women access to abortions in the United States.

The chapter’s lawsuit against the Columbus police department was more successful. In June 1975, two women applicants to the Columbus police department and the local NOW chapter filed a sex discrimination suit in the U.S. District Court, charging that the physical agility part of the qualifying exam was sex discriminatory.¹¹¹ At the time of the lawsuit, the physical agility examination

¹¹⁰ Karen J. Lewis, Jon Shimabukuro, and Dana Ely, “Abortion: Legislative Response,” *Congressional Research*, Library of Congress, 22 November 2004.

¹¹¹ Right NOW, January 1977 (in this newsletter, Saunier offered a brief history of the lawsuit as it stood at the time); “Suit Challenges 3 Police Tests,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 17 June 1975.

consisted of eight components, including a 440-yard run, fence climb, under-wire scramble, stair climb, trigger pull, driving test, car push, and sandbag drag. However, in May 1975, 40 of 41 women failed the physical agility part of the exam while only 27 of 103 men failed; in the next month, 37 of 38 women failed the physical agility test.¹¹² Columbus NOW member (and later chapter president) Anne Saunier suggested that “the fact that women failed the agility test demonstrates an obvious adverse impact on women applicants as a class. ... [I]f the test accurately reflected the duties of police officers, many women would be able to pass the tests.”¹¹³

Youla Brant and Myra Carney, the two aggrieved women applicants, and the NOW chapter filed suit against the city and the police department, and immediately sought class action status to extend the lawsuit to all “women who applied to become officers on or after Jan. 13, 1969...who were deterred from pursuing their applications or were rejected for failing to pass the physical agility examination.”¹¹⁴ NOW also charged that the police department restricted women’s opportunities for advancement in the department. At the same time that NOW filed the lawsuit, it also filed for a temporary injunction on the physical agility test, indicating that the test had not been given routinely to male applicants and that male officers had no physical

¹¹² “Suit Challenges 3 Police Tests”; “Findings of Fact” in *Youla Brant, et. al. v. City of Columbus* (1978 U.S. Dist., 15109).

¹¹³ *Right NOW*, Jan. 1977.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Sheehan, “Police Suit Defendants Told To Pay Damages,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 6 October 1978.

requirements in order to keep or advance in their jobs.¹¹⁵ According to the “Findings of Fact” in the final court decision, male and female officers had the same entry-level pay scales. However, duties assigned to women and men were unequal: women were assigned duties in the juvenile bureau, the jail, and specialized work in the detective and vice bureaus. Women mainly worked cases involving women, children, and the elderly; in vice, women occasionally worked as decoys in narcotics investigations. Patrol and traffic duty as well as supervisory duties were reserved exclusively for men; no woman had ever been a police department supervisor.¹¹⁶ At the time of the lawsuit, only 20 positions were authorized for women on the force; however, over 1,000 policeman positions were allocated. Actually, there were 14 women on duty in every year from 1963 through 1969; 11 in 1970, 14 in 1971, 19 in 1972, and 20 in 1973 and 1974. In the same time span from 1967 to 1975, the number of men on the city police force increased from 573 to 1,044.¹¹⁷

Having established a pattern of discrimination, the chapter pursued the lawsuit, which continued in the courts from June 1975 to October 1978. The city initially appealed to the Circuit Court of Appeals to have the case dropped for lack of evidence, but to no avail; by March 1976, the case was underway in the U.S. District Court with Judge Robert M. Duncan presiding. However, the legal fees associated with the appeals, as well as the depositions and NOW’s appeal for summary judgment rather than jury trial (which was denied), were quite high; according to one former

¹¹⁵ Right NOW, Jan 1977.

¹¹⁶ Youla Brant, et. al. v. City of Columbus (1978 U.S. Dist., 15109).

¹¹⁷ Youla Brant, et al. v. City of Columbus, et al. (1978 U.S. Dist., 15109).

NOW member, “when NOW sued the police department, it broke the chapter. I mean, we didn’t have any deep pockets around us.”¹¹⁸ However, the chapter managed to keep up with the legal expenses through pleas for monetary donations and through some pro bono work by the lawyers. Duncan ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and the class represented in the suit in 1978: “The Court concludes that the city of Columbus and the other defendants clearly manifested a purpose to discriminate on the basis of sex by treating males and females differently.”¹¹⁹ With the victory for the plaintiffs, Duncan awarded the chapter a financial sigh of relief because the city also had to pay not only damages but also all legal fees.

Whether addressing sex discrimination in public accommodations or on the job, the Columbus chapter of NOW sought to remedy the wrongs that local women experienced and brought to their attention. They preferred to pursue local and immediate change to the longer-term goal of the Equal Rights Amendment. Many members did not have to be shamed or have their commitments to feminism challenged when it came to ensuring that Sandy Meates could sit down and have lunch or that Youla Brant could earn a living in what was traditionally a man’s job. Moreover, they merged the threat and reality of public demonstrations with the legal system to advance equal opportunities for women in Columbus. On the surface, it is not uncommon to see protest strategies coupled with legal strategies. However, at least for some in NOW, their strategies reflected a more radical perspective on so-called liberal feminism—Wood, for example, indicated that “going to the root” by

¹¹⁸ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

¹¹⁹ Sheenan, “Police Suit Defendants Told to Pay Damages.”

attacking the Constitution was as “radical” as activism could get.¹²⁰ Wood also acknowledged differences between NOW and WAC, indicating that WAC did more of their work by consensus; Nancy Whittier indicated that WAC “continued to operate by a formal system of consensus, regularly rotating coordinators and meeting facilitators,”¹²¹ which was part of WAC’s organizational distinction from NOW. When NOW tried it, however, some members balked: “when it came to getting the work done, you can’t do it by consensus. You have to have someone get the bus and organize the time, or make the signs and get to the demonstration on time, and so on.”¹²²

So while Columbus NOW did not always operate on a consensus basis and they maintained a formal structure (and by 1974, implemented parliamentary procedure for chapter meetings), members did identify a radical element to their activism. NOW may have appeared from the outside to be “a bunch of liberal feminists, white-gloved and middle class,” but looking at this organization from the inside reveals the myriad and complex theoretical perspectives motivating their actions. These same women who worked to secure equal employment opportunities for Columbus women also grappled with and analyzed society, culture, and their lives as individuals and as women in very radical ways. Indeed, through their record of and reputation for successful demonstrations, NOW was the organization that people knew to contact in order to draw immediate feminist attention to local problems.

¹²⁰ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

¹²¹ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, 36.

¹²² Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

The chapter's radicalism in the street is reflected in its newsletters. For Columbus NOW, the newsletter was not just a record of past and upcoming events; it was a place where women shared ideas, issued manifestos, and analyzed society through experience. Turning to this chapter's newsletter reveals a complex mixture of various theoretical perspectives that drove their actions.

"It's time for women...to throw off male domination": Feminist Analyses in Columbus NOW

To be sure, chapter newsletters kept women up to date with current events and actions. Whether informing members about upcoming regional and national NOW conferences, apprising women of the formal process by which a bill becomes law, or providing names and addresses of current legislators, the newsletter was an important venue through which members knew about formal political action and how to undertake it individually. In the first newsletter, chapter president Judy Bell hoped that this new vehicle would allow "everyone who has been looking for us...[to] be able to find us." Moreover, she noted that, "It is all so gratifying [the work NOW members had been doing thus far]. Women are becoming aware. Men are becoming aware, too. At last, it seems, Columbus, Ohio, might be able to contribute its 'fair share' (pun intended) to the national effort."¹²³ Bell and many other feminists in Columbus NOW did not eschew working with men and always believed that feminism represented a human revolution. They criticized and analyzed women's

¹²³ Right NOW, Jan. 1972.

inferior status through broader social and cultural lenses, reflecting upon the complexities of lived experiences and various feminist solutions to problems women faced.

In March 1972, in the third issue of the newsletter, Bell extended an invitation and suggested the function of the newsletter: “We have a newsletter to get out each month which could benefit from YOUR life’s experiences, if you would be willing to share them with us. How much better we all feel when others share with us and help us realize that we are not alone with our thoughts and feelings, our needs and concerns.”¹²⁴ Bell initiated the use of the newsletter as a venue for personal reflection and analysis by discussing her first public speaking experience, indicating that she was “scared” and “I asked someone else to do it for me. She suggested that we do it together. (What’s that line about catty women? Competing for what? Outdoing who? What about the limelight?)” Rejecting the popular idea that some women in the movement were competing to be its “stars,” Bell encouraged her sisters to share their experiences, thoughts, and analyses: “we are not alone.”¹²⁵

Her fellow NOW members took up the charge and offered their insights on women’s place in society. Radical feminists published many newsletters and journals, such as *No More Fun and Games* and *off our backs*, with the goal of offering women alternatives on current events and radical political analyses of gender and women’s

¹²⁴ Right NOW, March 1972.

¹²⁵ Right NOW, March 1972.

status in society.¹²⁶ Scholars have turned to these publications to chronicle the development of radical feminist thought. In the city of Columbus, WAC publications have been used in part to chronicle radical feminism in the city,¹²⁷ but as the NOW newsletters evince, WAC was not the only place where women expressed radical feminist thought and merged radical feminist theory and action.

Writing in the then-new feminist magazine, *Ms.*, in spring 1972, Jane O'Reilly popularized the word "click!" as a way to describe the moment when she experienced a new insight on her life as a housewife. "Those clicks are coming faster and faster," she wrote. "American women are angry. Not redneck-angry from screaming because we are so frustrated and unfulfilled angry, but clicking-things-into-place angry, because we have suddenly and shockingly perceived the basic disorder in what has been believed to be the natural order of things." She went on to list examples of these insightful "clicks":

In Houston, Texas, a friend of mine stood and watched her husband step over a pile of toys on the stairs, put there to be carried up. "Why can't you get this stuff put away?" he mumbled. Click! "You have two hands," she said, turning away. ... Last summer I got a letter, from a man who wrote: "I do not agree

¹²⁶ For more on the importance of publishing and the variety of journals and "rags" published among radical feminists, see Barbara Crow, ed., *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); and Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Feminist Revolution* (New York: 2000). Chicago Women's Liberation Union features a variety of feminist publications on their website: <<http://www.cwluherstory.org/CWLUArchive/classic.html>>

¹²⁷ Whittier, *Feminist Generations*.

with your last article, and I am canceling my wife's subscription." The next day I got a letter from his wife saying, "*I am not canceling my subscription.*" Click!¹²⁸

In June 1972, Columbus NOW member and founder Ronnie Rosen identified her "click" moment when she took a sociology of women course at Ohio State University. As a result of this class, she challenged "the stereotype female role" and "knew that I was deeply committed to the women's cause and that I had to live this same liberation that I was fighting for."¹²⁹ She helped found the NOW chapter in 1971, but "after several months in the organization, I have reached some conclusions." She agreed with NOW's national Eight Point Program, which the national board issued in 1968, and she concurred that "our local chapter is really growing and projects are being organized." However, "I am not content or pleased with any of it. On the contrary, I am angry and impatient because we work so hard and yet it takes so long to move forward just a little," words she likely echoed on 2 June when she spoke at a rally at Ohio State sponsored by WAC, Women's Liberation, and Radicalesbians.¹³⁰ She chose to remain a member of NOW "because, as an individual, I know of no other way to help remedy the woman's plight in our society,"¹³¹ but she led a chorus of NOW voices who felt angry about the status of

¹²⁸ Jane O'Reilly, "Click! A Housewife's Moment of Truth," *Ms.*, spring 1972.

¹²⁹ Right NOW, June 1972.

¹³⁰ Right NOW, June 1972.

¹³¹ Right NOW, June 1972.

women and girls in U.S. society and chose to put her thoughts on paper and issue them to the chapter as a way to express and rally her NOW sisters.

Rosen's words were followed by those of others decrying sexism and calling for an overhaul of American society rather than just working within the system to create feminist change, an attitude that suggests NOW members were not content working exclusively for the ERA. The chapter initiated woman-only consciousness raising and "rap" groups, which, according to one member, "was hugely successful as an organizing tool and a grassroots tool."¹³² For women who could not or did not attend the consciousness-raising groups, the newsletter functioned in many ways as such, allowing women to address a variety of sexist concerns through printed and circulated manifestos, a medium heretofore claimed by and assigned to radical feminists. In July 1972, member Betty Carroll told the story of how a young man challenged her "women's libber" attitude because she would not purchase products the profits of which would "help keep *boys* out of juvenile delinquency" and not help girls and young women in similar situations. She turned this story into a larger analysis of sexist culture: "A trivial incident? Perhaps....but it is the assumption of male prerogatives, rights and privileges by these culturally conditioned male children that I find so infuriating." Moreover, she acknowledged that women could not simply "retreat into one's shell" or act as if these events are isolated or simply do not happen. She reminded her sisters that "chauvinism bangs on your door, invades your privacy, and threatens to poison the minds of your children." Her solution was female

¹³² Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004. April 1972 marked the first advertised woman-only CR group, but they appeared consistently through the newsletters in the 1970s.

solidarity: “Advance, not retreat, coupled with an organized plan to combat these chauvinistic assumptions and, most important of all, a strong sense of solidarity and Sisterhood, is the only way to implement change in cultural conditioning.”¹³³

It was in this same newsletter that the chapter announced its pickets of Red Door Tavern, a tangible place to address men, such as Youngquist, who “clearly intends to continue demeaning and degrading, intimidating and harassing women.” The chapter ultimately solved the problem through legal channels, but the analysis they brought to bear on the situation, and on the experience Betty Carroll—a self-identified middle-class, married woman and NOW member—shared, was one that could not be addressed through the law alone.

In the following month, three women shared different experiences and analyses of society. Carroll followed up her previous month’s story with another “click” moment she had at a local hair salon. While she waited, she leafed through a stack of magazines, coming across “this particular magazine known by the cutesy-poo title of ‘Girl Talk’ and is dedicated to the proposition that all women have a mental age of 7.”¹³⁴ Carroll focused her discussion in particular on an article by Arlene Dahl entitled “Don’t Let It Throw You,” which “says it is far better to live in a world dominated by men than by ‘big sisters.’” Carroll was enraged by the article and the magazine, which to her suggested how “it is obviously to their interests to keep the average American woman submissive to the patriarchal system so she has time to shop only for face cream and vaginal spray.” And she encouraged her sisters to write

¹³³ Right NOW, July 1972.

¹³⁴ Right NOW, August 1972.

to the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), the parent company of the magazine publisher, to “let them know that the American woman will no longer tolerate the media’s image of her as a microcephalic creature concerned solely about maintaining her youth, deodorizing her smelly body, and having a whiter-than-white wash.”¹³⁵ Although Carroll suggested a rather tame solution to her rage, it is telling that she spoke so forcefully about cultural prescriptions for women via magazines. She certainly was not the only one in larger American society to be openly critical of women’s magazines—after all, a group of feminists had taken over the offices of *Ladies Home Journal* in 1970 by way of protest and feminists had launched *Ms.* as an alternative to mainstream women’s magazines.¹³⁶ But in Columbus, and in this particular NOW chapter, Carroll testified to the impossibilities of prescribed womanhood and encouraged her sisters in NOW to reject these images and to take action.

For member V. Givens, “action” meant more than letter-writing, but like Carroll, Givens saw the “problems of women” as much larger and more systemic. Taking a long view of women’s oppression in society, she noted that “women, after eons of physical evolution, are still relegated to the biological function they commanded in pre-historic time—to womb the sperm, birth it, and nourish it.”

¹³⁵ Right NOW August 1972.

¹³⁶ On the development of *Ms.*, see Amy Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). On the takeover at *Ladies Home Journal*, see Brownmiller, *In Our Time*, 83-93; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 300-301 and 309-10.

Suggesting that evolutionary progress had eluded women, she noted that “we are still regarded as unclean and ‘sick’ in the normal biological functioning” of childbirth and sold a myth about sex and virginity:

In this exciting age of cybernetics and space exploration, when science and technology have, for all practical purposes, broken the barriers of every existing frontier, including the creation of life-forms in the laboratory, and overcoming death, women are still expected to be content to remain biological virgins until some earthman-god pierces the sacred hymen and implants his golden semen in her womb while the world still tries to con her into believing that she may be nourishing the next messiah.¹³⁷

After sharing her disgust about the sexual double standard, Givens indicated that women needed to “reject the role assigned to them, throw off male domination, and assert themselves as fully functioning individuals.” Her solution: “to invade every sacred male vehicle, regardless of how elaborately it has been constructed, or how well the ramparts are manned.” The solution was not in continued struggles for legal rights: “There’s no more time to wheedle, ask, demand, connive, or legislate for our rights. We must assert those rights by working where we please, living where we please, and by regulating the biological functioning of our bodies.”¹³⁸ Furthermore, she wrote, “If this socially castrates the male of the species or traumatizes him into sexual impotency, let us realize at last that it isn’t woman who is to blame. The real problem lies in the male’s own conceit and self-delusions, and it’s a matter he has to

¹³⁷ Right NOW August 1972.

¹³⁸ Right NOW August 1972.

come to grips with. State and Church will then give up their supra-dream of male superiority and accept women as the positive, constructive force that we are.”¹³⁹ This advocacy of separatism and complete rejection of the male and “the penis as the ultimate symbol of superiority and authority” is unheard of in analyses of NOW, but in Columbus, at least some members were advocating what became known as cultural feminism and female separatism, one of the many strands of feminism in this NOW chapter.¹⁴⁰

Although not all NOW members advocated separatism, they did analyze life from experience and suggest that feminism offered better alternatives for women. Mary Havens, a new member as of May 1972, recalled her coming to feminism in a story that could have been lifted from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*: “I was a dissatisfied housewife. I had no life of my own—the days were devoted to being a good wife and a mother of two very young children. And while it is good to be close to another person as I am to my husband, and while young children can be surprisingly enjoyable (sometimes!), neither can be everything.” For her, the “click” came when she read Friedan’s landmark book—interestingly, Havens is the only NOW member to tie her feminism to *The Feminine Mystique*—and then “found out about the Columbus Chapter of NOW.” She writes that “I was very impressed with the enthusiasm of the women working to improve all women’s lives....And WOW—

¹³⁹ Right NOW August 1972.

¹⁴⁰ Taylor and Rupp, “Women’s Culture and Lesbian Feminist Mobilization”; Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Whittier, *Feminist Generations*.

all kinds of things are happening!” It was an eyeopening experience for her to see discrimination in the workplace but she was heartened to know that the law and various agencies, such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), were working to overcome discrimination for all women. Her feminist activism gave her “a lot to think about besides husband, children, and housework. Working for women’s legal rights is a time-consuming and exhausting, complex operation. The housework piles up now because an active involvement in the women’s movement is more important, more enriching, and self-directing.”¹⁴¹

Although Givens suggested female separatism, most members who made the personal analytically salient advocated for liberation alongside men. This idea is congruent with NOW’s original statement and philosophy, which always included men as part of the “worldwide revolution for human rights.”¹⁴² And women such as Havens and Carroll were not interested in eschewing relationships with men but rather were more interested in pursuing egalitarian relationships with them. Few women in the NOW chapter during the 1970s and early 1980s identified outwardly as lesbians, and most members did not see lesbianism as a political strategy or identity.

Columbus NOW did not have a sexuality and lesbianism task force until 1985 and the newsletters rarely discussed issues related to lesbians’ lives or same-sex sexuality, nor was there a public meeting on same-sex sexuality or lesbians’ rights until the mid-1980s. Barbara Wood suggested that “that was more of WAC’s thing. They [lesbians] went to WAC,” a statement that June Sahara corroborated: “WAC

¹⁴¹ Right NOW, August 1972.

¹⁴² NOW Statement of Purpose, 1966; see also chapter two.

was lesbian, NOW was straight. That was just the way it seemed to be.”¹⁴³ Wood indicated that “NOW didn’t do the best job of acknowledging lesbian members” but “it went both ways. ... I remember one year we went to the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and ... we were trying to raise money and increase membership in NOW. Several lesbians told us that they wouldn’t join NOW because we were working on abortion rights and that it was ‘our’ issue because ‘you’re the ones sleeping with the enemy. It isn’t our problem.’”¹⁴⁴ Janet Burnside suggested that NOW was able to “sidestep that whole issue and never deal with it because the focus was largely on the ERA. Once that struggle was over [in 1982, when the ERA failed to secure the necessary 38 states’ ratification], my perception is that NOW [in Columbus] became primarily lesbian and dealt primarily with lesbian issues.”¹⁴⁵ She acknowledged that “I may be painting it with too broad a brush, but that was my perception.”¹⁴⁶ Still, she may be on to something—in Columbus, many lesbians who identified as feminists pursued membership in WAC in the 1970s. When WAC folded, which was contemporaneous with the defeat of the ERA, NOW remained; many WAC members went on to other progressive and/or gay/lesbian organizations in the city.

“Sidestepping” lesbians’ rights and identity in the chapter in the 1970s, members still grappled with the range of female sexuality. For example, under the

¹⁴³ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004; Interview, June Sahara, 11 November 2004.

¹⁴⁴ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

¹⁴⁵ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

¹⁴⁶ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

women's liberation symbol (the symbol for woman with a fist in the center), member Sandra Stout published a poem advocating sexual freedom:

Man, oh Man—I do not need your name
Fame I have in my own name
With my name yours it would be lost
And at such cost:
So I can do your laundry
Your dishes
Your kinky sex wishes.
Man, oh Man—I do not need your name,
Your laundry,
Your dishes—
But once in a while I'll do your kinky sex wishes.¹⁴⁷

We cannot know what Stout meant by “kinky sex wishes,” but it is clear that she sought to reclaim her own sexuality and chose a fun way to address a serious theme in women's lives. Liberation, for her, was eschewing housework and a man's name—these things would overshadow her own life and self. And she certainly did not mince words when it came to male domination as a cultural problem. In another newsletter, the poet Stout published “Topical Disease”:

If there's anyone I ever knew
Who will surely contract this new swine flu

¹⁴⁷ Right NOW April 1973.

For whom inoculation won't do

It's you, male chauvinist pig, it's you.¹⁴⁸

Liberation was about eradicating sexism; however, liberation was not about eschewing sexual pleasure with a man. Unlike separatists who insisted that women must live completely independently from men—a theoretical perspective Givens promoted—Stout and other members of NOW pursued sexual liberation within heterosexuality. For Stout, at least, it was not problematic to liberate women from male chauvinism while also enjoying and pursuing “kinky sex wishes.”

Women's sexual experiences, however, were not always positive, nor did women always discuss openly their “kinky sex wishes.” Like feminists across the country and in the city's Women Against Rape, Columbus NOW members discussed rape at chapter meetings and in rap groups; they also read about it in a moving “diary of a rape victim” that “anonymous” published in the April 1973 newsletter. In this highly detailed chronicle, she outlined the day and time she endured the rape: “November 13, 1972. 12:15 p.m. Chatted five minutes at my apartment door at lunch time with a pleasant black student seeking an apartment. When I attempted to end the conversation to return to work he pulled a small hand gun out of his jacket pocket and told me to let him in. A second man came to the door and was admitted by the first. They both raped me and then took about \$35 in cash and some bottles of liquor. I was left tied up on my bed.”¹⁴⁹ After she was able to free herself, she called a friend and the police, and went to her doctor (who told her she had “no medical evidence of

¹⁴⁸ Right NOW, February 1977.

¹⁴⁹ Right NOW, April 1973.

rape”). The next day, she shared her story with the NOW rap group to which she belonged: “someone said something which made [telling my story] essential. I told my story, shaking. ... I’m not alone.”

After she recounted her narrative about going to the police department and looking through police photographs of countless men, she contacted Women Against Rape (WAR), although she admittedly did not follow up on this inquiry. She also discussed her ambivalence toward rape in American culture: “March 19. In a letter a friend expressed his anger and referred to the rapists as ‘animals.’ Felt renewed social guilt. They were born human—did I and my society make them animals?” Another entry: “November – March. Informed selected personal friends of the incident to get reaction. Men were generally angry...suggested vicious punishment, castration, death. Hard conservative law-and-order stand. Suspicion grows that this is what they think I want to hear. Women were more gentle and concerned. ‘It can’t happen’ type of horror. Fear, especially in mothers of young daughters.”¹⁵⁰ Betty Carroll, who was then editor of the newsletter, reminded her NOW sisters that “rape is an external manifestation of the internalized contempt in which (some) men hold women. ... Obviously there is no single answer but perhaps the elimination of the second-class status of women will work as an impetus to the eradication of rape. ... We must NO LONGER accept our conditioning to be ‘victims.’”¹⁵¹ “Anonymous,” however, exposed the experience of being raped and then the legal and social aftermath she experienced.

¹⁵⁰ Right NOW, April 1973.

¹⁵¹ Right NOW, April 1973.

The chapter created a rape task force in October 1973, which WAC and NOW member Karen Jensen chaired, and many members involved in this new task force also joined forces with Women Against Rape (WAR), which was a spin-off of WAC. NOW and WAR member Erica Scurr reported that WAR sought to create a 24-hour rape crisis telephone line, rap sessions for rape victims, self-defense classes in the University area, and other programs to empower women as alternatives to the current legal system that demoralized women, as “anonymous” had made clear. Much like the Ohio Coalition for the ERA, WAR undertook much of the activism in the city on the issue of rape. The chapter addressed these issues, but because coalition forces in the city were strong, members were able to meet other needs for local women. In both coalitions, NOW members were active, indicating the numerous threads of continuity between and among local social movement organizations that created a richer tapestry of community activism.

On at least one occasion, Columbus NOW did take on the issue of rape independently of other organizations. For example, when chapters across the state met in Columbus in December 1976, some members reported that a local department store was selling “mod sox” with the slogan “Help Stamp Out Rape—Say Yes” emblazoned on them. Over 200 delegates to the conference marched downtown to the May Co. department store to confront the store managers.¹⁵² “When efforts to talk to the management of the store failed, the women pulled the sox from the display and those who had May Co. credit cards—including Flo Kennedy, keynote speaker for the

¹⁵² Columbus *Dispatch*, November 28, 1976, J18.

convention—mutilated their cards.”¹⁵³ Warren Harris, board chairman of the May Co. Department Stores, reported that the socks were ultimately removed from the stores and reemphasized “standing orders for buyers to avoid controversial merchandise.”¹⁵⁴ Although Harris avoided the reality that these socks, and by extension, the companies that sold them, encouraged women to acquiesce to rape, this NOW chapter joined with cohorts across the state and took action at a moment’s notice.

In this light, then, and through this elaboration of chapter members’ feminist analyses, it is easier to make sense of the “Gahanna Five,” whose action opens this chapter. Barbara Wood, one of the women who painted the Great Wall of Gahanna, reported that the incident, and their feminist philosophy and analysis of rape, came from radical analysis of women’s lives and safety; she and her NOW sisters wanted to generate public attention about rape in the city.¹⁵⁵ The law was not working for women, and women were refusing to accept victim status. Exploring chapter members’ perspectives through the newsletter, especially about the issue of rape but also general analyses about women’s status, makes this action seem less incongruent and in many ways completely normal, even predictable, for this group of white, college-educated women who ranged in age from 25 to 47. As Wood stated, “the rap that NOW was a middle-class white-gloved outfit didn’t hold in my experience.”¹⁵⁶ As their powerful observations and analyses bear, and their actions as, alongside, and

¹⁵³ Right NOW, December 1976.

¹⁵⁴ *Dispatch*, 28 November 1976.

¹⁵⁵ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

¹⁵⁶ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

on behalf of many working women in the city make clear, Wood is correct: Columbus NOW was not just a “white-gloved outfit.”

The incident at the “Great Wall of Gahanna” may have been dismissed in the press as “silly ‘fun,’” but for the chapter it proved to be quite costly. According to Wood,

it split the chapter. We had a huge blow up, half of them in the chapter insisting that we had ruined NOW’s reputation. We were respectable and they thought we undid it all. I asked, ‘since when are we afraid to say what needs to be said?’ ‘since when is “castrate rapists” more destructive than “Nancy is a good lay?”’ But it split the chapter, people left in shame that NOW had been ruined because we painted the wall. Some were just ashamed that we’d ruined NOW’s reputation, talking about property destruction and vandalism, and others were like ‘property destruction?!’ But we did it, and we weren’t ashamed, because it was about theory and about public signage and getting our message across. It mattered, and it drew attention to the issue of rape in Columbus.”¹⁵⁷

Unlike Memphis NOW, which split over the softball team and the implicit idea that the only true feminist is a lesbian, or San Francisco NOW, which split over chapter leadership, Columbus NOW split over the issue of respectability. Although there was a rift and it is nearly impossible to know from the records who left and for what individual reason, the chapter continued with business as usual.

¹⁵⁷ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

Navigating the “Sea Change”

In 1979, pro-ERA advocates pushed through a bill in Congress that would grant a two-and-one-half year extension for the amendment. Like other chapters across the nation, Columbus NOW renewed efforts on behalf of the amendment. However, the fight for the amendment took on a personal tone in the city, one that reflected the national shift to the right. On 1 November, 1980, directly before the presidential election, local Republicans hosted a large rally for Ronald Reagan, the party’s presidential nominee. About fifty-five women, including many from NOW and Women for Education and Beautification of Society (WEBS), assembled to demonstrate in opposition to Reagan. Carrying signs with such slogans as “ERA Yes—Reagan No” and “Free Nancy Reagan,” the women stood at the entrance chanting ERA slogans. After an hour passed, the women entered the building where the rally was being held and marched “peacefully” while chanting “Stop Reagan.” According to Patty Squeo (Hughes), “Reactions were shocking! At one point when we were standing together chanting, people in front of us turned around ready to attack us. They started throwing cans and yelling. ... Then when a man grabbed a sign from a demonstrator’s hand things got real scary. He tore up the sign and started to go for her. [The crowd] had hatred in their eyes—it seemed like they wanted to kill us!”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Right NOW, December 1980.

One woman who was present remarked that the incident evinced “a sea change that happened very quickly culturally.” Squeo, who had organized the demonstration, “saved us, and I mean truly saved us. These were the Cadillacs and the fur coats. ... And they started to beat us. The crowd tore our glasses off our faces, they hit us with their purses and briefcases. But she kept us moving so it was harder to pummel one or two of us.”¹⁵⁹ The attacks finally stopped when plain clothes police officers and Secret Service officers intervened and “suddenly it was all quiet again, as if nothing had happened.”¹⁶⁰ But for Squeo and others in the chapter, “it made me think of the type of people we are up against in our struggle to gain equal rights. They are so determined and self-righteous, after all they think they have God on their side! The 1980s are certainly going to be a challenge.”¹⁶¹

Of the three chapters studied here, only Columbus NOW members reported such violence on the issue of the ERA. The amendment had passed in Ohio in 1974, but members did not report traveling to potential ratification states as did their counterparts in Memphis and San Francisco. Instead, they continued to fight at home—and in this particular instance the fight turned physical and ugly. Squeo and Wood both suggested that it was a sign of things to come for women in terms of equality.

Although the political and cultural seas were changing, and the rights women had secured both locally and nationally were coming under fire, the Columbus

¹⁵⁹ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

¹⁶⁰ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

¹⁶¹ Right NOW, December 1980.

chapter maintained a focus on what was happening to women in their city. Joining WAC, the chapter continued to expose the desperate and negative plight of women within the legal system, elaborating in particular on the story of Helen Reeves. Reeves had intervened on behalf of a neighbor whose common law husband had pulled a gun and threatened to kill her. When Reeves arrived to help the woman, “Helen was axed in the head and upper part of her body and was shot three times; twice in the abdomen and once in the arm.”¹⁶² Reeves spent three months in the hospital; while hospitalized, her house was burglarized. She called Columbus NOW for assistance. NOW and WAC co-hosted a “collection night” so that people could bring clothes and other household items. But what was even more alarming than Reeves’ bittersweet tale of survival was the way the defense characterized Reeves in the ensuing trial against the husband. According to the report published in *Right NOW* that NOW and WAC members wrote based on trial testimony, “The Defense intended to show that Helen ‘did not fit the traditional role of the submissive female’ and that she was ‘always sticking her nose’ in Basset’s [the husband] private business. The Defense intended to show that Helen was the aggressor...and Basset was using self-defense.”¹⁶³ The report concluded with the now-familiar analysis: “All of the women involved in this case were victims of male abuse, in their private lives and during the public trial. The trial itself was an exemplary exhibition of the details of the oppression of women, but none of these details were addressed in the trial, rather, used against all the women involved.” Moreover, they called for “women to support

¹⁶² Right NOW, January 1981.

¹⁶³ Right NOW, January 1981.

other women who must go through a trial like this one.”¹⁶⁴ What they meant by “support” is unclear, but what remains obvious is that even after the split in the chapter, members remained committed to local women and addressing sexism systemically and not just through the law.

The chapter undertook a few more local efforts for the ERA during the extension period from 1979 to 1982, hosting parades and fundraisers, including a blood drive and a swimathon.¹⁶⁵ Following national NOW’s directive, the chapter set up an ERA Message Brigade in October 1981 to send messages to legislators in states voting on ratification of the ERA. In January 1982, the chapter hosted an ERA Rally on the Ohio State University campus, and the chapter leaders continued to ask members to write “one more letter” on behalf of the ERA.¹⁶⁶

While the chapter participated in the brigade and organized the rally, what really compelled members to act were local concerns where feminist activists could see tangible results. For example, in January 1982, Nora Palmatier reported an offensive and sexist business sign at a local bar proclaiming “Silent Woman.” According to her report, “to the left of these words is an illuminated figure of a squatty, peasant type woman who has been beheaded.” When an unnamed NOW member from Whitehall, an incorporated suburb of Columbus, complained about the sign to the Attorney General and the State Liquor Board, the Attorney General’s office stated that the bar was in violation of the law because its owner had not

¹⁶⁴ Right NOW, January 1981.

¹⁶⁵ Right NOW, December 1979; Right NOW, August 1981.

¹⁶⁶ Right NOW, January 1982.

received approval to erect the sign.¹⁶⁷ Members encouraged others to write letters to the chairman of the Liquor Control Commission. In February, the Commission was supposed to hold a hearing but “it has been delayed due to budget cuts and work overload, according to Commission staff.”¹⁶⁸ Palmatier published a sample letter for chapter members to modify and send to Keven Trojack, owner of the Silent Woman Bar; in March, however, the Liquor Control Commission finally held hearings on the bar’s sign and ordered Trojack to remove the sign because he had not erected it according to state law. It was a loophole in the law that forced Trojack to remove the sign; this solution, however, did not address the salient issue of sexism.

Rather than let the issue fade away, NOW continued to discuss the issue on the airwaves. City Cable Television channel 3 aired a show entitled “After Hours” which featured a discussion of the Silent Woman sign. Larry Levine moderated the discussion between Sue Crowley, then president of Columbus NOW, and Trojack, the bar owner. Crowley indicated that the image of the beheaded woman was derogatory to all women while Trojack maintained that the image was harmless. Levine agreed with Crowley that the sign was offensive but ultimately dismissed the conflict as a “trite issue.” Jack Willey reviewed the show in the Columbus *Dispatch*, in which he stated that “this was an absolutely ridiculous issue and the show is a hoot.”¹⁶⁹ Although the chapter got the sign removed, Crowley and others felt that the issue had serious ramifications: “True, whether the sign stays up or goes down will not affect

¹⁶⁷ Right NOW, January 1982.

¹⁶⁸ Right NOW, February 1982.

¹⁶⁹ Right NOW, April 1982.

passage of the ERA, or our reproductive freedoms, or even help women get paid more than 59¢ of the male's salary—but maybe the importance of this 'trite issue' is this: One woman felt degraded by a symbol and began organizing to do something about it."¹⁷⁰

Chapter members were similarly empowered at the personal level when they squared off with local radio disc jockey Doug Ritter. Following a 4 January 1982 news story about singer Johnny Paycheck, who had been arrested for molesting a 12-year-old girl, Ritter laughingly commented that "where he came from they were taught to wait until girls were 13 before they molested them."¹⁷¹ NOW members immediately called the radio station to complain but to no immediate avail. However, members continued to call and protest the comment, and members Marcia Miller and Wanda Brown met with the radio station's management several times to express their anger over Ritter's comment. In March, Miller and Brown reported happily that Ritter was suspended for the remark; moreover, the radio station was interested in working with the chapter to promote news of interest to women. Palmatier stated that "it is nice to see that complaining about offensive remarks can make a difference," but it was not always the case, as the Silent Woman Bar demonstrates.

Feminism in this Midwestern City

From the outset, Columbus NOW embraced change for women at the local level, preferring to see tangible results for women in their hometown. Their strategies

¹⁷⁰ Right NOW, April 1982.

¹⁷¹ Right NOW, January 1982.

and philosophies reflect the city's unrest at the time that the chapter was formed, and NOW was an outlet for some women to express their feminist selves. In spite of, and because, of the fact that this chapter fell between strong pre-existing feminist organizations and coalitions, its members enjoyed great latitude to embrace and redefine feminism and NOW at the local level. Although theirs was more peripheral to historical analysis of the women's movement in many ways when compared to OCSW and WAC, the women of Columbus NOW stayed focused on local women and committed to eradicating sexism in their hometown. They embraced the street activism and political analysis associated with radical feminism, but they did not shy away from working within the formal political system to create change to improve the collective status of women.

This chapter most explicitly falls between and beyond the classic liberal/radical divide as it is used to trace and analyze second-wave feminism in the United States. Although it aligned with the OCSW and Ohio ERA coalition, the NOW chapter in Columbus never really embraced the ERA as its main issue. And although it also brought radical feminist analysis to bear on women's lived experiences, it maintained a separate organizational presence from WAC. Most of its activism focused on "bread and butter" issues, such as workplace equity and job security and eradicating sexist practices because they were harmful to women. Such issues reflect a Midwestern sensibility about feminism,¹⁷² although NOW members never expressly identified as "Midwestern" feminists or grappled openly with a

¹⁷² See Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, and Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland*, on references to Midwestern feminists grappling with "bread and butter" issues.

regional identity in the same ways that Memphis NOW members did. However, like its counterparts in San Francisco and Memphis, Columbus NOW maintained a focus on local feminist issues and generated tremendous change for women as neither liberals nor radicals but as dedicated feminists committed to activism.

CHAPTER 5
THE FEMINIST FRONT OF PROGRESSIVE CHANGE:
THE SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER OF NOW

In the early 1970s, NOW Western Regional Director Shirley Bernard reminded her NOW sisters that “The best way to retain members is by getting them involved in a project so that chapter activities become an important part of their lives. Also, as people work together, they experience a growing feeling of concern for each other that leads to the cementing of friendships. Since these friendships evolve from and revolve around feminist activities, gradually a cohesive group of dedicated people emerges that ensures a solid base for feminist activities and chapter growth.”¹ She suggested that new members might be interested in a variety of issues, including (but not limited to) education, welfare, child care, study groups, feminist writing groups, legislation, local employment, media images of women, and other services, including divorce and income tax advice and assistance. Bernard warned her fellow NOW

¹ Shirley Bernard, “How to Attract and Retain Members by Promoting Various Action Projects,” n.d., Box 9, folder 35 “Chapter structural plan, 1970-75,” National Organization for Women Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts (hereafter NOW Papers). Although this particular memo is undated, Bernard was Western Regional Director for NOW from 1971 to 1973.

feminists to reach women in their communities where they were, not try to fit them into NOW's preexisting agenda.²

In addition to being a general example of many NOW members' philosophy on chapter growth in terms of members and local influence, Bernard's comments serve as a specific example of "left coast" feminism.³ NOW's national offices were never located any further west than Chicago, and then only early on and briefly. Indeed, NOW maintained its national focus by moving its offices to Washington, DC, where it could keep tabs on and influence lawmakers and offer a feminist perspective on legislative issues. This created a vast difference between national NOW and the San Francisco chapter (San Francisco or SF NOW), geographically as well as philosophically. While national NOW turned its attention to the ERA and electing feminist women and men to office—and encouraged its chapters to do the same—San Francisco NOW members kept their energies focused on issues as they related to women in their communities. The ERA was significant in SF NOW, especially in the extension campaign of the late 1970s. But early in the chapter's history, the focus was on material rights—issues on which national NOW has not had a remarkably strong record. SF NOW members focused on formal politics, but always to advance a larger feminist and progressive agenda and with a solid recognition that politics could not be divorced from culture. Feminism was rarely seen in opposition or contradiction to

² Bernard, "How to Attract and Retain Members by Promoting Various Action Projects."

³ Richard Edward DeLeon, *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992).

other movements for social justice; instead, it was integral to the “world-wide revolution for human rights.”

This chapter explores the development of the San Francisco chapter of NOW from 1967, when the Northern California chapter of NOW was formed and from which the San Francisco chapter emerged, to 1982, with the defeat of the ERA. San Francisco has a historical reputation as a “wide-open town”—a place where anything goes.⁴ This status shaped the growth of other social movements and communities in

⁴ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Other histories of San Francisco in the context of activism and community include William Issel and Robert W. Cherney, *San Francisco 1865-1932: Politics, Power, and Urban Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Douglas Henry Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); John H. Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Roger W. Lotchin, *The Bad City in the Good War: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters, eds., *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998) Chester Hartman, *City for Sale: The Transformation of San Francisco*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Frederick M. Wirt, *Power in the City: Decision Making in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Deborah Wolf, *The Lesbian Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, 2d.ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and DeLeon, *Left Coast City*.

the city, most notably the gay and lesbian community; “wide-open” also describes its NOW chapter as members made the organization a place where anything goes.

Forming a feminist community in San Francisco was, in some ways, much easier than in Columbus or Memphis. Home to a thriving gay and lesbian community, a student population protesting the war and advocating for free speech, and diverse racial and ethnic populations, San Francisco was a logical place for feminism to emerge.

Studying feminism on the West Coast allows for a greater understanding of the ways in which women found their feminist niche in an activist community that had shaped and defined their lives. I start here with background on the city of San Francisco to provide a context in which to understand the rise of second-wave feminism in the City by the Bay. This sets the stage for understanding the growth of feminism, particularly as embraced and contested by NOW members. It also underscores the challenges of building feminist community in the Bay Area.

Making Room for Feminism: Politics and Activism in San Francisco

“San Francisco is a seductive city.” These words open historian Nan Alamilla Boyd’s queer history of San Francisco; few people likely would disagree. Its scenery—in terms of landscape, architecture, eccentric population, and liberal politics—offers a place to which people long to return; indeed, singer Tony Bennett pined for the city, the place where “I lost my heart.” But in dispensing with any such sappiness, playwright Eve Ensler describes San Francisco as a “Vagina World Fair,”

further playing up the city's reputation for sexual openness.⁵ Seductive, romantic, and sexually playful, San Francisco represents a place in both imagination and reality where "deviance, like difference, is a civic resource, enjoyed by tourist and resident alike."⁶

San Francisco's history is filled with difference and deviance—and a willingness to challenge law and authority. As Boyd notes, "from its earliest days, sex and lawlessness have been fundamental to San Francisco's character."⁷ The village of Yerba Buena, as San Francisco was known prior to 1848 and the acquisition of California as a U.S. territory, was located on the outer reaches of the Mexican northern border. Its active port attracted traders and trappers, providing a distinct local economy. But with the discovery of gold in the city in 1849, the city attracted dreamers and opportunists, building a city with a reputation for sexual licentiousness and vigilante government. Its population, composed of Mexican ranchers, Indians, Anglo-American settlers, quickly multiplied through interracial marriages and the births of mixed-race children. When California became a territory, and later a state, San Francisco already had a reputation of being a place where anything goes.⁸

⁵ Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Dramatist's Play Service, 2000).

⁶ Howard S. Becker and Irving Louis Horowitz, "The Culture of Civility," in *Culture and Civility in San Francisco*, ed. Howard S. Becker (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), 6; cited in Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 1.

⁷ Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 2.

⁸ Pre-World War II histories of San Francisco include Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*; Issel and Cherney, *San Francisco 1865-1932*; Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*; and Carruthers, *Black San Francisco*.

With the discovery of gold in the already bustling port town, San Francisco quickly became a West Coast commercial center.⁹ As such it was home to a growing merchant class of shopkeepers, investment bankers, and insurance brokers. It was also home to a busy international trade, maintaining routes from South America; as the United States developed trade relations with Japan and China, San Francisco became a major seaport through which international trade grew rapidly. By the turn of the twentieth century, San Francisco became the economic capital of the West Coast.¹⁰

It was also the eighth largest city in the United States, with a population of almost 343,000.¹¹ However, contrary to most narratives of growth, the Bay City did not grow as a result of westward migration of whites. Instead, the majority of San Franciscans in the nineteenth century were foreign born, moving to the area from Chile and Peru to mine gold, and later from China. African Americans also ventured west in search of gold, but many also sought to escape slavery and, later, race-based economic deprivation that defined life in the U.S. South.¹²

As Boyd suggests, San Francisco's "overlap of cultures and communities, foreign and native born, contributed to a live-and-let-live sensibility."¹³ However, it was the local formal politics, replete with administrative corruption and "boss"

⁹ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 2; see also Issel and Cherney, *San Francisco 1865-1932*.

¹⁰ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*; and Issel and Cherney, *San Francisco 1865-1932*.

¹¹ Issel and Cherney, *San Francisco 1865-1932*, 24.

¹² Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 5, 248, n. 14; Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*; and Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

¹³ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 4.

politics, that most quickly codified a sense of “anything goes” within the Bay City. Prostitution and gambling became big business in San Francisco; “for the right price the possibilities for sex and gaming seemed endless.”¹⁴ From time to time, anti-vice campaigns grew up from the grassroots to challenge city politics and local culture, “suggesting that not everyone was comfortable with the profligate immorality that seemed to ensnare the city’s residents and draw tourists to the area.” However, they were never successful in reigning in the city’s real and reputed lasciviousness; ironically, anti-vice activism produced much print material that served to advertise the city’s vice districts and “the city’s reputation for vice became its calling card.”¹⁵

San Francisco is most well known in the post-WWII era as home to two important movements—the Free Speech Movement and the gay/lesbian liberation movement. The Free Speech Movement was short lived but meaningful in the city’s history and in the historical imagination of postwar America. The Free Speech Movement emerged in Berkeley on the East Bay. In September 1964, in an era of what many student leftists at University of California, Berkeley (UC-Berkeley) saw as a general disregard for civil liberties and in direct response to campus authorities’ ban on student demonstrations outside the campus gates on Telegraph Avenue, students set up tables on the street, offering handbills to protest the university’s action to passersby. When these students were arrested, some 500 students, led by Mario Savio but including students from other civil rights groups such as CORE, SNCC, and SDS, marched on the administration building. When fellow protester Jack

¹⁴ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 4.

¹⁵ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 5.

Weinberg was arrested for refusing to identify himself to the assistant dean of students, protesters surrounded the police officer and Weinberg for thirty-two hours, refusing to let the car holding the protester move to the police station.

From this moment, the Free Speech Movement was formed as a coalition of like-minded student organizations. In November 1964, Savio and his fellow activists set up literature tables on Telegraph Avenue in defiance of the administration that, in their view, had imposed limitations on freedom of speech. In the following weeks, both support for and opposition to FSM grew; demonstrations and concerts drew more and more students, professors, and community members. The faculty and university administration ultimately dropped all pending actions against the defiant students, a sidebar to the story in some ways. What was most compelling about this movement was that “they were capable not only of arousing strong feelings but of channeling them effectively,”¹⁶ and FSM leaders joined a strong and forceful chorus of voices protesting the denial of civil liberties to increasing numbers of Americans.¹⁷

On the other side of the Bay, others were also protesting the postwar-era denial of civil liberties, most notably (or at least most recorded) gay men and lesbians

¹⁶ David Burner, *Making Peace with the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ For more on the Free Speech Movement at UC-Berkeley, see Burner, *Making Peace with the Sixties*; Robert Cohen and Reginald E. Zelnik, eds., *The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Mark Kitchell, *Berkeley in the Sixties*, videocassette (New York: First Run Features); and Jo Freeman, *At Berkeley in the Sixties: The Education of an Activist, 1961-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). Archives of the Free Speech Movement can be located at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, and on digital archive, <<http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/FSM/>>.

in the homophile movement. The gay and lesbian movement has a much longer history in San Francisco, which is discussed in a variety of places.¹⁸ Its history, of course, cannot be recounted here, but pre-Stonewall activism was centered around homophile organizations that grew up in the 1950s era of McCarthyism. In 1953, Gerry Brissette founded the local chapter of the Mattachine Society, an organization that sought to bring the gay community out of the bar subculture and challenge legal restrictions facing homosexuals in the workplace and in the housing market. They joined other activist groups grappling with similar issues, including local chapters of the NAACP, ACLU, and National Woman's Party.¹⁹ In historian John D'Emilio's words, "Homophile politics in San Francisco remained within the limits of reformism during the 1960s and actively involved only a small fraction of the city's lesbian and gay male population. ... Yet the movement had achieved a level of visibility unmatched in other cities, so that by the late 1960s mass-circulation magazines were

¹⁸ See Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*; Deborah Wolf, *The Lesbian Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), John D'Emilio, "Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco since World War II," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 456-76, John D'Emilio, "Gay Politics, Gay Community: San Francisco's Experience," in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*, ed. John D'Emilio (New York: Routledge, 1992): 74-95; and Elizabeth Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 35; see also Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*.

referring to San Francisco as the gay capital of the United States.”²⁰ It is interesting that in the gay movement, reform was the call of the day; not until the late 1960s were there more overt forms of protest and more radical calls to action. By 1972, “Freedom Day” and “pride” became integral aspects of gay life, providing gay holidays and crystallizing a gay and lesbian movement in the Bay Area.

But early in the homophile movement, women activists faced overt and covert sexism. In 1955, local activists and lesbian couple Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon founded Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), a social club that they hoped would provide an alternative to lesbian bars.²¹ Within two years, however, DOB became a non-profit corporation, joining other local groups in pursuit of social justice issues. Many male homophile activists were ambivalent about a separate lesbians’ organization, nodding to different issues that women faced but ultimately wanting to pursue instead a single, mass-based organization. Although groups such as Mattachine Society were open to women, according to Martin and Lyon, “they had never been able to attract Lesbians in large number.... Despite their show of generosity and help, for which we are forever grateful, there has always been a private (and sometimes not so private) resentment against the separatist and segregationist policies of DOB, which restricted its membership to women only.”²²

²⁰ D’Emilio, “Gay Politics, Gay Community: San Francisco’s Experience,” in Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identity*, 31.

²¹ Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 37; and Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*.

²² Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1972), 228.

Throughout the 1960s, DOB had a tenuous relationship with the largely male homophile organizations; with the rise of gay liberation and a turn in American society toward more public displays of sexuality, Martin eschewed the gay movement for the women's movement. In a now-famous repudiation of gay men in the liberation movement (modeled on Robin Morgan's "Goodbye to All That"), she wrote in 1970, "Goodbye to the male chauvinists of the homophile movement who are so wrapped up in the 'cause' they espouse that they have lost sight of the people for whom the cause came into being. Goodbye to the bulwark of Mattachine grandfathers, self-styled monarchs of a youth cult which is no longer theirs. As they cling to their old ideas and values in a time that calls for radical change, I must bid them farewell."²³ She and many women in DOB rejected the racism of the homophile movement and the sexism that accompanied gay liberation. As a result, many women turned to the budding women's movement, looking to join forces in liberating women from the shackles of sexism. In Martin's words, again, "I must go where the action is—where there is still hope, where there is possibility for personal and collective growth. It is a revelation to find acceptance, equality, love, and friendship—everything we sought in the homophile community—not there, but in the women's movement."²⁴ It would not be a rosy journey for Martin in the women's movement and in NOW, but in 1970, she

²³ Del Martin, "Goodbye, My Alienated Brothers," *The Advocate*, May 1970.

²⁴ Martin, "Goodbye, My Alienated Brothers."

felt that the women's movement offered more opportunity for her and for lesbians in general.²⁵

San Francisco, however, offered space for a variety of gay and lesbian organizations, homophile and liberationist; it also offered room for a variety of activist organizations. The local political system reflected and buttressed this culture of diversity. During the postwar era, a "progrowth coalition of downtown business elites, labor unions, and city hall officials" shaped and defined local politics.²⁶ In the 1960s and 1970s, San Francisco political forces emphasized "human development rather than physical development" and pioneered legislation in the areas of domestic partnership, comparable worth programs, affirmative action, prohibitions on smoking in the workplace and in public accommodations, and rent control.²⁷ In order to be elected in this environment, local officials had to build a coalition of different people to support them. As sociologist Manuel Castells has suggested, "Perhaps the most striking local political trend [in San Francisco] is the importance of the broad and

²⁵ There are no histories of lesbian rights activism as such, but various scholars have traced lesbian separatism as both a part of and apart from the feminist and gay liberation movements. See, for example, Susan Kathleen Freeman, "From the Lesbian Nation to the Cincinnati Lesbian Community," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (January/April 2000): 137-74; Brett Beemyn, ed., *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian life in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991); and Ara Wilson's website on lesbian feminism <http://womens-studies.osu.edu/araw/1970slf.htm>.

²⁶ DeLeon, *Left Coast City*, 2.

²⁷ DeLeon, *Left Coast City*, 3.

loose coalitions on which city government is based.”²⁸ Candidates succeeded, then, when they drew together a coalition of groups in the city to create alliances for local political change. Activists banded together, creating formal, sustained coalitions as well as immediate ones to address specific issues and change local conditions. Among feminists in the city, coalitions were vital to sustaining second-wave feminism and NOW.

Cultures and communities overlapped in San Francisco, a geographically small community, but shared identities or spaces did not necessarily translate into a cohesive whole.²⁹ However, in the postwar era, with growing attention to civil rights, especially in the context of gay/lesbian rights but also in the context of racial issues, feminists found common cause in the context of many activisms happening at once. So when the local NOW chapter formed in 1968, it would never claim to be everything to everyone. The chapter’s feminism never merely reflected what the national Board deemed important to feminists. Instead, it highlighted a commitment to a host of local injustices and reflected what mattered to women in San Francisco. The major issues of SF NOW were on the national agenda but the activism was rooted in local strategies, tactics, and goals. In the work of feminism, NOW women joined forces with activists across the city. As a result, NOW rarely saw itself in

²⁸ Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*, 102.

²⁹ Boyd discusses this phenomenon in the context of gay and lesbian politics and culture in *Wide-Open Town*. See also Anne Enke, “Smuggling Sex Through the Gates: Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of Space in Second-Wave Feminism,” *American Quarterly* 2003..

competition with other organizations; instead it was part of a local, loose coalition of organizations in pursuit of progressive change. Many of its members came to the chapter from their involvement in other forms of social justice activism. In concert with other groups, the NOW chapter operated within a broad political constituency. Members articulated feminist perspectives on a variety of issues; however, they always did so understanding the impossibility of separating one facet of identity from another. Rooted in coalitions with other groups, the feminism of SF NOW was much more integrated than that of national NOW or other chapters, and this chapter represented a feminist flank of progressive activism in the city.

“Join Us in Common Cause”³⁰: Coalition Building in San Francisco

The early history of second-wave feminism in San Francisco is fundamentally a lesson in coalition building. Among NOW members and between NOW and other organizations, feminists early on forged a formal, sustained coalition in the Bay Area Women’s Coalition. They also formed less formal coalitions around individual issues and impromptu protest-based coalitions around immediate concerns. Coalition building in general is not discussed in the historical and sociological literature in the

³⁰ San Francisco NOW Newsletter, December 1970, Box 54, folder 50, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon Papers, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco (hereafter SF NOW; all SF NOW papers, unless otherwise noted, are from this collection). The quotation is a reference to a daylong “Women’s Conference for Liberation and Peace,” which SF NOW hosted and sponsored with local affiliates of WILPF, Women for Peace, Women’s Liberation, YWCA, Democratic Women’s Forum, and Women With a Purpose.

context of NOW, yet it is the only meaningful way to comprehend NOW's feminist history in San Francisco. I turn now to the Bay Area Women's Coalition first and then to NOW's efforts to build coalitions around child care, abortion, and job discrimination, three major issues around which NOW feminists forged coalitions. This section concludes with a discussion of other impromptu actions that NOW members launched in conjunction with other groups in the city. Through all of these coalition efforts, it is clear that SF NOW was never the only game in town, as was the case in Memphis. Instead, SF NOW members linked with others across the city not only as representatives of NOW but also as activists working to change local politics and culture. Only in the context of cooperative, coordinated, and broad-based action would and could progress be made, they believed.

In September 1969, at the initiative of the local NOW chapter, women from a wide variety of women's, feminist, and liberation organizations met at Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco for the first women's coalition meeting. Over thirty organizations sent representatives, including (but not only) Women's Liberation, Women for Peace, National Negro Business and Professional Women, Daughters of Bilitis, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Society for Humane Abortion, Mexican American Political Association, Young Socialists Alliance, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, American Association of University Women, and Socialist Workers Party.³¹ In the Coalition's first report, organizations were asked to "describe the programs of their groups." NOW represented itself

³¹ Report of Women's Coalition Meeting, September 27, 1969, from the personal files of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, copies in author's possession.

according to the national agenda: “Among the goals of the organization are: extension of state protective laws to men as well as women, expansion of child care centers as a community facility, repeal of laws penalizing abortion, enforcement of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, revision in the educational system to open opportunities for women, passage of the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, revision of divorce and alimony laws, revision of tax laws, full participation of women in political activities, provision of maternity benefits, elimination of discrimination in public accommodations such as restaurants, etc.”³²

NOW advertised that its membership was open to both women and men, as did other groups, including Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, which indicated that it “assists black men in getting educational opportunities previously denied them because of discrimination in the society.” Political and labor associations also broadcast the fact that their membership was sex-integrated. Their encouragement of men in the movement stood in direct contrast to other groups, such as Women’s Liberation, “a women’s organization which grew out of the radical student movement” made up of “young, white and middle class” women who “aim at individual fulfillment potential of women, rather than limited fulfillment through men.”³³ Daughters of Bilitis, “part of the homophile movement which includes both male and female homosexuals,” by contrast, was aware that “gay organizations that claimed to be co-ed were apt to see women as hostesses or secretary-office workers but not as decision makers” and was open only to women. Thus, in different ways,

³² “Report of Women’s Coalition Meeting,” September 27, 1969.

³³ “Report of Women’s Coalition Meeting,” September 27, 1969.

some groups saw men as integral to feminist advancement while others eschewed their participation or otherwise pursued single-sex organizing and advancement. Still, these groups came together for the purpose of formal coalition building and sought to create change for the whole of women in the Bay Area. Other single-issue groups emerged out of a specific need, such as Women, Inc. Organized in February 1966, “‘out of desperation’ because of the plight of women in the paper mills in Antioch,” Women, Inc. sought to help women who were discriminated against on the job. Women and men formed the Society for Humane Abortion to work toward repealing all laws that penalized abortion and, in the meantime, to help women obtain abortions.³⁴

At the first meeting in September 1969, the Coalition agreed upon nine items *by consensus* “to coordinate activities in support of the following programs”: developing government-funded child care centers, continuing communication between women’s organizations, compiling a directory of women’s groups, establishing coalition of women’s groups to protest job discrimination, extending protective legislation to men, promoting women’s caucuses in political parties and labor unions, abolishing all penalties for abortion, changing women’s self-image in the media, and pledging to cooperate with a local radio station KPFA-FM to promote “relevant programming on women.”³⁵ It is particularly striking that consensus politics, not majority rule, determined the actions and issues of the Coalition. Moreover, the diversity of this Coalition reveals the broad range of women’s and

³⁴ “Report of the Women’s Coalition Meeting,” September 27, 1969.

³⁵ “Report of the Women’s Coalition Meeting,” September 27, 1969.

feminist groups in the city. In this context, the local NOW chapter could not possibly afford autonomy or pursuit of issues on its own. Instead, members had to work collectively in order to create feminist political and cultural change.

It is also particularly noteworthy that in San Francisco, and among a diverse group of women representing a wide range of organizations, adopting a fundamental right to abortion united rather than divided feminists—unlike what happened a year earlier when national NOW adopted abortion rights as part of its national platform.³⁶ At the local level, especially in San Francisco, NOW could not afford such autonomy. It was through the Coalition, then, that SF NOW made a mark on the city, forcing a reconsideration of second-wave feminism more broadly.

In February 1970, the Bay Area Women's Rights Coalition met again. At this meeting, chaired by Brenda Brush, Vice President of SF NOW, 300 women representing 44 feminist and women's organizations pledged action on a variety of issues. Some of it was rhetorical posturing rather than outright action: "Because his sexist and racist attitudes render him incapable of fulfilling the obligations for the post," the coalition unanimously opposed the nomination of Judge G. Harold Carswell to the U.S. Supreme Court. But attendees also promised action on a range of local concerns, from bills before the state legislature to union protests at a local university. The coalition also endorsed a variety of legislative issues, including Assembly Bill 22 (AB 22), which would add "sex" to the state Fair Employment Practices Act and extend state protective labor laws to men. The Coalition also agreed

³⁶ Chapter two of this dissertation elaborates on the issue of abortion at the national level.

to lend its obviously tremendous support to eight women members of the American Federation of Teachers who recently had been fired for participating in a strike against San Francisco State College. Endorsing “their right to organize and strike as women and their right to political activity without penalty” showed SF NOW’s willingness to side with working women; political protesting and striking became important activities for NOW members on a host of issues. That they embraced such actions here and early on suggests the chapter’s allegiance to this tactic and reiterates NOW’s commitment in San Francisco to the issues of labor.³⁷

The Coalition also proposed a “Bay Area Women’s Center” as “‘free space’ for women, as a meeting place, referral and communication center.”³⁸ This center, finally located off Valencia in the largely Hispanic Mission District, became a reality in 1980. It became the home to SF NOW and other feminist women’s organizations and centers, such as a rape crisis center, a women’s health project, and a meeting place for teenage girls in the area.³⁹ The Coalition also issued a meaningful statement on lesbians’ rights in the women’s movement. In response both to Betty Friedan’s

³⁷ For more on women in labor unions and labor disputes, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women Workers and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Susan M Hartmann, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), and Lois Herr, *Women, Power, and AT&T* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003).

³⁸ Report of the Second Bay Area Women’s Coalition (untitled), 9 February 1970, SF NOW Papers.

³⁹ There are no extant histories of the Women’s Center, a topic ripe for analysis given its success as a feminist project.

“lavender menace” pronouncement and to the media’s insistence that feminists were man-hating bra-burners—there is no evidence to suggest that at this time there was local resistance to lesbians in the women’s movement—the Coalition stated, “as Lesbians, they [are] women concerned with the same issues and wished to participate in the Women’s Rights Movement openly and honestly. ... Although Lesbianism is not a major issue in the Women’s Rights Movement, certainly everyone’s right to sexual privacy should be respected and that Lesbians represent one among many women’s groups which have problems that must be dealt with in our society.”⁴⁰ Issuing this statement suggests that lesbians in the Coalition were staving off any possible resistance to their presence in the women’s movement and in NOW at the national level.

Through the Bay Area Women’s Coalition, NOW members formed alliances and worked with other local feminists and progressives. Through the mid-1970s, the chapter continued coalition work and initiated three significant, local, coalition-based efforts around the issues of child care, abortion rights, and job discrimination.

*“Striving for Women’s Greater Liberation”: Day Care, Reproductive Rights, and
Want Ads*

In September 1969, member Mary Morain offered her name and phone number as the chapter’s contact person on the issue of childcare. However, it was not until May of the following year that the local chapter activated a childcare committee,

⁴⁰ “Report of the Women’s Coalition Meeting,” September 27, 1969.

led by Joanne Ikeda; it held its first meeting on 1 June 1970.⁴¹ As the first course of action, exemplifying a commitment to the issue in their own lives, the committee advertised that child care would now be available at all NOW meetings and official functions.⁴² All NOW members donated 10 cents each for the childcare provider, irrespective of whether or not they brought children to the meeting, and by October of that year, committee members implored their sisters to “help get the ball rolling for free day care centers everywhere.”⁴³

In April 1971, Marian Ash, who edited “Skirting the Capitol,” a statewide newsletter that kept women’s organizations up-to-date on legislative issues that affected women, indicated that, at the state level, “tight money will make it difficult to fund day care this year. The only way for people to promote expensive programs is to make it clear that they are willing to pay for such programs. Women must establish their own system of priorities and then try to sell them to economy-minded legislators.”⁴⁴ In that same month, the NOW chapter advertised for the first time a “day care meeting of representatives of groups interested in the problem. The coalition is out there to get things done.”⁴⁵ The following August, childcare was listed as one of three major goals for the year in the chapter: “How many of our members

⁴¹ SF NOW Newsletters, n.d. 1969 and May 1970. Unlike national NOW and other local chapters, SF NOW refers to its task forces as “committees” until the mid-1970s.

⁴² SF NOW Newsletter, August/September 1970; October 1970.

⁴³ SF NOW Newsletter, October 1970.

⁴⁴ “Skirting the Capitol,” April 1971, Box 56, folder 18, Martin and Lyon Papers.

⁴⁵ SF NOW Newsletter, April 1971.

are working mothers who have trouble finding day care centers for their children?” the newsletter editor asked members. She also indicated that the group would form coalitions with other women’s groups to “develop tactics to form a power block. Women must unite in order to achieve their goals, for whatever our differences of approach, we are all striving for women’s greater liberation.”⁴⁶ NOW member Joanne Ikeda joined Letisha Wadsworth, Louise Taub, and Karen Schwalm in linking up with the California Child Care Initiative Committee in August of 1971. One vital issue: fundraising. The Committee sold bumper stickers—“Happiness is Free Child Care”—to raise money to lobby the state for child care provisions. They also sponsored dinners and movie nights at the YWCA on Sutter Avenue in the Union Square district of the city and hosted “Summer in the City,” a two-day festival in late August that provided entertainment, food, and crafts while raising money for the Committee.⁴⁷

At one point, the childcare committee also articulated the concerns of lesbian mothers. The Lesbian Mothers Union (LMU), formed by SF NOW member and lesbian mother Del Martin, formed in July 1971 to address the particular needs of lesbian mothers. “These women have found that neither the homophile nor the women’s movement has dealt with their particular needs. They live in constant fear and jeopardy that, on discovery of their identity, their children will be automatically taken away. Custody of children has been consistently awarded by the courts to

⁴⁶ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1971.

⁴⁷ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1971.

fathers because they were heterosexual—their only recommendation.”⁴⁸ Although NOW and LMU worked together, the chapter dedicated itself largely to securing state-funded childcare centers and rarely mentioned issues unique to lesbian mothers.⁴⁹

Childcare centers were becoming part of the national agenda as NOW nationally joined other activists and organizations who sought to make childcare a salient political issue. In 1972, the U.S. Congress passed a comprehensive child development bill, which, if signed into law, would provide services for middle-class and poor families. This was not the first time that childcare was a national issue; in World War II, the federal government subsidized child-care centers. The bill, which proposed \$2.9 billion dollars to set up a nationwide system of childcare centers, passed the Senate, and later the House of Representatives. Nixon vetoed the bill that year, citing, among other things, that it would lead to “communal” child-rearing.⁵⁰ This issue, however, did not have meaning only at the national level; local feminists pursued childcare because women in their communities demanded it.⁵¹

⁴⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1971.

⁴⁹ LMU went on to garner other successes and face battles differently. See Daniel??? Ph.d candidate at Stanford, working on gay/lesbian families. See also Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: 1992).

⁵⁰ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1972.

⁵¹ Susan Hartmann, “Rights Liberalism’ and the Material Bases of Second-Wave Feminism,” draft paper presented at the Modern U.S. History Workshop, 9 October 2004. (I’m not supposed to cite this paper as a draft, but am waiting for a more citable draft.) In addition to work on labor union feminists’ activism, see also Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); and

Encouraged by the passage of the 1972 Mondale-Javits childcare bill in the Senate, the chapter was then enraged by Nixon's veto. In May 1973, Linda Festa, who chaired the Child Care Committee, reiterated the chapter's support for "the broadest possible availability of high quality child care for all who wish to use it." Moreover, she wrote that "we [chapter members] declare that what Bay Area parents and children need is a crash program to improve the facilities we have now, rather than shutting down of some 80 percent of the centers women now depend on." In the face of federal threats to childcare, "women are to be deprived of the opportunity to work or to study, and in many cases will be forced onto welfare; children are to be deprived of the right to be cared for in a safe, developmental situation with other children."⁵²

Within a month, the Childcare Committee joined forces with other interested groups and individuals and formed CAPA, Children and Parents Action, and initiated a plan to put a childcare initiative on the November 1973 ballot in San Francisco. CAPA members devised a petition that, if passed, would direct the Board of Supervisors (the city's elected government) to maintain existing childcare programs as well as to develop new, more comprehensive ones. According to the wording of the petition, "childcare shall include infant care, pre-school and after-school

Jo Reger, "Motherhood and the Construction of Feminist Identities: Variations in a Women's Movement Organization," *Sociological Inquiry* 71 (2001): 85-100.

⁵² SF NOW Newsletter, May 1973. (It is perhaps no coincidence that in this same issue, the chapter encouraged members to "show your appreciation" for Mother's Day by purchasing "Fuck Housework" posters.)

programs” and “be made available to all San Francisco children.”⁵³ By law, CAPA needed 12,000 valid signatures to introduce the petition onto the ballot; operating on a shoestring budget, they sought donated office space, volunteer time, and funds to run this major effort.⁵⁴

In July 1973, chapter president Lorraine Lahr implored members to help gather signatures. She reminded members that CAPA would not meet its goal of 20,000 signatures (8,000 more than legally required, but they sought solid public support of the issue) “unless every member of NOW backs up their endorsement with action.” Reminding the chapter that more was at stake, she wrote, “it is terribly important both for our credibility to the outside world and our internal responsibility that when we endorse, we follow through.”⁵⁵ CAPA also inserted a two-page informational document into the SF NOW newsletter that month, which offered guidelines for petitioning and reminders to purchase yellow “Childcare—YES!” buttons, which CAPA made to raise funds. By July, San Francisco NOW had joined a broad coalition of organizational and individual endorsers of CAPA, including Assembly members Willie Brown and John Burton, San Francisco Federation of Teachers, Union Women’s Alliance to Gain Equality (WAGE), SF National Women’s Political Caucus, AFSCME Council 56, and the California Federation of Labor Women’s Conference of the AFL-CIO.⁵⁶

⁵³ SF NOW Newsletter, June 1973.

⁵⁴ SF NOW Newsletter, July 1973.

⁵⁵ SF NOW Newsletter, July 1973.

⁵⁶ SF NOW Newsletter, July 1973.

On 6 August, CAPA organized a press conference to coincide with formally filing signed petitions with the Registrar of Voters. Over 15,000 valid signatures were filed and the petition was introduced as “Proposition M” on the November 1973 ballot. The December 1973 SF NOW Newsletter reported the good news: “PROPOSITION M PASSES.” Hailed “a great victory for women,” Proposition M changed the policy of the City and County of San Francisco, requiring both “to provide low cost quality childcare and that the policy for these centers be made by the parents and faculty of each.”⁵⁷ The newsletter editor also acknowledged that it was “a coalition of parents, teachers, community organizations, women’s groups, and trade unions which grew out of the reaction to the cut-backs in childcare earlier this year. It is important to note that San Francisco NOW has played a leadership role in the group and that most CAPA members are women—many of whom are feminists.”⁵⁸ This vital coalition was born out of both a local feminist commitment to quality childcare for citizens and a response to potentially threatening situation as a result of federal rollbacks for childcare initiatives. They sought new and better legislation, if not at the federal level then at the local one. Working with literally hundreds of other activists, SF NOW, as a member and leader of CAPA, worked within the system to achieve meaningful feminist change.

The chapter also supported and coalesced with other groups on the issue of abortion. When NOW nationally took a stand in favor of abortion in 1968, it lost many members, including Catholic nuns who had served on NOW’s founding board

⁵⁷ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1973.

⁵⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1973.

and conservative feminists such as Gene Boyer. By the time that SF NOW was founded that same year, NOW was on record in favor of removing all penalties of law against abortion and securing abortion on demand for all women. Unlike the Memphis chapter, which did not address the issue of abortion whatsoever in the 1970s, the San Francisco chapter embraced abortion rights wholeheartedly in the first five years of its existence.

Society for Humane Abortion (SHA) was one of the groups participating in the first Bay Area Women's Coalition meeting in 1969. At that time, SHA had been writing *amicus curiae* briefs for court cases that challenged contemporary California laws and promoted the idea that "a child has the right to come into the world with love—as 'wanted'" and tied the issue of abortion directly to child abuse and feminism. In direct confrontation with current California law, SHA members also assisted women in obtaining abortions.⁵⁹ Prior to affiliating with SHA and other abortion rights' groups in the formal coalition, however, NOW hosted lawyer Wray Morehouse and physician Thomas Hart at the May 1969 meeting to discuss repeal of abortion laws. The unidentified newsletter editor offered what she called a "controversial" editorial on abortion, countering suggestions that abortion equated murder because an embryo is not a human being and "therefore abortion is not truly the murder of a human being." After discussing how animals in nature kill one another for survival, she suggested that "killing of both actual and potential life is one of nature's means of insuring a good life in nature; abortion, the killing of potential

⁵⁹ "Report of the Women's Coalition," September 27, 1969.

physical life, should be one of society's ways of insuring a good life for its citizens."⁶⁰ She invited members to respond via letters to the editor, "pro and con," and promised to publish them "as space permits," but no one evidently took her up on the offer.

Abortion continued to be a featured topic at chapter meetings. In December of the same year, the speaker was Lawrence Swan, who spoke on the topic, "Man's Future in the Hands of Women: The Control of Population." The newsletter editor encouraged a large audience for this "stimulating speaker," although members did not necessarily buy into the notion that controlling population was about men's success and future. NOW members supported the repeal of all abortion laws and offered a public forum for pro-choice speakers, but the chapter chastised Zero Population Growth (ZPG), another group advocating the decriminalization of abortion, for having exclusively male officers and only one woman on a thirty-seven member board. Karen Jacobs, the newsletter editor, asked, "shouldn't one of ZPG's primary goals be to educate society so that women's function is no longer regarded as that of motherhood? And shouldn't ZPG set an example by appointing women to responsible positions? ... If world population is to decrease, society's attitude toward women must change."⁶¹

The following month, January 1970, the California Committee to Legalize Abortion (CCLA), another group that participated in the September coalition meeting, spoke at the chapter's meeting. At that time, CCLA was working to put an initiative

⁶⁰ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1969.

⁶¹ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1969.

measure on the ballot to legalize abortion in the state of California, framing their argument specifically in the context of an individual woman's right to choose abortion for herself. Member Cheriell Jensen coordinated the meeting, talking in particular about the mechanics of putting an initiative on the ballot. With a looming deadline for signatures 16, members worked to get the initiative before the voters but failed to obtain the necessary number of signatures.⁶²

After the failure of the initiative, the chapter's activism on abortion was sporadic, with members largely reporting on various things happening around the area. For example, the April 1970 chapter newsletter alerted members that the Berkeley chapter of NOW would host an "ecology booth" at the Wonder Fair (an Earth Day festival) in Oakland; its purpose was "to demonstrate that the best way to solve the overpopulation problem is to legalize abortion and change society so that women have other roles besides motherhood."⁶³ At the chapter meeting held the following month, members voted to co-sponsor an "Office Abortion Procedures Symposium" to demystify the medical procedure of abortion at the Jack Tar Hotel in San Francisco.⁶⁴ They also promoted a new paper, available to members, entitled "Obstetrics in the Wrong Hands." Anne Treseder of both SHA and SF NOW authored the paper, which addressed "what's wrong with the medical treatment of women."⁶⁵

⁶² SF NOW Newsletter, April 1970.

⁶³ SF NOW Newsletter, April 1970.

⁶⁴ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1970.

⁶⁵ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1970.

In June 1970, the newsletter editor (Vicki Selmier, who was at this time also chapter president and editing the newsletter only this one time) included a letter from the California Association to Repeal Abortion Laws (ARAL), which informed sympathizers that Senator Anthony Beilenson had introduced a bill before the State Senate that would repeal the state's 1967 Therapeutic Abortion Bill. By doing so, it "would make abortion, finally, accessible to all women without red tape." Patricia (Pat) Maginnis, president of ARAL, outlined when the Senate Judiciary Committee would be holding hearings about the bill, which senators served on the committee, how important it was to undertake the "tedious task" of letter writing, and where to go to attend the hearings in person.⁶⁶ In this same newsletter, Selmier reminded people that "we do have PRIORITIES," abortion rights among them.

Whether it was Selmier's admonition to focus on chapter priorities, the fact that a feasible bill was before the state senate, or the vibrant personality of Pat Maginnis, who joined NOW in the summer of 1970, that mobilized the chapter into action, by August of that year the chapter moved beyond simply reporting on what was happening in the area of abortion rights and engaged in full-blown activism. At the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality, representatives of the chapter spoke forcefully to a crowd of over 1,000 people, demanding free voluntary abortion for all women and no forced sterilization of any woman.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ SF NOW Newsletter, June 1970.

⁶⁷ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1970.

The December meeting was held at the SHA offices, “provided through the generosity of Pat Maginnis and the wonderful women who work with her there.”⁶⁸ By the next month, Gina Allen, chapter newsletter editor, reported that the California state legislature was showing no signs of repealing “the restrictive state abortion statutes. Relief, if it is to come at all, must come through the courts and/or collective action of women.” She further reported that Rita Hersh, a local law student, sought to file a class action suit on behalf of the women of California, naming the state attorney general and all California county district attorneys as defendants. Her hope was that this suit would result in a ruling that would strike down all California abortion laws, making abortion equal to other medical procedures governed by state health codes.⁶⁹ Turning the legal system to women’s benefit, Hersh indicated that she needed women as co-plaintiffs—they did not have to be pregnant and seeking an abortion at the time because they were suing for the “right to obtain an abortion if and when it is desired”—following the pattern set by women in New York who in 1969 joined a similar class action suit and won.⁷⁰ Encouraging women to talk about their abortions was important to ARAL and NOW women—“your stories will keep the record complete – lest we forget what we have suffered. And they may teach male doctors some things that only desperate women have learned. Eventually, the accumulated knowledge might even make doctors superfluous.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1970.

⁶⁹ SF NOW Newsletter, January 1971.

⁷⁰ SF NOW Newsletter, January 1971.

⁷¹ SF NOW Newsletter, September 1971.

By June 1971, Hersh and other NOW members had not filed their lawsuit; however, members were alerted to another lawsuit involving two of their members. On 10 June, Pat Maginnis and Rowena Gurner, both NOW members and both chairpersons of ARAL, stood trial on a four-year-old charge of distributing information about abortion in direct violation of California's abortion laws. SF NOW members packed the courtroom with women; Gurner and Maginnis were merely fined and reprimanded.⁷² The following week, in a classic radical feminist practice, NOW sponsored a speak out on abortion at Glide Memorial Church. They protested the fact that current state law prevented women from "exercising the simple human right to control our own bodies. We are speaking out for our right to decide for ourselves whether or not to bear children." The event promised to give opportunities to women to speak about their abortion procedures, legal and illegal, to talk with doctors and nurses about safer abortions, and to talk with counselors. The event also featured NOW member Mynra Lamb's short play "of a man who becomes impregnated and seeks an abortion, 'What Have You Done for Me Lately?'"

Of particular interest is the photograph that accompanied this flyer. In this picture, a group of protesting women is holding signs in favor of abortion. All of them are women of color; the woman in the center holds a sign reading "Legal Abortion Si Yes."⁷³ ARAL also included an insert on the class action suit, reminding women that the only qualification for joining the suit is U.S. citizenship. They did not have to be pregnant or seeking abortion, but the information sheet that ARAL asked

⁷² SF NOW Newsletter, June 1971.

⁷³ SF NOW Newsletter, June 1971.

potential plaintiffs to offer statements about whether or not the woman had ever obtained an illegal abortion while a resident of the state and whether or not she would be willing to testify about her experiences.⁷⁴ In what had become typical form, in July 1971, SF NOW joined the Women's Ad Hoc Abortion Coalition, which advocated repeal of all abortion laws and opposed forced or coerced sterilization.⁷⁵

By October, SF NOW co-sponsored a "Women's Abortion Action Conference" for women in the western United States. This two-day event, held October 15 and 16 at UC-Berkeley, represented a coordinated effort with "sisters all over the country" who "are getting together to demand control over our own reproductive lives....A major focus of the conference will be to plan the building of massive demonstrations on November 20." The advertising flyer featured two photographs: one was an African American woman with an afro and sunglasses holding a hand-written sign stating "defend women's rights to control their bodies." A second woman, also African American, bore a sign featuring a clothes hanger and words reading, "15,000 women murdered by abortion laws."⁷⁶ This chapter used the images of women of color strategically to highlight their commitment to reproductive rights, which was much broader and encompassing than the national board's vow to work on repealing all abortion laws. The conference offered participants a "teach in" on how to repeal abortion laws, workshops on methods of demonstration, building coalitions in unions, on college and high school campuses, and among professional

⁷⁴ ARAL Letter, inserted in SF NOW Newsletter, June 1971.

⁷⁵ SF NOW Newsletter, July 1971.

⁷⁶ SF NOW Newsletter, October 1971.

women, an educational session on the then-new book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and “constituency workshops” to target “Black women, Asian women, Chicanas, Gay women, Mothers, and Older women.”⁷⁷ At this point, at least to many NOW members, “the repeal of abortion laws is truly a matter of life and death.”⁷⁸

Such action and commitment demonstrates NOW members’ commitment to the potentially divisive issue of abortion. Given the racial and ethnic diversity in San Francisco and the history of forced sterilizations of women of color, it was understandable that the local NOW chapter worked with so many women, including women of color, on the issue of reproductive rights. NOW members and abortion rights’ feminists joined the related issues of abortion rights and forced sterilization, creating common ground among women and understanding the issues of reproductive rights and freedom far beyond the decriminalization of abortion. Such was clearly the result of coalition building and working with women across race, class, and sexual orientation.

By August of the following year, the chapter happily reported that several bills were currently before Congress, most notably Bella Abzug’s “Abortion Rights Act of 1972,” which would “enforce the constitutional right of women to terminate pregnancies that they do not wish to continue” and Senator Robert Packwood’s “National Abortion Act,” which would authorize abortions to be performed by licensed physicians upon the request of women during the first 140 days of pregnancy. Abzug’s bill in particular referenced an inherent right to privacy; all of the

⁷⁷ SF NOW Newsletter, October 1971.

⁷⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, October 1971.

bills met with national NOW's approval and SF NOW members were encouraged to support these measures and the members of Congress who introduced and promised to vote for them.⁷⁹ Although members did keep tabs on such things happening at the federal level, the chapter focused most of its energies on what was happening at the state level. In December 1972, under the headline, "ERA RATIFIED, ABORTION LIBERALIZED," chapter president Lorraine Lahr informed members that on November 22, the state Supreme Court ruled the 1967 Therapeutic Abortion Law unconstitutional, a decision that in effect legalized abortion on demand for women pregnant up to 20 weeks and that the procedures had to be performed in an accredited hospital with a licensed physician.⁸⁰

The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Roe v. Wade*, followed suit in January 1973, creating and codifying the trimester system for abortion and creating the constitutional interpretation of a right to privacy.⁸¹ With this case, the "right to life" movement mobilized, engaging in its own letter-writing campaign to Congress to introduce anti-abortion and anti-choice amendments. By August 1973, some seventeen constitutional amendments outlawing abortion were proposed in Congress. The chapter political action committee, formerly the Job Discrimination Committee (JDC), reminded people to write in opposition to such amendments and any anti-choice legislation—"An intensive mail campaign to California's congressional delegation is essential to keep the pressure on from now until the end of the 93rd

⁷⁹ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1972.

⁸⁰ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1972.

⁸¹ *Roe v. Wade* (410 US 113 (1973)).

Congress.” Although the chapter informed members that “mini abortions” (also known as menstrual induction, for women who were 7-28 days overdue on their menstrual cycle) were available at Planned Parenthood on Clay Street in San Francisco,⁸² and with abortions legal in the state, the focus clearly shifted to opposing federal legislation that would nullify *Roe v. Wade* and encouraging members to “WRITE, WRITE, WRITE” in opposition to any federal threat to the Supreme Court decision.⁸³

SF NOW members also built coalitions around the issue of job discrimination. Although the chapter lamented sweat shop labor conditions in and around San Francisco, its main focus was to desegregate—or in the lingo of the day, “desexegrate”—help-wanted ads in local newspapers, following the national organization’s goals. In September 1969, at the same time that NOW was hosting the first Bay Area Women’s Coalition meeting, Donna Barnhill of the chapter’s newly formed JDC encouraged a rather innocuous letter-writing campaign. Letters would not be addressed to the newspaper editor but instead to members’ respective employers, encouraging employers to pressure the newspaper to advertise for employment in alphabetical order rather than “Help Wanted Male” and “Help Wanted Female.”⁸⁴

The JDC and NOW members went on to address help-wanted ads, but typically did so outside of any formal coalition with other women’s groups. In

⁸² SF NOW Newsletter, November 1973.

⁸³ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1973.

⁸⁴ SF NOW Newsletter September 1969.

December 1969, JDC members reported that they joined forces with other “Women’s Liberation groups” in the area to assist Women, Inc. with its demonstration against Fibreboard Corporation Paper Mills in Antioch, about 45 miles northeast of San Francisco.⁸⁵ Women, Inc. had been active since 1966, fighting for three years against the paper mills. Its members “found themselves discriminated against in employment—progression ladders were blocked; labor pools were segregated; ...women were barred from many jobs in the plant.” One woman with forty-two years’ seniority was laid off while a man with one week’s tenure was still employed. After filing cases with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which found and documented discrimination, women did not receive any settlement. In spite of its members’ own dilemmas, Women, Inc. had been asked to help other women organize at their plants and in other workplace situations.⁸⁶ At the December 1969 demonstration, one of many but the first one that NOW reported in its local newsletter, forty-five protestors picketed the main plant, and the women of Women, Inc. “were pleased, surprised, and grateful for the support of NOW and Women’s Liberation. They felt a new sense of camaraderie with other women fighting for their rights. The September Coalition meeting has borne fruit.”⁸⁷ The following month, in January 1970, JDC held a coalition meeting of women’s organizations interested in working to fight job discrimination against women. Among the topics on the agenda were extending protective labor laws to men, eliminating unnecessary protective

⁸⁵ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1969.

⁸⁶ “Report of the Women’s Coalition,” September 27, 1969.

⁸⁷ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1969.

labor laws for women, getting the EEOC to take up cases of sex discrimination, and demonstrating “against that arch exploiter of women—the Bell Telephone Co.”⁸⁸

In May 1970, NOW and allied groups started a “counseling and training service for women wishing to enter the trades and crafts.” Coordinated by the JDC, women could take courses with NOW member Margaret Bodfish in carpentry, plumbing, and home repairs. Bodfish specifically encouraged high school girls and young women considering careers in the trades to sign up for the courses. Whether or not the classes were successful or highly attended is unknown, but that such overtures were made belies the notion that NOW was only a middle-class women’s organization; instead members sought to provide material opportunities for advancement to working-class women in the chapter and in the city.

JDC also worked with the legislature to fight discrimination against women in higher education. Senator Mervyn M. Dymally, a Democrat from Los Angeles, introduced four bills into the state senate, which NOW and JDC supported, to hire more women faculty and administrators, admit more women into state colleges and universities, offer free, full-time day care centers for children of male and female students, staff, and faculty, and require elementary schools to adopt textbooks that portrayed women and men in non-stereotypical ways.⁸⁹

By October 1970, JDC proudly boasted about its accomplishments. In the space of just over one year, Barnhill reported that “most every move took on

⁸⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, January 1970. For more on the particulars of feminists’ fight against AT&T and for a chapter on NOW and AT&T, see Herr, *Women, Power, and AT&T*.

⁸⁹ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1970.

significance and resulted in accomplishment.” “Although the results of much work such as personal visits and letter writing are not immediately visible,” she iterated what she saw as the major undertakings and successes of the JDC, including over one dozen television programs on women’s employment issues, a formalized speaker bureau on job discrimination, and ongoing picketing against Crocker-Citizens and Wells Fargo banks for discriminatory banking practices.⁹⁰

With Barnhill’s departure from the chapter (for reasons unknown), the chapter focused less on organizing formal coalition efforts on job discrimination and channeled its energies into “desexegrating” help-wanted ads in the local newspapers. This action was not new to the NOW chapter or to NOW nationally; members had been working on the issue since 1968. But this single issue became SF NOW’s hallmark contribution to alleviating job discrimination against San Francisco women.

In December 1968, members of the local NOW chapter “had a ball carrying picket signs in front of the Hearst Building in downtown San Francisco.”⁹¹ They were protesting the local newspaper, the *San Francisco Chronicle-Examiner*, for having sex-segregated want ads, which advertised “Help Wanted Male” and “Help Wanted Female.” Among other activities, the protestors “sang amended Christmas carols rather lustily.” Although they did not always picket in front of the newspaper’s offices, members devoted themselves to this particular issue for several years. By November of the following year, NOW started picketing the newspaper’s offices every Friday afternoon. According to Brenda Brush, “the picketing started on October

⁹⁰ SF NOW Newsletter, October 1970.

⁹¹ SF NOW Newsletter, January/February 1969.

10 when NOW decided to join with a new Oakland organization called UNISEX, which is a group of men and women who recently became aware of discrimination against women in employment and having no knowledge of NOW's work in the field, formed their own organization and proceeded to become active by picketing the SF newspapers for not desegregating the want ads. More power to them and to us."⁹² By the next month, however, NOW called off its participation and affiliation with the protest because "we did not have enough pickets, the chief reason being that most of our members work."⁹³ The members decided to pursue different and less dramatic tactics, specifically meeting with Welles Smith, the president of the San Francisco Printing Company, to urge him to "desex the ads."⁹⁴

The NOW chapter took on the local newspapers in what must have felt like a "David and Goliath" sort of battle, but in their struggle, they curried public support and awareness. In January 1970, chapter president Victoria Selmier met with the publisher of the *Oakland Tribune*, a smaller local newspaper, who agreed to publicize more activities of NOW and other women's groups. According to the chapter's newsletter, this particular battle was an important step "in breaking the newspapers' conspiracy of silence against women. Newspapers fight us by silence, by printing only recipes, fashion needs and beauty hints; they rarely print news about legislation pending on behalf of women or of the activities of women working for their civil rights. Newspapers like to pretend that their readers think that all women are content

⁹² SF NOW Newsletter, November 1969.

⁹³ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1969.

⁹⁴ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1969.

with housework, low pay, and being some playboy's sex object. It is true that most women are still content with their inferior status, but more and more women are not. It is about time newspapers gave these women a voice."⁹⁵ Moreover, the *Oakland Tribune* integrated its help-wanted ads.⁹⁶

The EEOC, charged under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with handling cases of discrimination, decided early in its formation not to address issues of sex discrimination, spurring the formation of NOW in 1966.⁹⁷ Women around the country were angered by this decision, and NOW nationally admonished the EEOC for its refusal to hear sex discrimination cases. In San Francisco, Brenda Brush filed a legal suit against the EEOC and the *San Francisco Chronicle-Examiner* in February 1970. She was not at liberty to discuss her case with her fellow NOW members, but while the suit was pending, Selmier held independent meetings between herself and Charles Gould, publisher of the paper. According to the chapter newsletter, "Vicki has a mad hope of getting a voluntary desexification by the National [NOW] meeting in March."

Her hopes would be dashed; the newspaper did not give in to the threat, or reality, of a lawsuit. However, aid came in an appropriate but unexpected form: by

⁹⁵ SF NOW Newsletter, January 1970.

⁹⁶ On 26 January 1970, for the first time and with no mention elsewhere in the newspaper, the *Oakland Tribune* listed all help-wanted advertisements in alphabetical order.

⁹⁷ Donald Allen Robinson, "Two Movements in Pursuit of Equal Opportunity," *Signs* (1979); See also Susan M. Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream: Women in American Politics Since 1960* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).

April of that year, the EEOC reversed its position, claiming instead that newspapers could be regarded as employment agencies insofar as they published advertisements for jobs. The result of this reversal was that the EEOC finally assumed jurisdiction over newspapers and brought them into compliance with Title VII. The EEOC also submitted an *amicus curiae* brief in support of Brush, who in turn dropped the Commission from her lawsuit. The chapter continued to cheer Brush's efforts; members also reminded one another to continue calling the newspapers to protest sex-segregated want ads.⁹⁸ In February 1971, member Judy Copeland Bratcher began "blitzing advertisers in the Examiner-Chronicle want-ads with letters asking them to get their ads out from under the sexegregated listings and put them in the 'Men and Women' category and also to request the Chronicle desexegrate these ads." Members felt that this practice of pressuring advertisers and the newspaper itself was working; "Many Bay Area newspapers have recently reformed their want-ads practices...but the Ex-Chron still holds out." Ever optimistic, however, Sharon Rufener, chair of the Job Discrimination Committee, reported that "We may win this one yet!"⁹⁹ This feeling was buttressed, no doubt, by new legislation giving the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) new authority and jurisdiction to reprimand and censure newspapers and other agencies for not complying with Title VII.¹⁰⁰ The Job Discrimination Committee kept members abreast of developments, reminding newsletter readers that it was now illegal under state law to discriminate because of

⁹⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1970.

⁹⁹ SF NOW Newsletter, February 1971.

¹⁰⁰ On FEPC, see Carruthers, *Black San Francisco*, esp. 146.

sex in employment and that sex-segregated advertising was evidence of such discrimination.¹⁰¹

Until April of the following year, however, such proclamations amounted to preaching to the choir. But on April 11, “Two prominent bulwarks of sexism, the San Francisco Chronicle and the Examiner quietly capitulated to 3 ½ years of pressure from NOW and removed sex-discriminatory ‘Help Wanted Women’ and ‘Help Wanted Men’ headings from their classified ads.”¹⁰² On page 22 of the *Chronicle*, in the “Miscellaneous” section of the want ads, between “basement cleaning” and “warehouse liquidations,” the newspaper editor printed a notice: “Times have changed and so has the Want Ads Supermarket—Until very recently engineers were almost invariably male. Telephone operators were female. Today, though, a job title is a description of work that can be (and is) performed equally well by qualified people of either sex. We’ve combined all listings of job opportunities under one heading, ‘HELP WANTED’. This simplified system will aid both job-seekers and prospective employers.”¹⁰³ This was quite a switch: in November 1968, an editorial on “The Unmentionable Help-Wanted Ad” suggested that “by forcing the most widely-read of all want-ads into a coeducational or homosexual [sic] mold, the [Equal Employment Opportunity] Commission is inevitably fostering confusion, embarrassment, and unimaginable troubles upon advertisers, readers, and innocent female job seekers who, misled by an ad that is sexless, apply for a job that has

¹⁰¹ SF NOW Newsletter, July 1971.

¹⁰² SF NOW Newsletter, May 1972.

¹⁰³ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 April 1972, D22.

inalterable male characteristics—like, for example, that of a linebacker, chorus boy, or masseur in a Turkish bath....The hermaphrodite [sic] Help Wanted ad is impractical in this guys-and-dolls world and any law to compel it must be honored chiefly in the breach.”¹⁰⁴

The newspaper did change its policy, the result of “a lot of dedicated effort,” including “several picketings and leafleting, letters to the editor, over 100 complaints phoned into the Fair Employment Practices Commission urging action against the papers, a Federal lawsuit filed by NOW member Brenda Brush, several cases filed with the FEPC, including ones by NOW members Sue Sylvester and Ruth McElhinney, several mass mailings to advertisers, warning them that they were breaking the law; 3 ½ years of pressure from the EEOC, 1 ½ years of pressure from the FEPC, an impending Public Accusation, which the FEPC planned to file on April 12 (the paper got in under the wire by de-sexegrating on April 11).”¹⁰⁵ That it may well have been the Public Accusation that ultimately forced the hand of the newspaper editors does not deny the fact that NOW feminists worked diligently for the issue of integrating help-wanted ads, even if they already had jobs (indeed, income was vital to women such as Brush, who endured costs of a 3 ½ year long lawsuit). The newsletter editor took great pride in noting that “Help Wanted, Men has now become a historical footnote along with such other cultural oddities as ads which said ‘white only, Christian preferred’ and ‘no Irish need apply.’ Good riddance.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ “The Unmentionable Help-Wanted Ad,” editorial, *San Francisco Chronicle*, A8.

¹⁰⁵ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1972.

¹⁰⁶ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1972.

Desegregating help-wanted ads in San Francisco represents something that the NOW chapter did in concert with formal coalitions, but in large part, their actions took place largely independently of the coalitions. With Brush's 1971 lawsuit, very little information was available about the paper's actions; if other groups joined NOW in letter writing and persuading advertisers to pull their financial support to the paper, it is not documented in the NOW papers nor do members mention it elsewhere. But this was a NOW action that met with the awareness and approval of the Coalition. It was reported largely in the context of the JDC, but seems to have been an issue NOW tackled largely independently. However, members adopted a variety of tactics, from filing formal lawsuits to street politics, from letter writing and supporting state legislation to staging demonstrations outside of the newspaper's offices, to pressure the newspapers to change their sexist policies.

The chapter, then, from its formation until the end of 1973 was focused on and dedicated to a variety of issues and attuned to them as they affected women from all walks of life. Although the membership may not have been much more diverse than the national averages (and there is no way to ascertain its diversity in terms of race, class, and sexual orientation), it clearly reached out, through coalitions, to understand and work on issues in the context of many women's lives. Child care and abortion, and to a lesser degree job discrimination, were somewhat controversial in their own ways, but SF NOW embraced them and undertook action to seek feminist changes on behalf of all women, reflecting their concern with and activism on behalf of women's material rights and advancement. At the national level, NOW has been accused of offering little more than lip service to material rights, but at both the national and the

local levels, NOW feminists undertook meaningful action. In San Francisco, they invoked a variety of strategies and tactics to meet these goals, often turning to legislative ends but not exclusively and never with a focus or eye to meeting political goals exclusively. These issues mattered to women in San Francisco, and the SF NOW chapter took on these issues with force and vigor. It is not to suggest that the chapter did not discuss other issues; instead, it is to point out the various coalitions that the chapter engaged in and pursued. However, by 1973, the chapter was starting to feel pressures and in the following year, many people left SF NOW altogether.

A Chapter Divided

Although this chapter built feminist community in the city, it also suffered from internal conflict. Seeds of discontent were apparent from its first year or two of existence, but it was not until 1973 and 1974 that the chapter ruptured, creating a split and a second NOW chapter in the city. This section traces the divisions, the actual split, and the actions of a new NOW chapter—the San Francisco chapter itself was left with very little energy in terms of members who were actively engaged and it was threatened with dissolution for about three or four years. Although the chapter was remarkably good at building coalitions, it did not always succeed at keeping internal unity.

Many NOW members were aware of the reality that they could not separate their feminist selves from other aspects of their identity or their activism. From its earliest days, NOW members from San Francisco saw themselves as part of a larger progressive community, reflecting in many ways the experiences of Aileen

Hernandez, the first Western Regional Director and second president of NOW—and San Francisco resident. Unable to separate the various movements in which she was involved, Hernandez wrote in 1971, after the membership passed a resolution in opposition to the war in Vietnam, that

I have been very involved in the peace movement, and I would continue to be whether the Regional Conference had taken a position or not. I am also deeply committed to, and working hard in the black movement for equality. I would find it impossible to decide that all my energies had to go to NOW---especially if NOW viewed its own interests so narrowly that it did not see a relevance in the struggle against racism and war. ... If women are to be equal in society, there are no issues which should be considered beyond their concern---what women have to do, as feminists, is to develop feminist positions on these issues. ... It is certainly not radical at this time to call for an end to the conflict in Vietnam; it is almost a postscript to a long, star-studded list of anti-war groups. What would be novel would be for NOW to lead---from a feminist approach---a movement against all war.”¹⁰⁷

NOW members, from the chapter level to the top levels of leadership, would never be able to separate themselves into various aspects of their identities—for Hernandez, she would never be simply black, or female, or pacifist; she was all at once. Moreover, the issues she addressed were not at odds with “feminism,” and she

¹⁰⁷ Letter, Aileen Hernandez to Eve Norman, 29 April 1971, Box 169, folder 20 “Western Region, 1970-1976,” NOW Papers.

encouraged her NOW sisters to create and adopt feminist approaches to social, political, and cultural problems.

Hernandez's 1971 correspondence with Eve Norman clearly indicates that there was some objection to merging feminism and other social movement activism, and some, including Norman, suggested that the issues of women might get lost in the many contemporary struggles. A year prior, SF NOW chapter president Vicki Selmier foreshadowed Norman's complaint, indicating that women's issues mattered the most, at least to her. "Contrary to many of my friends," she wrote, "I do not always believe in dissipating energy on issues other than the status of women. Women are always expected to 'Do Good' and to subjugate their lives to the interests of someone or some issues that are more important. I do not believe anything—WAR, DISEASE, HUNGER, CALAMITY, ETC.—is more important than the Status of Women."¹⁰⁸

There is no record of anyone responding directly to Selmier's statement, but the chapter sought feminist perspectives on and solutions to problems as they affected everyone, incorporating race, class, and sexual orientation into their actions. For example, the chapter joined other feminist and women's groups in the Bay Area for the "Women's Conference for Liberation and Peace," a meeting premised on the notion that "women will be free only in a free and peaceful world," merging the issues of feminism and pacifism. The 5 December 1970 event featured workshops and panels on minority women, education, work, sexuality, family structure, and war—all arguably feminist issues. That the chapter supported this event may or may

¹⁰⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, June 1970.

not be in opposition to Selmier's concerns that women's status mattered most, but it is clear that the members of SF NOW pursued common cause with other groups and pursued a variety of interests, making them feminist issues and eschewing any notion that feminism was not about all aspects of women's and men's lives.

By May 1972, the chapter faced what newsletter editor Adele Meyer called "factionalism needling our chapter at present." The source of this factionalism was "disagreement over the meaning and value of 'sisterhood.'" Some members felt that sisterhood had "too sugary a taste" and that women should advance themselves and their individual goals, even if they were not met with the support of the group majority. Others felt that this perspective was too individualistic; women instead should be working for "the Women's Movement as a whole" and in support of all women, not individual women. Meyer clearly sided with the latter view on sisterhood: "Sisterhood means that our activities have ramifications for all women and for the Movement. It ... is a realization that my self interest is inextricably bound to the self interest of other women." At bottom, she suggested that "we must put aside this factionalism and have instead honest personal disagreements."¹⁰⁹

Although it is not clear how "honest personal disagreements" in the context of "sisterhood" would play out, and it is obvious that Meyer had a specific agenda and chose her words carefully to spotlight her "better perspective," feminists in the chapter were faced with threats of division. In March 1973, chapter president Diane Watson used her resignation (occasioned because she was moving to Seattle) as a

¹⁰⁹ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1972.

moment to address the membership in the newsletter. Feeling “free to pontificate and philosophize about the NOW experience,” Watson suggested that members had learned vital skills, including how to raise money, lobby, and develop political muscle. “We seem to find it much easier to criticize the people and systems ‘outside’ in the culture we’re trying to change,” she wrote, “than even to suggest to each other that an idea may not be perfect. It has been distressing for me to see members vote in favor of programs or statements with which they fundamentally disagree because to disagree would be ‘unpleasant.’ We must learn to disagree, to criticize each other’s positions or actions, without negating our love and respect for each other.” Invoking the sensitive subject of sisterhood, Watson suggested, “if we retain our sense of oneness in our essential sisterhood, we can accomplish everything more happily.” However, “one of the things that goes along with sisterhood is sibling rivalry.”¹¹⁰

Lorraine Lahr assumed the presidency after Watson’s departure. By May, she suggested a solution to the potential fragmentation that threatened the chapter: priorities. She wrote in her “President’s Column” that “today is not my day for saving the world; I am concerned that the San Francisco chapter fulfill its promise” of being “a major player in the Women’s Liberation Movement”: “I believe that is best done by narrowing our goals and activities to what can be actually accomplished now or in the near future.” Eschewing the notion that NOW or feminism can “save the world,” she indicated that the chapter must have priorities because “we cannot vote to do every worthwhile project and then when the time comes for volunteers, sit on our

¹¹⁰ SF NOW Newsletter, March 1973.

hands. If we vote yes, we should work yes.”¹¹¹ As she reminded people in the context of childcare activism, clearly a chapter priority, “It is terribly important both for our credibility to the outside world and our internal responsibility that when we endorse, we follow through.”¹¹² In November of that year, Lahr announced on behalf of the Board that the major priority for 1974 would be politics—“’74 is a statewide election year and we should be serving notice on and working for those we think will help women reach their goals.”¹¹³

By the following month, however, it was clear that the looming split in the chapter was immediate. Some people objected to the “priorities” mentality, wishing to work instead on whatever issues were important to them as individuals and on issues that expressed a greater perspective of personhood. But the impetus for the divide came in December 1973, when Lahr expressed great disdain for “members and non-members” who “asked for a vote on the establishment of a second chapter in San Francisco.” She reported that “there was a great deal of debate, which was finally resolved by an overwhelming vote against establishing another chapter in the city.” Although Lahr thought the situation should have been resolved, she commented that “after asking us to vote we were told that it didn’t really matter what we voted as ‘they’ were going to the national board to get an ok regardless of our decision.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1973.

¹¹² SF NOW Newsletter, July 1973.

¹¹³ SF NOW Newsletter, November 1974.

¹¹⁴ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1973.

“They” in this case turned out to be Del Martin, Phyllis Lyon, Aileen Hernandez, Patsy Fulcher, and other lesbians, women of color, and their allies, who wanted to leave San Francisco NOW and start a second NOW chapter in the city. Their reason for leaving was not about whether or not the chapter had the right priorities: in the words of Martin and Lyon and echoed by Hernandez, “the leadership in NOW was simply racist and homophobic. We were not going to stand for it anymore.”¹¹⁵ Martin led the charge locally, asking the SF NOW membership in October 1971 for a vote on having a second NOW chapter in the city, a departure from national NOW policy—the national bylaws indicated that there could be only one chapter in each city. At the time, there were five chapters in the Bay Area—Berkeley, Marin, Stanford, Oakland, and San Francisco—and all were active to varying degrees, but the San Francisco chapter was the largest with over 300 members (defined by NOW as people who paid dues). But in each city proper, there could only be one chapter. When SF NOW members voted down the idea of having a second NOW chapter in the city, Martin sought to change the structure.

Rather than continue to fight at the local level, Martin sought a seat on the national NOW board. After what she recalls as a rather contentious struggle because she ran as an out lesbian (the first to do so), she won the seat. “My first order of business,” she recalled, “was to change the bylaws so that there could be more than one chapter in a city. I was tired of the San Francisco NOW chapter and its insistence that we deal only with a few issues. As a Lesbian, I could not just be a feminist. I had

¹¹⁵ Interview, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, 21 March 2002. Corroborated in interview with Aileen Hernandez.

to be a full activist and San Francisco NOW was not wanting me [Phyllis: “us, many of us”] to do this.”¹¹⁶ Martin convinced the national Board that there could be more than one chapter in some cities; the Board agreed and at the national NOW meeting in St. Louis that year, the membership approved a resolution allowing more than one chapter in a city.

Lahr reported her disapproval of this national resolution to the membership. She felt as though she were “dragged” to the St. Louis meeting in spite of her “heartfelt lack of desire” to attend the national meeting because she knew that Martin and others had already planned to push for the resolution. Feeling swindled and bombarded, she suggested that National NOW needed to be “saved” because the Board “does not reflect the mainstream of the movement, but a minority which has the time, money, and interest to go to every meeting.” Closer to home, though, Lahr fumed at the recalcitrance of those who sought a second chapter even after the local membership had voted down the proposal: “votes taken mean nothing as you don’t live with the outcome if you lose. Of course the minority opinion is important and should be listened to, but not to the extent that you refuse to accept the free decision of the majority. Basically this is the ideological difference that NOW faces.”¹¹⁷

Despite her paeans to majority rule, some members left San Francisco NOW for the Golden Gate (GG NOW) chapter. Indeed, GG NOW attracted some of the most vibrant and active members (including many who attended meetings but did not necessarily join the organization), and the new chapter of NOW flourished for about

¹¹⁶ Interview, Martin and Lyon, 21 March 2002.

¹¹⁷ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1973.

three years. By comparison, SF NOW languished. New national NOW board member Martin and former national president Hernandez lent the new chapter an air of legitimacy and commitment to action, and GG NOW set out to address many of the same issues that the SF chapter had undertaken—women and credit, political action, and affirmative action among them.

However, the new chapter also publicly addressed other issues, including sexuality and lesbianism. SF NOW had devoted only one chapter meeting (March 1971) to “the Lesbian in the Women’s Movement,” which featured representatives from DOB and Gay Women’s Liberation.¹¹⁸ In October 1973, at the same time as the call for a new chapter of NOW, Martin hosted a “rap group with NOW and DOB” in an attempt to “widen the channels of communication,” and Martin encouraged DOB members who had not joined SF NOW to consider joining the organization.¹¹⁹ However, the San Francisco chapter did not institute a task force committee on sexuality and lesbianism until February 1974, after the Golden Gate chapter had already formed. Instead, the GG chapter, boasting 47 members by June 1974, worked most diligently to discuss issues of sexuality in the women’s movement.

Among issues of sexuality that the task force addressed was the thorny issue of prostitution.¹²⁰ Virtue Hathaway, a former SF NOW member and current GG

¹¹⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, March 1971.

¹¹⁹ SF NOW Newsletter, October 1973.

¹²⁰ For more on prostitution and the women’s movement, see Jill Nagle, ed. *Whores and Other Feminists* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander, eds., *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998); and Ronald Weitzer,

NOW member, penned an “advice column” for the GG NOW Newsletter. In September 1974, “a moral feminist” wrote a letter to Virtue voicing her disapproval that GG NOW co-sponsored the “Hooker’s Convention” with COYOTE at Glide Memorial Church. “Personally, I don’t sympathize with the hookers. I find it degrading that these women should sell their bodies. My friends would rather go on welfare than be street walkers. Just how does NOW justify supporting these loose women?” “Moral” inquired. Virtue responded with the fact that NOW nationally had just supported a resolution in favor of decriminalizing the practice of prostitution. More to the point, however, Virtue suggested that “in the realm of feminist ideology, we have made a fundamental commitment to uphold the right of a woman to do with HER body as SHE chooses. This is the basis of our efforts to repeal the abortion laws.” Moreover, “our sexuality has been exploited in many ways for a long time, including within the ‘moral’ institution of marriage. It is time now for women to break away from the barriers society has imposed upon us.” She also encouraged “Moral” to “work toward a society free of exploitation, where female and male sexuality are no longer commodities but at the same time let us begin to understand and support our sisters and brothers who must rent (not sell) their bodies for whatever reason.”¹²¹ Linking sexuality, labor, and economy, the GG chapter sought complex solutions and perspectives to complex problems. Moreover, this chapter of NOW was

Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry (New York: Routledge, 2000). On the sex wars in general, see Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000) and *Politics of Desire*..

¹²¹ GG NOW Newsletter, September 1974.

much more willing to address the range of women's sexuality and sexual experiences, something the SF chapter of NOW had not tackled.

Where GG NOW really made its mark, however, was in the Bay Area Women's Coalition (BAWC). Resurrected in July 1974 by members of the Golden Gate chapter of NOW and in concert with members of the National Women's Political Caucus, Black Women Organized for Action, and the Susan B. Anthony Democratic club, the BAWC reunited or otherwise brought together over forty groups, focusing its attention on local political issues as they affected the diverse population of women in San Francisco. In its statement of purpose, BAWC identified itself as "an action-oriented group; our 'motto' is 'Affirmative Action through political clout.' We want to help women become an effective, powerful voice in all areas of local affairs."¹²²

Although the BAWC undertook several issues in the mid-1970s, its major focus was the Counter-Commissioners Project, which Martin referred to as the "shadow government."¹²³ The purpose of this project was "to make our Boards and Commissions more open and accountable to the women of S.F." Because there were no women on any of the city's commissions, the Coalition appointed their own representatives to each Commission to attend meetings, read all public materials related to the commission, and analyze commission stands. This project's goal was to "increase our understanding of the issues raised in the City government, to prepare

¹²² BAWC Statement of Purpose, n.d. [July 1974], from the personal files of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, copies in author's possession.

¹²³ BAWC Statement of Purpose; Interview, Martin and Lyon 21 March 2002.

ourselves for city races in 1975, to identify able women with political potential, to be a voice for consumers, and to educate ourselves in the realities of the political process.”¹²⁴ It was also to put the city’s overt yet unacknowledged sexism on display. Mayor Joseph Alioto was responsible for nominating members to serve on the commissions, yet he did not nominate a single woman in 1974. Rather than launch yet another letter-writing campaign, GG NOW members and BAWC shadowed the mayor and the local commissions, creating an obvious female and feminist presence in local political matters.

Each of the city’s seven major commissions (Airport, Civil Service, Fire, Health Service System, Parking Authority, Police, and Public Utilities) had either three or five members, all of whom were male. By September 1974, at the start of the new government term, the shadow government “installed” two women commissioners on each governmental board. In January of the following year, when a position came open on the city’s Police Commission, the Coalition issued a press release appointing outspoken local feminist and lesbian activist Del Martin as the new Police Commissioner. According to the release, “Ms. Martin informed the mayor [Joseph Alioto] that she was available. Alioto neither interviewed Ms. Martin nor responded to her application. Although he had promised that he would appoint a woman to the police commission – albeit in the heat of his bid for governor – he finally appointed a man.”

¹²⁴ BWAC Statement of Purpose. These ideas are reiterated in the “Working Paper: Commissioners Appointed by the Women’s Coalition,” n.d., from the personal files of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, copies in author’s possession.

At the same time, the Coalition pushed the city Board of Supervisors to create a local Commission on the Status of Women in December 1974.¹²⁵ Learning about the machinations of city government through the shadow government, the Commission called attention to the need for greater awareness regarding city departments' treatment of women and men as equal in employment opportunities and awards. Moreover, the new commission would also review school textbooks to recommend against those deemed to perpetuate sex stereotyping and it would develop a "Talent Bank of Women" composed of qualified candidates for vacancies on city boards.¹²⁶ In January of the following year, amid "muttered sounds of disapproval" that "emanated from some of the men in the audience" the city Board of Supervisors endorsed legislation to create a city Commission on the Status of Women.¹²⁷ Although there had been some debate as to the size of the commission (seven members, which supervisors originally proposed, or fifteen, which the Coalition suggested), the final proposal called for eleven members, men and women, to be appointed by the mayor in order to "help women gain equality" in the city.¹²⁸ The Coalition further insisted that prospective commissioners must also demonstrate interest in "fostering meaningful equality for both women and men" and have the

¹²⁵ On the history of the PCSW and other state commissions on the status of women, see Harrison, *On Account of Sex*.

¹²⁶ Keith Power, "Commission on Women Urged," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 December 1974.

¹²⁷ Carol Kroot, "New Commission will eye women's status," *San Francisco Progress*, 11 January 1975, 5.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

support of at least fifteen signatories on an application for membership, although the mayor had suggested that the only requirement for appointment was legal residence in San Francisco.¹²⁹

The Coalition was successful; on 20 January 1975, the Board of Supervisors passed the ordinance creating the Commission on the Status of Women with all of the Coalition's demands intact. By May of that year, Alioto had named the commission members, some of whom were affiliated with the Bay Area Women's Coalition. With this success, the Coalition continued work on the "shadow government" or Counter-Commissioners Project, beseeching the Board of Supervisors to increase the number of each commission by two and to appoint women to those slots.¹³⁰ For several months they worked diligently to get the local government to make this change, and by January 1976, the new mayor, George Moscone, adopted this idea as his own and increased the size of each commission and appointed women to all of them. The shadow government resulted in significant change on behalf of women. Through the efforts of GG NOW and the BAWC, city government in San Francisco became more representative of its constituency and population in the space of two years.

¹²⁹ "Statement of the Bay Area Women's Coalition in Regard to the Ordinance to Establish a Commission on the Status of Women," n.d., from the personal papers of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, copies in author's possession; and "Women Upset over S.F. Panel," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 January 1975, 14.

¹³⁰ BAWC, Newsletter, March 1975, from the personal papers of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, copies in author's possession.

The Coalition certainly worked on other issues—maintaining support for abortion rights, supporting local labor unions in disputes, and addressing issues of poverty in the city. However, the major point of this departure from SF NOW to the BAWC and GG NOW is two-fold. First, many women sought to leave SF NOW but wanted to continue their NOW activism rather than abandon the organization altogether. In the words of Aileen Hernandez, “For all of its faults, NOW had it going on.”¹³¹ Martin and Lyon echoed this sentiment: “We were a part of the women’s movement and for us that meant being in NOW. We later left NOW altogether, but at the time, it was very important to stay with this organization. It had clout and provided opportunity for lots of other women. We just made NOW our own organization and used it to make important changes for women. We also knew lots of women in the city and we could get things done.”¹³² Getting things done, then, meant staying with NOW and building on NOW’s reputation both locally and nationally. Second, this departure from the San Francisco chapter demonstrates how some women were not ready to abandon the potential and possibilities that coalition building offered. Coalitions were essential to the political landscape of San Francisco, and to NOW chapters in the city. It was only through coalitions that some women felt they could achieve feminist goals. Working only on what some defined as NOW’s “priorities” was, to some, political and feminist myopia.

The Bay Area Women’s Coalition ultimately dissolved by mid-1976. The reasons for this are not documented anywhere, but by the fall of 1976, Martin was

¹³¹ Interview, Aileen Hernandez.

¹³² Interview, Martin and Lyon, 21 March 2002.

appointed to the Commission on the Status of Women, a position she enjoyed for two years. She was also actively writing, having just published her book *Battered Wives*.¹³³ Hernandez had founded an urban consulting firm, Hernandez and Associates, in 1967, but in the ten years that had passed, she had been working in cities around the country and spent less and less time in San Francisco. She also had been instrumental in other organizations, including the National Black Feminist Organization and Black Women Organized for Action. Margo St. James and Gayle Gifford, both NOW members and COYOTE members (St. James founded COYOTE), were fighting to decriminalize prostitution. With changes in the political landscape, prostitution-rights organizations were starting to create health centers for streetwalkers and to join in common cause with other groups who had been marginalized by discriminatory laws, such as nonviolent drug users who were starting to face harsh mandatory sentencing. With their major goals obtained, the women of the coalition set about to undertake the work that was a product of the changes they had created.

A Chapter Reinvigorated

By 1977, the Golden Gate Chapter existed only on paper in the National NOW offices. There were no active members, no newsletter, and no reports of activism on behalf of the chapter. Alongside the Bay Area Women's Coalition, members of GG NOW moved into other facets of activism, ceased local activism

¹³³ Del Martin, *Battered Wives* (San Francisco: Volcano Press, 1975).

altogether, or moved out of the city. But the San Francisco chapter, which had been in many ways a “paper” chapter (and at points in time between 1974 and 1977, ceased to publish a newsletter or appear in media sources), was reinvigorated, largely due to the national surge in passing the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and to the local shifts in the political landscape. The chapter also revived efforts for abortion rights and issues of sexuality, but in the main, it was the ERA that stimulated chapter growth. By 1982, with the defeat of the ERA, the chapter waned again, but for about five years, the chapter maintained a solid focus on this priority.

Of course, prior to the splintering of the chapter, the ERA had been an important issue for SF NOW members. In January 1970, prior to passage of a national ERA in Congress, the chapter asked the local Board of Supervisors to pass an ordinance prohibiting sex discrimination throughout the city and county of San Francisco, and the Board voted “yes” in favor of equal rights for women in the city. With this local success, chapter members kept their eyes on what was happening with the national ERA, encouraging members to write letters to get the amendment out of congressional committee and onto the House floor and to vote in the upcoming election for pro-ERA senators and representatives.¹³⁴ In July 1971, the chapter listed passage of the ERA as one of its three priorities. Because the local government did not need convincing, members saw their chapter’s role as one of “educating members and the public about the necessity of the amendment.”¹³⁵

¹³⁴ SF NOW Newsletter, November 1970.

¹³⁵ SF NOW Newsletter, July 1971.

By August 1971, however, union opposition to the ERA was growing in the Bay Area. Reasons for the challenges are familiar and are echoed in histories of union feminism—many labor feminists and women in the unions argued that if the ERA were passed, the labor legislation that protected them on the job would be eliminated. The chapter newsletter reminded readers that “protective laws based on sex have already been knocked down by Title VII.” Moreover, “that’s why NOW is working with other groups to enlarge protective labor laws to apply both to men and women. We are also working for the [national] equal rights amendment.”¹³⁶ In this issue, member Virtue Hathaway penned an elaborate cartoon featuring a large man representing “union opposition” next to prison cell labeled “dead end jobs” and “union neglect of women’s rights”; in this cell are dozens of women with mournful expressions on their faces. The man tosses away a key bearing the label “equal rights amendment.” The point demonstrates the resistance that SF NOW members felt: large labor unions could determine the fate of many working women, ultimately offering them only dead-end jobs, low wages, and sex discrimination if they continued to thwart the ERA.¹³⁷

When the ERA passed Congress in 1972, thirty-eight states were required to ratify the amendment and change the constitution. In the California state legislature, assembly members voted in April 1972 to approve the amendment. In front of “about 1,000 cheering women and several very unhappy women,” assembly members approved the ERA. Opposition from Union WAGE (Union Women’s Alliance to

¹³⁶ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1971.

¹³⁷ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1971.

Gain Equality) was not strong enough to persuade the California Assembly to reject the ERA. One assemblyman, Alistair McAlister, felt that if the ERA became law, “men would be able to swear in front of women”—to which one NOW member quipped, “Goddamn, I never realized there was a law making that illegal.” He was also evidently concerned that it would overturn statutory rape laws, in spite of the fact that California did not have one at the time.¹³⁸ When the ratification resolution moved to the state Senate, “California came dangerously close to losing the Equal Rights Amendment.” As Senators debated what one senator called the “Minnie Mouse legislation,” they heard testimony from powerful leaders of state organized labor, including John Henning of the California Labor Federation, who testified that the ERA would eliminate protective labor legislation for women.¹³⁹ The Senate ultimately refused to bring the resolution out of the Judicial Committee.

By October of that year, however, Senator James Mills reversed his position and decided to vote to send the ratification resolution (Assembly Joint Resolution 17) to the floor of the Senate. His reversal was formally attributed to the result of a blue-ribbon panel of experts to assess the legal impact of the ERA, but NOW members speculated that it was likely the result of a recall campaign initiated by a coalition of women in his home county of San Diego and his desire to seek the office of governor in 1974 or 1978.¹⁴⁰ The issue, however, that remained was labor opposition to the ERA. Diane Watson met with Union WAGE leaders, at which time NOW agreed to

¹³⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1972.

¹³⁹ SF NOW Newsletter, June 1972.

¹⁴⁰ SF NOW Newsletter, October 1972.

support AB 1710 in exchange for Union WAGE's support for ERA ratification in California and also in other states where the amendment had not yet been ratified.¹⁴¹

In the following month, November 1972, the state assembly and senate ratified the ERA, joining twenty-six other states in ratifying the amendment that year.

By 1977, however, when the chapter revived, the ERA was still in need of three more states to ratify the amendment. By 1975, the thirty-five states that were going to ratify the amendment had done so. But the deadline was rapidly approaching, and NOW nationally was mobilizing for an extension of the ERA deadline to 30 June 1982. In November 1977, when the chapter issued its first newsletter in six months, the ERA was literally front and center. On the front of the newsletter was a drawing of "Ms. Claus," obviously a member of NOW, bearing the feminist gifts of affirmative action, childcare, reproductive rights, and the ERA. Someone had also altered the lyrics of "Santa Claus is coming to town," to suggest instead that "Equal Rights is Coming to Town."¹⁴² On a less playful note, the chapter signed on to NOW's national boycott of states that had not ratified the ERA, encouraging members not to "travel or vacation in unratified states" and to "try to persuade all organizations of which you are a members to join us in boycotting these states."¹⁴³ The following month's newsletter recounted the effects of NOW's "economic sanctions" against states that had not ratified, indicating that several professional organizations—including the American Association of University

¹⁴¹ SF NOW Newsletter, November 1972.

¹⁴² SF NOW Newsletter, November 1977.

¹⁴³ SF NOW Newsletter, November 1977.

Women, the Modern Languages Association, and the American Psychological Association—agreed not to hold conventions in unratified states.¹⁴⁴ In December, the chapter also co-sponsored a press conference with the SF Commission on the Status of Women, Common Cause, and Bay Area Women’s Coalition, asking Governor Jerry Brown to spend no state money on out-of-state expenses in states that have not ratified the ERA. The newsletter indicated that NOW this stance on the ERA, which the governor “received enthusiastically,” pledging his support for the pro-ERA position and economic boycott.¹⁴⁵

Beyond working in the legislative arena, members also took to the streets in support of the ERA—this in spite of the fact that the ERA had passed in their state five years before and a local ERA had been enacted seven years prior. For example, on Mother’s Day 1979, SF NOW members met at member Val Weston’s home and went in teams to shopping areas in San Francisco to distribute ERA buttons, membership information, and pro-ERA petitions. NOW members nationwide were gearing up for the extension campaign, but locally members also wanted to draw attention to issues of equality by giving “mom what she has always needed—a chance for equal rights.”¹⁴⁶ By August 1979, members put the ERA on the agenda at every event possible, including a local Walkathon in which a dozen members walked with pro-ERA placards and distributed information about the ERA and NOW’s boycott.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ SF NOW Newsletter, December 1977.

¹⁴⁵ NOW Newsletter, January 1978.

¹⁴⁶ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1978.

¹⁴⁷ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1979.

Mirroring what was happening among national organizations, any rifts between SF NOW and local labor were repaired by 1980. At the International Women's Day celebration, a range of speakers, including Addie Wyatt and NOW president Ellie Smeal, addressed the broad feminist/labor coalition in support of the ERA. The photograph on the cover of the newsletter featured women who had participated in the previous year's IWD demonstration—a racially and ethnically diverse group of women and men under a large banner encouraging people to “Join San Francisco NOW!”¹⁴⁸ In addition to this event, NOW members joined union members in the “Bay Area Labor Salute to the ERA,” a rally that drew approximately 250 people. This rally “shows that the coalition of union organizations and women's rights groups has tremendous potential for building the kind of movement that can win ERA ratification.”¹⁴⁹ Newsletter notes continued to praise the newfound love and coalition building between feminists and union activists, encouraging members to travel with local labor contingents to Chicago for the major ERA rally to be held on 10 May in the yet-unratified state of Illinois.¹⁵⁰ Back on the local front, the chapter launched a picket that involved NOW women, local labor activists, and university students at the Mormon temple in Oakland. Approximately 200 picketers protested in opposition to the Church, which opposed the ERA and donated large sums of money to anti-ERA organizations and candidates for elected office.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, February 1980.

¹⁴⁹ SF NOW Newsletter, February 1980.

¹⁵⁰ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1980.

¹⁵¹ SF NOW Newsletter, July 1980.

This demonstration at the Mormon temple, in particular, offered the moment to reflect on why it was that San Francisco feminists in NOW continued to demonstrate and work on behalf of the ERA. “This kind of event and the attendant press coverage, which was fairly extensive in this case, does a great deal to keep the ERA in the minds of its supporters and to expose its opponents and their questionable activities. Our time for passage is running short. We must not let it run out.”¹⁵² And on the point of public demonstration, SF NOW felt that public action was the only way to mobilize people to action on behalf of the ERA. Carole Seligman, newsletter co-editor, opined that “SF NOW has long been providing more militant action proposals to National NOW both by example and by resolutions at NOW conferences. Now the need to provide an alternative strategy—one of *mobilizing* our members in national visible actions—is more necessary than ever before. ...If the attacks that this [Reagan] administration levels against us go unanswered in the field of *action*, more and more deadly attacks will follow. Massive mobilizations keep our issues in the spotlight, inspire our supporters, and put our enemies on notice that the political costs of denying a popular movement will be heavy indeed.” Her forceful words were concluded with a plea to get as many SF NOW members as possible to D.C. for the National NOW conference in an attempt to persuade national leaders and membership to pursue more demonstration tactics.¹⁵³

In spite of the rhetoric and paeans to “militant” actions on the part of NOW locally and nationally, the national Board rejected militancy in favor of one more

¹⁵² SF NOW Newsletter, July 1980.

¹⁵³ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1981.

march in Florida. Like Memphis NOW, the SF NOW chapter was back in business with the renewed effort of the ERA; also like Memphis NOW, with its defeat, the chapter could not sustain prior levels of activism. Not until the late 1980s did the local chapter reemerge as a local force.

Although the ERA captured much of the chapter's attention and efforts, members also focused on women's sexuality. As mentioned earlier, part of the reason that the GG Chapter formed was that some members felt that the chapter's leadership was "homophobic" and issues of lesbians were not being taken seriously. To note, the chapter mentioned only once in the context of childcare the issues that lesbian mothers faced and that the Lesbian Mothers Union had been formed by their own member Del Martin. The chapter also hosted only one meeting on lesbians in the women's movement, in March 1971, and in January 1974 announced the formation of a sexuality and lesbianism task force, this three years after the passage of the 1971 resolution affirming the rights of lesbians as women's rights. The GG chapter, by contrast, had an active task force on lesbianism and sexuality with over 40 active members. In February 1974, as the SF chapter was on the decline, the sexuality task force offered a meeting on lesbians, prostitutes, and rape as issues related to women's sexuality, but the meeting did not take place.¹⁵⁴

By the late 1970s, the SF chapter was discussing issues of same-sex sexuality, but it did so in the context of the rights of equality and privacy, not difference from heterosexuality. In May 1978, the chapter agreed to join a coalition against the Briggs

¹⁵⁴ SF NOW Newsletter, February 1974; SF NOW Newsletter, Feb 1974.

Initiative, which, if approved by voters in June, would deny gay men and lesbians the right to teach in California public schools (it failed). The following May, the newsletter published a request on the part of the Center for Homosexual Education, Evaluation, and Research (CHEER) to solicit interviewees to discuss if people's rights had been abridged because of sexual orientation. The goal of the study was to strengthen civil liberties for gay men and lesbians.¹⁵⁵ Further evidence of the chapter's fits and starts in relation to lesbians' rights are the newsletter announcements in December 1979, February 1980, and November 1980 that the chapter was starting a "new" lesbians' rights task force—each with different leaders. It is not clear why the chapter could not keep a task force going, but many other organizations in the city had been historically grappling with gay and lesbian rights issues and had generated a fair amount of success in this arena.¹⁵⁶ Also, as lesbian activists Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon suggested, "we never were just lesbians. We always were active in a range of social movement issues and cared about them all. That we are lesbians does not make us more or less concerned with feminism, civil rights, or anything else. We were so busy with so many things, when it came to thinking about Lesbian rights and a task force, we were just too exhausted!"¹⁵⁷ In many cases, lesbians were also feminists and there is no way to disentangle one type of activism from another. Martin and Lyon wanted heterosexual feminists' support of lesbian issues in the city, and they were not disappointed. If it did not always happen

¹⁵⁵ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1979.

¹⁵⁶ "The Castro" videocassette (San Francisco: KQED Public Television).

¹⁵⁷ Interview, Martin and Lyon, 21 March 2002. See also "No Secret Anymore" videocassette.

in NOW—and there is no evidence of overt hostility to them as lesbians, save the “homophobic leadership” remark—it did happen in the city, both among NOW members, coalition members, and other activists.

The issue of prostitution is also a thorny one, but one that SF NOW was willing to embrace, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The GG chapter of NOW co-sponsored the COYOTE “Hooker’s Ball” in 1974 and supported NOW’s resolution in favor of supporting prostitutes’ rights by supporting the decriminalization of prostitution. By August 1979, NOW had among its members COYOTE activist Priscilla Alexander, who co-hosted and participated in a general meeting symposium on “Prostitution: A Woman’s Issue?” The meeting promised “a dynamic, thought-provoking, spirited discussion” and featured both pros and cons of legalizing prostitution.¹⁵⁸ Whether or not members unilaterally supported legalizing prostitution, Alexander remained a member of SF NOW and by February 1980, she led a task force on prostitution in the chapter, coordinating activities with other prostitutes’ rights organizations in the city.¹⁵⁹ In May of that year, Alexander indicated that the task force had been meeting for two months, discussing “how to educate feminists about prostitution as an issue and how to involve more people who are affected by this issue in the women’s movement.”¹⁶⁰ With the support of the chapter, Alexander went on to work with other prostitutes’ rights groups to offer health and emotional support for prostitutes.

¹⁵⁸ SF NOW Newsletter, August 1979.

¹⁵⁹ SF NOW Newsletter, Feb 1980.

¹⁶⁰ SF NOW Newsletter, May 1980.

Conclusions

After fourteen years of existence and a major rift in the organization, members such as Alexander joined the many women and men who make up SF NOW's history and continued to pursue her own issues through and with the support of the organization. Such activism recalls one of the earliest SF NOW newsletters in which the editor encouraged members to "do your own thing" and reminded activists that they "have many diverse reasons for joining N.O.W. You can find purpose and a sense of accomplishment in working at what interests you."¹⁶¹ Indeed, members of SF NOW (as well as GG NOW and the BAWC) did their own thing, individually and collectively. Their activism was rooted not only in personal interest but also in enhancing and strengthening the community. As the chapter pursued feminist goals, its members rarely divorced them from other contemporary social justice issues.

Most of their battles were fought within the liberal establishment, but their strategies were not simply liberal ones. Instead, their activist repertoire included everything from letter writing to public protests. They publicly shamed local leaders who resisted NOW and/or feminism; they applauded those who supported them (and pledged their support at the polls). They held speak outs on abortion and demonstrations to "desexegrate" help-wanted ads; at the same time they met with local and state leaders to enact legislation to allow women to obtain legal, safe

¹⁶¹ SF NOW Newsletter, January 1969.

abortions and with local newspaper editors to change policies. “Liberal” and “radical” feminism provide ways to think about their activism in a broad sense, but in the Bay City, local culture and politics shaped the dynamics of feminist activism. In a city where you could join any number of groups, NOW was able to secure its place as a local political feminist force.

In particular, however, SF NOW focused its attention on issues related to women’s rights and abilities to work—job discrimination, child care, removing sex categorization from help-wanted ads, and protection on the job—issues reflected on the national agenda as well. As they tackled issues that reflected material rights, they worked on the ground to create meaningful change for women. Offering much more than rhetoric, SF NOW feminists created significant coalitions on issues of childcare and abortion rights and fought to make change in the city and the state so that women would have greater opportunities for economic advancement. They focused on economic issues and pursued ways to enhance women’s economic lives, whether through better job opportunities, childcare, or reproductive control. When the chapter divided, many energetic members went to the new GG NOW, which maintained a focus on coalition building. Through a solid coalition effort, these women changed the face of city government.

The history of SF NOW illuminates in significant ways how feminists worked across the politics of identity to create feminist change on the ground. Rather than see difference of race, class, or sexual orientation as an obstacle, SF NOW members embraced difference in coalitions. They did not set aside such differences; instead, they worked through them, using them as a source of strength. Members of San

Francisco NOW redefined for themselves what feminism was, eschewing the notion that it was simply a white women's term and that NOW was simply a white women's organization. Much of this likely reflects "left coast" feminism or feminism in a "wide-open town" and SF NOW members' activism, like that of other San Franciscans, reflected the political and cultural space for creating change. San Francisco feminists in NOW did not embrace a regional identity as such, although they were always aware of the geographical (and philosophical) distance between themselves on the West Coast and the national offices on the East Coast. Moreover, they did not enter into conflict with the local government to the same degree as NOW chapter members in Memphis and Columbus. As the feminist front of progressive change, SF NOW would be successful only in coalitions with other organizations, and they were. The context, then, in which their feminism emerged certainly shaped their activism and gives us reason to reconsider the role of location in understanding feminism on the West Coast.

CHAPTER 6

THE DYNAMICS OF FEMINIST ACTIVISM WITHIN THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN

In 2002, the Columbus chapter of NOW solicited members and interested parties to take an online survey on the status of the chapter and of women in the city. While a paperless survey via the web presents a striking contrast to the reams of paper surveys filed away across the country in NOW chapters' archives (and members' basements and attics), what remains the same is the chapter's motive: allegiance to grassroots politics and effecting change at the local level. The 2002 survey led with the statement that "NOW seeks to remain **grassroots** and engage in actions that benefit women, men, and children in Central Ohio... recogniz[ing] two primary principles: 1) All politics are local and 2) the personal is political."¹ This statement echoes a thirty-year-old commitment to local feminist issues and politics. In 1972, chapter members asked of people in Columbus, "would you like to know what is going on in the women's movement locally as well as nationally? Many things are happening, but would you like to MAKE them happen? Really DO something about the problems that concern you most? Then what are you waiting for? We need you,

¹ <http://columbusnow.homestead.com/AnnualSurvey~ns4.html>, accessed 12 March 2002, Bold emphasis in original.

your ideas, your help and your support. Join our organization as a member—make it your organization.”²

That “all politics are local” and NOW is “your organization” suggests that this chapter goes beyond national directives and formalities to embrace women’s needs in their own, day-to-day lives; feminists in Memphis NOW and San Francisco NOW chapters made similar paeans to grassroots feminism. These chapters did not simply spring up out of the groundswell of feminist activism that was enveloping the nation. They were also a direct response to women’s local situations—hence the commitment to feminist activism on the ground. Although they were a part of a *national* organization for women, they also constructed and contributed to feminist communities in their respective cities.

This project has analyzed the origins of three NOW chapters, tracing their roots in the local political and activist traditions and organizations of each city to provide a better understanding of the contexts in which each group emerged and what it did to create feminist change. Such a project builds on sociologist Nancy Naples’ work on women’s community activism, which suggests that “community is created in and through struggles against violence and for social justice and economic security, as well as through casual interactions with people who share some aspect of our daily lives.”³ The cases of Memphis, Columbus, and San Francisco NOW demonstrate not

² “Right NOW,” June 1972, 1.

³ Nancy A. Naples, “Women’s Community Activism: Exploring the Dynamics of Politicization and Diversity,” in *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Nancy A. Naples (New York: Routledge, 1998), 327-50, quotation on 337.

only *that* second-wave feminists created and contributed to their communities but also *how* such community building and shaping took place. Moreover, they illustrate how local context shaped the ways in which feminists were able to create change. In order to assess where these NOW chapters came from and the women and men who started and joined them, it is vital to step back and analyze local contexts in which women defined, contested, and enacted feminist change. Whether in a “sleepy little river town” in the mid-South, a Midwestern “Cowtown”, or the “wide-open town” of the west coast, women developed feminist consciousness not only through a national, feminist “imagined community” but also through day-to-day experiences in their own cities.

This project accomplishes several goals. First, it uncovers and analyzes the particular ways that feminists in NOW chapters responded to directives from the national organization. In the ten years between 1972 and 1982, the National Organization for Women focused on passage of the ERA and beseeched its chapters to continue work for the amendment. Once the amendment passed both houses of Congress, the ERA became a local issue for feminists. National NOW issued many statements on the amendment, and its leaders and members throughout this ten-year period believed that the amendment would become the twenty-sixth amendment to the Constitution.⁴ And they had reason to be optimistic: by the end of 1972, twenty-

⁴ Jane Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Mary Frances Berry, *Why ERA Failed* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Donald Mathews and Jane Sherron DeHart, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA: A State and A Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

two states had ratified the amendment, and five years later, thirty-five states were on board. When NOW and other feminist groups lobbied Congress in 1979 for an extension to the ratification deadline, the organization redoubled efforts, organizing marches in Washington, DC and in Chicago and Tallahassee, capitals or major cities in states that still offered a chance to ratify.

The case of Memphis NOW makes abundantly clear that feminists did not anticipate how opponents to the amendment would organize, and with such success that the state legislature rescinded its support of the ERA. In Columbus, likewise, the chapter faced entrenched organized resistance, not only from STOP ERA and Phyllis Schlafly but also from labor unions who had a home in the city and the region. In all three chapters, when Congress breathed new life into the ERA, chapter members responded to national NOW's call to push the amendment through three more state legislatures. Members of Memphis NOW traveled to Chicago and Tallahassee, promising to "bury the image of the helpless, stay-in-your-own-backyard Southern belle."⁵ Columbus NOW feminists preferred to stay in their own hometown, drawing attention to the ERA in what became a bloody standoff between pro-ERA activists and pro-Ronald Reagan (who was anti-ERA) supporters.⁶

Members in all three chapters shared a sense that the amendment would not be defeated—as one feminist shared with me conversationally, "we were...so optimistic about the future of humanity."⁷ Optimism, however, was insufficient in the face of the

⁵ "Memphians Go to Illinois to Urge ERA Ratification," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 10 May 1980.

⁶ "Right NOW," October 1980.

⁷ Email correspondence, Barbara Winslow to Stephanie Gilmore, 8 March 2005.

well-mobilized opposition—Eagle Forum, STOP ERA, Concerned Women of America, and other organized, conservative religious and political forces, all of whom worked to bring together masses of people to oppose not only the amendment but also welfare, affirmative action, and other progressive legislative measures.⁸ For those opposed to the ERA, the amendment tapped into their worst fears. As one Oklahoma woman suggested, the ERA “would affect my life more than anything else—it would affect my religion—it would affect my own financial situation in that it would change Social Security Laws. It would affect my home life in that my daughter would have to go to war. It would affect everything in my life—if this Equal Rights Amendment were passed!”⁹

Defeat was difficult as NOW members in each chapter, and feminists across the nation, watched as 30 June 1982 came and went. The tides had shifted, to be sure,

⁸ Ruth Murray Brown, *For a Christian America: A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002); Jean Hardisty, *Mobilizing Resentment: Conservative Resurgence from the John Birch Society to the Promise Keepers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995); and Rebecca Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) explore the rise of the Right in opposition to the ERA and other progressive legislation and use gender to explain, at least in part, the successful mobilization of the Right at the grassroots. Marjorie Spruill explores organized resistance to the feminist agenda at the 1977 IWY conference in Houston in her unpublished essay, “Women for God, Country, and Family: Religion, Politics, and Antifeminism in 1970s America” (paper in author’s possession).

⁹ Interview with Myrtle Kelly conducted by Ruth Murray Brown, 13 October 1981, in Brown, *For a Christian America*, 15.

and the defeat of the ERA was a significant turning point for many women in NOW. One Memphis NOW member poignantly recalled how defeat affected her personally: “My husband and I were watching television all night, switching back and forth between channels to hear any of the latest updates. I knew it was inevitable and fruitless to torture myself like this, but I just had to know. They finally announced that the ERA had failed. And I just sat there on my bed and cried. He kept ... telling me it would be ok. But I knew it wouldn’t, saying it wouldn’t be ok.”¹⁰ Saddened, angry, and in the case of some in Columbus NOW, literally beaten and bloodied, feminists in NOW struggled with how to cope. In San Francisco, one NOW member promised revenge at the polls through these revised lyrics to the song, “Hey Look Me Over”:

You screwed us over, you voted nay
We’re going to get you come election day
Don’t count your votes, boys, don’t feel secure
We’re going to get you in the end of that you can be sure
We’ll be back by the millions, you know this is true
Hang on to your ass boys, we’re coming after you
So here’s the lesson we learned that year, on this you can rely
When we are screwed, we multiply.¹¹

¹⁰ Interview, Paula Casey, 20 April 1995.

¹¹ “ERA Song,” Box 1, folder 10 “Ephemera and Printed Material/pamphlets, flyers, promotions,” Carolyn Nuban Papers, Social Protest Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Whether or not they made good on the promise to unseat politicians in subsequent elections, it is clear that the defeat resonated with NOW members in their chapters, communities, even their own homes. But anger, however righteous, was not enough to rally after the amendment's defeat. And in the face of successful opposition to the amendment, and to so-called women's rights, feminism, and progressive activism in general, the women's movement abated.

Although NOW chapters suffered a decline in membership nationwide and in each chapter studied here, the chapters themselves never disappeared. Part of the reason, as this project demonstrates, is that, at the local level—and nationally—NOW never was a single-issue organization. Whether or not the ERA passed or failed was important, to be sure, but it never was the only issue chapter members addressed. In Memphis, San Francisco, and Columbus, NOW members and activists had faced and sought to solve a variety of issues—rape, domestic violence, childcare, equal employment, sexual harassment on the job, sex-segregated want ads, the cultural perpetuation of sexism, the “second shift,” and more.¹² As Janet Burnside, former Columbus NOW member, noted, “that’s what was exciting about NOW. You’d find a problem and leap on it and try to solve it.”¹³

Addressing such a wide range of issues meant employing a wide variety of strategies. In some situations, “you’d be noisy. You’d solve [problems] in a noisy

¹² The “second shift” is in reference to Arlie Hochschild’s book of the same name, *The Second Shift*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

¹³ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

way. You were always calling people and having a demonstration.”¹⁴ Each chapter used street politics, zap actions, and other forms of demonstrations for different issues. In Memphis, for example, chapter members “took back the night” in a march around Overton Square to protest rape and the commodification of women, while Columbus feminists in NOW drew both public and legal attention to the overt sexism of a businessmen-only dining area and a local business’s sign promoting violence against women. In San Francisco, chapter members marched for reproductive rights and zapped the local newspaper’s offices in protest of sex-segregated want ads. In other situations, NOW chapters employed less dramatic means to meet goals, often seeking to force businesses and employers to comply with equal employment legislation. Whether suing the police department, as Columbus NOW did, or suing the *San Francisco Chronicle-Examiner*, as San Francisco NOW did, chapter members were not afraid to use the courts to their advantage and force the letter, if not the spirit, of new laws.

Merging zap actions with legal ones becomes, then, a historical hallmark of NOW feminists. San Francisco NOW demonstrated outside of the newspaper’s main offices while it simultaneously filed a lawsuit; likewise, Columbus NOW picketed the Red Door Tavern and sued its owner at the same time. Memphis NOW members never officially filed any lawsuits, preferring instead to draw public attention to rape, for example, and forcing the city to respond efficiently and effectively. Moreover, in Memphis, the NOW chapter did not have the resources to pursue lawsuits (although

¹⁴ Interview, Janet Burnside, 26 November 2004.

one Columbus NOW member recalled that her chapter did not have “deep pockets” and suing the police department “nearly broke the chapter”¹⁵). But the chapter and feminists in the city, perhaps even throughout the South, never were as successful pursuing legal equality. In Memphis, gender difference was more pronounced culturally and feminists successfully employed difference from men to make concrete gains. Whether drawing attention to rape or insisting that the “Southern belle” would help the South “rise and ratify” the ERA, Memphis NOW members reluctantly invoke women’s equality to men. But in Columbus and San Francisco, women in the respective NOW chapters were able to employ rhetoric of sameness with men and force legal equality because the cultural contexts mandated it. Rhetoric of difference shaped the actions of the chapter members less in these two cities.

Through a grassroots angle on these three NOW chapters, this project reveals the limitations of the liberal/radical divide as a historical framework for understanding second-wave feminism in the United States. None of these chapters can be forced under the rubric of liberal feminism, often equated with NOW in academic scholarship. As this project makes clear, local contexts mandated a variety of strategies, both in the courts and in the streets. Moreover, women who joined NOW were not particularly moved by national calls to feminist actions. Although much is made of the importance of Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* as a milestone

¹⁵ Interview, Barbara Wood, 3 December 2004.

in the movement of feminism from abeyance to “white-hot mobilization,”¹⁶ only one member, Columbus NOW’s Mary Havens, mentioned that this book was instrumental to her becoming a feminist and joining the NOW chapter. For many others, motivations to join the NOW chapter ranged from moving to a new city and looking for other feminists and women’s community to a personal “click” moment on the job, from a personal experience of violence at the hand of a husband or boyfriend to a general desire to alleviate frustration with sexism through activism. Various actions also drew attention to the respective chapters, which then drew new members. For example, within six months of Columbus NOW winning its lawsuit against the police department, membership, at least on paper, doubled.¹⁷ In Memphis, the successful city-league softball team “grew the chapter for years.”¹⁸

Moving beyond the liberal/radical divide, then, allows us to examine similarities and differences between and among these three chapters of NOW. Local context also shaped the place of the NOW chapter within the city’s political history and contemporary activism. In Memphis, NOW was the only game in town; as such, it was everything to everybody. By contrast, San Francisco NOW was a part of a force for progressive and feminist change. It never would be the only place where

¹⁶ The term “white-hot mobilization” is from John Lofland, “White-Hot Mobilization: Strategies of a Millenarian Movement,” in *The Dynamics of Social Movements*, ed. Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, 1979): 157-66.

¹⁷ Columbus NOW papers, membership rosters 1977 and 1978, in Columbus NOW Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

¹⁸ Interview, Betty Sullivan, 21 April 1995.

feminists converged, but it was where people went if they wanted to be on the forefront of progressive coalition building while providing a feminist framework for change in the city. Columbus NOW, however, occupied space between the two networks of feminist activists already in operation in the city; indeed, Columbus is the only city of the three under study here that has classic and separate liberal (or self-defined as “moderate”) and radical feminists. NOW in this city fell somewhere in between and oftentimes beyond this divide.

Of the three chapters, only members in Columbus NOW outwardly expressed a self-defined radical feminist politics, although members in all three chapters identified with the movement for “women’s liberation.” None embraced what scholars have called “liberal feminism” or identified as “liberal feminists.” By minimizing preconceived notions about this organization and the women’s movement and exploring instead how feminists identified themselves and what they did to create feminist change in their communities, this project advances a historical analysis of NOW. As such, it reshifts epistemological foundations of second-wave feminism, challenging how we know what we know about this organization and the movement by taking a grassroots perspective to explore NOW and second-wave feminism historically. Each chapter, in its own way, is an outlier when compared to the other two, which further illustrates the impossibility of thinking about NOW, and by extension second-wave feminism, as exclusively liberal or radical.

As each chapter sought to represent feminist action in its respective city, chapters did not always handle change and difference easily, and each chapter divided, although for somewhat different reasons and to different effects. SF NOW

was the first chapter to split, which it did in 1973; many of those who left formed a second chapter of NOW in the city to continue feminist work under the auspices of NOW but with a different local leadership and mission. The Columbus chapter split six years later over what one called “respectability.” Some members protested that the Gahanna Five’s painting of the “Great Wall of Gahanna” ruined the chapter’s reputation. Whether or not the chapter seemed to be a “lesbian” organization divided the Memphis chapter. The successful softball team “grew the chapter” but, for some, the increase in lesbian membership and visibility of lesbians affiliated with NOW was too much, prompting some members to leave the organization altogether.

These rifts, apparent only when we study NOW chapters and the development of feminism in various communities, suggest that social movement organizations do not always agree on who the organization and the movement represents.¹⁹ This project, then, supports the notion that internal conflict in feminist mobilization and organizations is not opposed to feminist community building. Instead, conflict and community are “part of the same process by which women came together...to create a sense of belonging and to work...together.”²⁰ Understanding this process at the local level—where feminists encountered one another, built an organization, tackled issues that women faced, created feminist change in the city and the community, struggled internally over personal and political differences—reveals the complexities of feminist activism.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Kaminski and Stephanie Gilmore, “A Part and Apart: Implementing Inclusivity in a Second-Wave Feminist Organization,” unpublished paper in author’s possession.

²⁰ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 6.

As the chapters sought to implement inclusivity, indeed, be an organization “for women,” members struggled over which women that meant. Two of the three chapters I studied here—Memphis NOW and San Francisco NOW—grappled internally with difference vis-à-vis sexuality; indeed, each chapter suffered through a major split and fought to maintain a feminist presence in the city even as they dealt with very public schisms. Only in San Francisco NOW did members tie the problems of the chapter to issues of racism as well, although some women of color both in and beyond Memphis NOW recognized that white and black women in the city would face tremendous challenges over what “feminism” was and how activism on women’s behalf would necessitate the question, “which women?”

It comes as no surprise that NOW never, either nationally or among its chapters, boasted a large membership of women of color. However, viewing this organization’s failure to attract a large number of women of color obscures the agency of Black, Latina, Asian, and Native American women to pursue their own “separate roads to feminism” and their own organizations. Moreover, it obscures what NOW feminists did in concert and coalition with various other feminist and women’s groups across racial and class divides, especially in local communities. Rather than reiterate the already established fact that most white women’s organizations failed when they sought to do “outreach,” I explore instead how and when NOW chapters engaged in various coalitions and projects to effect change in the lives of all women.

Many NOW members on the ground did not want to undertake “outreach”; instead they sought to work with other women and feminists to create meaningful change.²¹

The organization at every level was much more successful when dealing with lesbians’ rights, building successful task forces, consciousness raising groups, and public presence around women’s issues of and rights related to sexuality, including same-sex sexuality. The NOW chapters, particularly in Columbus and San Francisco, were also quite successful in recognizing and building community among and with working-class women. Each chapter listened when working-class and poor women within the group or in the community spoke about unequal employment opportunities and sexist workplace practices. Of course, class, race, sexual orientation, and sex are distinct yet indivisible facets of identity; when NOW feminists acted on the part of “women,” their activism benefited all women. SF NOW’s childcare coalition, Columbus NOW’s lawsuit against the police department, or Memphis NOW’s comprehensive rape crisis center did not address white, middle-class, heterosexual women exclusively; nor were members motivated to work only on behalf of or with such women. Instead, they worked together from the venues and organizational presences with which they were comfortable and made feminist changes locally to enhance the lives of all women and men in their communities. NOW chapters’

²¹ On the problems of “outreach” and the perspectives of women of color who resisted such an idea, see, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*; Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *But Some of Us Were Brave*. Other analyses include, but are not limited to, Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism* and Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Johnetta Cole, *Gender Talk*.

membership rosters never reflected the composition of the cities in which they grew up. But the activism of these grassroots activists reflects the issues that feminists brought to the public fore throughout the 1970s, not just in a national sense, but more important to women and men in their day-to-day lives, in a local sense.

In 2006, NOW will celebrate forty years of existence. Through success and defeat, the potential move from the second wave to the third, NOW has survived. Much of this success is attributable to its members' dynamic feminism—a willingness to employ necessary strategies, moving beyond the liberal/radical divide. Its chapters' histories bear out the dynamics of feminism in the 1970s, during the heyday of so-called second-wave feminism. Such a perspective builds upon the histories of feminisms across time and space, echoing sociologist Raka Ray, who reminds us in her work on local feminist activism in India that “if we do not closely understand the dynamics of the local, we fall once again into the trap of universalizing and homogenizing” women's experiences and movements for social change.²² Chapter members were never just part of a *national* organization; instead, they were grassroots activists, defined by Temma Kaplan as “ordinary women attempting to accomplish necessary tasks, providing services.”²³ They were not movement “stars,” nor did they seek to be; instead, they were, in the words of former

²² Raka Ray, *Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 166.

²³ Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 6.

Memphis NOW member Linda Raiteri, “individual women...ones, and lots of ones make millions.”²⁴

NOW has maintained a feminist presence both nationally and in all 50 states across the years—in the three cities I have studied, NOW members still operate chapters, and they still seek to bring a feminist presence to a host of other social movement organizations and issues, including antiwar and antiglobalization efforts; GLBT community activism; discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or ability; and environmental issues. Into the twenty-first century, feminists are revitalizing local NOW chapters in cities across the United States, including Toledo (Ohio), Jefferson County (Colorado), and Portland (Oregon); and on college campuses, including Central Connecticut State University, Georgia Southern University, and Florida International University.²⁵

After nearly forty years – or perhaps because of it – NOW remains at the forefront of people’s minds when it comes to feminist direct action. For example, when the Harvard Alumni Association and the Harvard Club of New York City announced that university president Larry Summers would be feted at a reception on 31 March 2005, feminist activists (many of whom were active in the second wave as self-defined radical feminists, both in and out of NOW) on a particular list serve called for a demonstration to protest the event. When one suggested “how about a picket?” others chimed in that a “ladies against women” type of demonstration would

²⁴ Interview, Linda Raiteri.

²⁵ www.now.org/chapters.

be most appropriate.²⁶ They started to suggest potential slogans to protest Summers' recent sexist remarks about how women were biologically ill-equipped for research in math and the sciences—"59¢ is too much—real women do it for free!" (a nod to the point that in the 1970s, a woman made, on average, 59¢ to a man's dollar) and "I want love, not logarithms" were two of several particularly amusing slogans. As is often the case on list serves where email travels in real time—and far different from the days when NOW chapters were trying to stay in touch with one another via postal mail and WATTS lines—feminists fired messages back and forth encouraging protest. The first organization mentioned to coordinate the demonstration—NOW. Why these individual women, many of whom identified as radical feminists in the 1970s, suggested NOW, I do not know. However, as this project has made clear, a local NOW chapter *would* coordinate such a demonstration because it always has.

²⁶ "Ladies Against Women" maintains a website, www.ladiesagainstwomen.com, where it offers photographs of various demonstrations and its "Ladyfesto." This campy style of street protest employs hyperbolic and mocking images of womanhood to draw attention to sexism and gender discrimination; various L.A.W. actions have also raised awareness of poverty and welfare, environmental issues, and reproductive rights.

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