

# Sexuality, Race and Zionism: Conflict and Debates in *Spare Rib*, 1972-1993

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## Abstract

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This thesis is about the longest-lived (1972-1993) women's liberation magazine in the UK: *Spare Rib* (*SR*). Surprisingly, to date there has been no extended research on this magazine. Only a small number of academic articles and book chapters make fleeting reference to it. Whilst maintaining a close connection to the Women's Liberation Movement, *SR* proclaimed itself a magazine for *all* women. It was produced collectively. *SR*'s collective endured many internal identity-based conflicts, made public on the pages of the magazine. In particular, the *SR* collective became deeply divided over three issues: anti-lesbianism, racism and anti-Semitism/Zionism. It is these three debates specifically, and the processes of how the magazine engaged with them, which this thesis focuses on. Using textual analysis, I investigate readers' letters, magazine editorials, and articles to analyse the shape of these debates, in terms of content and process. Thus, in the first substantive chapter I analyse how the debate about anti-lesbianism in *SR* developed. I also examine how the first discussions about 'the nature' of lesbianism – focusing in particular on whether it was primarily biological or emotional – and their follow-up established the pattern through which the *SR* collective engaged in contentious debates. Chapter 3 focuses on the issue of race and racism as it unfolded in *SR*. Here I analyse how an initial concern with Asian women workers' experiences in Britain was quickly superseded by a focus on the exclusion of black women from the WLM and their experiences of racism, and how this in turn developed into one of the most searing conflicts within *SR*. Chapter 4 demonstrates how the race issue overwhelmed questions of anti-Semitism/Zionism, dividing the collective along racial lines. My Conclusion suggests that ultimately the debates in *SR* magazine proved intractable because of irresolvable differences among diverse identity-based positions.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

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## Section 1.1: Introduction

This thesis is about the most important and longest-lived women's liberation magazine in the UK: *Spare Rib* magazine (henceforth *SR*). More specifically, it centres on three particular debates discussed below that had a major influence on *SR* and its life-course. The magazine began in 1972 and continued publication until 1993. Feminist in content, it maintained a close connection to the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). It was produced collectively and proclaimed itself to be a magazine for *all* women in order to be as inclusive and accessible as possible – to allow the ideas of Women's Liberation to engage those already involved with the movement as well as those yet unfamiliar with feminism.

It had not initially occurred to me to research *SR* magazine for my doctoral thesis. However, the Centre for Women's Studies (CWS) at the University of York had a complete run of the magazine, and when someone suggested that it was 'a PhD waiting to happen,' I decided to pursue the topic. Having taken that decision, I came to find *SR* very interesting for several reasons, three of which I shall explain briefly.

Firstly, as an American, *SR* was an incredibly rich source of insight into British, and British feminist, culture. I learned a great deal about British political and social history, the influence of the Miners' Strikes and the lingering effects of the Thatcher era through reading it. Similarly, its reports on the National Women's Liberation conferences enabled me to become more familiar with the discussions and developments of the WLM. Also, articles on British immigration policy and the formation of groups such as the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) made me aware of the different ways in which race has been configured in Britain relative to the US and how that configuration influenced feminist thinking.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, through *SR*'s editorials and readers' letters, I was able to see feminist politics as a living thing. To be specific, my relationship with feminism and feminist theory had become jaded. *SR* breathed life into that relationship, reminding me of the passion and feeling which so often underlies feminist thinking and action. The ways in which the *SR* collective, the authors of articles and news reports and the *SR* readers wrote about their lives made clear that the issues which they addressed really mattered. In turn, these issues began again to matter to me.

Thirdly, the complete run of the magazine that I had the privilege to have access to was in fact acquired through donation to CWS, and had been contained in a storage cabinet since the time of

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<sup>1</sup> As Heidi Safia Mirza explains in *Black British Feminism* (1997): 'The term "black" has different meanings when used in different academic and cultural contexts. For example, in the USA, Black has a more specific reference to peoples of African descent with a specific reference to people of African descent with a specific history as slaves – whatever their country of origin. Whereas in Britain, it is used more loosely as a political category that is grounded on skin colour and shared ex-colonial origins' (Mirza, 171).

its donation. It was not in the most pristine condition. However, I believe that this served me well for two reasons in particular. One, I needed to treat the magazine delicately. This again caused me to treasure and care for the information I was researching. Two, on several occasions materials fell out of the magazine, such as a personal note, or a used butt of a cigarette. This reminded me of the living nature of the magazine, and gave me a sense of *SR* as a magazine that had been important to others.

In reading through the run of the magazine to decide on the focus of my thesis, I noticed that certain topics were repeatedly aired and in particular ways which I shall discuss in the subsequent chapters. As I continued to read and re-read *SR*, a particular pattern in how these topics or debates emerged in the magazine and were dealt with began to surface, and I became interested in systematically analysing those debates and the patterns that their presentation followed.

As I shall expand on in more detail below in the Methodology section of this Introduction, what was most evident from my initial readings of the magazine was the articulation of and discussion/debate around 'politics'. Most often, these politics were negotiated in relation to questions of identity, and I noticed that the *SR* collective became deeply divided over three topics in particular: anti-lesbianism, racism and anti-Semitism/Zionism. Accordingly, these three debates form the content of my three substantive thesis chapters. However, before I move on to a brief outline of these chapters, I shall first of all establish the historical context in which *SR* was conceived and within which it was situated, review the available literature on *SR*, helping to further situate the magazine and its debates, and, then, move on to discuss how I approached my research, specifically addressing the methodological choices I made.

## Section 1.2: The British Political Climate of the Late 1960s to Early 1980s

Wedged between the years of relative optimism and confidence before 1973, and the rise of populist Conservatism after 1979, the 1970s, as recorded in Jonathon Coe's fictional account *The Rotters' Club* (2001) were, a time of strikes, political violence and racism' (Coe in Leese, 101). Whilst at the end of the 1950s, there had been a general sentiment that 'most of [Britain's] people have never had it so good,'<sup>2</sup> by the end of the 1960s there was noticeable unrest. This period of unrest at the end of the 1960s continued on throughout the 1970s to the mid-1980s. The major concerns that shaped 1970s and early 1980s Britain can broadly be categorised into three themes: a) the state of the economy, the decline of traditional industries and related labour unrest expressed in a series of strikes; b) increasing racial tensions; c) new social movements, such as

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<sup>2</sup> 'Most of our people have never had it so good' refers to a famous quote by former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in a speech he made in 1957 on the state of the economy and its effects on the quality of British life. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/20/newsid\\_3728000/3728225.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/20/newsid_3728000/3728225.stm).

the WLM and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), that sought to provide alternatives to the prevailing conservative government, especially from the late 1970s onwards.

## Section 1.2a: The Economy, The Decline of Traditional Industries and Related Labour Unrest

Following the Second World War, Britain experienced a surge in its manufacturing industry. As a result, the economy flourished and government was supportive of the labour unions. However, as the 1950s progressed, industry was becoming increasingly competitive in the world market. As the country did not invest money back into the industries, whilst it grew, it did not grow as quickly as other economies (McCormick, 20; see also Abercrombie, et al. 1994). Towards the end of the 1950s, 'Britain's economic deficiencies became increasingly evident and the 1960s opened with a veritable epidemic of what-is-wrong-with-Britain-itis. During the two decades that followed there was a gradual change of emphasis away from the problem of growth to the problem of arresting Britain's economic decline' (Stewart, 5). A recession was imminent, and in an attempt to combat rising inflation, the British government looked primarily towards limiting the demands of the then powerful labour unions which they were previously content to support. Accordingly, 'incomes policies and the question of the legal regulation of industrial relations increasingly dominated much of the political scene' (Stewart, 5).

The intention to regulate industrial relations did not bode well for union workers. Despite an attempt to lessen the mounting tensions between industrial workers and the government introduced with the Industrial Relations Bill of 1971, the problems quickly escalated and the related labour unrest was expressed in a series of strikes.<sup>3</sup> As Strinati makes clear:

Towards the end of the 1960s, partly in response to government incomes and industrial relations policies and the erosion of real wages and as an aspect of the efforts of union officials to regain the initiative from shop-floor leaders, the large-scale, national and official strike began to re-emerge, culminating in the epochal miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974. (Strinati, 62)

The strike that Strinati references came at the time of the British oil crisis<sup>4</sup>, and was so disruptive that Prime Minister Edward Heath introduced a 3-day working week in order to conserve dwindling energy resources. Whilst 'certain cuts had already been made in November in streetlighting,

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<sup>3</sup> 'There were 2,116 disputes in 1967 and over 2.7 million working days lost. In 1969 the number of disputes [rose] to 3,116 and over 6.8 million working days were lost' (Childs, 142; see also Brown (1983) and Marwick (1982)). Some of these disputes include: the strike by London's refuse collectors in 1970; the engineers' strike against the Industrial Relations Bill in 1971; the Grunwick film-processing factory strike in 1977; the 'Winter of Discontent,' which involved a series of strikes by gravediggers and refuse collectors, amongst others, in 1978 and 1979.

<sup>4</sup> John McCormick states that the British 'oil crisis' in 1973 was due to an increase in the amount Britain was required to pay for imported Arab oil, following the Arab-Israeli war. To be specific, Britain's 'import bill quadrupled' (McCormick, 25).

floodlighting, and television,' as a result of the 3-day working week, 'a State of Emergency was declared' (Childs, 175). With the economic downturn, factories and heavy industry began their demise.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, towards the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, unemployment was a very serious issue. Unemployment surpassed one million in 1975 (Marwick, 190). By 1982 there were approximately three million people unemployed (Timmins 1983). All of these factors combined promoted the general view that Britain, by the end of the 1970s, 'seemed to be sinking day by day' (Childs, 175).

Whilst 'already in the seventies politicians in the Labour Party as well as in the Conservative Party were claiming that trade-union powers must be curbed and that encouragement must be given to thrift and enterprise' (Marwick, 271), a dramatic decrease in the influence of the unions came with the election of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the shift to a Conservative government in 1979. Thatcher sought to disentangle the government from the unions through the privatization of the majority of public services. Thus, when the miners went on strike again in 1984 and 1985, she was not swayed by their demands. A bitter battle ensued, resulting not only in the defeat of the union, but also the 'clos[ing of] an epoch.' To be specific, the second miners' strike 'defined the end of the coal-based industrial economy and with it the core political philosophy of the left - that parliamentary socialists allied with the trade union battalions would confront and potentially transform capitalism through solidarity and unity' (Hutton 2005; see also Abercrombie, et al. 1994).<sup>6</sup>

As I shall demonstrate in Chapter 3, these issues were reflected in the early articles on race and racism that *SR* dealt with in relation to Asian women union workers.

## Section 1.2b: Racial Tensions

Likewise issues of race played an important role in *SR*'s life-course. Angus Stewart (1983) argues: 'unemployment, regional and urban decay, changes in occupational and family structure consequent upon economic change, the blighting of the educational opportunities [...] all these are experienced as being if not individually, then cumulatively, threatening and inexplicable' (Stewart, 35). In doing so, he illustrates the social consequences of the British unrest I have so far described. It is important to keep these consequences in mind when considering the turmoil of increasing racial tensions – characterized by riots, conservative immigration policy and institutionalised racism – during this time.

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<sup>5</sup> 'The government's holding in BP was sold, some British Rail assets were put on the market, as were British Aerospace, the National Freight Corporation, Cable & Wireless, Britoil and the radio-chemical centre, Amersham International' (Childs, 243-4).

<sup>6</sup> See Beatrix Campbell's fascinating *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and Politics in the 80s* (1984), in which she retraces George Orwell's famous 1937 trip to Wigan Pier, in an attempt to draw parallels between the Great Depression of the 1930s with Britain's lingering depression in the 1980s.

Glennerster (2000) states that 'Until the late 1950s Britain was an overwhelmingly white society' (133). However, this quickly began to change as large numbers of immigrants came to the country – mostly from Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent – to satisfy the demand for workers that coincided with the increase in industrial labour production. But as I have previously indicated, the 1970s especially saw the gradual death of heavy industry in Britain. The need for workers consequently diminished, and there was a surplus of workers. As competition for the remaining available jobs heightened, so did a 'rise of a nationalist politics' (Stewart, 7) and 'immigration became a political issue' (Glennerster, 134).

The Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962 restricted immigrant entry into Britain to those people who had a job. Whilst the Race Relations Act 1965 sought to improve race relations, its very inception was indicative that there was already a problem of racial tension in the country. This was evident in the rise of the National Front – an extremist right-wing nationalist organization – in 1967 and Enoch Powell's famous 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968 in which he attributed many of Britain's troubles to the immigrant population and warned of future turbulence. 'While [it can be argued that] neither English pride of place nor other nationalist movement within the United Kingdom were necessarily allied to racist sentiment' (Leese, 80), it is true that 'much of National Front support came in decaying urban areas where there were large immigrant populations' (Marwick, 223) and 'the effect of Powell's comments, whatever his intention, was to hitch the two together in acrimonious marriage for a decade or more' (Leese, 80).

In the same year of Powell's speech (1968), the revised Commonwealth Immigrants Act placed even harsher restrictions on immigrant entry. Whilst Glennerster (2000) argues that this Act 'was balanced by the 1968 Race Relations Act, which substantially extended the 1965 Act to cover employment and housing and strengthened the enforcement procedure' (135), it is not clear to what extent that enforcement actually benefitted immigrants. By the end of the 1960s the effects of the discrimination experienced by racially diverse immigrant populations against the backdrop of a country that was questioning its capacity to survive began to accumulate, and what followed in the 1970s and 1980s with regards to race relations was a repeated cycle of oppression, reaction, blame and institutional intervention.

'The law was [again] changed in Britain in 1971 to limit immigration to those who were born in Britain or whose parents or grandparents were of British origin' (McCormick, 55). Shortly thereafter a series of race riots broke out across the country. The first was at the Notting Hill Carnival of 1976,<sup>7</sup> which was surpassed in violence and damage by the Notting Hill Carnival riots in 1979. Fearing the potential verity of Powell's warning, explosions of racial tension quickly brought forth an increase in government intervention in the form of police presence. Thus, whilst 'in 1976 there were 1600 policemen in the district when the Carnival took place; by 1979 almost

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<sup>7</sup> I realise that this was not the first riot to erupt at Notting Hill. However, as the majority of my political and feminist context comments on the developments in British history from the end of the 1960s onward, and these previous riots took place in 1958, I have chosen to exclude them here.

half of the entire London force, around 10,000 officers, was present in what had by now become a ritual confrontation' (Leese, 105).

A nationalist sentiment combined with the incidents of race riots and increased police presence, contributed to a general sense that it was the immigrant, 'black' population in Britain that was the root of the unrest. This was met by what was later described as 'institutionalized racism'.<sup>8</sup> Mugging accusations predominantly against young black men were followed by 'the persistent stop and search or "sus" policy [- permitting officers to investigate anyone suspected of intending to offend -] used by the police between 1978 and 1980, in which searches, raids and crowd control techniques seemed to be targeted aggressively and particularly against West Indians' (Leese, 105). Yet, it is important to note that there was disruption even amongst immigrant populations. As Leese (2006, citing Widgery, 1986) points out:

By 1978 it had become impossible for anyone working or living in the London [...] area not to have witnessed the provocations: doorstep and bus-stop abuse, the daubing of menacing graffiti, the window-breaking and air-gun pot shots, the stone and bottle hurling sorties on Sundays, and the threatening atmosphere around certain estates and tube stations which produced a de facto curfew. (105)

Riots continued from the end of the 1970s into the 1980s with riots in Southall in 1979, and in Bristol in 1980 but the tensions more or less culminated in 1981 around the time when the British Nationality Act was introduced. The Act was effectively 'meant to clarify and restrict citizenship to those with close ties with the UK. [It mandated that] those seeking naturalization would have to meet a language standard, and foreigners marrying British citizens would have to wait three years before they could gain naturalization. The minorities felt the new restrictions discriminated against them' (Childs, 225-6) and a series of riots broke out around the country, taking place in Toxteth (Liverpool), Manchester, Birmingham, Ellesmere Port, Hull, Nottingham, Newcastle upon Tyne, Preston and, most famously, in Southall and Brixton.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the Brixton riots were so disastrous that they were investigated by the then Lord Chief Justice Scarman, resulting in the Scarman Report and a call for the end to the 'sus' policy. Yet two additional damaging riots broke out in 1985 in Handsworth and Brixton.

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<sup>8</sup> Following the inquiry into the report on the stabbing of black British teenager Stephen Lawrence, Sir William MacPherson declared that the British Metropolitan police force was institutionally racist. He defined it as: "The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin" made evident in "processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people" (Independent News and Media, 1999). Whilst this term was not used until 1999, it would be applied in retrospect to many of the incidents and policies in effect during the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, I have introduced it here, for the reader to bear in mind as I briefly chart the trajectory of race relations in Britain during this time.

<sup>9</sup> See Childs (1997: 224) for more details of the riots.



Immigration laws, police brutality and the institutionalization of racism were all addressed in the articles explored in Chapter 3 of this thesis and underscore the third debate on anti-Semitism/Zionism as detailed in Chapter 4.

## Section 1.2c: The Rise of Alternative Politics

To return to Jonathon Coe's (2001) assessment of 1970s Britain as a country plagued by 'strikes, political violence and racism,' I now wish to turn to the final category informing the unrest of 1970s and 1980s Britain, new social movements.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was established at the end of the 1950s.<sup>10</sup> In conjunction with the rise of the New Left and the student protests at the London School of Economics in 1968, it gained considerable momentum in the late 1960s. As Childs (1997) has noted, most 'public attention in the 1970s focused a great deal on violence connected with political demonstrations' (197). This focus continued into the 1980s and was intensified as a result of Britain's entrance into the Falklands War of 1982. Leese (2006) argues:

A fixation with past imperial greatness, as expressed in the Falklands War of 1982, signalled a growing 'cultural psychosis' in inverse proportion to actual decline; the absence of any bitterly fought war of decolonization such as the French experience in Algeria meant in politics and in the legal system that the crippled language of imperial domination still circulated freely, unchallenged and unrecognized. (142)

However, despite Leese's assertion, as early as September 1981 Britain gave birth to the Greenham Peace Camp, in which a large number of mostly women protestors established camp as a form of resistance to the government's decision to engage in war. Though not particularly volatile, Greenham Peace Camp<sup>11</sup> was nonetheless symptomatic of a general unease with government policy and action.

The rise of alternative politics contributed to a resistance and re-examination of traditional systems of engaging with political issues and served as a backdrop to the processes of how women constructed the politics of their identities. This is a major theme explored in all my chapters. The above sections indicate the context of British history within which *SR* was set. I shall situate *SR* in its feminist historical context by turning to a brief outline of British feminist history, again from about 1970 onwards.

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<sup>10</sup> In *Social Movements in Britain* (1997), Paul Byrne provides an extended study of the developments of the CND and the peace movement.

<sup>11</sup> For a historical analysis of Greenham Peace Camp see Sasha Roseneil's *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham* (1995).

## Section 1.3: British Feminist History

There has been much written about British feminist history (Caine 1997, Rowbotham 1989, Sebestyen 1988) and as Hemmings (2005) points out, many accounts follow a 'dominant narrative of a shift from 1970s sameness, through 1980s identity, to 1990s difference within Western English speaking feminist' contexts (117). It is undoubtedly important to understand the limitations and/or effects of this narrative, especially as in many ways *SR*'s evolution followed a similar trajectory. Wanting to be conscious of my own methods of 'securing' this narrative, I would nonetheless divide this section thematically in the following way: Women's Liberation and the notion of a collective identity emblemized by the idea of a 'universal sisterhood'; the rise of identity politics and the fracturing of the movement into different interest groups; and single-issue campaigning and the assertion of difference.

### Section 1.3a: Women's Liberation and the Notion of Collective Identity

The twenty-year span of *SR*'s existence saw enormous change in the development of feminism. Much has been written about the beginnings of British feminism (e.g. Wandor 1972; O'Sullivan 1982; Dahlerup 1986). It has been extensively noted that these beginnings developed out of leftwing politics and that therefore, from its inception, the British WLM was infused with socialism (Bouchier 1983; Coote and Campbell 1987; Caine 1997; Lent 2001).<sup>12</sup> In 1968, fishermen's wives organized for the improved safety of trawlers, female sewing machinists went on a three-week strike for equal pay at the Ford motor works outside London and 'a militant revolt by London bus conductresses who wanted to be drivers' was staged (Bouchier, 57). Therefore, whilst the first national Women's Liberation conference in February of 1970 at Ruskin College in Oxford 'has [...] come to stand for both the focus and the symbol of how English women came "to political consciousness as women"' (Caine, 263 citing Wandor 1990), it is clear that 'consciousness-raising and organisation for women's liberation were already well underway when [that] conference was called' (Lent, 67).

More than twice the expected number of attendants turned up for the conference. It was a monumental achievement in the organisation of women in Britain. As Coote and Campbell (1987) recall:

Like so many events at that stage of the movement, it happened almost by accident, taking everyone by surprise. A handful of women had attended one of the Ruskin history workshops, organized by the college to bring worker historians and academics

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<sup>12</sup> Lynne Haine, in her essay 'From 1971: Reinventing the Wheel,' writes that 'though there were many women who had been and still were political on the left, there were also many others coming from the hippy counterculture, from being bored housewives, mothers going off their heads at home with children, from being women with no reason for existence except to service men' (Haine, 65).

together. As usual, it was entirely dominated by men and the work proceeded as though the female sex had no part in history at all. But this time, the women historians would not stand for it. They held a separate meeting to discuss the problem. At first, they resolved that the next history workshop should be about women, but as they went on talking they grew bolder and decided that it would be not just a history workshop, but a national women's liberation conference. (12)

The Ruskin conference also, therefore, signalled the possibility 'that a movement could be said to exist' (Wandor, 97 citing Rowbotham, 1972). In addition, it represented some of the fundamental principles of early British second-wave feminism: the gathering of women, the sharing of personal experiences and organizing politically around those shared experiences. Two popular ideas of this time – consciousness-raising and the slogan 'the personal is political' – cannot be emphasised enough. Women, unhappy with their lives and isolated in their existence, began talking with other women about their feelings of dissatisfaction. Until this began to take place, these women were led to believe or had believed that their issues were their own personal problem. As a result of talking with one another, they realised that others had experienced the same situations and feelings. Women therefore

became aware that their very common shared problems must originate with social and political conditions rather than their own personal inability to submit to their misfortune. Hence, that which had been historically consigned to the sphere of personal misery and relationships now found its origins in the political sphere and thus must also find its solution in the political sphere. (Lent, 95-6)

The realisation of this correlation between the 'personal' and the 'political' and the 'raising' of one's 'consciousness' to it through the sharing of experiences was fundamental to Women's Liberation.

This new consciousness resulted in an official list of demands women at the first National Conference produced.<sup>13</sup> Equal Pay, equal opportunities for women, such as employment and education, free contraception and abortion and free 24-hour child care were all deemed necessary requirements for women to become more liberated from their constrained lives. These issues became central to women's political struggles throughout the 1970s. Influential texts from the US such as Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), and early campaigning efforts such as the one for Equal Pay at Ford Motor works in 1968, had already put some of these issues on the agenda. However, it was not until women began organising and talking about these issues amongst themselves more widely that their messages began to take effect. One example of this is the campaigning for Equal Pay, which began in 1968 with the Ford Motor works demonstrations and resulted in the Equal Pay Act of 1975. Similarly, the notion of 'sisterhood' as articulated in Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) became increasingly relevant as women found strength in one another in facing life's inequalities. Women encouraged

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<sup>13</sup> For a complete list of the demands born out of the British WLM see Zoë Fairbairns' 'Saying What We Want: Women's Liberation and the Seven Demands' (2003: 94).

each other to write about their experiences and 'spread the word' about their newfound awareness of their lives. The ideas put forth in texts such as Ann Koedt's paper, 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm' (1968) Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1971), and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) were radical in their critiques of heterosexual relationships and the constraints of femininity, and contributed to a rapidly growing body of literature offering revolutionary knowledge to women.

As the WLM grew in size, geography and momentum, its ideas were disseminated increasingly widely in the form of newsletters. The *Women's Liberation Newsletter*, which eventually became *Shrew* in 1969, along with *Red Rag* (1971) and *Women's Voice* (1972) were but a few of these publications and it was 'as part of [this] flurry of feminist publishing activity' that '*Spare Rib* appeared' in 1972 (Bouchier, 100).<sup>14</sup> In the early years of the magazine, 'more militant aspects of feminism were played down [...] and some traditional women's magazine features like cooking and fashion were retained' in the hopes of appealing to as wide a readership as possible. However, 'by 1974 *Spare Rib* had dropped all such features and clearly identified itself as a women's liberation journal aligned to socialism' (Bouchier, 101). This is particularly evident from *SR* front covers which eventually shifted to a more assertive feminist identification (see figs. 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d).

### Section 1.3b: The Rise of Identity Politics

The early celebration of a universal sisterhood within the Women's Movement quickly gave way to a recognition that the experiences of various groups of women had been overlooked, or altogether neglected by the Movement's majority. To be specific, the issues that the WLM raised meant different things for different groups of women. Lesbians challenged the heteronormative framework underlying some of the claims made by the movement as well as asserting that they were silenced within the movement. Asian and black women, who were engaged in daily struggles to provide economically for their families and offering protection to them from increasingly stringent immigration laws, incidents of police brutality and forced sterilisation, for example, felt little or no sympathy with the issues of marriage, sexuality and abortion rights as articulated by white feminists with very different life experiences. Instead they keenly felt the absence of any debates on race.

The result of this was an increasing sense of factionalism within the Movement, and 'it is probably no exaggeration to state that every feminist group, campaign or project in Britain was, at

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that *SR* is frequently associated with the left-orientated Underground Press, as one of its co-founders, Marsha Rowe, was involved in this prior to the creation of *SR*. I will come back to this later on in my introduction.

Fig. 1a. It Needn't Be A Chore!

*woman's news magazine march '73*  
17½p

# spare Rib



***It needn't be a chore!***

*Simpler than simplicity, quick clothes pattern/Evelyn Williams, wax figures in her life by Angela Carter  
China, the woman's revolution/Bigamy, the more the merrier?/News: Whose family allowance?*

Source: *Spare Rib*, 9 (March 1973).



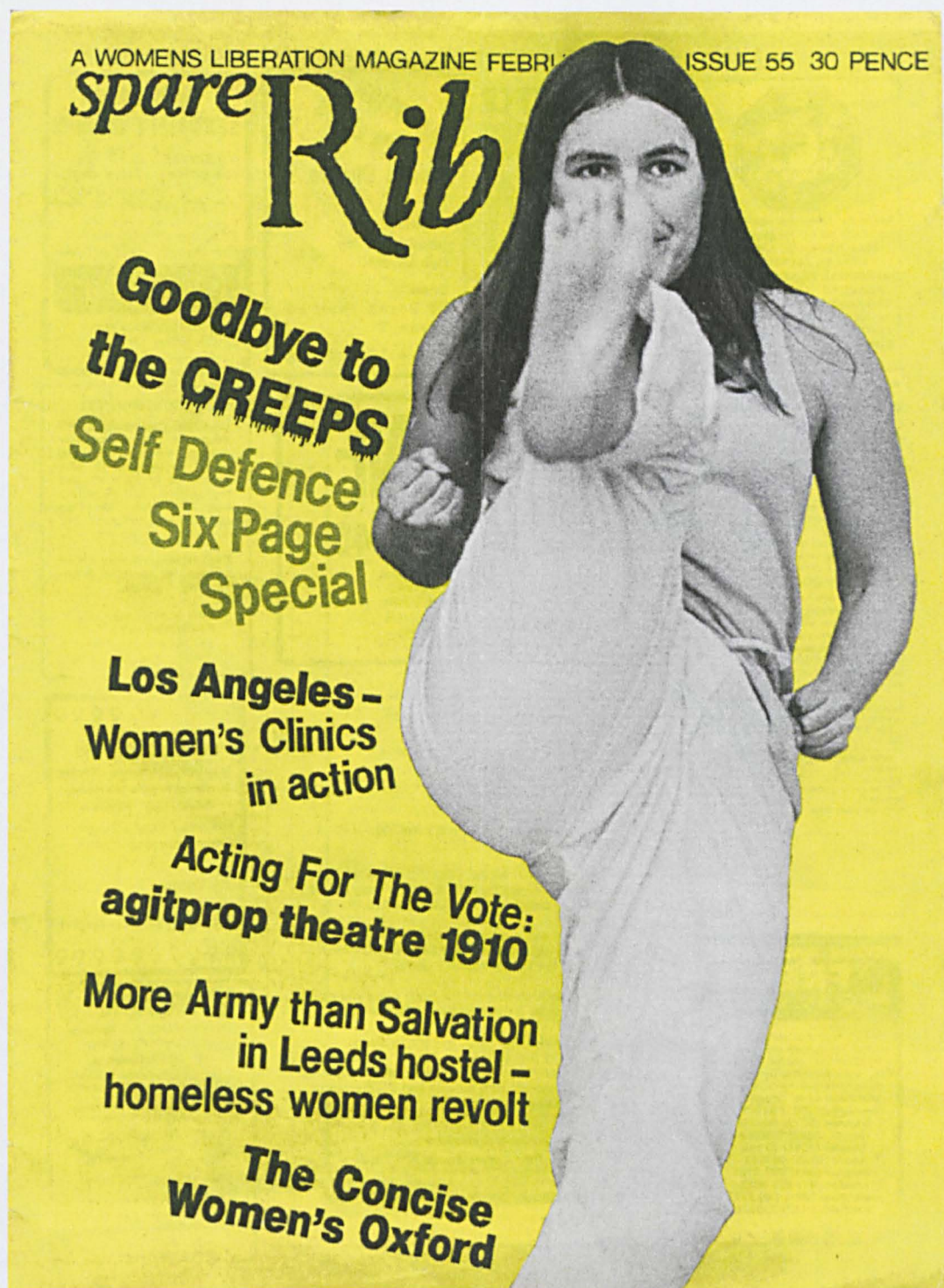
Fig. 1b. Why Women Starve Themselves



Source: *Spare Rib*, 28 (October 1974).



Fig. 1c. Goodbye to the Creeps



Source: *Spare Rib*, 55 (February 1977).



Fig. 1d. We Will Walk Without Fear



Source: Spare Rib, 66 (January 1978).



some point during the 1980s, touched by disputes over the marginalisation of a various identity or social group' (Lent, 153-4). As Holland (1984) writes:

many of us have watched and regretted the fragmentation of the Movement into small groups working on single issues, without that same sense of unity in a new beginning that made the early seventies such an exciting time. But it is pointless to indulge in nostalgia for a 'unity' which was actually based on the virtual silencing of working-class women, women of colour and other minority groups, through domination of an articulate and confident middle-class majority. (v)

The women from such identified 'minority groups' were invited to join in the larger Women's Movement and collectives such as SR. A conscious effort was made by white, heterosexual, middle-class women to make space for these new voices to be heard, and to raise their own consciousness about the issues affecting different women. But 'there were tense battles and conflicts within the new collectives, and new conflicts inevitably came to the fore' (Caine, 269). To be specific, whilst these efforts did indeed lead to 'a genuine rethink of the values, structures and prejudices of movements and their activists,' they also had the effect of dividing women into categories, often of 'victim' and 'oppressor.' Personal experience came to be known as the only basis by which political arguments could be made. 'At its most ludicrous this could mean that membership of an oppressed group was worn like a badge of honour, [and] it was not unusual for speakers at meetings during this time to preface their contributions with phrases such as "speaking as a black lesbian" or "speaking as a disabled woman" – rubrics designed to place one's words beyond dispute' (Lent, 153). The effect of this was most noticeable in the tensions and strain arising from attempts to reconcile differences: 'constructive dialogue over the issues raised at this time of division became increasingly difficult' (Lent, 153).

### Section 1.3c: The Fracturing of the Movement

This difficulty took its toll on many women's groups and publications, 'marking the beginning of the decline of the long period of movement mobilisation that ran from 1958 to the mid-1980s' (Lent, 162). The conflicts between various groups of women contributed to the very feelings of isolation and oppression that women fought so fiercely against at the beginning of the WLM. The issues causing this effect were not domesticity or abortion, but rather the 'ongoing disputes and introspection promoted by identity politics' (Lent, 158). Nonetheless, the feelings were the same. As a result, many of the women's groups and publications disbanded during this time as a result of the exhaustion brought on by all these disputes.

It is worth noting the ways in which questions of identity and identity politics developed from the 'second wave' of feminism, namely from that of an experience-based essentialist to a relativist constructionist view of identity. As identity was increasingly interrogated and problematised, the notion of personal experience, which was initially regarded as the determinant of one's

understandings, perceptions and knowledges, became challenged and the articulation of difference (as opposed to an assumed universality of sisterhood) appeared.<sup>15</sup> 'Experience' as a category was linked to diverse identity traits and the questions of what experiences 'counted' and which experiences and identity traits determined one's perceptions grew more and more prominent. This articulation gradually gave way to constructionism, suggesting that individuals are not born into identity categories, but that identities are constructed socially and culturally, and therefore not essential but malleable, was put forth. Postmodernism and queer theory, especially during the 1990s, were the key theoretical sites that developed and sustained constructivist views of identities.<sup>16</sup> The notion that identity was constructed meant that the individual had some control over that construction and, indeed, had the potential to be empowered by challenging and potentially changing such constructions.<sup>17</sup> In some respects the reaction against identity politics of the 1990s meant that identity-based claims became harder to sustain, and strategic essentialism was advocated by theorists such as Iris Marion Young. However, these developments came in a sense too late for *SR* and its collective.

*SR* is in many ways a historical record – indeed, almost a case-study – of the challenges of collective feminism and the implications of the personal being political set against the backdrop of 1970s and 1980s Britain. Given that *SR* stylised itself as the 'mouthpiece' of the movement, it engaged with the issues that were being discussed within the women's movement. I shall examine how the magazine negotiated these debates, the internal dynamics of the collective, the content, the editorial decisions, the format of the articles. This provides significant insights into the operations of this major feminist magazine.

## Section 1.4: Literature Review

Despite *SR*'s importance as a document of the British WLM, there has been virtually no academic work conducted on the magazine. To date, there is no monograph or dissertation on *SR*, and the majority of all references to the magazine are either in passing or have subsumed the magazine into a discourse on another topic. Therefore, my thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge since it is the first sustained academic research exploration of the magazine. In the following, I shall provide an overview of the kinds of texts on *SR* available at present.

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<sup>15</sup> See Joan Scott's article 'The Evidence of Experience' (1991) for a discussion on the influence of experience in the formation of the politics of identity.

<sup>16</sup> A good example of a text representing this view would be Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

<sup>17</sup> See Diana Fuss' *Essentially Speaking* (1989) for additional aspects and interrogations of identity politics from the period following the 'second wave'.

## Section 1.4a: SR Readers

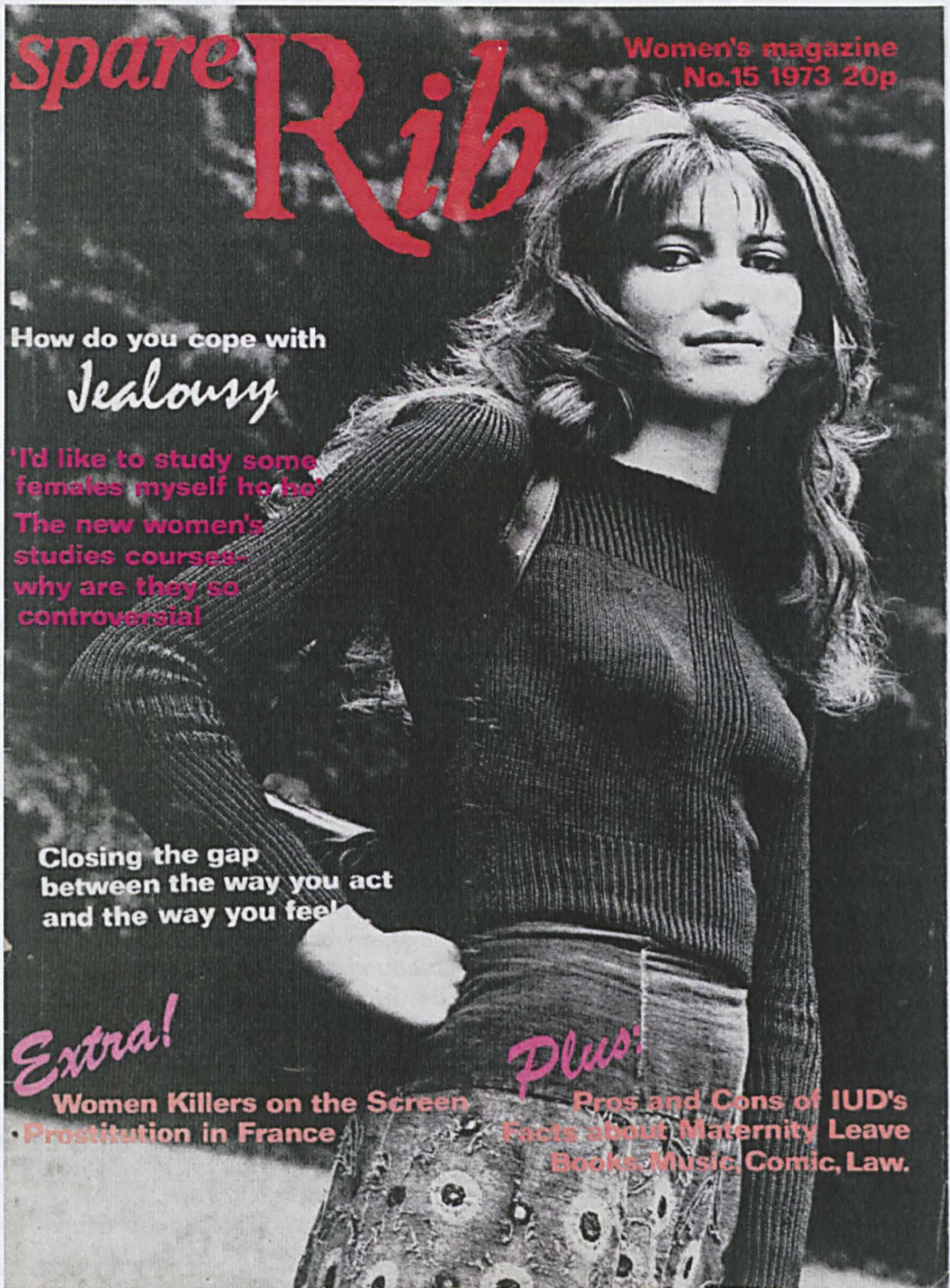
There are four readily available sources on the magazine, which are in fact edited readers. These constitute mainly compilations of texts published in *SR* but they also provide comments on *SR*, particularly in their introductions. The first is *Hard Feelings: Fiction and Poetry from Spare Rib Magazine* (1979), edited by Alison Fell. The other three volumes were produced by members of the *Spare Rib* collective: *The Spare Rib Reader* (1982), edited by Marsha Rowe; *Girls are Powerful: Young Women's Writings from Spare Rib* (1982) edited by Sue Hemmings; and *Women's Health: A Spare Rib Reader* (1987), edited by Sue O'Sullivan. All contain excerpts from articles or features that were originally published in the magazine and can be considered part of the efforts many women involved in Women's Liberation made to 'protect and preserve the records of contemporary developments' (Caine, 263). Although they provide the reader with access to *Spare Rib* magazine by means of their republished articles, as 'Readers,' they do not constitute critical work on the magazine. However, each of these books has a reflective critical introduction that allows larger insights regarding the magazine and I would like to detail some of these below.

The first of the four books, *Hard Feelings: Fiction and Poetry from Spare Rib Magazine* (1979), was a collection of poems and fictional writing originally featured in the first seven years of *SR* magazine, between 1972 and 1979. Early on in the introduction, Fell situates *SR* within the literary flurry of the 1970s, and in doing so provides background information on the formation and early years of the magazine. Fell writes:

the explosion of women's liberation consciousness across the world has, for the first time, given many thousands of women the conviction that their voices are important. Women have written leaflets, tracts, herstories, position papers, comics and newspapers in a sustained attack on sexist laws, attitudes and institutions. (Fell, 1)

Accordingly, she states that *SR* is 'an alternative women's magazine developed out of meetings of women who were angry at the sexism they faced in their work on the underground newspapers of the late 60s and early 70s' (Fell, 1). Intent on their own form of activism, Fell explains that when *SR* was first produced, it was 'clearly aimed' at women who were largely 'unfamiliar with feminist ideas' or not involved with the WLM. Thus, the decision to make the magazine somewhat similar to many other women's magazines published at the time in terms of its aesthetic and content was 'part of a conscious attempt to spread politics through familiar forms' (Fell, 1-2) (see fig. 2). Yet, not all feminists cottoned on to *SR*'s initial marketing strategy. Fell states that in the first year of *SR*'s existence (1972), it drew criticism from the WLM for its resemblance to typical 'glossies' and 'a very critical send-up called "Spare Tit" was circulated at that year's National Women's Liberation Conference' (Fell, 2).

Fig. 2. How Do You Cope with Jealousy?



Source: *Spare Rib*, 15 (September 1973).

SR changed significantly during its first few years. Fell particularly highlights that '*Spare Rib* gathered a readership which put its preferences forcefully,' and that this readership expressed 'disinterest' in early SR topics such as 'cookery and beauty' in favour of 'features which kept them in touch with all the legal, practical and theoretical developments in the women's liberation' (Fell, 2). It is interesting to note the shift in SR magazine features, as well as the importance readers placed on the developments in the WLM. Readers prioritised Movement development, and they viewed SR as an important source of information about those developments. Indeed, Fell states that as SR evolved in its 'connection' to the WLM, its internal structure changed in addition to its content. In particular, Fell references SR's decision to forgo its original hierarchical management of the magazine and instead turn to collective production. Here we see the egalitarian and democratic impulse which as I shall show in subsequent chapters, structured the magazine editorial policy and, in some respects, became its Achilles' heel.

Fell also discusses the changes that took place with regards to the fictional work published in SR. She writes that when SR first began including fiction in the magazine, there were 'few outlets for the spiky, political sort of writing that feminist consciousness produced' (Fell, 3). Suggesting that SR was also 'spiky' and 'political' she states that it was therefore 'an obvious place for these women to send their work' (Fell, 3). However, the 'radical' nature of women's fiction, in its articulation of women's experiences in an honest and straightforward manner, meant that when SR first began publishing women's fictional writing and poetry, there were not many writers to choose from (Fell, 5). It has to be noted in this context that the 1970s were the period in the UK when feminist publishing began to take off.<sup>18</sup>

SR's choice of texts was often questioned. Fell explains that they had questions on

how far our stories ought to concentrate on an accurate reflection of women's everyday oppression,' 'how far should we be trying to publish more stories with "positive heroines" who will provide new, optimistic roles models for women,' 'and what relation feminism has to the act of writing: does its impetus free women to write exactly what they think or does its ideology place its own limitations on the areas they feel they can uncover?' (Fell, 5-6)

The questions Fell relays are indicative of a growing awareness of the nuances, and perhaps conflicts, in how feminism related to women's writing, and particularly the disjuncture between its potential to 'free women' or 'limit' them through ideology. Fell concludes by acknowledging that 'these [are] sticky questions' and argues that they in fact 'can't be transcended but must be [confronted and] worked through in the *doing* of it, in the writing and publishing and reading and discussing' (Fell, 6; emphasis as in original). This is important because attempting to work *through* issues, as opposed to evading them, became a key discussion for SR in its work. At the time *Hard Feelings* was published, this 'working through' was not yet contentious. But by the time *The Spare*

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<sup>18</sup> Virago Press, for example, was founded in 1973; Women's Press in 1978; Sheba Press in 1980.



*Rib Reader* was published, just 3 years later, *SR* faced much more critical scrutiny from its readership.

The majority of *The Spare Rib Reader* is devoted to *SR*'s selections of texts from topics covered in its early years. The book is divided into sections such as 'Image,' 'Family,' 'Childcare,' 'Education,' 'Sexuality,' 'Health,' 'Violence,' 'State,' and 'Women's Liberation Movement,' with articles that connect to the respective section headings. However, the *Reader* is noteworthy particularly because, of all the *SR* anthologies, it is the introduction to this *Reader* which provides the most information on the general background of the magazine. Written by one of the founding editors and former collective members, Marsha Rowe, it details the specifics of how and why the magazine was started, as well as the early choices to focus on certain topics and issues. Rowe aligns *SR* with the WLM but views the magazine also as 'a daughter of the underground press' (Rowe, 15). Accordingly, Rowe goes on to retrace her involvement with the publication of British, male-dominated, alternative magazines such as *Oz* and *INK*. She states that the influence of the women's movement led her and other women to break away from such publications and 'call a meeting of women who worked in the underground press' to discuss their feelings (Rowe, 16). As the story has quite famously come to be known, it was as a result of that meeting that Rowe would eventually be introduced to Rosie Boycott, with whom Rowe co-founded *Spare Rib* months later, having raised the sum of £2,000.

In the introduction to the *Reader*, Rowe provides information on the collective and editorial decisions that were made in the first years of the magazine's publication. She explains that *SR* initially was organised editorially as a hierarchy with Rowe and Boycott at the top, due to the fact that with Boycott's previous work as a journalist on the underground magazine *Friendz*, they were the only ones with relevant experience. However, this shortly evolved into the magazine being produced collectively by a group of women in line with the principles of equality that had initially prompted some of them to seek out an alternative to the patriarchal practices of the underground presses. Rowe explains that 'When *Spare Rib* began, [the women] saw it as an activity and consciousness-raising process combined' (Rowe, 19). Whilst Rowe recalls the difficulties of 'how much there was to learn,' she affirms the importance of the consciousness-raising ethics which underscored learning from one's own and others' experiences. Thus, from the beginning, the collective sought to make the magazine accessible to all women, and was particularly intent to 'develop' their vision of the magazine as having a 'two-way role,' facilitating the 'sifting of information and ideas and continually making alterations according to [reader] response' (Rowe, 19). Rowe also states that after 'the first two or three years [...a] more articulate feminist editorial content emerged from the early *Spare Rib* format' which she connects to the influence of the WLM. She explains that 'as the women's movement grew, [and] as *Spare Rib* became more identified as a part of it,' the content and approach of the magazine changed. This indicates that from very early on, *SR* took its cues both from the Movement and from its readers – readers who were and were not involved or indeed, even invested, in the movement. Thus, in a sense, *SR*

situated itself between the two, in many ways making itself potentially vulnerable in relation to outside expectations of what the magazine should be, and more importantly, what – or whom – it represented.

Despite the fact that at the time of the *Reader's* publication (1982) the magazine had been in existence for ten years, Rowe's introduction does not provide any commentary on the development of the magazine beyond its first few years. This is perhaps because she was no longer a collective member at the time of editing the book.<sup>19</sup> A note following Rowe's introduction indicates that she was responsible for selecting articles from *SR* issues 1-77 for the *Reader*, whilst the current collective had chosen articles from issues 78-100. An afterword in the book written by the then current collective members strengthens the sense of Rowe's distance from the magazine beyond its beginnings. But whereas Rowe refrains from commenting on *SR's* 10-year history, the unnamed November 1981 collective members who 'signed' the afterword, do indeed offer a brief observation on the magazine at the time. The fact that the volume records two different editorial moments of the magazine – through the introduction and the afterword – highlights the movement in the editorial team that was one of the hallmarks of *SR*.

In the afterword, the then current collective writes that they have 'no doubts about [*SR*] being a women's liberation magazine' and, similarly to Rowe in her introduction, they maintain 'the continuing belief that *Spare Rib* [can] reach all women.' Specifically, the November 1981 collective writes that they want *SR* 'to take the women's liberation movement to women [who have] never encountered it' and, also, to be 'exciting and challenging for women already active in the movement' (November 1981 *SR* collective).<sup>20</sup> However, whereas Rowe seemed unaffected by the potential difficulties of the magazine's insistent desire to appeal to such a wide-ranging readership, the current collective speak directly to this. They explain that 'there are problems [...] in trying to stimulate a wide range of readers,' such as *SR* 'being lefty/not lefty enough, too man-hating/not man-hating enough, too parochial/too international, or, most commonly of all, too internal to the women's movement/totally out of touch with feminist debate' (November 1981 *SR* collective, 607-8).

Interestingly enough, the collective stated that it found itself 'agreeing with' these criticisms, thus indicating an awareness of the impossibility of pleasing their entire readership. They also articulated their decision to forego adopting a specific political line in favour of ambiguity, despite the resulting 'problems' they were already encountering. The collective go on to explain that 'as

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<sup>19</sup> In her *Spare Rib Reader*, it states that Rowe was a collective member until the mid-1970s (i) and in her introduction to the *Reader*, Rowe herself writes that in preparing material for the *Reader* she 'lived again the four years when I worked on *Spare Rib*' (13); *SR* began in 1973, dating Rowe's departure from the collective somewhere near 1977.

<sup>20</sup> I am stating the month and year, as it is indicated in the Afterword. The women who comprised the *SR* collective not only changed quite frequently but also shared many different and oftentimes opposing views – both individually and collectively – throughout the duration of the magazine's existence. Therefore, I think it's important to distinguish between what Rowe has written and the views expressed in the Afterword by the November 1981 *SR* collective.

fast as [they] try to update [their] coverage on one major area of struggle, another area emerges.' As 'more groups of women are demanding the right to speak – Black women, older women, young women, women with disabilities,' they are 'bursting at the seams and thinking of increasing the pages of the magazine yet again' in order to accommodate these women's interests. The collective admits that 'whilst absorbing all these changes, we want to support each other in working effectively as a collective – [but] this often means political and practical upheavals in our working day' (November 1981 *SR* collective, 608). Undoubtedly, *SR*'s provision of additional 'space' had practical implications, including financial ones. The latter were a continuing issue for the entirety of *SR*'s lifetime. However, their lines also reveal just how reluctant the *SR* collective were to draw a line and stand firm in their boundaries regarding the magazine. As the collective itself stated, they were willing to endure 'upheaval': not only conflict amongst collective members but also choosing to increase the page length of the magazine rather than 'silence' various groups of women. In the subsequent three chapters I shall discuss the implications of this position.

*Girls are Powerful: Young Women's Writings from Spare Rib* is an edited collection of writing (and a few drawings) by 'young women between the ages of 7 – 22,' most of which were originally published in *Spare Rib* between the years 1975 and 1982. The book is divided into six categories: 'Looks,' 'At School,' 'At Home,' 'At Work,' 'Friends and Lovers' and 'Together.' It also provides a small list of contact information and resources at the end, including the National Youth Bureau, the National Union of Students, the National Abortion Campaign, and various young women's newsletters and publications. The individual pieces in the collection are quite varied, even in the specified categories. For example, in the 'Looks' section, topics range from choosing to wear trousers and eyeliner to excerpts from readers' letters exchanging their personal testimonies on the difficulties of dealing with acne.

It is a short compilation, but covers a lot of ground. It was published in the same year as Rowe's *Reader* (1982) at a time when there was not much writing on the experiences of girls and young women and is, indeed, the first text on young women.<sup>21</sup> In the brief editor's preface, then collective member Sue Hemmings does not elaborate much beyond her intention in editing the collection. She writes: 'there are many magazines produced commercially for [young women], but, apart from a few letters, there is hardly ever anything by them inside' (Hemmings, i). She argues that 'young women have had very little say [...] in the growing volume of feminist research on young women's lives' (Hemmings, i). Thus *Girls* essentially gives voice to a group of women that had previously been mainly objectified. Hemmings connects her investment in producing *Girls* to her involvement in *SR*, explaining that the magazine maintains a commitment to 'topics that concern and interest women' but do not often surface on the pages of women's magazines. She writes that in line with this commitment, *SR* has a 'policy of printing pieces by those groups of women who hardly ever get a say anywhere else' (Hemmings, i).

Along with Hemmings' preface, *Girls* is also framed by an afterword, composed by Sally and

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<sup>21</sup> See Angela McRobbie's *Feminism and Youth Culture* (2000).



Llona of *Shocking Pink*, a magazine produced by and for young women. In their afterword, Sally and Llona admit their frustration with the amount of 'control' they feel 'older women' have over their lives. They write that all of their selections for the compilation 'had to be approved by both [...] *Spare Rib*' and the women at *Sheba Press*. However, despite Sally and Llona's annoyance, it is perhaps noticeable from Hemmings' preface that *Girls* was produced under the influence of the same ideas of inclusivity as put forth by the November 1981 *SR* collective in their afterword to Rowe's *Reader*. Furthermore, it is worth noting the ways in which the collective in their afterword and Hemmings in her preface communicate a position within *SR* that – where other magazines and publications had ignored certain topics of interest to women – *SR* was the one and only responsible source that *all* women could count on for inclusivity of their concerns.

*Women's Health: A Spare Rib Reader*, edited by Sue O'Sullivan is very similar to *Hard Feelings*, *The Spare Rib Reader* and *Girls Are Powerful* in that it is an edited volume of material from *Spare Rib*. The articles, images, and readers' letters chosen for the collection are from between 1972 and 1986 on topics related to women's health. Its scope is very wide-ranging, including chapters on 'Down There,' 'In and Against the System,' 'Emotional Matters,' 'Birth Control: Who Controls?,' 'Abortion and Feminism,' 'The Shape of Health,' 'Crises,' 'Across Boundaries,' 'Discussing Childbirth,' 'Addicting Forces,' 'Sexuality and Women's Liberation.' The anthology also contains brief introductions to each of the eleven sections, and, like *Girls Are Powerful*, a list of resources and further reading suggestions.

At the time of editing and publishing *Women's Health* (1987), Sue O'Sullivan was a former collective member and current contributing health page editor to the magazine. She writes in her acknowledgments that she began work on the project when she was 'convinced [...] that a *Spare Rib* health anthology was a good idea and a logical extension of [her] work around health issues' (O'Sullivan, i). Her introduction can be roughly divided into two halves. The first half discusses *SR* magazine's 'potted history,' including mention of the debates it had undergone and connects this history to the existence of the book as well as its content. The second half emphasises the importance of developing a feminist politics of women's health issues and, specifically, what kinds of evaluating practices that politics should contain.

In the first half of her introduction, O'Sullivan describes *SR* as 'a popular magazine which also sees itself as political' and one that is 'always [balancing] (or not) precariously between being the mouthpiece of already committed feminists and a vehicle for spreading the words of feminism to women not yet familiar with them' (O'Sullivan, 1). O'Sullivan states that this tendency has led to a diversification of *SR* collective members which she thinks 'has usually been reflected in the magazine's content' (O'Sullivan, 1). She explains that *SR* does have a 'line,' but that it does have 'a loosely defined agreement not to publish material which is anti-women, anti-lesbian, anti-working class, anti-Semitic or racist' (O'Sullivan, 1). Yet, as O'Sullivan continues to explain the commitments and connections of *SR*, it becomes clear that *SR* oftentimes struggles to sort out those commitments and how they influence the management of the magazine. O'Sullivan writes:

'the magazine is both a part of, and separate from, the women's liberation movement, whatever that is at any given point. It is not accountable to any particular group of women except for what accountability it takes on itself, or is pressurized into taking on, by groups or circumstances outside' (O'Sullivan, 1). With its internal and external pressures and separate but connected affiliation with the WLM, it is no wonder that O'Sullivan goes on to state that, perhaps accordingly, 'the internal workings of the collective, and the content of the magazine, have gone through many changes over the years' (O'Sullivan, 1). O'Sullivan adds that 'these [changes] have often been linked to debates and upheavals within the wider women's liberation movement' (O'Sullivan, 1). This, like Rowe's *Reader*, highlights the difficulty *SR* encountered in balancing its agenda – or not – between being a 'mouthpiece' for women involved in the Movement – whatever that was at any given point – and those not yet familiar with feminism. Especially considering the 'diversity' O'Sullivan refers to amongst the collective members, and the varying importance collective members placed on certain topics, combined with all of the other influences *SR* was susceptible to, it can easily be understood that it was difficult for *SR* to develop a consistent 'line.'

Indeed, O'Sullivan goes on to mention that 'at times, particular women on the collective [...] prioritized certain sorts of articles and ways of approaching subjects' and, coupled with 'pressure from "outside" [as well as] internal disagreements,' *SR* found itself engaged in 'two fierce and prolonged public battles' (O'Sullivan, 1). The first of these battles was on the topic of sexuality, and the second had to do with race and anti-Semitism. O'Sullivan states that the first debate 'boiled down to accusations that lesbians were silencing heterosexual women, countered by accusations of anti-lesbianism [and...] the second occurred when the collective was engaged in an attempt to become racially mixed.' Collective members became divided amongst themselves whilst simultaneously 'some women outside [*SR*] were accusing the whole collective of being anti-semitic' (O'Sullivan, 1). Here, O'Sullivan highlights the identity politics-based conflicts that dominated 1980s feminism and indeed *SR*. This is in fact succinctly and poignantly put when she states that 'each contention had at its core the aggrieved and angry assertions of groups of women who were fighting within the larger women's liberation movement for recognition, for a place of priority in that movement' (O'Sullivan, 1). The conflicts referred to here inform my subsequent three chapters and will be discussed in much greater detail there.

Instead of continuing to focus on the problems these conflicts caused the WLM or *SR* in particular, O'Sullivan chooses to explain how this period of disruption informed her processes in editing the *Women's Health*. O'Sullivan states that the *Reader* is only possible because of the fact that a magazine like *SR* existed, and boldly addressed women's health issues from a feminist perspective. As was true for *SR* with regards to featuring articles on the experiences and struggles of young women, the topic of women's health was not something that was often included in women's magazines. Indeed, feminist approaches to women's health, and in particular women possessing a sense of ownership of their bodies, was one of the developments of the

1970s. Little was published between the groundbreaking *Our Bodies Ourselves* in 1973<sup>22</sup> to burgeoning feminist texts such as Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger's *Women and Health: Feminist Perspectives*, 1994. As O'Sullivan writes in the introduction, when these issues were taken up, the focus was almost exclusively on heterosexual women's health and sexuality. Thus, O'Sullivan appropriately admits that 'health articles in *Spare Rib* have had the same problems as any other in the magazine,' namely that 'there are absences, omissions and political problems in this collection' as 'there is no doubt that throughout most of the 1970s *Spare Rib* articles more often than not assumed that "women" meant "all women," [whilst frequently...] Black women, lesbians, women with disabilities and older women have been largely absent' (O'Sullivan, 2). But what is additionally particularly interesting about O'Sullivan's establishment of the connection between *SR*'s history and the *Women's Health* reader is that it is crafted with an apologetic tone that in many ways communicates a desire for *SR*'s absolution. O'Sullivan writes that *SR* always had 'an eagerness to "do the right thing,"' and in discussing the omissions and political problems of her reader, she states that 'it would be wrong not to acknowledge and understand' them.

O'Sullivan continues this tone as she transitions to the second half of her introduction. As if leaving the magazine to its reputation and her connection to it, she states that *SR* 'is still catching up with its own changes,' but 'as far as health issues go, [in her opinion] it needs more articles which draw out the specific concerns and experiences of the different groups of women so long excluded' (O'Sullivan, 2). She concludes by stating that a feminist politics of health can only happen 'when a connection is made between ill-health and an oppressive society, and when that connection exposes and opposes the sexism, heterosexism, racism and exploitative class relations which run through our institutions and ourselves – that's when self-help becomes political and feminist' (O'Sullivan, 6).

O'Sullivan's *Women and Health* reader and Hemmings differ from the *SR* November 1981 collective. The latter chose to endure 'upheaval' and actual alterations to the magazine in order to make the point of providing space for the inclusion of a multitude of women's political perspectives. In contrast, Hemmings and O'Sullivan sought this space outside the magazine, through their anthologies. But it is also important to note where Hemmings and O'Sullivan depart from one another. In the space of five years, following the publication of Rowe's *Reader* and Hemmings' *Girls* – a time span which contains the very worst of *SR*'s upheavals, as shall become clear in my thesis chapters – O'Sullivan like Hemmings makes sure to acknowledge *SR*'s influence and successes, but she does this whilst at the same time maintaining a very critical distance from the magazine, specifically, by incorporating *SR*'s reputational weaknesses into her arguments alongside its strengths.

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<sup>22</sup> First British edition published in 1978.

## Section 1.4b: Passing References to *SR*

In addition to these four anthologies there is an enormous amount of literature which mentions *SR* fleetingly. None of these sources engage significantly with the magazine, and, for the most part, their reference to *SR* is in one or two sentences. Nonetheless, what is not written about *SR* is in many ways just as important as what has been written about *SR*. I have collected about 50 of the most readily available sources that make casual reference to *SR*, and organised them into categories. These categories tell a story about *SR* as a magazine, and the gaps that exist between and within each category add to that story's narrative.

For one thing, the dearth in literature on *SR* is very surprising given that many of these casual references extol the magazine and its importance. Such references describe *SR* as 'the most influential of the Women's Liberation magazines' (Laing, 39), a 'beacon of British feminism' (Barthel, 823), 'a feminist magazine which was not a commercial venture and managed to survive much longer than might have been predicted at the time' (Allbrook, 63), 'the most widely distributed British feminist magazine' (Patrick, 366), 'the most widely read feminist publication' (Segal, 122; emphasis added), 'the pioneering feminist magazine *Spare Rib*' (Rylance, 57), and an 'extremely important magazine,' without which, it would be difficult to 'imagine writing a history of British feminism in the 1970s' (Doughan, 134).

It is perhaps this 'pioneering' for which *SR* is most revered. Despite being described as a 'magazine of relatively dull format,' 'not a mental chocolate' and one that is 'read largely by feminist insiders [...] out of a sense of duty rather than delight' (Barthel, 823), many texts place a great deal of emphasis on the very beginning of the magazine. These references seem to reiterate Rowe's introduction to *The Spare Rib Reader* by recalling how Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott founded the magazine in 1972 with just £2000, selling out their initial print run of 20,000 copies (Neustatter, 150; Grocock, 102; Campbell, 17; Bouchier, 101). An enormous amount of literature has been printed in newspapers and online sources retelling this account. This is undoubtedly connected to the fact that most of this newspaper and online material is based on interviews with Rowe and Boycott. As the founders of the magazine, they were continuously interviewed about their involvement in the WLM and the result is an intertwining of *SR*'s 'beacon of feminism' and 'pioneering' status, and Rowe and Boycott.<sup>23</sup> Other texts highlight Rowe's and Boycott's involvement with the underground press (Bell 1975; Hartley 1982; Laing 1994)<sup>24</sup>, and, specifically that *SR* 'was both a product of and a reaction to the "alternative" magazines of the sixties [...] as well as an alternative to commercial women's magazines' (Merz and Lee-Browne, 42-3).<sup>25</sup> Perhaps accordingly, *SR* is also referenced in relationship to other magazines of the time

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Daly (2008) and Bedell (2008), and, for the rare interview with Sue O'Sullivan, see <http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/F/flourbombs/essay.html>.

<sup>24</sup> See also <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/Sixties/Feminism/publications.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> See also April Carter's *The Politics of Women's Rights* (1988).

– most of which had something in common with *SR*, whether that be feminist politics in such publications as *Red Rag* and *Shrew* (Forster, 152), or sexual and left politics as in *Gay News* (Hartley 1982; Laing 1994).

*SR* is also referenced in comparison to *Cosmopolitan* for the exact opposite reason. Indeed, when such references occur, it is to draw a distinction between *SR* and a magazine such as *Cosmo*: ‘that yawning chasm between *Cosmopolitan* and *Spare Rib* is effectively empty’ (Chinyelu, 42); ‘it never achieved anything approaching the popularity of mainstream “glossies” like *Cosmopolitan*,’ (Merz and Lee-Browne, 42-3); ‘from the glossy *Cosmopolitan* to the left-wing *Spare Rib*’ (Boris, 1992). Finally, yet another way in which *SR* is commonly mentioned is in reference to its circulation figures. One source states that the magazine continued until 1994 (Law, 239) and circulation figures ranged from ‘a small circulation’ of 20,000 to 30,000 (Barthel, 239); to 22,000 (Neustatter, 150) to a regular monthly circulation ‘through subscriptions and sales [...of] about 32,000 readers’ (Bouchier, 101) to reaching a ‘zenith,’ in the 1980s, of 25,000 (Law, 239).

The references mentioned thus far construct a more or less popular historiography of *SR* that locks the magazine into a popular idea of what it was, did, and therefore, in many ways still thought of as. This is reflected by the choice to include information on *SR*’s circulation figures, despite the fact that these are inconsistent. In this narrative, consistency of circulation figures is not the point. Rather, the point is that *SR* sold magazines, and those magazines were circulated to many women, and at a time when this venture was in and of itself completely novel – indeed, pioneering.

What I find particularly interesting about these references to *SR*’s ‘beginnings’ is that they appear wistful and indeed, somewhat nostalgic. This idea of two women founding a magazine that would go on for over 20 years is what is deemed to be important about *SR*. Whilst I do not wish to belittle the great feat that was undertaken – and successfully at that – when Rowe and Boycott started *SR*, neither co-founder stayed on the collective for even half of the magazine’s lifetime; Boycott left after just two years in 1973 and Rowe left in 1976.

Accordingly, *SR* is often subsumed into larger discussions on the WLM, or feminism in general (Dahlerup 1986; Hemmings 1986; Caine 1997).<sup>26</sup> In these instances, *SR* is not the topic of focus, but is referred to as part of a general history or combination of issues relating to the WLM or feminism. This is also the case for *SR* in other disparate subject areas, such as literature (Merz and Lee-Browne 2003; Winship 1987; Davies et al. 1987), social movements (Lent 2001), women instrumentalists (Reddington 2004), lesbian/gay texts (Gay Left Collective 1980; Dahlerup 1986; Grocock 1995), disability (McCarthy 1999), images and aesthetics (Frueh 2000; Moore-Gilbert 1994) and ‘the appearance of food-related items’ such as recipes (Floyd and Forster 2003).

Similarly, there are many examples of texts in which *SR* is only mentioned because the former

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<sup>26</sup> See also Kramarae, et al. (1992); Mirza (1997); Holland (1984); Kanter et al., eds. (1984); Griffin and Braidotti (2002); Neustatter (1990).

references an article, essay or letter previously published in *SR* on a particular topic. In many cases, this referencing functions as a way of articulating that topic's importance. This not only emphasises *SR*'s popularity but also communicates the wide range of material *SR* covered, including texts on abortion (Fletcher 1995; Amos and Pamar 2005), women's committees (Harriss 1989), pornography (Assiter and Avedon 1993; Segal 1990), the peace movement (McDonagh 1985), lesbian housing (Egerton 1990), women's conferences (Fritz 1979).

Finally, the remainder of the references to *SR* that one may find are related to the contentious debates – over anti-lesbianism, racism, and anti-Semitism/Zionism – that took place amongst the collective members, which were made public on the pages of the magazine. Some of these references take a more general approach to the debates, highlighting the overall conflict that the magazine experienced, particularly during the early to mid-1980s. Segal (2007) writes that 'the magazine [...] was tearing itself apart from within: accusations of anti-lesbianism, heterosexual privilege, racism, anti-Semitism, class privilege, divided women' (Segal, 122). More specifically, Ardill and O'Sullivan (2005) state:

*Spare Rib* spent much of 1980 tearing itself apart over the issue of sexuality. The collective was split over whether a submitted article claiming that lesbians had silenced heterosexuals in the women's movement was anti-lesbian and, secondly, whether *Spare Rib* (all white women at that time) differed over the article and the lesbians differed among themselves. (105)

Similarly Gerrard (1997) argues:

By the mid-1980s [*SR*] was struggling. The feminist magazine which in the 1970s had captured a mood, expressed a common outrage, had failed to move into a harder and shinier decade. While Thatcher changed the direction of politics for good and women all over the country suffered, *Spare Rib* fragmented into bitter, furious schisms. The black woman-Jewish woman debate tore the magazine in half and the readers disappeared down the tear. (336)

Other references tend to focus on the specificities of the three debates. In *SR* the lesbian/anti-lesbian debate was not as explosive as the second and third debates. This is reflected in the amount of literature referring to this as opposed to the final two debates. But also, interestingly, the three major debates are often discussed as two debates: the first, on anti-lesbianism, remains the first; the second and third, on racism and anti-Semitism/Zionism, are combined into one. This suggests that the first debate seemed more contained than the second and third debates, and possibly also that it did not receive as much public attention. But the references on the first debate make an important point which is that lesbianism never reached the same level of contentiousness as race within the WLM or *SR*. In fact, one of the factors in the first debate was about the presence or absence of writing on lesbianism in *SR*. Grocock (1994) argues that 'in the early issues, lesbian topics were noticeably absent' and that 'there was a wish to avoid controversy, and lesbianism was clearly a contentious issue' (102). Bouchier (1983) suggests that 'some of the most difficult debates in the movement [such as...] the place of lesbianism in feminism, for example – were muted in the pages of *Spare Rib* for fear of deepening existing

divisions and giving ammunition to the enemies of the movement' (101).<sup>27</sup>

With regard to the references that deal with the 'combined' racism/Zionism conflict, several focus on what they see as the anti-Jewish aspects of the debates (Bard 1991; Campbell 1984). However, most are completely entrenched in the complicated intersections of racism and Zionism. Barrett and McIntosh (2005) mention 'the dramatic struggles on *Spare Rib* in the course of 1983, when "women of colour" castigated the existing collective for its racism, and when women attacking the state of Israel were accused of anti-semitism and those criticizing them were in their turn accused of racism, were so highly charged that we tended to keep our distance' (23). Kushner (1993) similarly explains that 'in 1982/3 the journal *Spare Rib* was left bitterly divided after accusations from black women that the women's movement was fundamentally racist, and from Jewish women that the growing anti-Zionism in *Spare Rib* was in effect anti-Semitic' (143).

Other references to the combination of the race/Zionism debate discuss the 40 unpublished letters,<sup>28</sup> or the controversial 1982 article, 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism,'<sup>29</sup> which prompted the eruption of the third debate. Kandel (2002) for example writes:

In the UK *Spare Rib* published a series of unusually violent (and one-sided) texts and interviews, the first one asserting that anti-Zionism was a necessary aspect of feminism. [...] For around a year the journal refused to publish any of the numerous letters of protest it received, including those from Israeli feminists who were critical of their own government. (185)

In addition, Bulkin (1984) stated that 'the multi-racial collective which edits *Spare Rib*, the London-based feminist monthly, decided that it would print none of the letters it has received from Jewish women in response to the statement of an Israeli woman, "if a woman calls herself feminist she should consciously call herself/ anti-Zionist"' (180).

These sources about *SR*, although always very brief, are important for their somewhat 'factual' representation of the debate. Whilst many briefly engage with the debates, it is almost always done by situating them within the larger context of the WLM and feminist politics. This is by no means 'wrong' as the debates were indeed situated within these contexts. However, the debates encompassed and were the source of much more controversial political questions related to feminism than the article in question or the factual information that 40 letters were prevented from being published.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps referencing the decision to not publish the 40 letters was employed as a symbol or a metaphor, or as an attempt to understand the roots of the conflicts; these were the factors that could be tangibly accounted for. The remainder may have indeed been too complicated, muddled and, literally, debatable. The need to make sense of the underlying politics of the controversy, along with just how seriously the reverberations of the controversy were felt,

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<sup>27</sup> See also Wallsgrove (1986), and Barthel (1988).

<sup>28</sup> See Julia Bard (1991); Erica Burman (1994). I shall discuss the significance of the 'unpublished letters' in Chapter 4.

<sup>29</sup> See also Katie Campbell's 'Boning Up on *Spare Rib*' (1984). I shall address this article in detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>30</sup> Lynne Segal briefly addresses the complexity of this issue in her memoir *Making Trouble* (2007).

can be found in the amount of referential material to *SR* and on the topics of the debates (Bourne 1987; Parmar 1989; Kanter, et al. 1984). In other words, there was enough public discussion about 'the *SR* debates' that some of the articles or comments originally printed in *SR* on the topics of the debates as they occurred, were again printed in other journals, anthologies and papers later. However, it should be noted that these discussions were always very brief; something which I shall rectify in my thesis.

The final category of this section of my literature review which I would like to discuss is the one in which references suggest something about the demise or collapse of the magazine. There are not many sources which make reference to this, and they only do so fleetingly. I take up the issue of *SR*'s collapse in detail in my thesis conclusion. The texts that comment on *SR*'s eventual demise echo the passing references to the magazine that I have hinted at above. The actual reasons behind the cessation are discussed in various ways. Law (2000) suggests that 'it closed through financial difficulties' (239). Similarly, Sudbury (1998) had previously argued that '*Spare Rib*'s closure due to lack of funds coincided with a protracted argument on the letters page about whether the magazine had shifted its focus from "women's issues" to "world politics"' (213). Sudbury also mentions that around the same time 'three of the five of *Feminist Review*'s black members left after acrimonious battles over the content of the journal.' This is important to consider, as, lastly, McCarthy (1999) asserts that 'conflicts around race and ethnicity and wider economic factors [...] led to the collapse of not only *Spare Rib* but also a number of other women's collectives' (31). Ultimately *SR* suffered from a combination of factors as the magazine reached the end of its lifetime. But it is also interesting to note that there are far more accounts of *SR*'s beginning and its importance than its end and the reasons behind that. My interest is not in giving more weight to the end than the beginning, or vice versa for that matter, but to draw attention to the fact that *SR*'s origins are much more readily addressed than its demise.

In the next section of this literature review, I discuss academic work on *SR*, and as will be demonstrated, none of these sources engage with this issue, but rather seem to reiterate what little is written about *SR*.

### Section 1.4c: Critical Analyses of *SR*

Academic work on *SR* is sparse. There is no single volume that deals with *SR*. Instead it is discussed as part of more general accounts of women's magazines. To date these include: Brian Braithwaite and Joan Barrell's *The Business of Women's Magazines* (1988), Brian Braithwaite's *Women's Magazines: The First 300 Years* (1995), Selina Todd's 'Models and Menstruation: *Spare Rib* Magazine, Feminism, Femininity and Pleasure' (1999), Simone Murray's *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* (2004) and Janice Winship's *Inside Women's Magazines* (1987). I have organised my discussion of the above texts in this manner primarily because it



follows the degree of specific attention given to *SR*. Thus, whilst Braithwaite's *Women's Magazines* was published after Winship's *Inside Women's Magazines*, Winship's analysis covers an entire chapter, whereas Braithwaite's study includes one paragraph on *SR*. Yet, I have kept the two publications by Braithwaite together, because, taken together they communicate something about the trajectory and reception of *SR* magazine that is most easily – conveniently – grasped when in closer proximity to one another, and it is with these two texts that I begin.

Braithwaite and Barrell (1988) explore all aspects of producing women's magazines. They cover content, editorial control, marketing, target audiences, publishing, distribution and finance. They focus primarily on the 1950s and 1960s, but also include information in their second, 1988 edition on women's magazines from the 1970s until approximately 1987. They describe *SR* as 'committed and unrelentingly "women's lib"' and state that 'it is published and run by a dedicated group of women.' They write:

By glossier standards the magazine is never far from the breadline but it has persevered over the years and has outlasted flashier contemporaries. No circulation figures are published [...] and its figures do not appear in the National Readership Survey. To the outsider it appears rather drab and colourless, a bit like a political tract. The advertising is sparse and it is not the kind of magazine one could recommend for a jolly good read. Subjects dear to its heart are women's lib in all its forms. It is uncompromising stuff which obviously supplies a real, if rather esoteric, need to a minority audience, and has to be considered as part of the rich fabric of women's magazines. (Braithwaite and Barrell, 62)

Braithwaite and Barrell's description of *SR* is highly pejorative. They present it as visually unappealing. They dismiss the possibility of *SR* as a 'jolly good read,' instead portraying a stern old maiden – drab, colourless and uncompromising. What is more, this image is explicitly connected to the *WLM*. Its 'subjects' are actually 'uncompromising stuff' in disguise, which Braithwaite and Barrell seem almost stunned to admit appeal to an audience. This audience itself is portrayed in a condescending tone: it is a 'real' audience, but nonetheless 'esoteric and of a minority population.' 'Rich,' in this sense, has the ring of 'diversified,' leaving the reader with the impression that *SR* is an odd puzzle piece in the milieu of women's magazines. What is particularly interesting about this is that Braithwaite and Barrell are writing about *SR* in 1988, after it had already 'reached its zenith' and established itself as the 'beacon' of British Women's Liberation.<sup>31</sup>

This observation is even more significant when compared with Braithwaite's 1995 book, *Women's Magazines: The First 300 Years*, published seven years later. *Women's Magazines* is essentially a documentation of women's magazines from 1693-1994. Here, Braithwaite again describes *SR* in one paragraph as 'the antithesis of *Cosmopolitan*: unglamorous, uncommercial, radical, feminist, political,' which also began in 1972. As mentioned above, *SR* was often compared to *Cosmo* particularly for the ways in which the two occupied opposite ends of a

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Barthel, who referred to *SR* as the 'beacon of British feminism,' did so in the same year that Braithwaite and Barrell's book was published (1988).

continuum of women's magazine style and content, and Braithwaite initially continues his description in this manner. Specifically, he explains how *SR* differed from other women's magazines published at the time, in that *SR* 'carried no mainstream advertising, running instead classified advertising for folk festivals, consciousness-raising groups, political rallies, lesbian events and the like.' Then, however, Braithwaite writes:

*Spare Rib* was a magazine with a positive drive and, in comparison to the lively glossy titles from the big, commercial publishers, looked in those early days as if it had been produced in the back street of Tomsk. It never printed more than 20,000 copies, knew its market and enjoyed the iconoclastic, left-wing Greenham Common reputation. The life span of twenty years was a tribute to its uncompromising and honest commitment to the feminist cause. (Braithwaite, 102)

The change in Braithwaite's 1995 description in comparison to that written by him and Barrell in 1988 is astonishing. Whereas in the previous description, Braithwaite and Barrell were quite critical of the magazine, here Braithwaite's tone is much more celebratory. *SR* now has a 'positive drive' and despite still being visually unattractive, has a reputation that has been 'enjoyed' for its iconoclasm. For Braithwaite, *SR* has remained 'uncompromising.' However, in the earlier description, that uncompromising nature was in relation to 'stuff' that an esoteric, minority population desired. Here, 'uncompromising' is paired with 'commitment' – not only an 'honest' one, but one connected not to 'stuff,' but the 'feminist cause.'

Braithwaite's representation of *SR* thus changed dramatically between the years 1988 and 1995. This occurred after *SR* had ceased its publication. 1988 was only five years before the magazine's collective disbanded, and by that time, *SR* had been in existence for almost twenty years, having gained a significant popular reputation. Perhaps, too, the influence of political correctness is worth noting. One might argue that Braithwaite's more positive perception of *SR* tends to indicate a memorializing of the magazine, as well as the impact of new forms of political correctness that made the language employed in the 1988 edition unacceptable.

In her online essay, 'Models and Menstruation: *Spare Rib* Magazine, Feminism, Femininity and Pleasure,' Selina Todd also in many ways memorializes *SR*. She argues:

The significance of *Spare Rib* was that it suggested that women's pleasure was an area that feminism should engage with; it offered women a space to explore the potentialities of the relationship between the feminine fantasy embodied in the fashion model, and the reality of women's lives: work, family, sex, bodies. (77)

I take issue with Todd's argument, on the basis that her study focuses on only the first two years of the magazine's existence (June 1972 to March 1974), and that *SR*'s 'significance' is determined by 'its first 21 issues' (60). I have already stated in this introduction that the first few years of the magazine were a period of development in terms of the magazine's aims. *SR* was trying to appeal to readers more comfortable with traditional glossies, but was also moving towards a decided shift

in being more explicitly a Women's Liberation Magazine. Todd acknowledges that *SR* continued its existence until 1993, and indeed references Rowe's *Reader* in which Rowe (as mentioned) articulates the 'jumble' of messages in the early years of the magazine. However, she asserts that it is precisely because these early messages were jumbled, that makes her 'examination of the magazine's early years [...] valuable.' Her 'study,' she explains, 'explore[s] the dilemmas and contradictions hinted at by Rowe, which, [...] provide an important insight into the evolution of a wider feminist challenge to the social and cultural construction of femininity, and the difficulties inherent in such a process' (60). This exploration is indeed an interesting one, and Todd goes on to investigate femininity within *SR* in useful ways. However, Todd's generalisations, particularly with regard to situating the 'feminist debates within the magazine' in the first two years of its existence, are misleading. I realise that my reference to *SR*'s 'debates' necessarily implies the three I discuss in my thesis, and that this implication reifies those debates as *the SR* debates in much the same ways that Todd's essay reifies *SR*, its topics and 'debates' of the first two years of the magazine. But I am explicit in acknowledging that the debates I have chosen are, indeed, chosen from several debates that took place in the magazine. In contrast, whilst Todd comments on the fact that *SR* existed for another 18 or so years, she makes no such acknowledgment of debates in *SR* other than those that related to the feminist challenge of certain constructions of femininity. I think this problematic, but also emblematic of the tendency to situate *SR* within the context of the 1970s, out of which it emerged.

*Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* (2004) by Simone Murray is an investigation of feminist publishing efforts in the twentieth century. For the most part, Murray makes use of British examples of feminist presses and publishing houses as case studies to identify thematic issues related to the 'mixed' aspect of feminist publishing, which involve an interest in communicating a political message in combination with the need for making a profit. In *Mixed Media*, Murray only fleetingly mentions *SR* magazine in ways similar to the many references I have previously discussed. Whilst she does not go into detail about *SR*'s specific content or debates, her analysis of collectively-produced or managed feminist publishing endeavours such as *Virago*, *Sheba Feminist Publishers*, *Pandora Press* and *Silvermoon Books*, amongst others, is useful for my investigation of *SR*. There are three points that Murray makes in her book, which I would like to outline below: the general difficulties almost all feminist publishing collectives faced, the implications of women's unpaid work for the collectives, and a potential financial incentive in *SR*'s attempt to appeal to all women.

Murray illuminates some of the struggles that typically presented difficulty for female collectives involved in 'mixed media' publications. She addresses the struggles many presses endured as their white, heterosexual, middle-class orientation was questioned by black women, and the adjustments many collectives made to become more inclusive of various groups of women. However, Murray points out that even those publishing collectives that developed primarily out of the need and desire to address women of colour, such as *Sheba Press*, were also quite fraught

with internal conflicts during their lifetime. Thus, what Murray provides is a sketch of the challenge of collective publishing not because of specifically racial, sexual or class topic matter, but because, simply, 'judgements' on personal preferences were often, 'invariably, at odds' (145).

Murray states that to try and resolve differences, 'elaborate consensus models for arriving at group decisions were implemented' (145). She references the experience of the Lesbian Writing and Publishing Collective (LWPC) in 'editing a 1986 anthology for the Women's Press' to demonstrate how despite these models, it was still hard 'to make any generalisations about why a piece of fiction worked for one of us and not another' (Murray citing LWPC 1986, 145). In this case, Murray writes that the LWPC took to writing a collective 'statement of the group's editorial policies [...] as a way of consciously acknowledging value judgements – even if not all the individuals involved actually subscribed to them' (145). This same practice of oftentimes non-unanimous collectively written editorials occurred repeatedly during the history of *SR*, as did the disagreements over political priorities and the silencing of issues that Murray goes on to mention. But what is most important about this contentiousness is the awareness that 'judgements' on content or preference were invariably linked to personal politics, and Murray puts this well when she writes that 'inevitably,' for collectives involved in the publication of political feminist material, 'at some point, the political [becomes] personal' (146). This inevitability was only exacerbated by 'a strong emphasis on group solidarity and a low tolerance for dissent' (147). This, too, is a very important consideration, as it explains much about the frustrations of working in a collective. To be clear, collective members were more or less trapped in a double-bind: dissent was not encouraged, but differences were real; stifling dissent and ignoring difference might have worked in favour of solidarity, but it only caused resentment and thus further divisions, hampering the 'goal' of solidarity. Thus, as Murray suggests, "unstructured groups may be very effective in getting women to talk about their lives; they aren't very good for getting things done" (Murray citing Freeman 1970, 149). Whilst *SR* did indeed get things done for over 20 years, its professionalism was often interrupted by internal struggle – most notably when the decision to include 'Sisterhood is Plain Sailing' in the July 1983 issue of the magazine was made at the last minute, causing a discrepancy between the contents page and the actual articles in that issue. I shall return to this in Chapter 4.

Finally, I would like to turn to two additional observations that Murray makes about aspects of women's collective publishing that are applicable to *SR*. The first is the 'detrimental' aspect of women working in the collective voluntarily for little or no wages. Murray highlights the lack of emphasis by feminist publishers on financial gains, being more concerned with the advancement of a political agenda than a capitalist venture. She states that it was typical for women's publishing collectives to accept or even encourage help with their production from interested women who were willing to work for free. As mentioned during my discussion of the various *SR Readers*, this was also typical of *SR*. Murray, however, points out that this practice, which was seen as an extension of collaboratively produced women's literature, 'effectively guarantees a self-selecting,

middle-class membership – no boon to organisations publicly committed to representing the variety of women's voices' (151). Whilst one should not necessarily assume that just because there are middle-class women helping out at any particular feminist magazine, that magazine will therefore necessarily be middle-class, it is worth considering how members of a collective, already frustrated with the lack of diversity in what was increasingly seen to be a homogenous Movement, became even more frustrated, leading them to question their involvement in such collectives.

The last observation that I wish to mention is related to *SR*'s definition of itself as a magazine for all women, and, accordingly, market itself as such. As stated, most feminist publishing groups were not primarily focused on profit. However, it was costly to produce a magazine every month. Murray suggests that there were 'two obvious ways to fund an alternative press: [...] aside from requesting charity-type donations, to amass revenue from sales either to already converted feminists or to women who are not already self-declared feminists but who might be receptive to feminism's message' (155). It is hard to discount the fact that 'only an expanding readership can underwrite an expanding budget' (155). *SR*'s political agenda did not provide it with more than a precarious financial basis.

The most sustained, published academic work on *SR* magazine to date is Janice Winship's (1987) '*Spare Rib*: "a women's liberation magazine"' in her *Inside Women's Magazines*. Winship's account of *SR* is somewhat limited in that it was written during the magazine's lifetime, and can therefore not offer a holistic reflection on the magazine's complete run. It is nonetheless an insightful critique of the magazine, and in many ways, perhaps that is because Winship's observations were made whilst *SR* was still enduring the difficulties of the debates. Indeed, there are a number of points Winship makes on the structure of the magazine, readers' letters, its 'dilemmas' and editorial practices, which are pertinent to my thesis. But in addition to these points, Winship also constructs a vivid idea of how *SR* was situated amongst other magazines at the time – how it looked and how that impacted on its management – which is important in understanding *SR* as a women's magazine. As such, it is this 'picture' of the magazine that I will turn to first.

At the beginning of her chapter on *SR*, Winship references Braithwaite and Barrell's portrayal of *SR* quoted above. In response, Winship writes, "'Jolly" *Spare Rib* is not; a "good read" of a different sort *Spare Rib* assuredly is [...]'. 'Undoubtedly, too,' she continues, '*Spare Rib* is something of a cultural shock. Unlike commercial magazines it expresses less a fragile contentment with women's lot than a critical discontent; it is less a women's magazine than a women's liberation magazine' (123). By a 'women's magazine' Winship refers to standard 'glossy' prototypes. These magazines were laden with 'sexual and domestic imagery', advertisements for popular commercial consumer products, bold, bright colours and excessive femininity (127-8). Winship highlights how some of the 'early design [...] had much in common with the alternative press' *SR*'s founders emerged from. But, perhaps more importantly, she entertains the notion that the decision to avoid these areas of consumerism and excessive femininity was connected to a feminist perspective on the 'austerity' of women's lives at the time. She highlights the fact that

because *SR* did not participate in the 'mainstream' commercialisation of women's magazines, it therefore had freedom in some of its managerial practices – specifically its collective rather than hierarchical internal organisation and its freedom to contract/hire women with relatively little or no previous writing experience. Whilst these freedoms tended to come at the price of 'almost continual financial crisis,' she makes clear that *SR*'s opposition to 'consumer culture' and its 'representations' was a conscious priority for the magazine (129-30).

Winship provides an excellent summary of the features and topics typically presented in the formative first few years of the magazine (similarly to the magazine's beginnings, which are also, incidentally, acknowledged here using the more or less 'standard' version of the story: Rowe, Boycott, '*Spare Tit*' and £2,000). She also discusses readers' letters in *SR*. However, whereas the texts mentioned previously in this introduction focused on readers' letters almost exclusively in relation to the withholding of 40 of them by the collective during the final debate of the magazine, here Winship helps to demonstrate the ways in which readers' general letters, along with *SR*'s classifieds, advertisements and reviews, contributed to what I earlier referred to as the dialogical aspects of the magazine.

Winship argues that 'through readers' letters, news section, short list, classifieds, ads and reviews, *Spare Rib* took part in the creation and affirmation of a collective feminist culture beyond its pages' (134). She continues this assertion by stating that advertisements for social events 'publicise what would otherwise be isolated events in far-flung places' and that therefore, 'unlike commercial magazines it does not leave you on your own once you have closed its pages' (134-5). This observation points to the importance of consciousness-raising groups and the notions of 'sisterhood' that were so dominant at the beginning of Women's Liberation. This is only strengthened when Winship writes: '*Spare Rib*'s letters are not, as they might be in *Cosmo*, simply voicing opinion. Rather women participate in an ongoing dialogue and share experiences, and in this way begin to take hold of their lives' (136). Taking this further, it could be argued that *SR* facilitated this process. *SR* did not offer "'Auntie"' advice 'nor [...] practical solutions [...] but rather it sparks off discussion' (136).

In her reading of *SR*'s reviews, Winship goes to some lengths to describe what she perceives as a fairly authoritarian feminist approach in *SR*'s reviews of art, books and films: *SR* has a specific 'view' of what is and is not feminist and anything falling outside that definition is easily dismissed. This perspective is interesting to consider for the ways in which it may or may not contradict *SR*'s engagement with its readers. *SR* readers could either feel 'shut down' in terms of voicing their opinions or interpret *SR*'s dismissal of certain cultural productions as a form of 'spark[ing] off discussion.' However, I am more interested in Winship's opinion that *SR*'s reviews were 'emblematic of a wider tendency in the women's movement: the espousal of a feminism which partly denies not only the experiences of other women but also [of oneself]' (140). Winship argues that this contributes to the 'uncomfortable oscillation' between what women think they should want as feminists and what they are drawn to 'for social and ideological reasons' (140). I

find this observation particularly pertinent not only for how it in many ways parallels *SR*'s 'balancing act' between outside and inside pressures within the movement, collective and its readers, but also because it indicates a 'divide' between personal integrity and the expectations of a feminist agenda, and, specifically, the conflict that erupted in the negotiation of the two.

Finally, I would like to turn to Winship's analysis of *SR*'s 'dilemmas,' and the role *SR*'s editorial practices played in them. Winship begins this analysis with a quote from the editorial of the December 1983 issue of the magazine, in which *SR* declared itself 'no longer a white women's magazine.' Winship writes that 'this broadening of its address to include black women and to take on an anti-racist politics is part of a longer, often tortuous endeavour in which *Spare Rib* has shifted from its early preoccupations with the interests of white, middle-class, heterosexual and relatively young women' (141). The impetus for the broadening was, of course, the recognition of differences amongst feminists and the challenge of identity politics. Winship argues that the movement's fundamental principles of prioritising women's personal experiences became complicated when one woman's experience was interrogated or given less priority than another woman's experience. The result, she asserts, was women feeling 'threatened' – 'I either crumble or attack with anger' – and a 'conceptualisation' of politics 'through a language of "doing battle"' (142).

'*Spare Rib*,' Winship states, '[was not only] caught in these tensions,' but 'its editorial task' was made more difficult 'since the demise of the women's movement's annual conferences in 1978' (143). Winship argues that the annual Women's Liberation Conferences made available a space for the 'public airing of political differences and the discussion of controversial issues' (143). Without that space and, indeed, opportunity, the airing and discussion of these topics, issues and the WLM itself, transferred to the pages of *SR* magazine. On the one hand, this is what made *SR* such a dynamic magazine – the engagement with contentious issues in which various groups of women had real investment. On the other hand, it is also what caused enormous conflict amongst the magazine's collective – conflict that Winship argues was exacerbated by its editorial practices.

Here, Winship makes a case for *SR*'s sense of responsibility to the WLM. She argues that 'as a national institution *Spare Rib* undoubtedly occupies a special place, with its collective likely to have a much more comprehensive sense of the women's movement than most other groups of feminists' (146). As a result of this perceived 'comprehensive sense of the women's movement,' *SR* felt the need to protect readers unfamiliar with feminism, 'introducing feminist ideas and politics' whilst not forgetting to guide them 'through possible conflicting positions' (146). Indeed, Winship acknowledges that 'readers do not want to be, nor are in a position to take on *Spare Rib*'s editorial dilemmas' and that therefore, 'judicious silence' from *SR* was 'preferable to a plethora of confusions' (146). In a later section she adds that 'when differences arise *in* the women's movement they tend also to be ones between [the] collective members' (emphasis as in original). Given this, it seems unreasonable to assume that *SR* would be any less susceptible to feeling 'threatened,' or indeed likely to escape publishing material 'through a language of "doing battle".'

This is perhaps why *SR* repeatedly tended towards censorship when confronted with controversial issues. Winship argues that *SR* might have done well to make known its dilemmas to its readers. Indeed, she asserts that ‘the risk’ of suppressing the voices of women’s opinions could essentially mean ‘rendering’ those opinions – and the experiences which inform them – ‘not-OK’ and thus pushing them back into the sphere of the ‘personal as private’ (147). This is an important point, but as I shall show in subsequent chapters, it does not fully take into account *SR*’s many efforts to appeal to its readers.<sup>32</sup> *SR* in fact undertook a number of strategies in an attempt to negotiate the challenges it faced as a collective. It is worth stating that during the course of this negotiation, *SR* consistently veered between censorship and public exposition, neither of which, as I shall analyse, fully ameliorated the difficulties it encountered.

To conclude, there has been no sustained academic investigation of *SR*. Further, as I have demonstrated, the references and investigations that do exist are fleeting and subsume *SR* into a larger topic or analysis. Therefore, my thesis presents the first detailed textual analysis of *SR*. It does so by focussing on the ways in which three major debates that occupied both the *WLM* and the *SR* collective were played out on the pages of *SR* magazine. Through my thesis, I add to the literature on women’s magazines and collective publishing and offer insights into the nuances of feminist identity politics as articulated in a specific feminist magazine. In the following section I shall explain how I went about my exploration.

## Section 1.5: Methodology

There were many different ways in which I could have written about *SR*, and, accordingly, a great number of theses could come out of an investigation of the magazine. My chosen form of analysis resulted in part from my initial unfamiliarity with the magazine. Due to this, my first step was to read through its entire 20-year run. What stood out the most to me during this first reading was the idea of ‘politics’ as it was presented in each month’s issue. Many other magazines published at the time, such as *Women’s Own*, in contrast to *SR*, did not engage with political issues at all. This stood out to me from my current historical position, but I realise that it would also have been equally prominent back then. *SR* was committed to engaging in politics and others, simply, were not. This prompted my curiosity into how *SR* was situated within the British political context of the 1970s and 1980s, and I accordingly sought out secondary sources on *SR*.

However, as mentioned, there was very little material available to help me formulate a more coherent conception of the magazine. I therefore instead turned to literature on British history for information on the context during which *SR* was produced. Given that *SR* was intricately linked to

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<sup>32</sup> Winship acknowledges some of *SR*’s reader-orientated editorials, explaining their collective practices and principles, but she by no means accounts for the frequency and, indeed, urgency with which *SR* repeatedly appealed to its readership, as I shall discuss in the subsequent chapters.



the British WLM, I also read texts on the Movement and the evolution of feminist politics as they developed during the early 1970s to the early 1990s. Texts such as Sheila Rowbotham's *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (1973), Beverley Bryan et al.'s *Heart of the Race* (1985), Selma James' *Strangers and Sisters* (1985), Amanda Sebestyen's '68, '78, '88 (1988), Scarlett McGwire's *Transforming Moments* (1989), Jeffrey Weeks' *Coming Out* (1990) and Heidi Safia Mirza's *Black British Feminism* (1997), amongst others, helped me to construct a picture of this evolution.

After having completed this secondary source reading, I then returned to the magazine for a more detailed exploration. Effectively, I undertook a closer textual analysis. I paid specific attention to the instances in which 'politics' were mentioned, and noticed that there tended to be a great deal of discussion generated around three issues in particular: anti-lesbianism, racism and anti-Zionism. Having identified these three issues, I then investigated each of them systematically. I read through all of the magazines noting all the articles, editorials and readers' letters that related to each issue. Once I had done this, I summarised in note form the content of all the primary source material I had collected, and then organised this information chronologically. This allowed me to identify the arguments involved in each of the issues, and how, as well as when, those arguments evolved.

I then again consulted secondary source material, this time as it related to the context of the UK, and the three debates in particular. I consulted texts such as Abbott and Love's *American Sappho Was a Right On Woman* (1973), Jeffrey Weeks' *Sex, Politics and Society* (1989), David Cesarani's *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry* (1990), John Solomos' *Race and Racism in Britain* (2003), as well as researching the history of immigration laws in Britain. I then returned to my selected textual material from *SR* and I analysed each of the arguments individually, and situated them within the context of the UK and the British WLM.

Before moving on to outline the structure of my thesis, I would like to comment on two additional methodological decisions. The first is a simple wish to explain how I use certain terms throughout this thesis. When I use the abbreviation '*SR*' I refer to the magazine itself. To distinguish this from the editorial collective when I refer specifically to *SR* magazine's collective, I use the phrases 'the collective,' '*SR*'s collective,' or 'the magazine's collective.' Secondly, it is worth pointing out in advance that I quote quite heavily from the *SR* text. This is done intentionally, as the magazine is not readily available anymore for personal perusal or consultation, and, more importantly, it is important to me that the words printed in the magazine be used to convey a sense of the articles, letters and editorials' content and tone. My analysis is of the debates as presented in *SR*, but it is also in many ways an exploration of how those debates were presented. The tediousness with which some articles invoke a certain rhetoric and the intensity with which others express anger are essential to understanding the impact these selections made and in imagining how they might have been received by readers.

## Section 1.6: The Structure of the Thesis

The structure of my thesis emerged quite organically from my methodological approaches and resulted in both a chronological as well as a thematic organisation. I had three particular areas of interest, and I therefore devoted one chapter to each issue.

In Chapter 2 I focus on the anti-lesbian debate. This was the first debate to surface in *SR* and in this chapter I analyse the general nature and trajectory of this debate. However, Chapter 2 also functions as an introduction to the magazine through examples of readers' letters, articles and editorials. In doing so, it provides insight into the editorial difficulties of the collective and, in particular, their struggles with areas of controversy, which resurface in each of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 focuses on the development of race and racism within British culture and the WLM as presented in *SR* magazine. This issue began with the introduction of a series of articles on Asian immigrants and the labour unions during the 1970s. However, as race riots took place and the national agenda on immigration became tougher, black and Asian women participated in coalition-building activities, and race and racism specifically within the WLM – and *SR* – became a site of interrogation. The eruption of this debate occurred when *SR* made efforts to become a racially mixed collective, and the black women who joined the collective made their grievances known. In Chapter 3, I then analyse the ways in which the race debates took shape in *SR*.

Chapter 4 documents how the racism explored in Chapter 3 completely subsumed the Zionist/Anti-Zionist debate that was sparked off as the result of the publication of the 1982 article, 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism.' The article, in which one of the authors declared that feminism necessitated a political commitment to anti-Zionism, prompted heated discussions from Jewish feminists and readers, and completely divided the *SR* collective racially, in their internal conflict over whether or not to publish the many letters they had received in response to the article. The prolonged debates and tensions that arose from this conflict are the focus of this chapter.

The conclusion of my thesis draws together my analysis of the three debates, specifically as they reveal patterns about the ways in which they were handled by, and presented in *SR*. In my chapters, I discuss evidence of how the collective dealt with the debates; in my conclusion I draw together the ways in which the handling of the debates is indicative of why the magazine ultimately ceased publication. I shall now turn to the introduction of the first debate.

## Chapter 2: Issues of Lesbianism in *Spare Rib*

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### Section 2.1: Introduction

My second Chapter analyses the first debate in *SR*, which, in many ways, was indicative of all of the major *SR* debates in that it is centred on questions of the inclusion and exclusion of certain identity-based groups of women and their concerns about being recognised and accepted within the WLM. In this particular Chapter, I shall focus on women's sexuality and the understanding and recognition of lesbian identities within the WLM and *SR*. The lesbianism/anti-lesbianism debate was the first of the three debates I shall explore in this thesis; the other two will follow on. As I shall demonstrate, the first debate took a particular form of which I shall talk in further detail throughout the Chapter. However, before doing so, I would like to provide a brief comment on the structure and development of the Chapter.

My second Chapter can be broadly divided into three sections: the introduction to the debate, *SR*'s handling of the debate and a return to the initial debate to discuss its final shape. As I shall demonstrate, the lesbianism/anti-lesbianism debate can be characterised as a more marginal one in the sense that the debate itself was not as explosive or content-laden as the subsequent two debates I analyse in this thesis. It centred on an article which was never published but nonetheless involved readers in a discussion about the status of lesbianism. Before this discussion occurred, the nature and meaning of lesbianism and lesbian relationships, and the connection and importance of female sexuality to the WLM was indeed explored in *SR*. Yet, the lesbianism/anti-lesbianism debate as the first debate was primarily significant for the ways in which it revealed aspects of *SR*'s editorial decision-making policies. These policies – or lack thereof – would continue to prove difficult for the collective throughout the life of the magazine. As future 'controversial' issues regarding women's identities and their personal and political investment in those identities arose in the WLM, they also arose in *SR*. In Chapter 2 the controversial issue was related to lesbianism and women's sexual identities. Whilst *SR*'s handling of this issue is important for the ways in which it shaped discussions of lesbianism, sexual identity and introduced critiques of heteronormativity, as this Chapter shall demonstrate, it is the fact that this first debate in many ways set precedent for *SR*'s handling of future debates that I wish to highlight here.

### Section 2.2: Early Discussions Around Female Sexual Identity: Bisexuality and Ambivalence Towards Lesbianism

Issues of the relation between lesbianism and heterosexual women formed the first major debate in *SR*. The first time the topic of homosexuality was mentioned in *Spare Rib* magazine was in

October of 1972. In the first few years of the magazine there was a recurring feature in the 'News' section of the magazine entitled 'Lillian with Love.' 'Lillian with Love' was a casual journalism feature reported by New Zealander Lillian Roxon, as she lived, worked and travelled around the United States. Roxon also wrote for several other magazines at the time in both Australia and New York, most often scripting articles on love and sex for magazines such as *Mademoiselle*. Her pieces written for *Spare Rib* primarily offered glimpses into US culture, and her observations were often critical, influenced by women's liberation rhetoric. A good example is when she questions women's current preoccupation with platform shoes, recalling the time when women 'used to think comfortable shoes were a [form of] liberation' (SR 4: 19). Most of her pieces were not much longer than a few paragraphs, the topics shifting abruptly from paragraph to paragraph, effectively operating via a series of vignettes.

The reasons for the inclusion of Roxon's reports were perhaps twofold: for the readers who were engaged in the movement, the reports from America gave insight into the US women's movement which was seen as more advanced in its trajectory than the UK one, and thus heavily influenced British developments; for those readers only beginning to learn about women's liberation, it introduced them to the notion that women's experiences and observations were worth noticing, worthy of 'News' status, and provided an example of how the everyday structured women's lives in gendered ways.

Roxon's discussion of homosexuality in this particular article is in relationship to the formation of the Gay Mothers' Union. Roxon begins by recalling how she 'asked a man [...] what his worst fantasies about women's liberation were' and the man replied that 'he felt a very real fantasy was that his wife would leave him not for another man but for another woman – and take the children with her' (SR 4: 19)<sup>1</sup>. Roxon states that several of the men she had spoken with shared this fear, and explains that 'the story of two unhappy married women meeting, comforting each other, falling in love and running off together with the children is apparently just common enough for something called the Gay Mothers' Union to come into being.' Roxon's tone is mocking. She clearly finds the fears of the men she spoke with amusing and reduces them to a 'story' they have conjured up in response to women's liberation. Roxon's tone appears just as amused about discovering that the men's fears are not wholly unfounded, but are 'apparently' '*just* common enough'<sup>2</sup> to warrant those fears, and her further investigation of the Gay Mothers' Union. As a result of this investigation, Roxon reveals that gay mothers encounter a great deal of difficulty in keeping their children following separation from their male partners, and in doing so also indicates the social context of the time in relations to lesbianism. She explains that 'One woman [...] said she was allowed to keep the children but only after she agreed to ask her female lover to move out. She also had to see an analyst and stay in analysis until she was "cured."' That the retention of one's

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<sup>1</sup> All direct quotes to Roxon's article are from SR 4: 19 unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout my thesis all quotations from SR are exactly as they appear in the magazine. I state this here because authors frequently employed the use of italics, capitalisation and bold print to emphasise what they wrote.

children was conditional upon the eradication of the reasons for the dissolution of the nuclear family in which they were conceived highlights the stigma and silencing of homosexuality that was prevalent. This stigma and silencing had many effects. Homosexuality, situated within a dominant heterosexual context, was regarded as something to be 'cured'.<sup>3</sup> It caused fear in men and supposedly put children in jeopardy. Its marginal status combined with the shame attached to it kept 'stories' circulating about what being homosexual meant, and highlighted the importance of the formation of groups like the Gay Mothers Union. But because of the stigma and silence, it was very rare for homosexual women to speak in great detail about their experiences. This served to further the 'stories' and confusion about what being a 'lesbian' meant.

It is important to note that the term 'lesbian' was not yet used – either by Roxon or in the naming of the Gay Mothers Union. As stated in this Chapter's introduction, because many women involved in Women's Liberation were heterosexual and focused on issues related to their sex roles, homosexual women initially identified more closely with gay men. What is more, Roxon's report is a report on developments in America. Discussions of lesbian identity were only gradually beginning to emerge in the British WLM and *SR* magazine.<sup>4</sup> The discussion was taking place in another country and had yet to take hold in Britain. Roxon ends her feature with a rather odd comment. She concludes, 'if any woman who is reading is a gay parent who badly needs a cynical laugh, I recommend a new novel "Shockproof Stanley Skate" [...] about a 17-year-old boy who finds out his beautiful chic mother is having an affair with his beautiful chic girlfriend.' Instead of providing, for example, information for readers seeking advice or assistance on related matters, or an analysis of how requiring gay mothers to seek therapy for their homosexuality in order to retain custody of their children reflects societal taboos towards lesbianism, Roxon defers – even if possibly ironically – to yet another 'story,' also situated within a heteronormative frame and suggestive of more reasons for, particularly men, to 'fear' the effects of the potential of female sexuality.

Many of the themes identified in Roxon's feature were present in the second article to address women's sexual relationships with other women. In April of 1973, half a year after Roxon's piece, Susanna Allan wrote an article on bisexuality entitled, 'The Best of Both Worlds.' She begins her piece by stating, 'when I say I am bi-sexual people often react as though I have admitted some dreadful perversion' (*SR* 10: 25)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See Jeffrey Weeks' *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality and Identity* (1991) for an extended analysis of the ways which homosexuality has been categorized in various ways as deviant.

<sup>4</sup> It is true that in the 'Classifieds' section of the same issue of the magazine, joint advertisements for *Sappho* magazine and monthly *Sappho* meetings began appearing, thus indicating that some developments in Britain were taking place. However, this was not happening in *SR*, and *Sappho* itself is described as a magazine 'exclusively for Women Who Else?' and one that is 'written by homosexual women for ALL women' (*SR* 4: 38). The term 'lesbian' was not used and *Sappho* was not advertised as being exclusively for homosexual women.

<sup>5</sup> All direct quotes to Allan's article are from *SR* 10: 25 unless otherwise indicated.

This notion of 'perversion' is very similar to the perception of homosexuality as disease-like and needing to be 'cured' mentioned in the Roxon piece. Allan quickly counters this public perception by arguing that 'we are all basically bi-sexual.'

Allan does not offer any evidence for her argument, but she does suggest that one of the main reasons behind peoples' abhorrence of bisexuality is the emphasis placed on the sexual aspects of the relationship. This, she states, leads to an incorrect public perception of an abnormal preoccupation with sex. In contrast, Allan asserts that 'a great many [homosexuals] do not actually have sexual relations with the same sex companions they may live with and love,' and 'the fact is that the homo-sexual relationship is *less* likely to be purely sexual as one is more likely to have a deeper level of true understanding and friendship than in the hetero-sexual relationship.'<sup>6</sup>

It is clear from Allan's attempt to define women's bisexual and homosexual relationships that ideas regarding the nature of those relationships were uncertain. Was it an emotional attachment or a sexual attachment? She praises homosexual relationships, and extols their usefulness 'especially in the many situations where it is impractical or impossible to be with someone of the opposite sex – [for example] widowed and divorced people, the same sex sharing a flat, women who don't happen to fall into the limited acceptable stereotype of female beauty or don't have too much choice where men are concerned.' For these people, she concludes that 'the obvious solution is to be with one's own sex.' Allan is clear about her support for same-sex relationships. Indeed, she tries to make them appear as casual and uncontroversial as possible. However, the ways in which she outlines the motivations for entering a homosexual relationship suggest that homosexuality, here really portrayed as homosociality, is for those unfortunates who cannot quite manage to secure heterosexual relationships within 'normal' social conditions. To be specific, same-sex relationships are what you default to when it is 'impractical' or 'impossible' to be with someone of the opposite sex. In other words, it is not constructed as a positive choice. At this point, three kinds of relationships between women that were to govern subsequent debates about lesbian relationships had been articulated: a sexual relationship between women; a platonic, that is non-sexual – friendship between women; and an instrumentalised relationship between women, driven by non-romantic necessities such as economic ones.<sup>7</sup>

Allan goes on to give details of her own sexual history, particularly as it leads into her decision to define herself as bisexual. She addresses first the fear and anxiety she experienced, followed by her sense of liberation. Allan recalls how after only a few weeks of marrying her then husband, to her confusion, she began having sexual dreams about women. Wondering what the dreams meant, she questioned if she subconsciously would like to make love to someone she knew, or if

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<sup>6</sup> This way of viewing homosexual relationships – i.e. emphasising their ideal rather than sexual nature – goes back to writings by sexologists such as Edward Carpenter who, in his book *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (1912), takes a similar view. For a more recent account of this discussion, see Gilbert Herdt's *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (1996).

<sup>7</sup> For further discussions of different views of lesbian relationships see Rich's 'Compulsory 'Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980); Stimpson's *Where the Meanings Are* (1988).

she was, perhaps, a lesbian. She writes that she started considering sleeping with her friends, and 'even contemplated going to a lesbian club but was too scared.' Allan's fear finally subsided one night out in Amsterdam, where she had a brief sexual encounter with another woman at a club. After this event, Allan returned home and began sleeping with a female friend. This second homosexual encounter was truly transformational for Allan. She states that as a result of this experience, she 'suddenly realised what being *female* felt like.' She explains: 'I had only known myself from the male point of view till that moment. I had been brought up like all of us to dislike, distrust and rival women so naturally I had ended up with self loathing [*sic*] and distrust. Now,' she concludes, 'all those feelings of hostility, envy and competition [are] gone' (SR 10: 26).

I find it interesting that Allan was too afraid to act on her sexual curiosity in Britain, but was able to do so in Amsterdam. Having gained some distance from familiar surroundings, her anxiety subsided when she was in an environment that carried no direct social or cultural implications for her or her actions. Importantly, Allan's homosexual relationship with her friend is recalled more for how it allowed her to 'realise what being *female* felt like,' and less for the sexual aspect of the relationship with her friend (SR 10: 26). Allan associates 'female-ness' with freeing herself from a male-centred self-perception<sup>8</sup> and she goes on to explain how her relationship with her friend had a positive influence on her other relationships with women. But although Allan argues that she had been freed from knowing herself only from a male point of view, she still situates herself within a heterosexual framework when she explains that another positive effect of her encounter in Amsterdam was that she 'immediately noticed that sex with men was better' (SR 10: 26). Just as Roxon framed the formation of the Gay Mothers Union in the context of heterosexual men's fears, Allan situates her transformational experience in the context of her heterosexual interactions. Allan exalts the positive aspects of homosexual relationships primarily as tools for use in 'trying to get [her] heterosexual relationships to this level too' (SR 10: 26).

Allan then tries to dispel the myth that one simply 'becomes' a lesbian as a result of only one or two 'scenes' with another woman, and adds that if someone were to discover their lesbianism after such encounters, it is nothing to be particularly fearful of. But the implication of her trying to dispel such a myth about how one 'becomes' a lesbian indicates that there is no general consensus about how one 'discovers' one is lesbian and accordingly what becoming a lesbian means. What makes someone a lesbian? Allan's position suggests the distinction between the 'true' lesbian who *is* lesbian and needs only to discover her identity and a woman-centred woman who may have a sexual encounter with women but not be focused solely or permanently on women as sexual objects. As Abbott and Love questioned: 'At what moment does a woman step outside the boundary of acceptable relations with women? When she feels emotion for another woman? If she has one sexual experience with a woman? If she becomes bisexual? Only if she sleeps for a time exclusively with one woman?' (SR 10: 27) It is important to note the suggested

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<sup>8</sup> One might argue that in this she follows Virginia Woolf's line of reasoning in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), especially in Chapter 5.

'boundary of acceptable relationships with women,' and how this boundary communicated a strong sense of impropriety being projected.

Allan's encouragement of women to explore their sexuality was connected to an important impetus in the WLM. Whilst Allan acknowledges that some 'of the women [she has] been to bed with probably won't have a lot of sex with women but were glad of the experience' (SR 10: 26). 'Most of us,' she writes, 'have found a new sort a freedom from challenging the taboos if nothing else' (SR 10: 26). As previously stated, the social and cultural understandings of sexual behaviour during the early 1970s were informed by normative ideas of heterosexuality.<sup>9</sup> Thus, even if the sex between two women lasts only a short time, the 'transformative' potential of the experience, which Allan herself lauded, presented a break from this normativity. This is why Allan's encounters in a sense 'freed' her from her perception of herself as a woman in relation to men. In this sense, the lesbian 'experience' or lesbian sex came to be a means of challenging heteronormative structures and taboos of various kinds, and the breaking of such taboos (sex between women) served to make women feel more liberated and confident about their ability to transgress and assume agency. Thus, lesbian relations were, in effect, here constructed as a path to liberation from oppressive relationships with men.

At the end of her article, Allan writes, 'of course the Women's Movement has a lot to do with this developing bi-sexuality in women simply because we are learning to know each other in a way our mothers never could and this knowledge quite naturally leads to sexual encounters just as it does with men' (SR 10: 26).<sup>10</sup> Allan's matter-of-fact tone portrays lesbianism as a 'natural' by-product of the 'knowledge' women are acquiring in the movement. The process of 'learning' about – indeed, talking about – areas of women's lives that up until that point had been silenced cannot be underestimated. Allan's article though also glosses over any difficulties – such as a mother losing her children after having left her husband for another woman – that might actually present a 'big worry' to a woman who is confused about whether or not she is or wants to live as a lesbian.

Two readers' letters were printed in response to Allan's article. Both address some of Allan's generalisations about homosexual relationships. The first was from Virginia Sturgess. She took issue with Allan's perspective that the sexual side of lesbian relationships was less important than the emotional one. Sturgess also argues that the belief that 'lesbians are lesbians by default' is a 'very unliberated attitude to take' (SR 12: 31)<sup>11</sup>. Perhaps for this reason, Sturgess is sceptical of Allan's sexuality, which she defines as 'rampant,' and asks of Allan whether or not she initiates and enjoys sex with men. It is interesting that Sturgess feels the need to 'solve' the case of Allan's sexuality, and also, that presumably, whether or not Allan initiates and enjoys sex with men is an important factor in determining how 'authentically' Allan presents herself. Sturgess concludes that Allan views people from too 'sensual' a perspective, and that it reminds her of the ways in which

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of how constructions of homosexuality were influenced by heteronormative ideas of sexuality see Jeffrey Weeks' *Sexuality and its Discontents* (1985).

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that bisexuality in women had been addressed earlier including in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and in texts Charlotte Wolff's *Bisexuality: A Study* (1977).

<sup>11</sup> All direct quotes to Sturgess' letter are from SR 12: 31 unless otherwise indicated.



men view women 'as sex objects.' Whilst Sturgess also identifies as bisexual and admits that 'bisexuality attracts hostility, from which [she has also] suffered,' she is nonetheless 'slightly critical of her wellmeaning [*sic*] assumptions for the rest of us homophiles.' Sturgess thus takes a less instrumental view of bisexuality than Allan, regarding it as not exclusively an emotional attachment, but also as a sexual one. The latter must in some way be detached from the construction of heterosexuality, in which men view women as 'sex objects.'

This is a particularly important point, as the second letter, from a reader identifying herself as 'V.C.,' also criticises Allan for her 'chauvinistic attitude.' Whilst V.C. begins by stating that she agrees with Allan that many of the women in the movement are bisexual she dislikes Allan's outlook 'in assuming other women are there to provide the sexual satisfaction men fail to give her' (SR 13: 15)<sup>12</sup>. V.C. goes on to reveal that she was married for eight years before she decided to enter into a lesbian relationship. She writes that although her lesbian relationship led her to conclude that she 'no longer need[ed] men,' she states that she does 'prefer a secure relationship' and explains that she 'would [therefore] not be willing as a divorced woman to be on call for [Allan] and her followers to practice their bisexuality on.' She questions the sexual focus of Allan's article, asking, 'aren't we all trying through Women's Lib to prove we are not just sexual objects?' This question highlights an underlying implication of Sturgess' and V.C.'s critiques: the difficulty of conceptualising female desire. Bisexuality and lesbianism provided many women with the opportunity to extricate themselves from unhappy marriages or sex roles – oftentimes as *sex objects* – with which they were uncomfortable. In doing so, female desire was in many ways, as Allan described, 'liberated.' But different women experienced the effects of pursuing this newfound sexual liberation differently. Allan describes her same-sex encounters, which inform her heterosexual relationships and contribute to her awareness of her own 'female-ness,' as 'transformational.' For V.C., who struggled to disentangle herself from an eight-year marriage, bisexuality was not something to be 'practiced' casually. Thus, she, presumably as well as some other women, felt the sexual emphasis was almost insulting to the seriousness of their relationships, which led to their criticism of Allan's article.

It is clear that whilst the discomfort that Sturgess and V.C. expressed towards the potential preoccupation with sexual side of female same-sex relationships did in many ways have to do with the articulation of female desire, it also had to do with the articulation of homosexual desire in particular. At the time their letters were published in *SR*, there was not much literature on female homosexuality and the right or authority to speak about areas such as sexuality was predominantly relegated to medical professionals.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, ideas about sex were heavily

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<sup>12</sup> All direct quotes to V.C.'s letter are from *SR* 13: 15 unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>13</sup> In their 2001 book *The Lesbian History Sourcebook: Love and Sex Between Women in Britain from 1780 – 1970* Oram and Turnbull write: 'It is relatively straightforward to trace the dominant medical discourses on lesbianism in the twentieth century because they took place in a professional public domain where doctors published books and papers and others responded to them' (Oram and Turnbull, 96).

influenced by the sex surveys of Alfred Kinsey (1948; 1953), and Masters and Johnson (1966; 1970).<sup>14</sup> These were instrumental in changing the ways in which men and women thought about sex, and helped to begin a dialogue about sexual development and practices. However, heterosexuality was the primary focus of these studies. Kinsey and Masters and Johnson helped elevate the importance of the clitoris and eventually distinguish, alongside Anne Koedt's revolutionary 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm' (1970), between clitoral and vaginal orgasms. This distinction drew attention to female sexual pleasure, creating the potential for a more empowered sense of female sexuality. Yet, within this discourse homosexuality was repeatedly marginalised.

For this reason, the publication of medical doctor Charlotte Wolff's *Love Between Women* – not only a volume by a lesbian about lesbians, but also a text which framed lesbianism in a positive manner – was a very significant contribution to the field of sexual research. *SR* featured a review of the book by Rosie Parker in its April 1973 issue. Whilst Parker does not go to great lengths to praise Wolff's book, she recognises its 'aims to combat the prejudice and misunderstanding surrounding the subject [of lesbianism]' (*SR* 11: 34)<sup>15</sup>. Similarly to the views expressed previously in the magazine by Allan and reader V.C., Parker writes that the 'basis of [Wolff's] theory is that everyone is naturally bisexual,' and like Sturgess and V.C., Wolff de-emphasises the sexual nature of the lesbian relationship. Parker introduces readers to the term 'homoemotional,' which she states Wolff created to define homosexual relationships (*SR* 11: 34). Indeed, in her book Wolff dismisses the term homosexual, claiming that it 'has strayed so far from its true meaning [...acquiring] the status of a taboo,' 'signif[ying] perversion, abnormality and vice' (Wolff, 11). Homosexuality, as Wolff postulates, is primarily an 'emotional' – as opposed to 'political' – 'disposition' and it is therefore the emotional aspects of that relationship which should be stressed (Wolff, 12).

Wolff's argument for the emotional importance of lesbian relationships is strategic. In the first half of her book, Wolff explores the biologically-based arguments that emphasise the 'deviant' aspects at the root of female homosexuality; in the second half she turns to environmental factors. This turn towards the possible environmental 'causes' of female homosexuality is a radical and potentially risky shift from traditional views of biologically determined sexual practices. The biological determinist argument states that if homosexuality is genetic, then it is also 'natural' and homosexuals therefore cannot be held responsible for their inclinations. If the cause is environmental, however, it means that they are fully accountable for their sexual choices. Wolff's shift was reflective of a growing awareness of the social construction of gender and sex roles,

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<sup>14</sup> Oram and Turnbull (2001) assert whilst it is 'difficult to measure historically, [it is important to note] how widely known these theories were, and how quickly they were taken up, either in actual medical practice or in common-sense understandings of who the lesbian was and what she did' (96). However, in Liz Stanley's popular *Sex Surveyed: 1949 – 1994* (1995) the prominent influence of these medical theorists and their conducted sex surveys is persuasively argued.

<sup>15</sup> All direct quotes to Parker's review are from *SR* 11: 34 unless otherwise indicated.

which ultimately destabilised the normative views of biological determinism.<sup>16</sup> This destabilisation led women to seek out an inherent 'female-ness.' As Parker argues, citing Wolff: "perhaps the lesbian has remained closer to the authentic woman than the 'normal' female, [since] she has been less gripped and affected by male demands which determined character traits and emotional reactions in other women".'

Yet, although bisexuality was projected as a 'solution' to women's heterosexist oppression, homosexuality was cast as potentially liberating for women and heterosexuality was increasingly under attack for the ways in which it contributed to the subjugation of women. For many women at the time, lesbian relationships were still contentious. This makes Wolff's book so important. But it is worth noting that with the lack of emphasis on the sexual and political aspects of lesbianism, lesbianism was not widely discussed as primarily a sexualized and romantic relationship between two women. The circulation of the notion that bisexuality or homosexuality functioned as means to achieving one's 'authentic' or truly 'female' self, meant that the lesbian relationship was effectively constructed as a tool.<sup>17</sup> Parker states that Wolff 'might as well have called [her book] "Women and Love" [instead of *Love Between Women*] because it is relevant to all of us.' This suggestion allows lesbianism to be encompassed in the larger context of women's liberation in love relationships, and in doing so the reader is told that same-sex relationships are for all women, and that bisexuality and lesbianism are not as much about sexual identity as they are about providing opportunities for women to participate in realising their own female-ness (SR 11: 34). In *Sappho Was a Right On Woman* (1973), Abbott and Love describe this situation as follows:

in the beginning, the highest aspiration of most lesbians in the women's movement was just that – to be included. For the first two years of the second wave of Feminism, this desire to be included was the perspective from which Lesbians viewed the women's movement. In the midst of fighting for Women's Liberation, they continued to submit to oppression by hiding so that they could be included, or worse, defensively trying to prove the obvious – that they were also 'real' women. (135)

As lesbians began to increase in numbers and become more involved in the WLM, the silencing of their experiences eventually waned. The view of homosexual relationships as tools in achieving womanly authenticity came to be criticised by lesbians. This was evidenced by a report featured in the November 1973 issue of *SR*, in which Sara Davidson interviewed four American feminists – Marilyn Webb, Kate Millet, Susan Brownmiller and Lynn O'Conner – about their reflections on the developments of the movement. Whilst these discussions referred to developments occurring outside of Britain, its publication in *SR* indicates the extent to which Britain was taking cues from the American WLM and also that these issues were gaining in importance within the British context.

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<sup>16</sup> Celia Kitzinger's *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (1987) is relevant here.

<sup>17</sup> A few years later, in 1981 the notion of 'woman' would be read in terms of its alignment with heteropatriarchy and dismissed for that very reason. See Monique Wittig's 'One is Not Born A Woman' (1981).

Out of Davidson's interviews, the most pertinent was her interview with Kate Millet. At the time of the interview, Millet had recently undergone quite critical public scrutiny after she was denounced for identifying herself as bisexual. Millet's response to the criticism was very familiar: 'of course I'm bisexual, we all are' (SR 17: 8)<sup>18</sup>. Yet, unlike past examples, Millet qualified her assertion by adding, 'this is the revolution.' Whilst Allan indicated the influence of the Women's Liberation on her sexual practices in 'Best of Both Worlds,' Millet more or less equates bisexuality with 'the revolution.' Millet explains that 'the women's movement has always had lesbians at its vanguard' and that, indeed, 'much of the running motor has been supplied by lesbians, even when they were in the closet.' Taking this further, Millet states that 'the lesbian is the archetypal feminist because she's not into men – she's the independent woman par excellence, [and] the most important experience any woman, any feminist can have, is to love another woman.' Millet's statement suggests a seamless move from bisexuality to lesbianism. In other words, there seems to be a blurring of the distinctions between bisexuality, lesbianism and loving another woman. Whilst the first two terms nonetheless incorporate the latter, Millet's defence and normalisation of her own bisexual identity by heralding the importance of the lesbian role within the movement and the significance of women loving women for feminists, Millet's defence gestures towards the fact that same-sex relationships were still heavily stigmatised. Her own public discrimination for her bisexuality conveys not only how it was viewed with significant suspicion but also very differently from lesbianism. Thus, it is important to note that bisexuality and lesbianism were not perceived in the same way.

Davidson reports that when Millet participated in a forum on sexual liberation at Columbia University, lesbians in the audience accused her of exploiting them whilst promoting her book *Sexual Politics* (1970). They challenged her to state, then and there, whether or not she was a lesbian. In response, Millet told them that she was bisexual, but added, 'if you want me to say I'm a lesbian I will, because I know you feel bisexuality is a cop-out.' Here the contested 'nature' of bisexuality becomes explicit. In 'The Best of Both Worlds,' Allan sought to convince readers that bisexuality was something worth pursuing. In this interview, however, bisexuality is presented as a 'cop-out.' The criticism Millet received from the media and from lesbians at the Columbia forum indicates an increase in public debates about and challenges regarding sexuality both within and outside of the movement. It also reveals that sexuality had begun to take on a political dimension within the movement. Needing to know, with some degree of certainty, how someone identified sexually, allowed others to place that person both socially, in relationship to oneself, and politically within the wider WLM. Thus, perhaps the larger point was that identity politics started to come to the fore and one might argue that it was identity politics which finally undid SR and the Movement.

Many lesbians were very critical of women who seemed to be engaged in same-sex relationships through the touting of bisexuality. Such women came across as, indeed,

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<sup>18</sup> All direct quotes to Davidson's interview with Millet are from SR 17: 8 unless otherwise indicated.

experiencing 'the best of both worlds' – engaging in a seemingly temporary manoeuvre, allowing them to 'try on' lesbian identities without having to suffer difficult, ongoing discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in a sense a distinction was made between lesbian identities as a given, a state, and lesbian identities as a chosen position.<sup>20</sup> Millet does not address the politics of this difference in her account of the Columbia conference. However, in *Sappho Was a Right On Woman*, a book devoted to the real-life struggles of lesbian existence within the WLM, Abbott and Love reference the very instance Millet describes for Davidson in the *Spare Rib* interview, providing another, more nuanced perspective on the situation. They write that a woman in the audience 'challenged [Millet]: "Why don't you say you're a Lesbian, here openly? You've said you were a Lesbian in the past, at DOB and other times and places. Then in *Life Magazine* it was printed that 'you were not into that.' Are you or aren't you? We get one story and [then] another'" (Abbott and Love, 119). Abbott and Love write that Millet 'had already quietly stated in her remarks that she was bisexual; she was exhausted from a series of speaking engagements, but she repeated her statement.' Their portrayal of Millet is somewhat sympathetic. They seem to suggest she was almost passive in her quiet demeanour and recognise that at the time of the conference she was tired. In the interview with Davidson, Millet states that when the press discredited her on the basis of her 'announcement,' the movement came together in support of her and gay liberation. Indeed, she says that 'it was the one time in the whole women's movement that we got everybody to agree on something.' Abbott and Love's portrayal coupled with Millet's statement regarding the support she received from women in the Movement at the time of her public criticism indicates that the lesbians in the audience at the Columbia conference did not seek to attack Millet irreducibly. Despite the differences among women within the American WLM that were slowly becoming more apparent, women were still able to pull together in 'sisterhood.' However, the lesbians quoted in Abbott and Love were bewildered by Millet's seemingly vacillating identification with lesbian identity.

As Abbot and Love explain:

lesbians are both surprised by, and leery of, women with little or no sexual experience with other women who call themselves Lesbians. The woman who has become a Lesbian because of her political beliefs or who wants to become a Lesbian because they are 'the most independent women' and 'the vanguard of the women's movement' has trouble communicating with Lesbians because she lacks a gay consciousness. Lesbians hear her happiness, but they do not hear any recognition of society's hostility toward homosexuals. (153)

Abbott and Love use the same wording – lesbians as 'the vanguard of the movement' – that appear in the interview with Millet, but this time with a completely different intent. Whilst it is not

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<sup>19</sup> See Claire Hemmings' 'Locating Bisexual Identities: Discourses of Bisexuality and Contemporary Feminist Theory' (1995) for further discussion of how bisexual identities are often problematised and excluded within feminist structures of sameness and difference, particularly as it relates to binary discourses of lesbian/queer identity politics.

<sup>20</sup> This of course goes back to much older debates about lesbian identity. See, for example, Havelock Ellis (1897).

clear whom Abbot and Love are quoting, if one is to compare the use of the phrase in the Millet interview to its use in *Sappho*, the suggestion in the latter context is that viewing lesbians as a sort of 'archetype' of feminism and the movement is somewhat clichéd. The clichéd nature of these types of phrases, and the fact that Millet makes use of at least one of them somewhat naively perhaps, highlights the very element of Abbott and Love's analysis that Millet seems to lack: a 'gay consciousness.' This notion suggests different categories of lesbian identity, those with and those without a 'gay consciousness.' Rather than arguing about the meaning of that term, I want to suggest that this highlights both the rise of identity politics and its fraughtness, as different groups of women identified along increasingly diverse and complex lines.

The discussions of female same-sex relationships and practices within the American WLM were quickly evolving into a politics of identity; how a woman identified sexually had larger implications, and those implications were different for different groups of women. The difficulty of sameness versus difference had begun to replace questions about the nature of female homosexuality as such. The question of the authority and inclusion of different identities in relation to each other began to gain prominence.

### Section 2.3: Struggling for Lesbian Visibility

Up until this point in the discussion (September 1974), the topic of homosexuality, bisexuality and lesbianism as presented in *SR* magazine tended to focus on developments outside of Britain. This changed with the September 1974 issue of the magazine, when *SR* magazine featured a report of the Sixth National Women's Liberation Conference that had recently taken place in Edinburgh. The report states that at this conference, the attendees added two new demands to the formal list of the WLM: the demand for 'legal and financial independence for women,' and 'an end to all discrimination against lesbians and the right of all women to a self-defined sexuality' (*SR* 27: 17). The conference report is divided into three different sections, each section written by a different author (see fig. 3). Whilst one of the sections of the report traces some of the reasons behind the need for women's legal and financial independence, none of the sections go into any detail as to what brought about the demand for an end to the discrimination against by lesbians, or, indeed, what kind of discrimination they faced.

However, one section of the report, written by Lesley Gilbert, offers the first insight into some of the discussions about sexuality, and lesbianism in particular, taking place within the context of the British WLM.



Fig. 3. News: Women Together, Edinburgh

# NEWS

900 women came together in Edinburgh at the end of June for the sixth national women's liberation conference, talked, danced while the Northern Women's Liberation Rock Band played for the first time, ate, talked some more, adopted two more demands for the movement:

"We demand legal and financial independence for women."

"We demand an end to all discrimination against lesbians and the right of all women to a self-defined sexuality."

The impressions here try to look at what Edinburgh meant to a few of the women there.

## WOMEN TOGETHER! EDINBURGH

1 As a whole the conference seemed very much like a working conference

I found the atmosphere relaxed and friendly, certainly much more so than at Bristol last year. I had expected that there would be a confrontation between the radical feminists, arguing for separatism and sexual relations only with women, and the rest, but this did not really materialise. The workshop that I attended on lesbianism - which was supposed to raise some questions about the differences between lesbians and non-lesbians and how we could work together - was quite productive. Women spoke about the ways in which they felt threatened by each other, straights by lesbians and vice versa, in some detail. This was very useful as a preliminary to discussing political separatism and how all women could work on campaigns around discrimination against lesbians. There was more open discussion about sex and sexuality than at previous national conferences. The main thing that I thought

was good about the conference was that we had a much more realistic idea of what you could achieve in short workshops talking to women whom you probably wouldn't see again for some time. Most of the workshops that I attended - on psychiatry, medicine and the welfare state - took the form of swapping information and discussing actions in different parts of the country and how to widen them or make them complementary to each other. It was more realistic than trying to turn every workshop into a consciousness-raising session where people say anything that comes into their head about the topic in question. There seemed to be an awful lot going on all over the country, and there was so much to discuss in the medicine and psychiatry workshops that weekend conferences specifically devoted to each of these were planned.

A common theme that ran through all the workshops I attended was the relationship between clients of and workers in social welfare and health services, between patients and doctors and nurses, between the victims of psychiatrists and mental institutions and women social workers. Was it possible to work

politically on feminist issues as a state employee - say a social worker - and if so, how would this link up with claimants union's activities? Could women's groups be established in hospitals incorporating auxiliary workers, nurses, health visitors as well as medical students? How could we combine creating our own alternatives, like self-examination groups, with campaigns around NHS provisions?

Most people seemed to think that we should try to work both to create alternatives and to attack the system from within as workers and without as clients. There was quite a lot of scepticism though of women getting professional jobs like that of social worker or psychiatrist, which put them in a position of power over other women whether they liked it or not, and which gave them a personal stake in their own status and step in the hierarchy.

This questioning of getting professional jobs could also have included teachers who are in an analogous position to social workers, in teaching ideology, and operating a selective system that reproduces and preserves both the class and the sexual division of labour in this country. But even though so many of the women in the women's movement are

teachers, very few seem to question their own position in the education system, nor even find it contradictory: the issues that were discussed about social workers, doctors and shrinks never seemed to come up in the "women and education" workshops.

As a whole the conference seemed very much like a working conference, with everyone very aware that there was a lot to be done, and a lot of theory to be developed, but that we had successfully started on it.

2 Broad areas of women's oppression have hitherto found no place in the movement's statement of its aims

One workshop discussed the proposal for a demand for legal and financial independence for women. A paper written by some sisters from Oxford and High Wycombe outlined some of the theoretical implications of the demand, and areas for

Spare Rib 17

Source: Spare Rib, 27 (September 1974): 17.

Gilbert writes:

The workshop that I attended – which was supposed to raise some questions about the differences between lesbians and non-lesbians and how we could work together – was quite productive. Women spoke about the ways in which they felt threatened by each other, straights by lesbians and vice versa, in some detail. This was very useful as a preliminary to discussing political separatism and how all women could work on campaigns around discrimination against lesbians. There was more open discussion about sex and sexuality than at previous national conferences. (SR 27: 17)

Gilbert's observations are revealing. The fact that Gilbert attended a workshop that was designed to address specifically the differences between lesbians and non-lesbians indicates that the WLM in Britain was, like the Movement in America, dealing with questions of difference. Despite no previous features in the magazine on these differences in the British WLM, they were clearly contentious, and had been the source of conflict prior to the conference. Indeed, Gilbert states that both 'lesbians and non-lesbians' at the workshop felt 'threatened' by each other, and that this year's discussions were 'more open [...] than at previous national conferences.' The implication is that such discussions had taken place previously but had just not been included in *SR* magazine.

It is also worth mentioning that the conference 'report' consisted of two pages of the separate, individual reflections by two different women – Faith McDevitt and Lesley Gilbert – and the Northern Women's Liberation Rock Band, all of whom had attended the conference. This style of reporting was fairly common for *SR*, especially when featuring coverage of a National Women's Liberation Conference. *SR* writes of the Edinburgh report that 'the impressions here try to look at what Edinburgh meant to a few of the women there' (SR 27: 17), and I would argue that its intentions in soliciting several women to write reports of an event, to be published alongside each other in the magazine, was a way of including readers and activists in the production of the magazine and a method for allowing the voices and perspectives of a variety of women to be heard. It is not clear whether *SR* asked specific women to report on certain aspects of certain events, or advertised for the reports of several or even all women, and then chose from the reports what to publish. In the context of this report, and this section of the Chapter, this is an important point to consider. In no other section than Gilbert's in the whole of the report is there any discussion of lesbianism, and the information on the 'differences' between 'lesbians and non-lesbians' that Gilbert refers to might not have been intentional on the part of *SR*.

Indeed, a two-part editorial featured in March of the following year (1975) suggests that even if lesbianism was surfacing more prominently as a topic within the British WLM, it was still primarily viewed in relation to women's sexuality in a heterosexual context rather than as topic of interest in its own right. The editorial, written by Ann Scott and entitled 'Why is Your Magazine so Depressing?', was written in an attempt to address 'the most frequently-asked questions about *Spare Rib*' (SR 34: 8).<sup>21</sup> The first part of this editorial focuses on Women's Liberation, the depressing nature of *SR*, the sex wars between women and men and the connection between

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<sup>21</sup> All direct quotes to Scott's editorial are from SR 34: 8 unless otherwise indicated.



lesbians and Women's Liberation; part two centres on the need for political change. The question on lesbianism – 'what have lesbians got to do with women's liberation?' – indicates that not only did readers not understand the relevance of lesbians to the Movement, but that that relevance was not being made clear by *SR*. Therefore, it is interesting to consider Scott's response:

Homosexuality exists as a socially outlawed form of human sexuality but lesbians have been hidden in a particular way. The belief that lesbianism doesn't exist is part of the belief that women are not sexual beings. However lesbians are also feared because their existence and their emerging solidarity as women undermine the sanctity and security of the family structure as we know it today. Society takes its revenge in many ways. Gay women experience harassment and persecution at the hands of GPs, psychiatrists, the divorce courts, and sometimes their husbands.

Scott's response is in many ways based on the recently added demand of the WLM: 'an end to all discrimination against lesbians and the right of all women to a self-defined sexuality.' She provides examples of the kinds of discrimination lesbians experience, and explains how lesbianism is but one form of 'variation' of women's sexuality that is not 'allowed.' Yet, through Scott's response, it is apparent that there is a disjuncture between the two parts of the demand. Whilst Scott acknowledges that lesbians have been 'hidden in a particular way' she connects the 'belief that lesbianism doesn't exist' to societal and cultural ideas about women's sexuality in general. The reader is therefore left to deduce that lesbianism is related to the WLM because of socio-cultural views regarding women's sexuality, not because of the discrimination that lesbians face. This supposition is affirmed when Scott states that 'even within Gay Liberation lesbians have needed to organise specifically as gay women, not just as gays.' This statement implies that there already exists a sentiment that, to use Gilbert's words, either 'lesbians' or 'non-lesbians' or both, in Gay Liberation as much as in the WLM, feel that lesbians need to organise autonomously. Indeed, Scott goes on to report that 'the International Congress of Gay Rights, held last December in Edinburgh, was censured by lesbians for its male bias, [and] lesbians have also criticised *Spare Rib* for its heterosexual orientation.' The suggestion here is that lesbians were neither the focus of Gay Rights nor of the WLM. When Scott concludes her response to the question of the relationship between lesbians and the movement by stating that *SR* 'think[s] that women have a right to define their own sexuality' – that they 'know that [women's] lives are much more varied than they are assumed – or allowed – to be,' it becomes clear that it is the latter part of the sixth demand that informed the connection between the two.

Overall, until approximately 1975, *SR* reported little on lesbianism and lesbian issues, and gradually readers picked up on this sidelining and wrote to the magazine to voice their criticisms. In July of the same year, *SR* published a reader's letter which criticised Scott's March editorial. Reader Nick Rogers claimed that *SR*'s 'support of lesbians [...was] mere tokenism,' as Scott's analysis of lesbianism in the editorial was 'in terms of patterns *within* the heterosexual structure rather than analysis of the structure itself' and 'the same [heterosexual] bias runs through the rest of [that issue of] the magazine' (*SR* 37: 5). Similarly, in the November 1975 issue of *SR*, another reader's letter was published, criticising the magazine for 'distorting lesbianism and reducing it to

[...] a matter fit for general ridicule' (SR 41: 4). Reader Wendy Burkett felt this ridiculing was evident in 'An Exercise in Trust,' a brief series documenting the exchanges between author Anne Severson and her friend, Penny, who was in the process of coming out. The letter was published under the heading 'Offensive and Sexist' and stated that Severson 'display[ed] a derogatory, sexist attitude towards lesbian women' and that the series as a whole was 'hardly [...] conducive to ideals of liberation and release' (SR 41: 4).

However, *SR* still did little to engage with the criticisms it had received, and the little that it did do was indicative of the lack of concern and understanding of lesbians' lives. The only published response to either of the two letters mentioned was to Burkett's letter and it was Severson, not *SR*, who wrote it. Severson's response was very brief, although apologetic in nature. She admitted that upon rereading the series of exchanges between herself and Penny, she felt 'uncomfortable' with the 'pompous' tone and "abstract attitude" (SR 41: 4). Yet, as Severson continues in her response, she does so in a manner that further distorts and reduces lesbianism. She explains that in light of Burkett's criticism, she re-evaluated her 'attitude towards lesbians by deciding [whether or not she] would want to be one.' Following this re-evaluation, she concluded that she 'wouldn't mind being a happy one' as her 'belief is that the circumstances of anyone's life are less important than how they feel about their life' (SR 41: 4). To qualify this statement she refers to Penny who is now unashamed of her sexuality and willing to take 'responsibility for her own life' (SR 41: 4). In doing so, Severson suggests that lesbians who are unhappy are unhappy because they fail to take responsibility for their lives. The discriminating circumstances encountered by many lesbians which could be potential causes for their unhappiness are inconsequential to Severson.

But whereas in the past lesbians seemingly were content 'just' to be included in the Movement, they were now increasingly dissatisfied with this refusal to engage with their experiences – or to engage, but only through the lens of heterosexuality. As they gained strength from their independent organising, they also gained confidence in their right to demand more from their 'sisters' in the WLM. In her report on the Seventh National Women's Liberation Conference featured in the June 1976 issue of *SR*, Jill Nichols writes that on the final day of the conference the planned plenary on International Women's Day 'petered out after confrontation by a group of lesbians who said they'd felt oppressed all weekend by heterosexuals' (SR 47: 27). Lesbians were increasingly ready to challenge the 'non-lesbians' at the National Women's Liberation Conference, interrupting the plenary to vocalise their grievances.

Yet, whilst lesbians were clear in their refusal to be 'oppressed' by other 'non-lesbians' in the Movement, amongst themselves they were divided regarding how to go about making such refusals known. As Nichols reports, 'other gay women had found the conference very open, and disagree[d] with that group's tactics – shouting their anger from the stage' (SR 47: 27). Similarly, in her report on the third National Lesbian Conference, featured in the May 1976 issue of the magazine, Ros Came writes that 'any woman's experience of a lesbian conference in our present

social context must necessarily be fraught with contradiction, [and] the Third National Lesbian Conference [...] was no exception' (SR 46: 26). Carne does not expand on what the 'present social context' is that she refers to, or why it would necessitate the lesbian conference being 'fraught with contradiction.' However, she does state that there were 'varying attitudes' at the conference regarding the issue of sexuality and that these 'differences [...] are [...] a partial explanation of the confusions and complications, the seemingly rapid alternations of love and hostility, rationality and irrationality of the weekend's events' (SR 46: 26). Yet, when she postulates 'surely *any woman* can be a lesbian' (SR 46: 26) and wonders why some groups of lesbian women have argued for strictly lesbian-only organising, she reveals that she herself is unclear of the source of the tensions amongst the women. However, Carne finally concludes that 'it would be misleading to deny the reality of those differences [...because] they reflect an ongoing debate not only within the lesbian movement, but the women's movement as a whole' (SR 46: 26).

The descriptions of the two conferences communicate significant conflict: one group of lesbians interrupted a plenary session in order to make their complaints known, accusations of women 'oppressing' other women were made, claims that lesbian experiences were surely for all women circulated, yet differences between 'lesbians' and 'non-lesbians' were so intense that it led to shouting on stage and disapproval from other lesbians creating a chaotic mixture of 'love and hostility, rationality and irrationality.' Yet, as indicated above by Carne, whilst the conflict was apparent, there was a great deal of confusion about the source of this conflict. The tension was not only between heterosexual and lesbian women, but also amongst lesbians themselves, and it was present in both lesbian-only environments as well as in the larger WLM. At the same time, despite the seemingly unavoidable extremity of the conflicts, there was a high level of resistance amongst women to admit this. Notions of sisterhood had so strongly influenced the developments of the WLM that the idea of 'difference' was something that many women preferred to 'deny.' The dissolution of one of the very foundations of the Movement was frightening. There was no point in ignoring the issue of difference, but there was no clear answer regarding how to deal with it. For this reason, despite the contentiousness of what they wrote, Nichols and Carne concluded their reports in a manner which suggested that it was crucial that some kind of lesson was learnt amidst all the turmoil. Carne, for example, stated that whilst it is true that 'at the time [of the conference] there was exasperation and anger, [...] there were also flashes of enlightenment and hope' (SR 46: 27). She continues:

The cumulative effect of a conference only becomes apparent after the event. Relating to the world in the days that followed I began to ask questions with a renewed sense that somewhere among us there was a solidarity; we were moving onward and learning from each other. (SR 46: 27)

Similarly, Jill Nichols ends her report by stating that 'we left feeling stronger and recharged' (SR 47: 27). Indeed, the growing unease with the fractioning of the movement, and the need to reclaim its initial tenets of sisterhood and camaraderie can be glimpsed from the title of Nichols' report.

'Going Back to the Beginning' communicates a beginning nervousness with the state of the WLM, and the need to retreat to that which was familiar. However, differences between women had become more and more apparent so that it was not possible for the Movement to 'go back' to its beginnings. The women involved in the Movement were not able to avoid becoming involved in these conflicts. In the next section, I shall demonstrate that despite its ability to avoid entanglement with the conflict thus far, this was also true for *SR*.

## Section 2.4: Seeking Affinities

In September 1976 the Lancaster Women's Centre wrote a letter to the magazine regarding the proposed split of the aforementioned sixth demand. The demand was for 'the end to all discrimination against lesbians and the right of all women to a self-defined sexuality.' The split was intended to separate 'discrimination against lesbians' from 'a woman's right to self-defined sexuality.' In the letter from the Lancaster Women's Centre (LWC), it becomes apparent that *SR* had announced in a previous issue of the magazine that it would be 'planning [a] meeting [...] to talk about the ways of campaigning around the second half of the sixth demand' (*SR* 50: 5).<sup>22</sup> The proposed split of the demand was troubling for many women within the movement and for lesbians in particular. They perceived the proposed split as a statement from the Movement itself that not only was lesbianism separated from a self-defined sexual identity but that, specifically, for lesbians, a self-defined sexuality did not include freedom from discrimination. Thus the LWC wrote to *SR* to express their unease with regard to what they saw as a 'heterosexual bias' within the Movement. The LWC explain that the demand's 'original basis and impetus' was to acknowledge lesbian discrimination. They wonder 'what justification [...] there [is] for concentrating solely "on the right of all women to define their own sexuality" and ignoring' the demand's 'original' intent (*SR* 50: 5). As I have previously argued in my analysis of Ann Scott's response to the question regarding the relationship between lesbians and the movement, it is clear that it is the latter part of the sixth demand that seems to hold the most importance for *SR*. Since the proposed split was perceived as another example of lesbians' exclusion from the movement, *SR*'s decision to plan a meeting to discuss not the implications of the splitting of the sixth demand, but how to campaign around its second half was most likely also similarly perceived. Indeed, the comments from the LWC indicate this when at the conclusion of their letter they conflate *SR*'s decision to plan the meeting with a comment on the Movement in general. They ask *SR*: 'Is everything meant to be OK if you're a lesbian or are we no longer a part of the women's movement?'

Before continuing on with the discussion of lesbianism, I would first like to briefly comment on the LWC's conflation of *SR* with the WLM. This conflation is interesting because it implies that *SR*

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<sup>22</sup> In their letter, the Lancaster Women's Centre state that they were made aware of this meeting through *SR* issue number 48. However, I have searched through issue number 48, as well as 46, 47 and 49, and can find no such announcement.

was so interwoven with the Movement in the perception of its readers that amongst them there was an assumed level of responsibility that *SR* not only should, but would uphold certain standards in ensuring that the Movement was not biased in its representation and agenda. What is more, the letter from the LWC suggests that *SR* has the influence to decide which women were and were not a part of the Movement. They viewed *SR*'s planned meeting as a form of betrayal and the underlying implication of that view was that if one was considered part of the WLM, one's concerns were taken seriously and, indeed advocated, by *SR*.

In many ways the conflation of *SR* with the WLM was a dangerous configuration: it exposed *SR* to the same vulnerabilities as the Movement. However, as stated in my thesis introduction, Winship argues that *SR* itself adopted this sense of responsibility to the Movement. This assertion is affirmed in *SR*'s response to the LWC letter. *SR* could very easily have distanced itself from the Movement – simply explained to the LWC that it was connected to the Movement, but was not the Movement itself. Instead, *SR* appeared to take the blame for whoever it was within the Movement who originally suggested the splitting of the demand. They write: 'maybe it was a mistake to split the demand but we're sure it was no-one's [*sic*] intention to go against the spirit of it' (*SR* 50: 5)<sup>23</sup>. As for their decision to hold a meeting to discuss only the second half of the sixth demand, *SR* explain that the meeting was called because 'people felt it was important to continue discussions on many aspects of sexuality,' and pointed out that this included 'lesbian sexuality.' *SR* defend themselves by stating that 'almost all [of] the women at the *Spare Rib* meeting were gay,' as if to suggest that the meeting could not possibly be anti-lesbian because the presence of gay women alone contradicts that insinuation. *SR* claim that 'far from "ignoring the impetus" of the sixth demand, we felt that for women – gay and straight – to discuss more fully the sexual politics involved in defining our own sexuality could only strengthen the entire demand.' Yet, despite *SR*'s claim that they were invested in the entirety of the sixth demand, this did little to convince the LWC that they were also interested in how to campaign in support of its first half.

This is particularly interesting when considering the fact that in another letter published immediately after the one from the LWC, reader Poppy Rice criticises *SR* directly for its 'failure to show the important role of lesbians and bisexual women within the WLM' (*SR* 50: 5). Rice's letter is in response to a previous *SR* feature by Eleanor Stevens entitled 'Making Changes, Making Love.' This article on lovemaking had completely excluded any discussion of lesbianism and bisexuality. Rice explains that she has 'often been disappointed by *Spare Rib*' for this type of 'omission,' which she feels 'not only alienates gay women but . . . reinforces the prejudices of straight women who can happily go on believing that lesbianism is of no concern to them' (*SR* 50: 5). Whilst *SR* did not respond to Rice's letter, it placed this letter right next to the one from the LWC. Since both letters are quite critical of *SR* for its portrayal of lesbians – or lack thereof – and insinuate that *SR*'s attitude to lesbianism is an extension of the WLM's, one might have expected that *SR*'s response to the LWC would include more of an apology or an effort to communicate its

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<sup>23</sup> All direct quotes to *SR*'s response are from *SR* 50: 5 unless otherwise indicated.

understanding of lesbians and the discriminations that they face. That month's issue of the magazine does feature an article on lesbian mothers and their custody battles for children, and so perhaps *SR* were making an effort to feature content pertinent to lesbian issues. However, that it had been almost exactly four years since the Lillian Roxon's paragraph-long piece on the Gay Mothers' Union was first published. This suggests that lesbianism and lesbian issues had been severely neglected in *SR*. What is important about both readers' letters and *SR*'s response is that two important issues are articulated as a result: the question of how lesbians are represented in *SR* and the WLM more widely, and *SR*'s imbrication in the WLM, and therefore its battles. This is particularly evident in Rice's tone. As she describes *SR*'s lack of portrayal of lesbian and bisexual women within the WLM as a 'failure,' and points out the 'omission' and 'alienation' lesbian women feel in relationship to straight women within the movement, she almost suggests that *SR* is responsible for the failures of the movement – not just its failures in its reporting of them.

That *SR* itself, as stated, seemed to uphold this sense of responsibility contributed to its imbrication in the conflicts of the Movement. Indeed, *SR* identified so closely with the Movement that in its April 1977 editorial, the collective wrote that the 'difficulties' of the movement 'are [ones that they] face [at] *Spare Rib*' (*SR* 57: 3). The editorial served almost as a preface or a brochure for the upcoming National Women's Liberation Conference as it sought to address the 'watering down' of 'feminist content' in the Movement, and the dangers of campaigning around single issues.

The issue of 'watering down' the 'feminist' content in the Movement was important to *SR* and its ability to maintain its readership. To be specific, *SR*, advertising itself as 'A Women's Liberation Magazine' was particularly concerned with what the editorial states was the tendency for women involved in the Movement to favour women's 'rights' over women's 'liberation,' and resulting 'discussion[s over] whether [or not] to omit the word "liberation" from the poster publicising this year's conference' (*SR* 57: 3). In their 1977 April editorial, *SR* wrote that they questioned 'how to be popular, accessible and reach more women without toning down what [they wanted] to say' or sacrificing a certain standard of quality (*SR* 57: 3).<sup>24</sup> This statement makes it clear that if the Movement appeared to be in jeopardy, and the difficulties of the Movement were the difficulties of the magazine, then *SR* itself would also be in jeopardy. Thus, if *SR* wanted to survive the fractioning of women interested in campaigning not for Women's Liberation, but for their rights on single issues, it had to figure out a way to navigate this terrain, and it had to do so whilst continuing to advocate for Women's Liberation – unless it wanted to reinvent itself as something other than a Women's Liberation magazine.

Doing just this was very difficult for *SR*. As indicated, the conflicts between women in the Movement were escalating and issues were not often viewed as interconnected but rather in

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<sup>24</sup> Here we see the beginnings of a debate that, one might argue, reached its zenith during the 1990s and in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century when the issue of women's rights as human rights became one of the centrepieces of feminist debate. See for example, Charlotte Bunch's 'Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights' (1990), or Julie Stone Peters and Andrea Wolper's *Women's Rights, Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives* (1995).



terms of polarized positions. Augmenting this was a sense of confusion about the direction of the Movement and how to approach issues that had become contentious.<sup>25</sup> In *SR*'s report on the National Women's Liberation Conference that it had written about in the above editorial, a woman who had attended a workshop on the question, 'what is female erotica?' wrote that the women at the workshop 'couldn't think of anything erotic, so [they] talked about anxieties instead [...]' (*SR* 58: 10). Similarly, another conference attendee who described some of the uncertainty surrounding the proposed split of the sixth demand wrote: 'the sixth demand is up in the air, we don't know what a self-defined sexuality *is*' (*SR* 58: 10). Yet another woman who participated in a workshop on the National Abortion Campaign stated that 'as usual there were problems of what to discuss' (*SR* 58: 11). Clearly, the Movement lacked structure and cohesion. Issues that were on the agenda for the conference either presented 'problems' because women could not decide what to discuss, or, they were tossed aside in favour of discussing 'anxieties.' Some of the most heated topics were not grasped at their most basic level. There was a sense that the Movement was moving forward in its evolution without a proper understanding of its developments by many of the women engaged in it, and this disconnection only exacerbated the confusion and uncertainty already present due to the conflicts themselves. This lack of direction, structure and cohesion is exemplified in *SR*'s report. Divided into topical sections, written by several different women, all of whom were either interviewed by the magazine, or were encouraged to 'write down their impressions,' the result is quite a lengthy eleven-page conglomeration of randomised, 'spot' news briefs detailing various workshops, conversations, and issues, but with no great sense of cohesion or purpose (see fig. 4).

Yet, with regards to lesbianism, whilst it was made clear that lesbianism was now recognised as an important matter to the Movement. This importance was primarily due to the divisions between heterosexuals and lesbians. Only two very small sections on this were included in the entire *SR* report: Berta Freistadt's 'Lesbian Heterosexual Dialogue' and Siobhan and Maria's 'Lesbian Left.' Both reports are indicative of how lesbians and heterosexuals were trying to bridge their differences. In the first report, Freistadt herself made the attempt. Her report is in fact a summary of the workshop she organised 'to set up a dialogue between lesbians and heterosexuals, after experiencing [what she felt was] a very negative atmosphere at last year's conference' (*SR* 58: 13)<sup>26</sup>. Freistadt, who describes herself as 'a so-called "straight,"' states that whilst the workshop helped her to learn more from the lesbian women present about their experiences and struggles, she doubts her interpretations. As she begins to offer her observations of some of the workshop's conclusions, she questions whether or not 'I've got this right.' Ultimately, Freistadt states that her understanding is that 'being a lesbian is a political decision, a

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<sup>25</sup> Whilst Val Coultas' article 'Feminists Must Face the Future' (1981), was published almost four years after the April 1977 editorial on the upcoming Women's Liberation Conference appeared in *SR*, Coultas argues that the 'many problems facing the women's movement,' contributing to its current state of 'crisis' had been accumulating for quite some time (Coultas, 36).

<sup>26</sup> All direct quotes to Freistadt's report are from *SR* 58: 13 unless otherwise indicated.



public confrontation as it were – it is less to do with who you sleep with and more to do with an emotional commitment, where you expend most of your energies.’

It is interesting that ‘lesbianism as an emotional commitment’ is what is stressed. It could be argued that Freistadt’s understanding of the discussions in the workshop were indeed askew. However, given that the workshop was designed to facilitate the smoothing over of differences between heterosexual women and lesbians, it is most likely that a definition that allowed for all of them to participate in lesbian politics was the one that was used. This suggestion is strengthened when it becomes obvious that the emotion-based definition of lesbianism befuddled the other heterosexual women who attended Freistadt’s workshop for the ways in which it challenges their sexual self-perception. Freistadt writes that this way of thinking about lesbianism caused many of the heterosexual women present to feel ‘a great ambivalence’ regarding their own sexuality, as they described their primary commitments as also being women, and explained that as a result of the workshop, some ‘felt [they] have a lesbian potential that may or may not one day be realised.’ The emphasis on emotional commitments to women and the potential for a lesbian identity in all women was of course a dominant position amongst writers discussing lesbian identities during the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>27</sup>

Freistadt’s report conveys a sense of there being so much worry over the divisions between women and the effect of this on the Movement that there was a fear of not ‘getting it right’ resulting in further tension. One might describe this as the ‘anxiety to achieve inclusiveness’ which troubled so much of the WLM and SR as a magazine. ‘Getting it right,’ doing justice to the sensibilities of differently identified groups of women, became a key concern for the WLM and, indeed, SR. Perhaps to combat the anxiety or concern, about ‘getting it right,’ both heterosexual women and lesbians seemed eager to meet each other halfway. Freistadt’s organising of the workshop for a National Conference was demonstrative of heterosexual women seeking to give space and attention to lesbian women in the Movement. Lesbians at Freistadt’s workshop presented an idea of lesbianism that did not make sense for all lesbians in the Movement. However, it was nonetheless a version that, stressing the emotional commitment between women, made lesbianism relevant to heterosexual women. As a result, the heterosexual women considered their own ‘lesbian potential.’ Yet, it is clear that it was the lesbians in this example that had actually stretched themselves much further than halfway. For the sake of proving lesbianism’s relevance to heterosexual women, they were invited to deny – or denied – any possibility of sexual desire as a factor in lesbian relationships.

The denial of the sexual aspect of lesbian identity for the sake of inclusion in the Movement was also apparent in the second report, ‘Lesbian Left,’ written by Siobhan and Maria. The two authors state that the workshop they attended was by the Lesbian Left who are described as ‘a lesbian group attempting a Marxist feminist practice.’ The overall tone of Siobhan and Maria’s

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Rich’s ‘Lesbian Continuum’ (1980), Radicalesbians ‘The Woman-Identified Woman’ (1970), or Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1991).



report is fairly dismissive of the group, stating that the conversation that took place in the workshop could have taken place 'at any workshop on sexuality in a socialist feminist context.' The reason why Siobhan and Maria felt this way was due to the lesbian women having suppressed certain aspects of lesbian identity to the extent that the discussion had more to do with sexuality than with lesbianism. They write: 'the Lesbian Left women there were trying so hard not to be "divisive" and to be scientific that they were playing down being lesbian; the politics were watered down' (SR 58: 13). Siobhan and Maria convey a sense of agitation with the Lesbian Left's decision to 'play down' the politics of being a lesbian in an attempt to prevent worsening the divisions among women at the workshop. Taken together with Freistadt's report, it becomes clear that lesbians were in these instances perceived to be consistent in compromising themselves and their politics in favour of creating a sense of cohesion between heterosexual women and homosexual women. The reason for this may have been, as Abbott and Love argue, that 'for Lesbians, Women's Liberation [was] not an intellectual or emotional luxury but a personal imperative' (Abbott and Love, 135). Thus, whilst it was true that the divisiveness of the Movement expanded beyond the lesbian-heterosexual issue, because lesbians' involvement with the Movement was a 'personal imperative,' and they had to prove their relevance to others in order to be included, they were therefore perhaps more willing to 'play down' their politics in order to remain included.

But despite lesbians' willingness to 'play down' being a lesbian for the sake of their inclusion in the Movement, the two reports also indicate that the responses to this strategy were mixed. Whilst the sexual identity of Siobhan and Maria is not apparent, the fact that their response to the lesbians' 'watering down' of their politics differs from Freistadt's nonetheless communicates that there was disagreement between various groups of women within the Movement in how they would like to see the divisions handled. To be specific, whilst the compromising stance of the lesbians worked well for the heterosexual women attending Freistadt's workshop, the Lesbian Left did not impress Siobhan and Maria.

It is also significant that Siobhan and Maria's use of the expression 'watered down' is the very same expression used in *SR*'s preparatory editorial about the conference. This suggests two possibilities. The first is the circulation of various phrases that quickly became part of a familiar repertoire of language used by women in the Movement to describe patterns taking place. This inference in itself feeds the second possibility, which is that this example illustrates the overlaps between the magazine, the Movement, and the dialogues taking place both on and off the pages of *SR*. Just as when both Kate Millet and Abbott and Love use the phrase 'vanguard' to describe the perceived role of lesbians in the Movement, the repeated use of 'watered down' demonstrates how discussions about the WLM and its developments were used to draw conclusions about the implications of those developments and the Movement itself. *SR*, both influenced by the WLM and an instructive resource for women interested in learning more about it, clearly facilitated

discussions that were taken up elsewhere, and it also entertained the conclusions that were made as a result of those discussions.

## Section 2.4: Difference and Identity Amongst Women

To return to the issue of *SR*'s editorial role, its vulnerability was enhanced as it began to participate more fully in the increasingly tense discussions about women's liberation and the difficulties of the Movement. Also adding to *SR*'s predicament was the continued 'advice' it received from its readers regarding the magazine's direction, such as the letter from Ms J Knuckles, for example, who suggested *SR* 'should "open out"' and 'develop the lesbian potential of [the] mag' (*SR* 61: 5). Still, for some time *SR* continued to remain uninvolved and unwilling to take sides. This was evident in *SR*'s response to the National Women's Liberation Conference held in Birmingham in spring of the following year. The conference, as it was reported in the May 1978 issue of *SR*, was particularly worrisome. Written by Anny Brackx, Gail Chester and Sara Rance, and titled 'How We Oppress Each Other?', the report communicated that the confusion from the previous year's national conference regarding what to talk about and how to talk about it, had evolved into an admission of coercion and repression within the movement. Indeed, as Brackx, Chester and Rance report, the 'three issues particularly important to the women's liberation movement [were]:' How do women oppress each other? What is the nature and effectiveness of, and alternative to, campaigns? And how do women come together within the organisation of the movement?' (*SR* 70: 17)<sup>28</sup> All three of these questions indicate a dissolution of the solidarity, sisterhood and activism once viewed as central to the Movement and to women's liberation. They also indicate a desire to address these issues and to resolve them. They write:

There's very little we can call our own so far. Unfortunately one concept which we have developed hardly surfaced in this set-up: sisterhood. Even though alliances were shifting, the battle lines were firmly drawn all the time. There was little sympathetic listening; it was mainly a question of attack and defence... An awful lot of women were caught in a cross fire between various shouting groups, not identifying with any of it. It was next to impossible to hear anyway, especially at the back.

Disruption, antagonism and restlessness are all clearly evident from Brackx, Chester and Rance's descriptions. Their language – 'battle lines,' 'attack and defence,' 'cross fire' – is overtly war-like, indicating how significant the disagreements had become amongst women in the Movement. Consciousness-raising was replaced with 'unsympathetic listening.' Women felt trapped as they were 'caught' in the middle of 'shouting groups,' and 'identification' was prevented. Brackx et al later add that 'some of the political divisions were clear to [those] who had been around the

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<sup>28</sup> All direct quotes to Brackx, Chester and Rance's report are from *SR* 70: 17 unless otherwise indicated.

women's liberation movement for a while, [but] for others it was impossible to reach sensible decisions through the veils of political manipulations and dishonesty.' In Brackx, Chester and Rance's report, the resounding hopefulness for the 'potential' of the movement's unification and growth that was common in previously mentioned *SR* conference reports, has given way to exasperation and defeat. Indeed, when Brackx, Chester and Rance describe the voting process that took place at the conference on the wording of the seventh demand, they state that it 'becomes a meaningless gesture and decision-making a charade when every one [*sic*] is overwrought, too hot, too tired and pushed into rigidly defined polarised positions.' The collapse of the conference and the fatigue brought on by the endless opposition left the authors wondering whether or not the movement itself had reached its point of collapse. Their conclusion is that the divisions themselves 'need not be negative' – the question lies in how to handle those 'splits.' The recommendation put forth by Brackx, Chester and Rance is that 'in order to grow [women] need to keep on exchanging ideas as feminists.'

This recommendation is particularly important given the collective's response to the calamity of the conference. In the next issue of the magazine (June 1978) the collective 'responds' to the disaster of the conference by doing two things: reprinting the seven demands of the WLM, and devoting almost the entire 'forum' page of the magazine to letters readers sent in about the conference. These two 'responses' are indicative of *SR*'s lack of direction. As an introduction to the reprinting of the official demands of the WLM, the *SR* collective state that women are in disagreement over the importance of the demands. Whilst some women in the Movement think that the demands should be abolished, others wanted to keep them 'as an outline statement of what [the WLM] stands for.' The *SR* collective states that they chose to reprint them because they feel it will be 'helpful' to readers (*SR* 71: 5). However, the 'helpfulness' of the reprinting of the demands is questionable. In my view, it communicates that in the midst of confusion about what was going on within the Movement and, indeed, what the Movement was even about, the collective thought it would be 'helpful' to go back to a certain preordained list of basics. *SR* itself admits that the usefulness of the demands is debatable. The demands themselves had of course previously been the source of conflict amongst women in the Movement. Also, in disentangling various issues into individual demands as seemingly unrelated items on a list, they did little to promote a sense of the interconnectedness between issues such as child care and sexuality, or equal pay and lesbian discrimination, and fail to articulate the nuances of the demands themselves.

Adding even *more* opinions and perspectives as *SR* did by presenting the views of its readers on the Forum page of that issue further reinforced the message that the conference report communicated about the disarray of the Movement. The letters represented a wide range in tone and topic and most women focused on the conflicts of the conference, using familiar descriptive words such as 'chaos,' 'attack,' 'manipulative,' and 'freaked out.' In addition, many of the readers offered their perspectives on the divisions between women, with the majority expressing interest

in figuring out some way for the movement to move forward whilst ensuring that the concerns of *all* women were recognised. A few of the letters specifically addressed the division between lesbians and the movement, some arguing for the split of the sixth demand and some arguing against it. *SR* stated that it had 'received so many letters about the National Women's Liberation Conference [...] that [they] decided to give over this [particular] "forum" entirely to a selection of readers' letters.' Yet, although receiving 'so many letters,' only seven were printed, and the *SR* collective did not engage specifically with any of the views put forth. Instead, they revealed their readers' different positions and thus the crisis in the Movement.

As the July 1979 *SR* editorial showed, *SR* struggled as a collective to define its image and this struggle had direct implications for the editorial decisions of the magazine. The editorial was written by Rosie Parker<sup>29</sup> to mark *SR*'s seventh birthday, and as such recalls its difficulty in finding a niche amongst feminists, the movement and other women's magazines, whilst maintaining an appeal to a 'broad spectrum of readers' (*SR* 84: 18)<sup>30</sup>. Parker writes of the magazine's initial inhibitions towards an overt connection between itself and women's liberation, referring to the magazine's logo as evidence of its reserve:

*Spare Rib* started by calling itself 'the new women's magazine,' retreated by *SR* [issue number] 4 to plain 'news magazine,' over the next year veered between 'women's magazine' and 'women's news magazine,' and then left a description off altogether. With its fourth birthday it came out as a 'women's liberation magazine.'

This vacillation is indicative of *SR*'s indecisiveness as to its identity. As Parker addresses the magazine's concerns of speaking out and taking a stand on particular issues, the trepidation and anxiety that were present in several of the past conference reports is recalled. Parker writes that '*Spare Rib* tended at first to soft-pedal,' and that 'this was due in part to a lack of experience, a lack of knowing, a fear of "getting it wrong" rather than just wanting to "play it safe".' Parker's explanations of *SR*'s fears are remarkably similar to the descriptions of women's feelings in previous WLM conference reports – particularly Freistadt's, who in commenting on her observations of the definition of lesbianism in her conference workshop on the lesbian-heterosexual dialogue, was worried about whether or not she had 'got it right.' *SR*, in its continued efforts to appeal to *all* women, found that negotiating a balance between content that interested both women familiar and unfamiliar with the WLM was complicated and increasingly so, as the Movement became fractioned. Parker writes that eventually *SR*'s 'lingering timidity took a different

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<sup>29</sup> Rosie Parker is involved with The Squiggle Foundation, a foundation dedicated to the works of D.W. Winnicott. She has given the following talks: 'Maternal Ambivalence and Creative Parenting' (1995) and 'Creativity, Femininity and Aggression' (1998). See <http://www.squiggle-foundation.org/record>.

I conducted research to find out biographical details on the *SR* collective, contributors and readers I refer to in this thesis. Some individuals – such as former collective member Rosie Boycott – are quite well known as they have continued to remain in the public sphere. Others, however, have not. Where biographical information was available on an individual I included it through the use of footnotes. Different amounts and kinds of information were available on those for whom I added such references and this is reflected in the differences among the relevant footnotes.

<sup>30</sup> All direct quotes to Parker's editorial are from *SR* 84: 18 unless otherwise indicated.



form: trying to present a perfect, agreed movement “line” and avoiding areas of controversy [...] for fear of confusing readers new to feminism or putting them off.’ However, Parker explains that *SR* had since concluded that this avoidance actually ‘excluded readers from important areas of discussion,’ and that they were now ‘try[ing] to get the balance right with features like “Forum” and [...] article[s] on movement tendencies.’

Parker does not elaborate on what ‘important areas of discussion’ the collective thought they had excluded readers from. Nor does she detail the ‘areas of controversy’ that *SR* had tried to avoid. It is clear from her editorial that as *SR* reached its seventh birthday, the collective were reflecting on their editorial choices and how those choices impacted on the image and, indeed, reception of the magazine. Parker seems to be communicating more of a commitment from *SR* to include its readers not only in the discussions presented in the magazine, but also to incorporate their feedback on the magazine into their decision-making processes. *SR*, in its aim to be a magazine relevant to *all* women, thought that one way to deal with controversial areas was to present *all* sides of the issues at stake. By encouraging readers to participate in the negotiation of controversy, they were more likely to represent *all* perspectives thus enabling them to circumvent claiming a political line which could potentially alienate certain women.

Fig. 5. Controversial Articles



Cover illustration by Lynn Duncombe

Controversial articles have always been a problem area for *Spare Rib* — articles which raise issues basic to feminism in lively new ways, and articles which expose and explore differences within the Women's Liberation Movement.

We want to be accessible and interesting to new readers while stretching and surprising older readers; we want to be honest about the movement without 'betraying' it to the world outside.

The *Spare Rib* Collective itself contains a variety of feminist opinion. Do we tend to suppress our differences to keep the peace, and so arrive at a safe but boring 'common denominator'? How much should *Spare Rib* be an open forum, and how much should we develop our own 'line'? We have certainly had bitter disagreements over some articles — do they stimulate debate within and about the movement? Is it necessary to publish such material in order to open issues out and move us all forward? Or are the views expressed so offensive to some collective members that we shouldn't print them? Could they be harmful to certain groups of women — lesbians, separatists or black women, for instance? Where does 'responsibility' become censorship?

We have decided to call a readers' meeting to discuss all this. We genuinely want feedback from you. Do you find *Spare Rib* dull and bland? Does it help you think about feminism? How would you like to see 'controversial' issues covered? — issues like transsexuality, religious beliefs, racism in the women's movement, anti-woman practices in Third World countries, accusations of lesbian chauvinism.

Please come and tell us! If you come half an hour early, there'll be papers here for you to read which should give you fuller examples of the dilemmas outlined here.

SATURDAY  
JULY 12 2.00

ACTION SPACE  
16 Chenies Street WC1

Creche space available



*Spare Rib* is produced collectively by Anny Bracks, Lorie Epstein, Zoe Fairbairns, Susan Hemmings, Mary Middleton, Jill Nicholls, Sue O'Sullivan, Rosie Parker, Ruthie Petrie, Angela Phillips, Linda Phillips, Amanda Sebestyen, Carole Spedding, Ruth Wallgrove, Lucy Whitman. Special thanks this month to Jude Carlson, Sharon Lea, Frances Knight, Ingrid Ernsden, and Marie Naily.

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## Section 2.5: The First Debate: Editorial Responsibility and Anti-Lesbianism

As *SR* was collectively produced, it had to negotiate not only the perspectives of its readers but also those of its collective members. Whilst publishing several extra readers' letters in the 'Forum' section of the magazine was no guarantee that readers would be satisfied with the magazine's handling of controversial issues, it was likely to make readers feel that their views mattered enough to be acknowledged through publication. The collective, however, had to resort to different tactics when faced with multiple viewpoints on particular issues. In July of 1980, *SR* published an editorial specifically addressing the difficulty of 'controversial' articles for the collective (see fig. 5):

Controversial articles have always been a problem area for *Spare Rib* – articles which raise issues basic to feminism in lively new ways, and articles which expose and explore difference within the Women's Liberation Movement.

We want to be accessible and interesting to new readers while stretching and surprising older readers; we want to be honest about the movement without 'betraying' it to the world outside.

The *Spare Rib* Collective itself contains a variety of feminist opinion. Do we tend to suppress our differences to keep the peace, and so arrive at a safe but boring 'common denominator?' How much should *Spare Rib* be an open forum, and how much should we develop our own 'line'? We have certainly had bitter disagreements over some articles – do they stimulate debate within and about the movement? Is it necessary to publish such material in order to open issues out and move us all forward? Or are the views expressed so offensive to some collective members that we shouldn't print them? Could they be harmful to certain groups of women – lesbians, separatists or black women, for instance? Where does 'responsibility' become censorship? (*SR* 96: 3)

To find answers to some of these questions, *SR* solicited the advice of its readers: 'Please come and tell us!' The collective called a meeting and informed readers that if they arrived at the scheduled meeting 'half an hour early,' *SR* would provide them with 'papers' enabling readers to become more familiar with the 'dilemmas' with which the collective grappled (*SR* 96: 3).

The editorial suggests that what makes controversial articles 'controversial' is the extent to which they divide women, or represent differences, within the movement. *SR* qualifies their goal of maintaining their appeal to both new and old readers by stating that they want to be 'honest' about the movement without 'betraying' it to the world outside. But this means to admit to the differences between women in the Movement and the editorial indicates the collective's fear that to do so is as much a risk in putting off readers as arriving at a 'safe but boring "common denominator."' By inviting women to attend a meeting where articles could be read and ideas exchanged, *SR* sought to break down the wall between the editorial and readership roles. Whilst *SR* may have seen this as a way of equalising and democratising its processes, one could also argue that it expressed a certain discomfort with the responsibility of the collective's editorial role. *SR* framed this discomfort in a theoretical question regarding the line between editorial responsibility and censorship. Yet, it is clear that *SR*'s editorial was about more than its concern for maintaining a broad-based

readership. They were seeking readers' advice on their collective's 'dilemma.' They were planning to hand out 'papers' at the meeting that served as examples of the types of editorial problems the collective had come up against and did not know how to handle. As a result of the 'bitter disagreements' it had endured and the collective's uncertainty how to prevent future disputes, the collective in a sense sought to re-negotiate its editorial role with its readers, thus indicating that SR did not feel sure how to manage this responsibility.

Indeed, the collective circuitously admitted just this only two months later in another editorial. In the September 1980 issue of the magazine the collective publicly admitted that it had 'recently [...] come up against acute decision-making problems' and that as result of those problems it had 'realised very abruptly that [they] had never worked out a clear collective practice' (SR 98: 3). What was already apparent in their July 1980 editorial regarding SR's difficulty in handling 'controversial articles' was now made clear. The 'controversial article' – the cause of their 'abrupt realisations' – was entitled, 'Feminism for her Own Good,' and addressed the tensions between lesbians and heterosexual women in the movement. The collective state that the article had provoked quite opposing perspectives amongst collective members, and a debate on whether or not the magazine should publish the article began. The collective explains:

Some [members] felt it should be published alongside replies and reactions from individuals in the collective [...and a] decision was taken to publish. But three members came to feel that [the author] expressed her views in anti-lesbian and heterosexist ways and so this article should not be published. One of them felt so strongly that she said she'd withdraw her labour for the issue in which it was to appear. Publication was blocked. Personal rifts and political disagreements opened up that had until then lain relatively dormant. Since then it has been difficult to produce work and get along in a sisterly spirit. (SR 98: 3)

SR reveals that this lack in 'sisterly spirit' was so severe that the collective sought the help of a group counsellor. It was also why they called the readers' meeting. The collective indicate that the 'papers' readers were told they would be provided with as examples of the 'dilemmas' SR faced were in fact copies of the 'Feminism for her Own Good' article, along with commentary from the collective on the contrasting viewpoints of members and 'notes' on previous editorial 'problems' (SR 98: 3). Whilst the collective did not explicitly state that they were hoping that readers would help them solve their editorial decision-making problems, they did not hide the fact that they held the reader's meeting as an opportunity for them to get feedback on developing the editorial policy they 'abruptly' realised they had never established.

Yet, SR was also apparently confused about the actual 'function' of the magazine, and therefore also used the meeting as an opportunity to discuss its role. The collective write that readers had a number of suggestions for the magazine. Many expressed an interest in SR 'opening up to controversies' but advised the collective to 'enter the debates with caution' (SR 98: 4). Whilst 'a sizeable minority felt that though *Spare Rib* should get involved in the debate between heterosexual and lesbian women, this particular article gave it a wrong start,' most thought that the 'Feminism for her Own Good' article 'should have been published, as it [not only]

expressed the views of some feminists, [but also] because readers should be trusted to make up their own minds' (SR 98: 4). However, SR saw many of these suggestions as evidence of their difficulty in establishing editorial decision-making practices. When readers expressed their opinion 'that *Spare Rib* couldn't just publish whatever [they receive]' the collective correctly interpreted this as meaning that they 'had to make choices.' 'More decisions,' they write, clearly unhappy in this acknowledgment.

The SR collective members found it difficult to deal with the fact that as the producers and editors of a national magazine, they were required to 'make choices' and 'decisions.' SR's editorial indicates that the collective was unable to answer questions readers asked of them at the meeting regarding 'what does SR want to do' and 'whom does it want to reach?' In fact, instead of answering these questions for themselves by offering a prospective vision for the future of the magazine, the collective wrote that they were relieved to see that 'readers seemed to be aware that having [the] power [to make choices and decisions] is exactly what creates the problems [for the collective]' (SR 98: 4). Perhaps the collective felt too burdened by the responsibility of editing a magazine that due to its commitment to the WLM sought to incite discussion on topics that were increasingly problematized, and then as a result had to manage and negotiate the discussions they incited. This task was undoubtedly difficult. But by deflecting their editorial decision-making onto their readership they shrugged off the responsibility they had created for themselves as marketing their magazine as *the Women's Liberation* magazine. Contributing to this situation was the failure of SR's democratising and sharing impulse, the implication of which was that women engaged in the principles of the Movement were meant to work collectively. When this practice stopped working, a readily available solution was not at hand.

This shrugging off of this responsibility and the perceived importance of collective participation coupled with SR's dependency on readers to inform the magazine how to manage controversial topics in many ways backfired on the collective. At the conclusion of the editorial SR included further suggestions by readers made during the meeting on how the collective might handle similarly controversial articles in the future. Among the suggestions SR mentions two: including 'statement[s] to explain that articles in the magazine don't necessarily reflect the views of the collective, or [publishing] individual disclaimers [by the collective members]' (SR 98: 4). These two suggestions would potentially allow SR to publish controversial material without jeopardising the collective because they enabled collective members to disagree. It is important to note here that the suggestions mentioned were particularly significant for how they would later inform SR's collective and editorial decisions made during the second and third major debates in the magazine on racism and anti-Zionism, respectively. The lasting implication of this editorial is that it in many ways set a detrimental precedent for SR's future handling of controversial issues, as will be demonstrated in the next two chapters of this thesis.

In addition to the various opinions and advice given to SR by readers during the readers' meeting, the collective also received feedback – and indeed, criticism – through letters sent into



the magazine by readers either unable to attend the meeting or those who had attended but who had more advice to give. These featured in the September 1980 issue of the magazine under the title 'Controversy... Letters Extra.' Many of the letters refer to the questions regarding editorial control put forth in *SR*'s initial editorial on how controversial topics had always presented problems for the magazine. Several of these letters argue that *SR* should include controversial material in the magazine, claiming, like reader Sandra McNeill, that 'no matter how watered down and liberal [...] *Spare Rib* [becomes] there will always be some readers who object' (*SR* 98: 40). 'The only alternative,' as asserted by reader Lilian White, 'would be to become boring and to suppress anything which might give offence' (*SR* 98: 40). Here the implication was that if *SR* did not include controversial articles, the magazine would not be interesting. Yet, other readers, such as Sue Coates, admitted that they 'feel *Spare Rib* has a duty to protect women from further oppression' (*SR* 98: 41). This notion clearly placed *SR*, as another reader writes, 'between two fires' (*SR* 98: 40). The magazine was to protect women from further oppression and at the same time not censor material to the extent that its content became boring; clearly a difficult, if not impossible, task.

Though contradictory expectations were articulated, ultimately how to proceed was the decision the *SR* collective needed to make. Despite the fact that most readers' responses were a variation of reader Hazelle Eastman's suggestion, "publish and be damned," the collective's reluctance to do so also meant that collective members could not reconcile their differences. The first letter printed in the 'Letters Extra' section of the September 1980 issue of the magazine addressed this problem directly. Penny Collier wrote:

Because I happen to be on the lesbian-feminist, London grapevine, I pick up two messages about *Spare Rib* and your collective. The first is that you feel that it is very important to reach and appeal to as many women as possible, particularly women who are isolated from, or new to, the Women's Liberation Movement. And second that there are political splits in your collective about the implications of implementing such wide-ranging appeal. Grapevines being as limited as they are, that is more or less the full extent of my knowledge. (*SR* 98: 40)

Collier's letter indicates that *SR*'s collective problems were not unknown by the wider WLM community. Whilst she points out that *SR* was in a particularly precarious position because of its insistent aim to reach as many women as possible, both internal and external to the Movement, Collier also acknowledges that 'the conflicts that exist within the magazine and the collective are central to the problems within the Women's Liberation Movement at this point in time' (*SR* 98: 40). Nonetheless, it was clear to many readers that *SR*'s editorial difficulties were difficulties that the collective had to deal with. Reader Sue Coates, who expressed her belief that *SR* had a 'duty to protect' women from offence also argued in her letter that 'ultimately, the decision to publish or not publish must rest with the consciences of the collective' (*SR* 98: 41).

Yet, it should not be overlooked that the continued exposition of the collective's internal conflicts was also a matter of editorial control. Reader Penny Collier concluded her letter by stating that the collective should '[risk] exposing [its] own conflicts' because that way, 'any

criticism thrown at [the collective] could be answered in the light of [their] courage rather than in the shambles of [their] confusion' (SR 98: 40). Collier implies that SR would benefit from making its internal conflicts public. However, her suggestion includes an important distinction that should be kept in mind. Collier writes that the magazine would be wise to communicate its conflict to readers, but only if the collective can speak from a place of conviction for the editorial decisions that it has made. Thus, she is not suggesting that SR avoid areas of controversy, or that it should strive to always agree as a collective about the editorial decisions that are made. Instead Collier makes clear that she would prefer not to have to be exposed to the 'shambles of confusion' that SR were presenting of themselves.

Unfortunately – for both Collier and SR – the conflict as well as the confusions were yet to escalate. Two months later, in the November 1980 issue of the magazine, SR published a letter from the author of the 'Feminism for her Own Good' article, Ann Pettitt. Pettitt's anger with the magazine was unmistakable. She begins by writing:

I am utterly horrified by your decision to publish letters about my article which mention me by name, and which give various opinions and interpretations of what I have written, in the context of your continued refusal to publish the article itself. Your readers are left to surmise for themselves what unprintable 'anti-lesbian' and 'anti-women' calumnies I may have written. When I lived in London I had a number of friends and acquaintances in the women's movement; what on earth must they be thinking? (SR 100: 28)

Pettitt's grievances against SR are understandable. SR distributed her article to read at the readers' meeting without her knowledge. It then allowed, and indeed encouraged, quite an extensive discussion of the article to ensue – both at the readers' meeting and on the public pages of the magazine – without giving all readers the opportunity to read her piece and without giving her the opportunity to explain herself at either occasion. SR announced the 'controversial' nature of the article, and informed its readers that some collective members found Pettitt's article so offensive that they were going to withdraw their 'labour' on the issue in which it was originally supposed to be published. As Pettitt goes on to express her frustration with the magazine, she accuses it of hiding from areas of controversy behind the mask of the collective. She writes that 'most [SR] articles are unsigned or "collectively written"' (SR 100: 29). However, SR had not extended 'such sisterly protection' to Pettitt, and she was left 'in a position remarkably similar to a person at a trial at which the defence is not allowed to speak' (SR 100: 29).

In Pettitt's view, her 'position' was a direct result of SR's lack of understanding about its editorial role and its vision for the function of magazine. 'Really you must get a bit of honesty into this somewhere,' she writes.

Either you do have a 'line,' and you don't print stuff which contravenes it (as in fact has happened), in which case you owe it to us to make the line explicit please; or, at risk of offending some, you print reader's [sic] ideas and opinions. The compromise you've arrived at in this case, to print letters about an article only 100 or so of your readers have been allowed to read, seems unspeakably crass, as well as mean to me



personally. How can your readership possibly discuss something they haven't read? How can I possibly make it clear what I am saying? (SR 100: 29)

Whilst it is reasonable to expect that the SR collective would encounter difficulty as a collective in its editorial decision-making processes, given the political content of the magazine and the state of the WLM, if SR had not involved their readers in their internal conflicts, they might not have acted so inappropriately with regard to Pettitt's article. The decision was made to publish Pettitt's letter presumably because SR had decided that it was not, after all, going to publish Pettitt's article. But the collective did not resume discussions with its readership over the issue following Pettitt's letter.

The decision not to resume discussions was perhaps because the collective was still struggling with the fallout that had occurred and thought that silence was preferable or necessary. This notion is supported by the publication of 'A Statement' by Amanda Sebestyen one month later in the 'Letters' section of the December 1980 issue of the magazine, detailing her reasons for her resignation from SR. In her statement, Sebestyen references the 'Feminism for her Own Good' article and expresses her dismay at the magazine's handling of the affair. She asks that in exchange for 'keeping silent on points which might aid [her] argument but [...] could damage *Spare Rib* or individuals working there,' SR 'please grant [her] the privilege of an uncut letter, with no "response" or editorial explaining how [she] be read' (SR 101: 19)<sup>31</sup>. SR accepted Sebestyen's request, but in a footnote at the end of her letter admitted that they had modified the letter to 'omit individuals' names.' Yet, considering the content of Sebestyen's letter, it was almost shocking that SR included it in the magazine at all. Sebestyen reveals not only that she was upset over how SR handled Pettitt's article, but that she was 'worn out' by SR's non-judicious editorial decisions. She writes that more often than not, there was indeed an implied line influencing the collective's editorial decisions, 'and anything else is lucky even to get to the letters page, unless the writer's a friend or a lover or someone working here.' She states that 'SR's reasons for rejecting things seem often to have more to do with counterculture snobbery than "politics".' In her criticisms of SR Sebestyen clearly seeks to defend her decision to resign from the magazine and in doing so she distances herself from collective practices with which she disagrees. Her letter sheds light on SR's insularity and the unattractive sides to its oligarchic structure. On the one hand, much of what she writes almost contradicts SR's dependence on reader feedback to tell the collective how to run their magazine. On the other hand, it is perhaps precisely because some members of the SR collective proceeded in their editorial decision-making with such pomposity and exclusivity that the collective was 'split,' the views of those opposed to what appears to be a majority being so strong that the collective was at a standstill, forced to seek external solutions for what they themselves could not resolve. At the end of her editorial Sebestyen confesses that it was she who 'was the sucker who said we should call in a counsellor,' suggesting that it was a minority in the collective that was invested in the cohesion of the collective. Indeed, Sebestyen concludes by stating that

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<sup>31</sup> All direct quotes to Sebestyen's letter are from SR 101: 19 unless otherwise indicated.

two other collective members had left in one month alone. Whilst the reasons for the other collective members' departures are not given, one can only assume that they shared Sebestyen's sentiment when she admits that she had 'finally given up hoping that [the collective] will ever make decisions in a fair or consistent way. It's taken me six months,' she writes, 'of rage, misery and boredom to make me see I was wasting our time.'

For as much as Sebestyen's letter revealed about the collective's practices and the divisiveness, 'rage, misery and boredom' tearing it apart, it also suggested other implications of the original heterosexual/lesbian debate that underlined the problems plaguing the magazine. In the second half of her letter, Sebestyen explains that for her 'the crunch [of her decision] came over two articles: "Feminism for her Own Good," which [SR] didn't publish, and "What Me, Racist?'. She writes:

both times there was an identical situation: several people disagreeing strongly with an article, but only one who felt she couldn't bear to see it in *Spare Rib* – the first woman is still on the collective; the second was me. But the way we decided was quite different – we took a year to shelve "Feminism for her Own Good" but decided to go ahead with "What Me, Racist?" after one short meeting.

The article, 'What Me, Racist?' which is explored in detail in the second Chapter of this thesis, is an article that dealt with the racial conflict taking place within the WLM. Sebestyen's claim that the 'Feminism for her Own Good' article, which focused on many of the questions about women's sexuality as it figured in debates between lesbian and heterosexual women and their political alliances within the Movement, was in effect 'shelved' in favour of an article that drew just as much concern from members of the collective, but was on the topic of race. The inference drawn from this is that the lesbian/heterosexual debate, and the claims that SR was anti-lesbian in its neglect to publish material on this debate as well as on the discrimination of lesbians in the Movement and the larger British political context were largely left unresolved, only to be replaced by seemingly more pressing issues of the time, in this instance racism.

## Section 2.6: Issues Unresolved

Indeed, in May of 1981 a handful of readers wrote to SR in reference to a recent sex article, 'Taking Control of Our Sex Lives,' written by Angela Hamblin and featured in the March issue of the same year. In one anonymously written letter, one reader argues that it was not until she became involved in her first lesbian relationship that she, 'like many heterosexual women in the women's liberation, [...] envied and felt inferior to lesbians in the movement. This envy and sense of inferiority was due to the perceived ability of lesbians to escape the "sexual oppression" all women experience "by the simple art of refusing to sleep with men" (SR 106: 4)<sup>32</sup>. She goes on to

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<sup>32</sup> All direct quotes to Hamblin's letter are from SR 106: 4 unless otherwise indicated.

say that after she slept with another woman – which she makes a point of clarifying, was ‘out of love [and] not for political reasons’ – she ‘realised that the myths held in ignorance by many heterosexual women about lesbians [...] simply aren’t true.’ She states that ‘With a woman [she] was never sure if [she] was oppressor or oppressed’ and that ‘if she’d been a man, [she’d] certainly have been critical of some of her ideas and actions.’ However, ‘as it was,’ the reader felt she ‘should support her as a woman struggling to define her own sexuality.’ The reader concludes her letter by saying that whilst she had been upset about the ending of her affair with the woman, the ‘effect of [her] experience had been that [she] no longer [felt] guilty about learning to enjoy again the heterosexual relationship that has survived. Both relationships involved struggle and pleasure. [But,] in this instance,’ she writes, ‘I found the heterosexual one easier to handle.’

There may be many reasons such as habituation, for instance, that prompted this reader to write as she did. A second reader’s letter criticised Hamblin article as a ‘prime example’ of how the women’s movement still predominantly assumed sex to mean heterosexual sex. Readers Cath Jackson and Sophie Dick argued that the article’s heterosexual slant ‘should have been made clear in the first paragraph [...] that the section on loving women is an insult,’ and that the article, in their view, ‘comes down to ignoring lesbians.’ They concluded their short letter by thanking *SR* ‘for calling it “Sex with Men,”’ but claim that ultimately, like Pettitt’s view of *SR*’s ‘compromise,’ ‘it wasn’t quite enough’ (*SR* 106: 4).

Both of these readers’ letters are reminiscent of earlier exchanges in the magazine. The anonymous letter contains elements similar to the article on bisexuality written by Susanna Allan. Lesbianism, for both this reader as well as Allan, was something that was ‘out there.’ She felt an ‘ignorance’ – one that she states many heterosexual women feel – and this ignorance evolved into ‘knowledge’ only after the reader began her relationship with the other woman. The framing of her affair is still within a heterosexual context, and has the same resonance as Allan’s piece, when she describes how the experience enabled her to rid herself of her guilt, and ‘enjoy’ her heterosexual partnerships once again. Lesbianism, in this sense, is constructed as *being* the ‘experience’ of having sex with another woman, and, as a result of that experience, being able to ‘work out’ – as the women in ‘Four Years On’ tried to do whilst living in the commune – the alternating ‘struggle’ and ‘pleasure’ of one’s sexuality. The second reader’s letter is reminiscent of the criticism of Eleanor Stephens’ sex article ‘Making Changes, Making Love.’ The criticism, in both instances, is that the article is too focused on heterosexuality. In the five years time from the first to the second piece, it seems as if the only difference between the two articles and corresponding readers’ letters was that *SR*, in the latter case, pointed out that it would be on ‘sex with men.’ Whilst this gesture was indicative of a growing awareness that sex did not necessarily mean heterosexuality, Jackson and Dick nonetheless thought that the article ‘comes down to ignoring lesbians,’ just as reader Poppy Rice felt Stephens’ ‘Making Changes’ represented *SR*’s ‘failure to show [...] lesbians and bisexual women.’

In December of the same year, Gaby Charing wrote a review of Adrienne Rich's article, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.' She starts her review with the following:

Let me begin with a hunch I have: that most of us, most of the time, simply cannot cope with sexuality. Political sexuality, compulsory sexuality, lesbian sexuality, non-lesbian sexuality, feminist sexuality, celibate sexuality, not to mention sex: it is all too much for us; it makes us want to share our thoughts, and our beds, with no-one [sic] but our cats. (SR 113: 40)

Clearly, the issue of sexuality proved overwhelmingly complex for many women besides the anonymous reader, Jackson and Dick. Indeed, Charing writes that the inability to 'cope with sexuality' is not specific to lesbians – it is an oftentimes disconcerting issue for other women too. This, she argues, 'needs saying at a time when we lesbians are being depicted as larger-than-life figures of good and evil.' 'Good' and 'evil' sound very much like the repeated language within the magazine of 'right' and 'wrong.' Despite the many sexual configurations Charing lists at the beginning of her review, by highlighting the fact that at the time the review was written, lesbians were depicted as 'larger-than-life figures of good and evil' Charing suggests that women's sexuality is still portrayed as quite polarised. This construction of the lesbian closely parallels the contrasting 'ignorance' and 'knowledge' that comes with the mystification of the lesbian sexual 'experience' that is ultimately subsumed back into its opposing heterosexual framework. This is particularly important given Rich's premise which placed women's love for other women on a continuum that runs between these two poles. As Charing writes:

Adrienne Rich suggests that all women experience forms of primary emotional intensity with other women at some stage in their lives. This has its fullest expression, of course, in emotional and sexual passion between women, the lesbian existence which is constantly being written out of history. But by redefining the erotic in female terms, by broadening it to encompass a whole range of woman-identified experience in each women's life, and most specifically, women's resistance to marriage, we can identify a 'lesbian continuum' occupied by all women some of the time and by some women most (I would like to say all) of the time. (SR 113: 40)

What is interesting here is that Charing talks of being able to 'identify' a lesbian continuum. In addition, both the emotional and the sexual connections between women are mentioned as being the 'fullest' expression of women's love for other women, communicating that the two are just as split, and that what it means to *be* lesbian is still a bit of a mystery. The emphasis on the primary emotional bonds between women, and the opening up – the 'broadening' – of the lesbian range, is connected to the political, most specifically with regards to institutional resistance. The move from dependence on men (marriage) to the embrace of the 'experience' of intensity *all* women encounter at some stage in their lives postulates the idea of 'sameness,' even if that sameness is diversified by varying emotional, sexual and political ratios. Charing highlights the broadening of the notion of lesbian to encompass a range of relations, from the emotional to the sexual.

Charing concludes her review by saying that she feels as if 'slowly, and with difficulty, [women] are perhaps learning to *talk* about sexuality rather than shout about it.' Indeed, with the

introduction of ideas such as Rich's continuum, it appears as if a notion of (sexual) fluidity is starting to emerge. However, this fluidity is still clearly restricted by the ongoing debates that frame women's sexuality within the binaries of the early women's movement. To be specific, women are still unsure of what to do with the lesbian 'figure' (SR 113: 40).

This uncertainty is easily perceived in Charing's review of Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality* and it is also visible amongst the SR collective. In March of 1982, SR included an editorial in the front of the magazine, addressing, again, the topic of lesbianism. The editorial, like the second part to 'Why is Your Magazine So Depressing?,' featured in March of 1975, was also a response to a reader's letter. This time, however, the reader's letter was printed in the magazine as a form of introduction to the editorial. In the letter, the anonymous reader writes to SR to renew their subscription. They praise SR, but criticise it for its high volume of lesbian content. 'Don't get me wrong,' they write, 'I'm not anti-gay. But they are in a minority, and if you want to reach more readers, surely you shouldn't publish so much about them. As it is, I can't show your otherwise excellent magazine to my mother, my neighbours, or my workmates' (SR 116: 3).

This letter is particularly interesting when compared to the letter by Ms. J. Knuckles back in August of 1977, who advised the magazine to 'open out' and 'develop' its 'lesbian potential' because it was the lesbian readership which was responsible for the magazine's increase in sales. Now, when the lesbian is viewed as a 'larger-than-life' figure of 'good and evil' within the movement, she becomes a reason for hiding the magazine from other potential readers. SR's reply to the letter does not offer much insight. They state that they're often 'puzzled' by readers' claims that the magazine is too heavily lesbian-focused, as 'the fact is,' they admit, 'that [...] in over a hundred issues, [SR] published no more than half a dozen features about lesbians!' (SR 116: 3) Yet, despite the paucity of their articles on lesbians, in the next section of their editorial the collective state that the magazine wants 'to question the assumption that heterosexuality is "the norm,"' and explain that 'a whisper – which is all *Spare Rib* has really given to lesbians over the years – can seem like a shout when all around is silent' (SR 116: 3).

The use of the word 'shout' is intriguing, especially considering its juxtaposition to the words 'whisper' and 'silent' and when remembering that it is the same word that Charing uses at the conclusion of her review when she writes that women are learning to 'talk' about sexuality rather than 'shout' about it. The lingering effects from past women's liberation conferences where anger and divisions dominated the event are noticeable. Binaries are presented which suggest that the emerging 'fluidity' of female sexuality is still very nascent: women are either heterosexual or lesbian, emotional or sexual, alike or different, shouting or silent; there is no example of being somewhere in between. Towards the end of their editorial, SR tries to occupy this space – to 'open it up' – by writing that '*Spare Rib* is, in fact, just the magazine where you'd expect to read a good deal about lesbians [...because] women caring for women – something central to women's liberation – takes many forms, and we need to show it in all its fighting spirit and passion' (SR 116: 4). However, even though women's attachments to other women is believed to take 'many

forms,' the 'caring,' or 'emotional' is still situated as one, the 'spirit and passion' as another. What is more, *SR* intentionally draws a line connecting the magazine to the WLM and reminding readers that what is 'central' to the movement is central to the magazine. This provides insight into the position of lesbians within the movement as well as the continued timidity of *SR*. Lesbianism, something supposedly so 'central' to the movement, had been featured only half a dozen times in over one hundred issues of the magazine, yet, the magazine, is just the place 'where you'd expect to read a good deal about lesbians' (*SR* 116: 4).

Over the course of the next several months, *SR* printed ten readers' letters lauding the magazine for its support of lesbians. At first glance, this would appear to confuse the issue of lesbianism further. However, what it does, instead, is to reveal that the 'lesbian issue' was not resolved – both within the movement as well as for *SR*. The debates surrounding women's sexuality as they related to lesbian identity remained in effect until the introduction of 'queer' almost a decade later. The dilemmas *SR* faced in relation to its representation of lesbians resurfaced in connection with other topics. Indeed, *SR* moved on to the next debate which had already begun to surface as the issue of lesbians in the movement was discussed and as such, race and racism are the focus of the following chapter.

## Chapter 3: Issues of Race in *Spare Rib*

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### Section 3.1: Introduction

My third Chapter will look at the issue of race within *SR* magazine and the WLM. Given Britain's colonial and imperialist past, the racial dynamics in the UK tend to be constructed on the basis of 'colour.'<sup>1</sup> Thus, as a backdrop to this Chapter, I shall briefly outline the post-World War II context regarding race policies in Britain, and, specifically, how this has been linked with patterns of foreign immigration. However, before doing so, I would like to provide a brief outline for the Chapter.

As I shall show, when the magazine started one particular migrant group and its race emerged in relation to engagement in the British labour market. This however, as my Chapter demonstrates, was quickly superseded by focus on another group and their relations with other women in the WLM. As the debates about race began to intensify differences amongst various groups of women, both across and within diverse racial groups, were increasingly and heatedly discussed. I shall analyse these fully below. These debates were in part articulated through a changing use of vocabulary and terminology in relation to race. An early, seemingly unselfconscious use of 'black', for example, to refer to, for instance, Asian women, gave way to other linguistic forms of expression, which were, at times, part of the political debates about race. These, too, I shall discuss in greater detail below. In all cases, I have done my best to be clear about the terms that were used in a specific article, by a specific person, about a specific group of people and have made every effort to refer to an author or group of women as they identified themselves racially. In the cases where racial identity is not clear, I have made note of this in the text or have referred to the person or persons in questions as racially diverse.

Britain has a long history of immigration. Nevertheless, British people have felt uneasy about sharing this geopolitical space with others. As Walvin (1984) states: 'Urban poverty, cheap labour, filthy housing, disruptive children, crime: all these and an apparently endless litany of offences have, in greatly differing historical English contexts, been imputed to immigrants and settlers' (20). As a means of negotiating this uneasiness with immigration, post-World War II Britain increasingly sought to impose restrictions on the number of people permitted to enter the country as residents. Many scholars have noted the ways in which Britain's colonial history undoubtedly influenced its 'attitudes' towards different immigrant races (e.g. Goulborne 1998; Layton-Henry 1992). This is perhaps most notably evidenced by Britain consistently allowing very large numbers of migrants from other European countries to settle whilst simultaneously limiting the numbers of entrants from the Commonwealth (Solomos 2003; Goulbourne 1998; Walvin 1984). 'Race' or 'colour' was the primary 'distinguishing factor' between immigrants from Africa, Asia and the Indian subcontinent, and those of European origins, and was associated with the negative potential for

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<sup>1</sup> For an extended discussion of this issue, see 'Whiteness and European Situatedness' (2002) by Gabriele Griffin with Rosi Braidotti and Sandra Ponzanesi's *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* (2004).



disrupting the social, economic and moral fabric of Britain (Goulbourne 29; Solomos 52). Thus, 'while officially the illusion of the United Kingdom being freely open to all British subjects was carefully fostered, substantial and repeated efforts were being made to obstruct the migration to Britain for settlement of people from the Indian sub-continent, the Caribbean and West Africa' (Spencer 1997: 46).

This obstruction became more important following the Second World War. In the 1950s and early 1960s the British economy grew at a rapid pace. This resulted in 'substantial shortages of labour, particularly in the relatively stagnant sectors of the economy – for example, textiles, metal manufacture, catering and transport – where low pay, long hours, shift work and job insecurity made employment unattractive to native workers' (Layton-Henry 1992: 45). Immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa and the Indian subcontinent were actively sought for these work opportunities. Consequently, Britain experienced significant immigration from these places. As already stated, whilst Britain was historically consistent in its discomfort with immigration, the issue during the 1950s was not exclusively about immigration *per se*, but about the immigration of distinctly 'coloured' persons. Thus, 'the racialisation of the immigration issue was [...] done through coded language: Commonwealth immigrants were seen as a problem, but race itself was not [publicly] mentioned as the central issue' (Solomos 2003: 56). Over time, the 'politicisation' of such issues occurred as 'immigrants' came to be synonymous with, and 'visualised as the colour black.' Or, in other words, 'immigration became a coded term for racial questions' (Solomos 2003: 56).

The conflation of immigration with race continued (to grow) throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The 1958 race riots in Notting Hill seemed to suggest that 'coloured' immigrants did, in fact, present a potential threat to the country. Three years later, in 1961, a bill was introduced that sought to increase immigration legislation. The result was the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act which restricted entry to those persons either holding a British passport or a certified work permit. This Act was not overly stringent; it was significant primarily because it provided the groundwork for future legislative restrictions on immigration.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s Britain faced a radical and 'unexpected' decline in the economy. True to the past, immigration received much of the blame. 'For legions of Britons who saw their country declining in material and international terms, it was easy not merely to explain key aspects of that decline in terms of one of the most obvious and undeniable social transformations around them – coloured immigration – but it was a comfort to *blame* the immigrants for the undesired changes in Britain's fortunes' (Walvin 137). In a sense, immigrants functioned for many as a sort of 'human reminder' of the changes the country was experiencing (Walvin 137; Goulbourne 30). Furthermore, Britain watched with disquiet the birth of the US Civil

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<sup>2</sup> See David Coleman's article 'U.K. Statistics on Immigration: Development and Limitations' (1987) for further information on the 1962 Act.

Rights Movement; its influence also a reminder of the potential difficulties a nation could encounter due to racial conflict (Hansen, 70).<sup>3</sup>

In 1965 the Race Relations Act was introduced in Britain, which made discrimination on the basis of race, colour or ethnicity illegal. The Race Relations Board was also established as a result of this Act, with the intention of addressing the increasing number of discrimination complaints filed. But the illegal practices it dealt with were quite narrowly defined, and the Act appeared to be more of a pre-emptive gesture than a practical solution. This became even more apparent with the rise of the National Front — in 1967. The Front — ‘a string of small but voluble and vociferous Fascist groups’ advocating ‘nationalist, authoritarian and racist’ principles — perpetuated the belief that multiculturalism and a mixed-race society was indeed the cause for Britain’s recent economic decline (Walvin 141). This belief was rejuvenated the following year when in April 1968 Enoch Powell delivered his famous ‘rivers of blood’ speech<sup>4</sup> — the first of several speeches in which he issued warnings about the hazards of too many immigrants, predicting, amongst other problems, urban chaos and the loss of British identity. Both the National Front and Powell presented a very public disapproval of immigrants (Winder, 376), and tried to instil a general sense of fear of their potential or actual effect on British society; it was Powell who introduced the idea of repatriation.

The agitation against immigrants by Powell and the Front meant that immigration controls and ‘race relations became subjects of partisan debate on an even larger scale’ (Solomos 2003: 61). Similarly, the connection of immigrants to crime, and black youth to various social problems escalated in the public imaginary. In 1968 the Commonwealth Immigrants Act was revised so that entry with a UK passport was now conditional upon passport holders having been born in the UK, or proving that if they themselves were not, their immediate family — such as parents or grandparents — were, or were at least appropriately naturalised as citizens. Those that sought entry but did not fit this qualification would have to apply to the government for a voucher.

In the same year, the Race Relations Act was amended to broaden its range and include areas of discrimination such as housing. The Community Relations Commission declared that the Race Relations Board would have to deal with complaints of discrimination. That these two Acts — one further restricting the number of Commonwealth immigrants permitted entry to the UK, the other supporting the rights of those immigrants already settled — were put into effect in the same year, suggests the complexity surrounding the immigration and race debates of the late 1960s. This complexity is also clearly visible in the Immigration Appeals Act of the following year (1969). On the surface, the Act appeared to provide a much needed appeal system for the growing numbers of Commonwealth citizens being denied entry into Britain. However, a clause added to the Act by the Labour government, stating that dependents who wished to join their relatives in Britain must

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<sup>3</sup> See Kobena Mercer’s *Welcome to the Jungle* (1994), Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) and Hazel Carby’s article ‘White Woman Listen!’ (1996), for an extended analysis of this issue.

<sup>4</sup> Reprinted in *The Telegraph*, available online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643826/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html>.

first obtain an entry certificate which could only be done after proving their relationship to the British resident through proper documents and an interview at the British High Commission, in actuality proved to be a further attempt by the British government to create entry restrictions – particularly for the relatives of those who had already immigrated. 'Already separated by great distances and, in many cases, over a long period of time, such families were often compelled to live apart by the sheer impracticalities created by the procedure; at best the coming together of these families was greatly hindered, delayed and inconvenienced' (Walvin, 120).

In 1971 the Immigration Act was introduced, which radically shifted the ways in which immigration issues were dealt with. To be specific, the Act gave a great amount of authority to the Home Office in the development of various 'rules' regarding immigration (Hansen, 194). This meant that the procedures and criteria for evaluating individual cases of immigration were more or less up to the 'discretion' of the Home Office. What is more, the Act instituted the term 'patrial' which described the UK citizen with no more than two generations' distance from his or her British roots. Sassen (1999) states that 'the United Kingdom has traditionally been a jus soli system: all persons born in any British territory in any part of the world could claim British citizenship, even if their parents were not British.' However, the 'immigration controls [...] introduced in the 1960s and 1970s [...] began to undermine [the] broad definition of citizenship in that they restricted the right of citizens to enter and settle' (Sassen, 121); 'patrials' effectively defined those who were and were not British citizens. This reinforced the notion that immigrants were alien, fundamentally *not* British, different and undesirable, and could – or perhaps should – if necessary, be dealt with by means of deportation. Other stipulations brought about through the 1971 Immigration Act were that work permits must be renewed every year, and that those who obtained a permit must register with Britain's police. 'Thus the police were, at an early and sensitive stage, brought into contact with immigrants' (Walvin, 121).<sup>5</sup>

### Section 3.2: First Discussions of Race in SR

The first issue of *SR* magazine appeared in July of 1972, one year after the Immigration Act came into force. It was over a year later that the November 1973 issue 17 of *Spare Rib* magazine carried an article entitled, 'Lottery of the Lowest: Asian Families in Southall,' written by Rosie Boycott and Christine Aziz.<sup>6</sup> The article, which was the first to appear on the topic of race, describes the derelict living conditions for most of the Asian families living in Southall, a borough of London that has since become associated with Asian migrants. The article explains that these conditions occurred following the arrival of approximately 30,000 Asian immigrants who were

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<sup>5</sup> See, also, *Racism and Anti-Racism* (1992) by Peter Braham et al. for additional information on the relationship between the police and immigrant populations in the early 1970s.

<sup>6</sup> See Amrit Wilson's book, *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (1978), for detailed insight into the experiences of Asian women living in Britain in the 1970s.

recruited to Southall in the 1950s to work in the Woolf rubber factory. These large numbers of migrants resulted in overcrowding, insufficient employment and low levels of pay. Boycott and Aziz go on to illustrate some of the conditions in which the Asian families live, including the long hours of work, the strain to meet financial responsibilities and the ghetto-like accommodation.

Eventually, the article shifts to focus on the experiences of female Asians in particular. Boycott and Aziz state that for women who in Asian cultures are traditionally bound to the home, 'the working situation is crucial' (SR 17: 17). Although there are not many local options for employment, the women have to find work outside the home in order to cope with the extraordinarily high rent. Aside from the discomfort of having to take on the shared role of 'breadwinner' alongside their husbands, the women face a number of difficulties in the factories where most of them work. They are required to wear factory uniforms which contravenes their culture's dress codes. In addition, they are not allowed factory union participation, and, because many of them do not speak fluent English, they find day-to-day interaction difficult.

In a section titled 'Women Alone,' Boycott and Aziz expand on the marital issues of Asian women, to focus on divorced or widowed Asian women. They write that the majority of Asian women's marriages are arranged, and that divorce is seen as socially disgraceful. Thus, when Asian women are confronted with infidelity or abuse, they are very reluctant to leave their husbands. In the situation where an Asian woman finds herself abandoned by her husband, she – like the widow – 'can only depend upon relatives to draw her back into the extended family circle' (SR 17: 20). This will allow her to 'maintain her dignity, but [nonetheless,] overnight the divorced or abandoned woman gains a reputation of worthlessness and notoriety – she becomes a social outcast' (SR 17: 20). However, as Manjulah, one Asian woman interviewed, indicates, the family can end up adding a great deal of extra pressure and strain. She tells Boycott and Aziz that when she made the difficult decision to leave her husband, her parents came to Britain, essentially to 'make sure she did not divorce.' What is more, she suggests that whilst they did their best to try and comfort her, because they "can't understand one word of English" and "are completely bewildered" she, as a result, is instead "comforting and helping them." Manjulah explains that because she has "to do everything for them," "they have become a liability" (SR 17: 20).

In this article, and in almost all subsequent articles, Asian women are portrayed as the victims of their culture's attitudes towards marriage, divorce and women's domestic role in general. Nerys Williams, an English teacher, who works with Asian women in Southall, talked with Boycott and Aziz about the ways in which female Asian immigrants struggling without a male partner face difficulties that "are in no way similar to those experienced by their Western counterparts. Their situation,' Williams writes, 'is intensely aggravated by their lack of English and their total passivity and reluctance to act positively. This gives one the mistaken impression that they are uncooperative' (SR 17: 20). However, Williams argues that this is not the case. Rather, it is the Asian woman's cultural emphasis on her 'servitude' and 'dependence' on her family – 'to have to

function suddenly as an independent, thinking person and to be economically responsible for the rest of the family is a great strain for them. They are completely lost and helpless” (SR 17: 20).

On the very next page, *Spare Rib* featured another related article, entitled ‘Racism, Discrimination and the Unions’ by Geoffrey Sheridan. Whilst this second article did not focus exclusively on Asian women, it did deal with the issues Asian immigrant workers faced. Sheridan states that ‘there was a rumour circulating on the picket line at Standard Telephones and Cables that a shop steward in the Electricians’ Union had threatened Asian workers that if they joined the West Indians who were on strike, they would be reported to the police and deported. Perhaps the rumour wasn’t true,’ he writes, ‘but the strikers were quite prepared to believe it’ (SR 17: 21). The article describes the events leading up to the strike, and the racism that was present as negotiations between factory management and immigrant workers took place. Sheridan writes that this racism was also obvious among the white workers who, he claims, ‘are deeply imbued with the ideology by which the ruling class justified Britain’s imperialist ravages’ (SR 17: 21). This ideology, he feels, ‘effectively isolates an increasingly more insecure and legally deportable immigrant labour force’ (SR 17: 21).

These two articles are very illustrative of *SR*’s early focus on race and racism. Indeed, all of the articles between November 1973 and January 1977 outline both the challenges faced by Asian immigrant workers in Britain in the early 1970s and the daily discrimination they experienced. For this group of people, during the 1970s almost every interaction was a negotiation involving the conflict of meshing the principles of their former culture with the standards of British life. Clothing, and the English language were but two of the areas in which this conflict arose. The social expectations regarding Asian women’s behaviour and roles from their own communities were in many ways quite contradictory to the new ways in which they found themselves having to engage both at work and in their homes.<sup>7</sup> The lack of patience with and understanding of the pressures that Asian women in particular were under only exacerbated the feelings of many of these women of helplessness and isolation. Not at all familiar with asserting themselves or being placed in a position where they needed to articulate their rights, they found it quite difficult to do so. The threat – realistic or not – of deportation further encouraged their silence and passivity, and demonstrates the extent to which Asian immigrants, both male and female, felt unwanted and vulnerable.<sup>8</sup>

Another article, featured in March 1974, further highlighted how the workplace contributed to undermining Asian women’s feelings of worth. ‘Women In Struggle: The Strike at Mansfield Hosiery’ focused on the strike at the main factory of Mansfield Hosiery which took place in November and December 1972. Author Bennie Bunsee describes it as ‘a struggle which exposed

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<sup>7</sup> For an extended discussion of this issue, see Section 3, ‘Racism and Sexism at Work,’ and Avtar Brah’s “Race” and “Culture” in the Gendering of Labour Markets: South Asian Young Muslim Women and the Labour Market,’ in particular, in Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard’s edited book *The Dynamics of ‘Race’ and Gender* (1994)

<sup>8</sup> It is, however, important to note the ways in which the articles by Williams and Sheridan reproduce certain stereotypes of Asian women as passive, helpless and vulnerable. See Amrit Wilson’s *Finding A Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (1978) for a more critical analysis of this representation, as well as examples of Asian women who challenge it.

[...] the racialism of the National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Workers and the management' (SR 21: 18). As background information to the strike, Bunsee explains that women make up 60 percent of the workforce within the hosiery industry, and that Asian women are 'at the bottom of the ladder.' Asian women are consistently employed in the lowest paid jobs, are not referred to by their names and are oftentimes suspended for petty mistakes. In addition, whereas white female employees are waged, the Asian women are only paid on a 'piece-rate basis,' thus forcing them to work harder for the same amount of money. Asian women's lack of English language skills made it difficult for the Asian women to understand the instructions of their supervisors, and even more difficult to deal with harassment from management, or, for example, stand up for themselves and explain why it was 'against [their] customs' to wear 'English clothes or trousers' to work (SR 21: 18)<sup>9</sup>.

Yet, Bunsee also offers another, contradictory view of Asian women to the 'passive' one previously presented in SR features. Bunsee states that 'few have analysed the extent of the pressure the workers were able to put up with [...] nor has the involvement of Asian women in the strike been looked at.' Bunsee reports that after several issues were raised at one of the local hosiery factories, Asian women at one plant came out on strike in support of the women employed at the first factory. One of the women from the second factory explained that she was striking in support not only of the women from the first factory, but for all Asian employees. As she told Bunsee, 'The colour bar applies to us all. If our brothers are on strike we have to give them support. They need to feel self-respect, when they are treated like dogs how can we go in, if our brothers are out.' Bunsee states that as a result of their participation in the strike, the Asian women began discussing their own problems in the factory and 'soon [...] they were to come forward with their own demands concerning their own conditions.' With the support of the second factory, and a sense of indignation at their own working conditions, the women refused to return to work, despite several threats from their employers. Their resistance and demands surprised and worried the Trade Union, causing it to offer workers representation in the form of a factory workers' committee. Whilst the women were unfamiliar with such negotiations, and did not particularly trust the offer extended to them, they agreed to the conditions, and the strike was ended. A shop committee of fifteen women – eleven of whom were Asian– was formed, and despite the language barriers, increased communication took place. What is more, Asian women were made waged workers, and were given the opportunity for upward job mobility. Bunsee concludes by stating that 'the strike raised many issues, not least of which was the dignity of the Asians themselves as people' (SR 21: 19).

Bunsee's article highlights two important points. Firstly, it is strongly evident in the SR text that the Asian women workers' reaction directly contradicted the stereotype of Asian women as silent, passive and submissive. Bunsee's article suggests that as a result of learning to form strategic alliances with their fellow white female co-workers, Asian women learned how to 'come forward

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<sup>9</sup> All direct quotes to Bunsee's article are from SR 21: 18 unless otherwise indicated.

with their own demands,' and speak up about 'their own working conditions.' These women, whom people imagined as docile, in fact had a sense of their rights and were willing to fight for them. Secondly, it demonstrates the solidarity amongst male and female Asians. The 'colour bar,' as one Asian woman striker stated, applies to *all* Asians – not just the women. Yet, it is clear that the relationships between the different groups of women also necessitated a certain sense of unity, as it was women who made up more than half of the workforce, and therefore mostly women with whom Asian women had to work every day. In order to secure their request for improved conditions in the workplace, Asian men needed the support of Asian women. Similarly, Asian women needed the support of their white female co-workers.

Three months later in July 1974 a letter from reader Pat Kirkham,<sup>10</sup> responding to Bunsee's 'Women in Struggle,' appeared. In the letter, entitled 'Asian Women,' Kirkham writes that she was pleased to see a report on the Mansfield Hosiery mills in the magazine, and that she herself had interviewed several of the women who were on strike. She states that Bunsee quotes heavily from her article, and that whilst she's happy that the women's own words were used to describe their experiences, she does not think Bunsee addresses 'one of the main problems facing Asian women [...] in such situations,' namely the cultural conservatism of their communities (SR 25: 4). Kirkham explains that 'to overcome ideas of what women should and should not do, to speak up for yourself in the factory and take an active part in a strike is a huge step [for Asian women] and requires a great deal of courage' (SR 25: 4). She therefore thinks it is necessary to 'point out' that the women she interviewed were all unique in that they were financially independent. She believes it is 'no coincidence' that these women were also the most 'militant' amongst the strikers. Kirkham then concludes her letter by stating that 'it would be useful if *Spare Rib* could produce more material on black women and look at some of the cultural problems they face' (SR 25: 4).<sup>11</sup>

In addition to reinforcing the view of Asian women's behaviour being directly influenced by their 'cultural conservatism,' Kirkham's letter is worth noting as the first example of conflating 'Asian' with 'black.' None of the articles produced thus far in *SR* magazine had referred to Afro-Caribbean women and the article that Kirkham refers to in her letter details specifically Asian women's experiences in the workplace. Thus, Kirkham's use of the term suggests that she is either unselfconsciously using the term 'black' to refer to Asian women, or that she would like to see more material on Afro-Caribbean women in addition to more material on Asian women.

In the same issue of the magazine, Amrit Wilson's<sup>12</sup> article, 'Racism and Sexism: How They are Linked Under the Immigration Act,' is featured. It examines changes made under the Immigration Act of 1971. The Act, she writes, prohibits the foreign husbands of British women

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<sup>10</sup> Pat Kirkham is now (2009) a Bard Graduate Center faculty member. She is the author of several books, including *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (1993), *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies, and Women* (1995) and edited *The Gendered Object* (1996) with Janet Thumin.

<sup>11</sup> See Gilroy (1987) for further discussion on the unselfconscious use of term 'black'.

<sup>12</sup> As of 2008, Amrit Wilson is an Honorary Research Fellow at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is the author of several books, including *Finding A Voice* (1978), *The Challenge Road: Women and the Eritrean Revolution* (1991) and *Dreams, Questions, Struggles: South Asian Women in Britain* (2006).



from entering the country. She claims that James Callaghan,<sup>13</sup> the person responsible for the changes made, specifically said that the Act helped deter Asian men from immigrating to Britain with the intention to marry. Wilson's article is primarily interested in illustrating the ways in which these changes mask both racism as well as sexism. She writes: 'by allowing men settled here to bring in their wives but stopping women bringing in their husbands, it is implied that only men count – even as immigrants' (SR 25: 30). She states that 'the imaginary black hordes waiting to pour through any breach in the immigration law are seen as men' (SR 25: 30). Consequently, she argues, 'racial hypocrisy is, in fact, strengthened by the Act's discrimination against women' (SR 25: 30).

Wilson, in a fashion similar to Bunsee, communicates that in the lives of Asian female immigrants, racism and sexism – whether at the workplace or in intimate relationships – are intertwined. Both Kirkham and Wilson draw attention to some of the problems Asian women face out of a desire to prove that they too 'count.' However, Wilson's article contradicts Kirkham's view of Asian women being overwhelmingly influenced by the conservatism of their culture. In her analysis of the Immigration Act, Wilson argues that it discriminates against women on the grounds of both racism and sexism, due to the fact that it – like Kirkham – discounts the Asian women living alone in Britain without their husbands.<sup>14</sup> One example that she mentions is the situation of 'Veena,' a woman who came to Britain for an arranged marriage only to discover that the man she was supposed to marry was 30 years her senior.<sup>15</sup> When Veena consequently 'refused to get married' she also relinquished her right to stay in Britain. Whilst seeking refuge at a friend's, she applied to remain in the country as an 'indefinite' visitor. She was denied this possibility, but was able to receive extended stay. Despite lingering difficulties with her former fiancé and having to move house several times, she said that 'she did not want to return to her family in Punjab because she felt that her only chance of controlling her own life would be by remaining in Britain' (SR 25: 31).

Wilson's example of Veena also serves as an insight into Wilson's use of the term 'black' to describe the hordes of imagined racially diverse immigrants making their way into Britain. Veena is Punjabi, not Afro-Caribbean. At this point in time, there is still a distinct absence of a specifically Afro-Caribbean focus. Thus, Wilson, like Kirkham is also most likely using the term in an unselfconscious manner. 'Black' is just another way in which to refer to people of racially diverse backgrounds, here Asian women; they are not 'white,' and therefore they are included in the category 'black.' Thus, whilst it can be assumed that Kirkham is referring to Asian women, it is not absolutely clear what specifics she is thinking of when she suggests SR should focus more on the 'cultural' problems faced by 'black' immigrants. However, it is worth considering SR's decision to

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<sup>13</sup> James Callaghan was Prime Minister of England from 1976 to 1979.

<sup>14</sup> Whilst Kirkham did point out that the financially independent women were the most militant amongst the strikers, she does not equate this independence with living alone.

<sup>15</sup> This problematic is also described in the Southall Black Sisters' *Domestic Violence and Asian Women* (1994) and Rahila Gupta's *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers: Southall Black Sisters* (2003).

print Kirkham's letter, and the possibility that Wilson's report was published in the same issue as some form of a response to it.

The topic of immigration and marriage was taken up twice more in *SR* the next three months with the publication of two different readers' letters. The first letter appeared in August 1974. In it, Sara Jinha asks the readers of *SR* magazine rhetorically if they are as 'sick' as she is of the poor reception a recent bill preventing the discrimination against wives who have foreign husbands. She writes that she has 'come to the conclusion that this rule is being perpetuated by men with the aim of protecting and preserving British women from foreigners and punishing those who, like [herself], have actually' married foreign men (*SR* 26: 3).

Two months later, in the November 1974 issue of the magazine, another reader's letter, in reference to Jinha's letter, was printed. The letter which was anonymously written, is titled, 'Asian Women Arranged Marriages' [*sic*]. The author intends to 'put forward another point of view' (*SR* 29: 4)<sup>16</sup>. She describes herself as a seventeen-year-old British Asian female. Her parents, she writes, 'come from India, a village, [and] the customs of that village are law in [her] home.' The young woman explains that she has three sisters, and that her father is 'contemplating finding four husbands in the village' for them. Because she and her family are British citizens, the soon-to-be husbands will eventually come to Britain to live. She states that she is 'sure there are hundreds of girls in [her] position' but asks, 'What can we do? What chance have we got to have even limited freedom?' 'You talk of discrimination,' she writes, '[but] few of you know what it is like to belong to a background such as ours. I myself may be luckier, because I have good friends who help, but when I see my sisters I worry.' Finally, the reader concludes with the admission: 'I read your magazine in the newsagents, [but] I wouldn't dare buy it.'

The two letters produced different takes on one raced and gendered issue: the entry of males who have actual or potential partners in the UK and the effects of this entry – or lack thereof – on women. This is a complex issue, primarily because whilst one woman wants free entry as she is happily attached to her partner, another woman dreads this possibility, as she does not want to be married against her wishes. Both women's perspectives are valid in that both defend the freedom of choice for women. However, both views also raise questions about appropriate forms of regulations and about how to support women's right to choose their partners appropriately.

The anonymously written letter is interesting for the way in which the author concludes. She claims that whilst she reads *SR*, she would not 'dare buy it.' The use of the word 'dare,' suggests that due to the cultural strictness of her family, buying *SR* would be viewed as a (perhaps punishable) transgression.

Over one year later, in November 1975 *SR* took on the advice of Kirkham and published an editorial feature on Asian women. Yet, as the beginning of the editorial reveals, what followed was not the explicit opinion of the magazine collective. *SR* informed its readers that 'editorials are not

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<sup>16</sup> All direct quotes to the 'Asian Women Arranged Marriages' [*sic*] letter are from *SR* 29: 4 unless otherwise indicated.

always written by the collective. We decide on a particular subject for an editorial,' they state, 'and then look for the person or the group who we feel is best able to write about it. We invite them to a meeting and the editorial they write develops out of our discussion' (SR 41: 8).

That month's editorial was by Amrit Wilson on 'the position of Asian women in Britain' entitled 'Racism and Sexism (SR 41: 8)<sup>17</sup>. SR does not explain why Wilson was chosen to write the editorial, nor why its particular focus was on racism and sexism. The editorial begins with Wilson stating that 'for generations Asian women have accepted an inferior role within the family. In Britain they have come face to face with a new form of oppression – racism.' Wilson states that this 'new form of oppression' is something she believes white women know little about. She claims Asian women, however, 'can see it clearly' and are starting to fight back against its influence. One example of this resistance that she provides is in black workers' unwillingness to settle for the lowest paid work or poor working conditions. 'They can see sexual discrimination every day of their working lives,' she writes, 'and having learned to recognise it they have begun to perceive it within their own families and to think about their liberation as women.' Yet, Wilson argues that this liberation cannot be considered without first acknowledging their experiences of racism.

As the article continues, the tenuous relations between white and Asian women are addressed. Wilson questions whether or not a white woman can identify with an Asian woman, wondering specifically if white women even care to know where Asian women live, or what their familial ties might be like. 'Perhaps it is difficult,' Wilson suggests, 'because Asian women, particularly older ones, are seen as almost identical with their culture – complex, incomprehensible – seen through veils whether they wear them or not. Since the Asian woman *is* her culture her every act takes on for English people a depersonalising cultural significance.' Wilson provides the example of how Asian women often feel pressured to dress in 'British' clothes when confronted with disparaging remarks about the visibility of their bare 'tummy.' She argues that the implication of such remarks is that an Asian woman's 'tummy being visible [is] somehow a flag of defiance on a foreign ship in the English harbour and covering it up [is] an acknowledgment of the superiority of British culture.' These kinds of everyday situations, she writes, communicate 'the extent to which colonial and missionary attitudes linger on in Britain.'

Wilson concludes the editorial by suggesting that it is this 'lingering' attitude of Britain's colonial and imperialist past that prevents white and Asian women from understanding each other. 'For the white women's liberationist who want to be involved in black women's struggles,' she writes, 'there exists a minefield of misunderstandings.' 'Cultural superiority,' 'distrust' and ignorance are all potential hindrances. But regardless of these hindrances, Wilson asserts that 'the struggle for women's liberation in a community can only come from within that community.' Her advice for the white women who want to help liberate 'their black sisters is to *support* already existing struggles of black women – to support their strikes, make political issues of their at-present-ignored battles with immigration officers, to take a stand on racist education methods if you are a parent, to refuse

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<sup>17</sup> All direct quotes to Wilson's editorial are from SR 41: 8 unless otherwise indicated.

to implement them if you are a teacher. In other words,' she states, 'attack the racism which defines the position of black women in British society.'

As in her feature on the Immigration Act of 1971, Wilson again slips back and forth in her language when referring to racially diverse women. For the majority of her editorial, she describes the experiences of specifically Asian women. Yet, as she concludes, she offers advice to white women to 'support already existing struggles of *black* women' (emphasis added). She makes no distinction between the two terms. In her editorial immigration, strikes, and racism in education are key concerns, and the antagonism highlighted is between white and Asian or 'black' women. It is possible that for some of these concerns, such as immigration, she is indeed including Afro-Caribbean women. However, as Wilson herself is Asian, and her examples of women's dress include typically Asian 'bare tummies' and 'veils' it is likely that she is again unselfconsciously using the term 'black.'<sup>18</sup>

Wilson's editorial makes clear that the concept of 'liberation' becomes complicated for Asian women when they interact with white women, and it is important to note that this is the first time that white women have been included in a discussion on racism in a way that challenges their awareness and involvement.<sup>19</sup> Wilson describes the misunderstandings between them as a 'minefield,' indicating that the existing 'distrust' and 'ignorance' are catalytic. The lingering British colonial legacy makes connecting with one another difficult, and contributes to the feeling that white women are assuming a 'missionary' role in relation Asian women, 'appalled' by the conditions of their lives and eager to help, but largely unaware of the realities of their daily lives and how best to support them in their struggles. Wilson implicates white women in constructing the racism that 'defines' the position of Asian women in British society. It is therefore not surprising that Wilson is very specific about the fact that it is only the Asian women who can liberate themselves within their communities, and the kind of support white women should be offering to them. Accordingly, she challenges white women, in essence, to acknowledge the institutional oppression Asian women experience and stop focusing on such trivialities as dress.<sup>20</sup>

Wilson's editorial had no follow-up response in subsequent issues of *SR*. Nonetheless, it was significant for its added insight into the experienced racism of Asian (and black) women living in Britain, their relationships with white women and their ideas of 'liberation.' Wilson begins by writing about how as a result of the sexual discrimination Asian women encounter in their work environments, they are starting to recognise and confront their traditionally inferior roles within the family. This connects back to Bunsee's report on the Mansfield Hosiery strike, when she writes that after Asian women became involved in the strike out of support for Asian men, they began making 'demands' of their own regarding their own working conditions. Again, the shift in view of

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<sup>18</sup> I will therefore use 'Asian' throughout my analysis of Wilson's editorial.

<sup>19</sup> Antagonism between racially different women is more prominent later.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that the question of white women's support of Asian and Black women was intensely scrutinised until the mid-1980s and writers, especially in the United States, such as bell hooks, also proposed that black women needed to fight their own racism struggles. See, for example, hooks's book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000).

Asian women from that which portrays them as trapped in the conservatism of their culture, in an accepted role of passivity and servitude, to individuals who 'confront' sexual discrimination and 'demand' recognition of their struggles and rights is considerable.

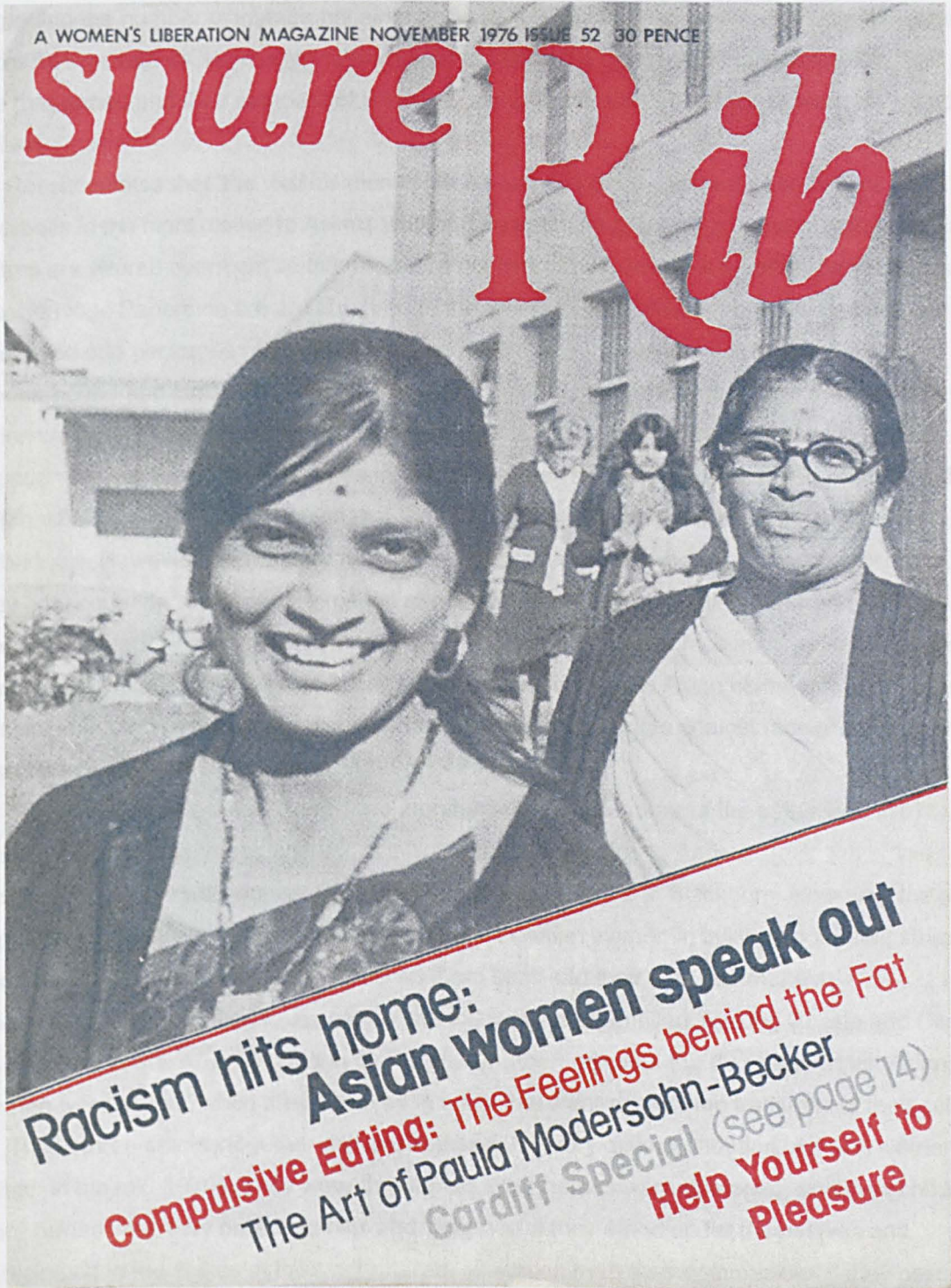
This shift is made even more considerable when placed within the context of the daily experiences of racism. The weight of this experienced racism is evident when Wilson describes that she thinks the decision to wear traditional clothing is perceived as an act of 'defiance' and to 'cover up' by wearing British clothing is a covering up of Asian woman's culture, an open acknowledgment of the 'superiority' of British culture. This example in particular highlights a conflict for Asian women. As a result of immigrating to Britain, they had to take on unfamiliar roles by seeking employment in order to help provide financially for their families. Partly through that process, they learnt to question the traditions of their culture, and start to make demands regarding their own conditions and struggles. However, due to the racism of British culture, as their demands were voiced, they were told that they were being 'defiant' and must 'cover up' those parts of themselves – their culture – that were still 'inferior' when compared to the 'superiority' of Britain. The latter seems insurmountable, for as Wilson points out, it is an 'attitude' steeped in a very long history of colonial rule.

The editorial clearly speaks more to the experiences of readers such as the anonymous woman who wrote to *SR*, stating that she would not dare buy the magazine, than readers such as Jinha. The *SR* collective obviously thought that 'Racism and Sexism' was a significant enough topic for an editorial. However, *SR* openly admitted to its readership that the collective did not feel it could adequately address this particular topic. Wilson was the person they considered best able to write about it, but the *SR* collective never explain *why* they selected her. They also never explain why they felt that they themselves *were not* able to write about it suitably. As mentioned, Wilson herself is an Asian woman, and that is probably why the *SR* collective thought that she was the most appropriate person to write about the topic. Yet, at this time, there was no overt acknowledgment of the value and importance of Asian or other racially diverse women speaking for themselves, about their own experiences – particularly within the context of both the *WLM* as well as *SR*.

About one year later, another three pieces were published in the magazine again drawing attention to the complex experiences of Asian women in Britain. Like those that were previously published, the next two features describe the contradictory, competing view of Asian women as wedged between the conservatism of their culture and the courage they display in resisting the codes of that culture in fighting for their individual rights. The first article, entitled 'Racism: What About Asian Women?,' was published in August 1976 (see fig. 6). Author Ann Rossiter details the 'racial clashes' occurring in East London. These 'clashes,' Rossiter explains, directly involve immigrants and Asian women in particular and are a result of 'the leakage [...] of a secret



Fig. 6. Racism Hits Home



Source: *Spare Rib*, 52 (November 1976).

government report claiming that hordes of Asian dependents are about to descend on Britain,<sup>21</sup> and confused accounts of the number of immigrants already here' (SR 49: 17)<sup>22</sup>. The paranoia regarding the number of immigrants already living in Britain combined with the potential for even more foreign settlers 'led many white workers to blame the Asian or West Indian when their jobs are threatened and their standard of living cut.' As a result, Asian immigrants were harassed and bullied.

Rossiter writes that 'the victimisation is often petty, but persistent: irate taxi-drivers ring doorbells in the night, called to Asians who had no intention of taking a taxi ride at 3am; their milk-orders are altered overnight so that there are not one or two, but twelve bottles on the doorstep in the morning.' Papers on fire are put through the letterbox, windows are broken, gardens are destroyed and packages of faeces are delivered. But it is the women who are not employed – thus 'house-bound and isolated' – who 'get the worst deal.' Rossiter describes how the pressure for Asian women to keep quiet, coupled with their low levels of English-speaking ability, makes their situation all the more dire. She writes that Asian women's participation in strikes – such as the one at Mansfield Hosiery – have shown that they are not passive or unaware of their rights as individuals. However, their culture makes it hard for them to speak out and seek assistance, and they consequently 'suffer severe mental stress and related physical disorders. Some,' she writes, 'have attempted suicide, often successfully – they could no longer face such hatred.' Rossiter concludes by stating that 'with so many contradictions within the Asian community [...] with every possible obstacle in the way of black and white unity, the struggle against racism and growing fascism in Britain will be long and hard' (SR 49: 18).

The second article was featured two months later, in November of the same year (1976). Again written by Amrit Wilson and entitled, 'It's Not Like Asian Ladies to Answer Back' the article includes interviews with women from East London, Bradford and Blackburn. However, the article is paradoxically almost entirely about the silence of Asian women in talking about their struggles and how their experienced racism 'pushes them back into their own communities' (SR 52: 13).

The third article, published in January of the following year, entitled 'Risking Gossip and Disgrace: Asian Women Strike,' again written by Rossiter, further indicates the degree to which Asian women were at 'risk' when they behaved in ways that went against the traditions of their culture.

These three articles together demonstrate well the very difficult situation of Asian women in Britain in the mid-1970s. They were threatened, their homes were damaged, and their children were bullied. Yet, they risked 'gossip' and 'disgrace' if they stood up for themselves and participated in the strikes at their workplaces, alienation from their communities if they assumed

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<sup>21</sup> I have not been able to find the 'secret government report' to which Rossiter refers. However, in her article 'The Racist Appetite Will Never be Satiated' (2005), Diane Abbott argues that 'immigration panics [– or 'scare stories' –] are cyclical, [...] have followed an unvarying pattern for more than half a century' and are promulgated by the media. Given this, the actuality of a 'secret report' is somewhat unimportant in comparison to how its purported existence is symptomatic of the general fear generated by the possible impact of immigrants in Britain – and specifically, how that fear, in turn, negatively impacted immigrant communities.

<sup>22</sup> All direct quotes to Rossiter's article are from SR 49: 17 unless otherwise indicated.



too British an appearance, and 'dishonour' if they left their husbands or spoke out about their conditions and asked for assistance. The 'contradiction,' as Wilson writes, is evident. The tension surrounding this contradiction – the growing inability to establish 'black' and white unity in an increasingly 'racist and fascist Britain' – is important to note. Despite Wilson's slippage in terminology, the binary between white and racially diverse women was again being articulated.

The Race Relations Act of 1976 attempted to address some of this increasing tension. It broadened the scope of the previous Act to include discrimination that was considered 'indirect.' It also introduced the notion of equal opportunity for non-British natives and established the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE). What is more, the Act included the prohibition of verbal discrimination which meant that it was illegal for someone to engage publicly in conversation or speech that had the potential to incite racism.

The actual effectiveness of the revised Act in the reduction of racial discrimination in the day-to-day lives of British immigrants is difficult to assess. However, the Act demonstrated that race and racism had reached a heightened significance within British society and that to a significant extent, the battle against the occurrence of racial discrimination was being recognised and acted on at the state, or institutional level.

### Section 3.3: Autonomous Organising

Towards the end of the 1970s, a shift began to take place with regards to race and racism within the context of the WLM. This shift was also reflected in *SR*. *SR*'s early discussions of race issues, as I analysed in the previous section, centred exclusively on Asian women, focusing significantly on the influence of their culture, employment issues and housing conditions as well as on racism expressed through racist attacks and on questions of immigration regulation. From about May 1977, these topics began to recede as the focus shifted to the growing presence of black women within the Movement. This growing presence not only challenged the priorities of the Movement, but also directed this challenge directly at white women. Specifically, as I shall analyse in the next two sections, white women were ordered to examine their practices and attitudes towards black women, as black women often felt excluded from WLM events and discussions. Eventually, and for a time, this sense of exclusion led black women to organise autonomously with Asian women.

The beginning of this process was first evident in *SR*'s report on the National Women's Liberation Conference in London (1977). This conference, which I have previously discussed with regards to lesbianism and sexuality, was the source of much confusion for most of the women in attendance. As the section of the report dedicated to the issue of race and racism illustrates, the increase in tension concerning the experiences of black and Asian women was also apparent.

As indicated in Chapter 2, the *SR* collective did not write the conference report. Rather, *SR* invited women who attended the conference to write down their impressions and submit them to

the magazine. The result was a mosaic report of different individual synopses (see fig. 4). Credit is not always given to the women who provided sub-sections of the report, and in some sections, such as the one on race and racism, it is difficult to determine who said what.<sup>23</sup> Two of the conference summaries in this section have identified authors. The first is from 'Bradford Women' and the second is from a woman named 'Rachel Williams.' However, the font is italicised at the beginning and end of the section, before the Bradford Women's report and after Williams', and it appears as though the italicised beginning and end is in fact commentary that SR added.

The section begins with SR reporting that at the workshop on racism and fascism 'four black sisters told us to fight racism in our own communities and in ourselves, "rather than approach it from a missionary or social work view"' (SR 58: 9). They write that the four women 'wanted whites to recognise the autonomy of black women' and, told them "don't just go on about women together and feminism as *the* issue because that denies *our* existence"' (SR 58: 9). SR recalls that 'A lot of women clapped when the black women took the mike' and suspiciously wonders, as indicated by parenthesis, if this was 'inverted racism?' (SR 58: 9).

The Bradford Women's report follows immediately. They write that from their point of view, the workshop 'was mainly white women talking about racism of black men against black women and finding it frustrating to combat it. Surely,' they write, the white women 'should fight racism within themselves and within the white dominated women's movement' (SR 58: 9). They criticise the white women who attended the workshop for their assumption that 'West-Indian and Asian women . . . share the same racist experiences' and how 'they are lumped together because they are black,' communicating a lack of 'awareness of their dissimilar cultural backgrounds' (SR 58: 9). But what they felt was most important to point out was that 'white women [should] not to fall into the trap of thinking that Asian women are meek' simply because it is difficult for 'English-speaking Asian women to articulate what they feel' (SR 58: 9).

At this point, we see a shift occurring. 'Black' is increasingly used as a political term including all racially diverse women for the purposes of distinguishing them as often having different political interests and priorities from white women. The white women engage with intra-racial (black versus black) as well as gendered (men versus women) oppression, blending racism and sexism and focusing on the '-ism' of *others*. In fact, by the early 1980s we see the critique of black women directed towards black men rise, especially in the United States.<sup>24</sup> But in the context of the 1977 conference, black women reacted *against* white women's focus on this issue, and instead demanded that they reflect on their own racism. This shift marks three things in particular. Firstly,

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<sup>23</sup> There are twenty-three sections comprising the SR May 1977 conference report and a total of thirty-four by-lines are provided, ranging from 'Anna Briggs (North Tyneside Coast Women's Group)' to the rather anonymous 'A Woman from Norwich.' The number of by-lines exceeds the number of sections because, whilst some section reports do not state the author or authors, most sections are comprised of multiple authors. For example, the section entitled 'Structure and Energy' contains five different reports, all written by different women.

<sup>24</sup> See Ntozake Shange's play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1977), Michele Wallace's book *Black Macho and The Myth of The Superwoman* (1978) and Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1983) for examples of this rise in critique.

the shift away from centring the race issue on Asian women. Secondly, black women's refusal to privilege sexism over racism and thirdly, the differences that emerged between white and black women's attitudes towards racism. In addition, it is important to note that despite the politicisation of the term 'black' to refer to all racially diverse women, a further critique emerged in the report, which heightened the sense of difference, and that is the reported insistence by black women that Asian women's and Black women's concerns are not the same. To be clear, in this report, the issue of *cultural* differences among racially diverse women is raised for the first time, in the wake of issues of employment, housing and state or institutional oppression.

Rachel Williams begins her report by stating that out of the nearly 3,000 women who attended the conference, 'only 35 were black.' She writes that she was told that this 'appallingly' low turnout was in fact 'a tremendous increase from the previous year' (SR 58: 10). She attributes these low numbers to the sense that 'black women don't feel as though racism has been dealt with among the members of the feminist regime' and thus do not feel as though they are 'considered as women who have a cause relevant to the women's movement, [because they] suffer a different kind of oppression' (SR 58: 10). She then shifts her focus towards recalling some of the actual events of the conference. She writes that 'rape and racism were discussed as separate issues. The irony of this came about when one white lady had the audacity to stand up and say that black men were largely responsible for most rapes' (SR 58: 9).<sup>25</sup> Williams explains that at this point, 'the chairwoman and the audience closed the issue [...] the chairwoman' decided to hold a vote on something Williams has 'yet to figure out' but she believes 'one lady thought she was in Parliament' (SR 58: 9). After the vote was held, 'all of a sudden it was announced that too much time had been devoted to the previous session, so only five minutes [could] be admitted for the discussion of racism' (SR 58: 9). Openly expressing her disbelief Williams concludes by asking, 'Can you believe five minutes for a discussion on racism?' Williams' report is followed by an italicised sentence in parenthesis that reads: '(We thought what was meant was that black men are **blamed** for most rapes by the police and the courts?)' (SR 58: 9). I shall return to this below.

This joint report on the discussions about race during the National Women's Liberation Conference is significant for several reasons. Up until then, as I analysed above, the experiences of black and Asian women presented in SR magazine had concerned their lives in Britain, not their participation or presence within the liberation movement. Although this *is* a conference report, previous reports featured in SR did not address issues of race or racism. Both the Bradford Women's and Williams' reports reveal a great deal of irritation among the black women who were present at the conference. White women are consistently told to deal with their own racism and their communities, and are criticised for their assumptions about what black and Asian women are coping with. It is clear that black women felt left out of the movement, unconvinced that they, like

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<sup>25</sup> This marks the beginning of the shift that, as Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti point out in their article 'Whiteness and European Situatedness' (2002), occurred as 'black feminists were exhorted to set their racial allegiances above their gendered grievances and to stop seemingly siding with white people against black men' (Griffin, with Braidotti, 222).

the white women, actually had a 'cause' that was 'relevant' to women's liberation. This feeling was affirmed at the conference when the debate on racism was given 'only five minutes' of discussion time. The joint report also shows that when racism was addressed within the conference, it was done through the controls of white women. Williams describes being told to vote on something she could not 'figure out,' and describes one of the white women as 'audacious.' Another white woman she caricatures as a 'lady' acting like a member of Parliament, which speaks directly to the perceptions of 'inferior' and 'superior' roles occupied by black and white women within British culture – something echoed by the Bradford Women's group when they write about the 'white-dominated' women's movement.

Lastly, it is worth noting the italicised commentary at the beginning and end of the race report. *SR* felt the need to offer an additional perspective to the ones presented by the Bradford Women's group and Williams. Nowhere else in the entire conference report do they do this, which suggests that they thought the race section, in particular, needed special attention or, perhaps, clarification. What they write strengthens the observations of the two other reports. For example, *SR* writes that the black women 'took over' the microphone, suggesting that white women were previously in control of who was and was not allowed to speak, that the black women felt that they were being denied this opportunity and thus needed to create one for themselves by force. By introducing and concluding the section on race, *SR* communicate a sense of authority in that it is the magazine's perspective that contains and situates the others. The magazine appears to be trying to pacify the tension surfacing in the report by putting forth the possibility that the events reported by the Bradford Women's group and Williams could be interpreted another way – that the positive response from the audience when the black women took over the microphone was, possibly, 'inverted racism' and that contrary to Williams' recollection of the white woman who stood up and said that black men are responsible for most rapes, *SR* indicate – in bold type – what was meant was that black men are often 'blamed' for most rapes. Yet, both *SR*'s comments end with a question mark and are placed in parentheses. This suggests that *SR* were possibly uneasy about their assumed authority, and observations, feeling vulnerable to the tensions or contentious events of the conference, or feeling a sense of responsibility to 'interpret correctly' the events without explicitly 'interrupting' the authors' reports. Uncertain or unwilling to commit to one side of the debate and risk polarising readers, they commented on the incidents of the conference, but did not take a clear stand.

*SR*'s coverage of the National Women's Liberation Conference the following year, in May 1978, 'How We Oppress Each Other?' was, as mentioned in the previous Chapter, completely devoted to the debate surrounding the decision to split the sixth demand of the WLM. The June 1978 issue featured a 'forum' of extra readers' letters sent to the magazine addressing this particular issue. Race or racism within the WLM was not once mentioned in the year that had passed, and it was not until one month later, in August 1978, that the topic surfaced again. This 'silence' is worth noting, as well as the fact that the question of Asian women, as previously

featured in the magazine, had almost completely receded by this point, and that subsequent discussions, until around July 1983, focused primarily on relations between black and white women.

In August 1978, the members of Brighton Women's Liberation (BWL), including Joan Mortimer and Annie Rotheram, wrote to the magazine because they thought that *SR*'s report on the 1978 conference, and the subsequent readers' letters published in response to the report, were 'one-sided and inaccurate' (*SR* 73: 20). They state that they were too upset by the conference to write down what had happened when *SR* sought submissions, but hope that their letter, entitled, 'Another View of the Plenary,' will provide just that.

The members of BWL reference the decision to split the sixth demand, and go on to describe some of the events of the conference, giving details of the discussions leading up to the decision to make the split. They say that the discussions took up a great deal of time, and so the women present decided to 'carry on with the agenda' for the conference, even though 'there was only one hour left' which meant that each of the remaining items on the agenda was given only five minutes. The women recall that at that moment, 'a black woman stood up and said that if black women were not allowed to speak next they would never come back to another conference. Women agreed to let this happen although,' the members of the BWL group add, 'it had been pointed out at the 1977 conference that cheering every time a black woman speaks is patronising and racist' (*SR* 73: 21). They write that after the woman spoke out, 'dirty tricks started.' They state, 'we were accused of being racist, classist, fascist, oppressive, etc.' and explain that 'the discussion around the sixth demand and feminist principles was delayed by default as the issues of race, class and imperialism were considered to be more important and time was short' (*SR* 73: 21). To close their letter, the BWL group state that 'while the plenary was disastrous and upsetting it revealed genuine political differences within the movement which we have been afraid of facing up to' (*SR* 73: 21). They stress that their 'politics are feminist' – that they consider their 'oppression as due to male supremacy, to the patriarchy. Men are [the] oppressors, the enemy, and not some abstract "system". The system,' they conclude, 'is created and perpetuated by men for the benefit of all men' (*SR* 73: 21).

The members of Brighton Women's Liberation depict a scenario of the 1978 National Women's Liberation Conference that might very well present 'another view' of the controversial plenary where the decision to split the sixth demand was made, but I would like to point out that their letter highlights events that are uncannily similar to the events of the 1977 conference reported by the Bradford Women's group and Williams. In the extensive coverage given to the debate surrounding the split of the sixth demand by *SR* magazine, and despite the fact that the letter from the BWL members indicates that black women at the conference felt so excluded that they threatened never to attend another conference, the issue of race or racism is never mentioned, apart from them stating that they were called 'racist' at the conference.

The anger and frustration of the black women is a subsidiary aspect of the conference proceedings. The letter almost dismisses the black woman who stood up and voiced her grievances by rebuking the audience for their response, reminding readers 'cheering every time a black woman speaks' is 'patronising and racist' rather than not allowing her to speak. Whilst the Brighton Women's Liberation members admit that the plenary was 'disastrous' but good because it revealed the political differences amongst women within the movement, they are adamant in pointing out that it is men who are the oppressors of women, not other women or some 'abstract system.' The insistence on this point further dismisses the black women's concerns, never taking into consideration the possibility that clearly *some* women did indeed feel oppressed by other women. For some, 'issues of race, class and imperialism' really *were* 'considered to be more important' than whether or not the sixth demand should be split. Yet, *SR*'s decision to feature another 'forum' in the very next issue on the usefulness of the demands of the WLM – rather than, for example, an analysis of the increasing tensions amongst groups of women in the Movement – in some ways added to this dismissal, perhaps further enforcing the 'political differences' between white and black women.

The focus on specifically Asian women's issues briefly surfaced again in the March and April issues of *SR* in the following year (1979) on the topic of the 'virginity tests' conducted by immigration officials at Heathrow airport.<sup>26</sup> Whilst this occurrence was by and large an issue for specifically Asian women, the term 'black' is used in both of the two *SR* examples. In the first feature, located in the 'newshort' section of the March 1979 issue, the term is used to refer to Asian women. The story, entitled 'Harassment at Heathrow,' describes how a female Indian schoolteacher moving to Britain to be with her fiancé, already a resident, was subjected to a sexual examination in an attempt to 'see if she's lying [about her reasons for immigrating to Britain] – in this case pretending to be a fiancée not a wife' (*SR* 80: 9).<sup>27</sup> The 'test,' intended to verify whether or not a woman's hymen was intact, is, as described *SR*, a 'disgusting exercise [that] is an extreme stage in the humiliation and harassment of black immigrants.'<sup>28</sup> The news article states that hymens can be ripped in a number of different ways and even assuming that the hymen is not intact due to sexual activity, just because one is not a virgin does not necessarily mean that one is married. The article argues that the test is 'like the equally pointless X-ray tests [being conducted by immigration officials] on children to "prove" whether they're telling the truth about their age' or, on the contrary, trying to beat the system which restricts children of a certain age from entering the country – with or without their parents. The 'newshort' argues that a female fiancée has the right to enter the country without the usually required entry certificate, but that a married woman must 'go through an extremely lengthy clearance procedure in their country of origin.' Due to the 'racist assumption that the worst thing that could happen to Britain is for one

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<sup>26</sup> See Rahila Gupta's *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers: Southall Black Sisters* (2003) and Gurharpal Singh and Darshan Singh Tatla's *Sikhs in Britain* (2006) for further details.

<sup>27</sup> All direct quotes to article 'Harassment at Heathrow' are from *SR* 80: 9 unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>28</sup> The term 'black' here is worth noting as the occurrence of the virginity tests in fact pertained predominantly to Asian women.

more black person to get in than absolutely necessary,' the article concludes by explaining that immigration officials will do everything in their power to prevent 'spurious' persons from entering the country, even if it means 'excluding genuine claimants.'

One month later, in the second feature, a reader's letter entitled 'Virginity Tests Must Stop,' 'black' is used by the author to argue that the 'virginity tests' are an example of the combined racism and sexism that all racially diverse women face. In her letter Perminder Dhillon<sup>29</sup> writes that 'once again the racist and sexist and utmost degrading treatment meted out to Black and Asian women in this country [has] been exposed!' 'I am of course,' she clarifies, 'referring to the "Virginity tests"' (SR 81: 4).<sup>30</sup> She states that what is particularly 'hurtful is that this kind of thing has been going on for a long time but it has taken this long for it to be brought out in the open' and laments the poor media attention this has received. Dhillon reprimands her fellow 'sisters,' declaring that 'the feminist movement should be in uproar, condemning in every possible way this humiliating practice.' She writes, it is 'up to us to see it doesn't happen again – EVER' and urges readers to 'participate now in all the pressures being brought on the Home Office to alleviate the double oppression of [...] Asian and Black sisters.'

Apparently, the 'virginity tests' were worthy of a news report but not 'uproar' from the WLM. In subsequent issues of the magazine, the topic of the virginity tests, or the X-ray examination of children, was not mentioned again with the exception of a few additional, brief news reports. SR never explicitly took up Dhillon's suggestion that women involved in the movement should participate in applying pressure to the Home Office regarding this issue. They wrote no editorial and did not print any additional readers' letters. Consequently, it is almost as if SR perpetuated what Dhillon observed about the absence of support on the issue. This is all the more surprising since such tests were overtly sexist: they were not conducted on men; they were a specifically sexist form of intervention. Therefore, one could conclude that even if SR were not interested in the tests for their racist nature, the sexist aspect should have been of concern to them.

In June 1979 SR reported that the first ever National Black Women's Conference had taken place in March, a few months earlier. Almost two years after the 1977 conference reports from the Bradford Women's group and Rachel Williams, the newshort states that 'nearly 300 black women met together in Brixton' for what was a 'historic occasion.' The report explains that it was 'historic' because it was not only 'the first time that Asian, Caribbean and African sisters had got together in such numbers, and from so many different areas, to discuss the issues and campaigns concerning us [but also because] it marked an important stage in the development of an autonomous black women's movement [in Britain]' (SR 83: 11)<sup>31</sup>.

The conference was organised by OWAAD – the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent – which was established in February 1978. OWAAD was designed to be 'an umbrella

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<sup>29</sup> Perminder Dhillon is the author of the poem 'I am Woman' (1984) and the article 'Rethinking Rural Race Equality: Early Interventions, Continuities and Changes' (2006).

<sup>30</sup> All direct quotes to Dhillon's letter are from SR 81: 4 unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>31</sup> All direct quotes to the newshort on the first National Black Women's Conference are from SR 83: 11 unless otherwise indicated.



group' for black and Asian women's groups 'active in anti-racist, feminist and community campaigns.' Evidently, Asian, Caribbean and African women made the decision that they would bring their own issues 'out in the open' rather than wait for the 'political differences' of the WLM to be resolved. Instead of hoping for the opportunity to be 'allowed' to speak out and have their concerns and needs recognised, they chose to break away from the movement and organise themselves autonomously. Thus, the birth of OWAAD points to the increasing separation between white and racially diverse women in the movement.

Yet, it is important to note the differentiation between Asian and black women as indicated in the organisation's acronym. In the 1977 National Women's Liberation Conference, The Bradford Women's Group expressed their irritation about the way in which white women lumped Asians and West Indians together, assuming that their experiences of racism were the same.<sup>32</sup> In its decision to distinguish between Asian and black women, OWAAD similarly recognised that just because women are not white does not therefore mean that they share the same colour or cultural experiences. At the same time, it is also worth noting that OWAAD distinctly uses the term 'black' in its reports. The newshort states that at the conference, 'in addition to the talks, poetry and short play, sisters had the opportunity during the breaks to buy books, posters and badges on black/feminist issues, to view the photo exhibition on black women in Britain, and to listen to progressive music by or about black women.' One might argue that this is again a politicised use of the term to include all racially diverse women. However, OWAAD's description of the subjects of various talks taking place at the conference suggests otherwise:

racism and sexism in immigration laws and education, the racist use of Depo-Provera, black-women's participation in campaigns against "SUS" (Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act, which is widely used by police to harass and arrest black people, claiming that they are "persons *suspected* of loitering with intent to commit an arrestable offence"); and "Sickle cell" (an hereditary blood disease, suffered mainly by black people, and widely ignored by the NHS).

Whilst the 'sus' laws indeed tended to target racially diverse individuals, the use of Depo-Provera and the hereditary possibility of sickle-cell anaemia were issues specific to Afro-Caribbean women. The emphasis given to such topics further indicates that despite the collaboration between Asian and Afro-Caribbean in creating OWAAD, there was a noticeable recession of specifically Asian women's issues. Nonetheless, OWAAD's report as featured in *SR* is significant for how it communicates that Afro-Caribbean and Asian women were willing to join together in order to build on their shared oppression and fight the racism in their lives. By focusing on how they were discriminated against in racialised terms, they seemed to have more in common with each other than with their white 'sisters.' At this point in time, they felt they could more effectively make use of their energy and determination, regardless of their differences, by supporting one

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<sup>32</sup> There is a specificity of the Bradford context in terms of racial composition contributing to the Bradford Women's Group's irritation: 'Bradford has the highest percentage of people with Pakistani origins in Britain' (First Key Census Statistics for Bradford District, 3). See [http://www.bradfordinfo.com/census/pdfs/Key\\_Stats\\_Initial\\_Response.pdf](http://www.bradfordinfo.com/census/pdfs/Key_Stats_Initial_Response.pdf).

another in a unified fight against British institutions, society and culture than by fighting to make their 'cause' seem 'relevant' to the larger movement. This report marks the beginning of a period of coalition-building politics amongst women of diverse racial backgrounds that dominated the 1980s in British feminist and anti-racist politics.

For black and Asian women, the decision to organise jointly and autonomously was crucial. The discussions at the Black Women's Conference highlighted some of the many institutional difficulties black and Asian women encountered from immigration officials, the NHS administrators and doctors. But as the article, 'They're Killing Us in Here,' featured in the July 1979 issue of *SR* demonstrated, the increase of police attention was the most serious concern for black women.

The article was written by Perminder Dhillon, whose letter, 'Virginity Tests Must Stop,' was previously published in *SR*. Dhillon begins by recalling how the day after 'the first national demonstration organised by Afro-Caribbean and Asian women' she went into work and was asked to explain why black women were fighting against police brutality (*SR* 84: 32)<sup>33</sup>. She states that this 'is the sort of question black feminists get asked' and that 'what happened in Southall on April 23 might give answers' as to why black women organised 'against police brutality and immigration harassment.'<sup>34</sup> Dhillon here uses black to refer to both Asian and Afro-Caribbean people and this, indeed, became the dominant term to refer to both groups during the 1980s. Dhillon goes on to describe how on April 23, the National Front came to Southall to hold an electoral meeting at the town hall. The 'people of Southall' had secured permission to sit down outside the hall in protest. However, 'as early on as 2pm [protesters] were being arrested for trivialities like crossing the street, or refusing to move instantly when told to do so.' She claims that 'a hundred such arrests were part of deliberate provocation by police, and set the tempo for what was to follow.'

What followed, Dhillon reveals, was a disaster. She writes that 'after 3pm Southall was a town under siege' and by 6:30pm the situation had escalated to extreme police harassment.

The police began to show their force: mounted police, police with dogs, and the special patrol group with riot shields and truncheons laid into [the protesters], forcing them to run into the nearby park. Hitting out, pulling off the turbans of Sikhs, dragging them along the ground by their hair – while women suffered racial and sexist abuse. They were grabbed by their breasts and told, "Move, you black whores!" Some older women who could not climb over the rails into the park were dragged away and arrested. [In another group], young and old women, linked arms, and in this way managed through [...] combined strength to drag [...] free from the police.

Dhillon states her belief that the events on April 23 were pre-planned by the police – that the whole operation was nothing more than an excuse to target racially diverse communities. She writes that 'in the days of the Empire, black people were forced by the army into accepting colonial

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<sup>33</sup> All direct quotes to Dhillon's article are from *SR* 84: 32 unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>34</sup> Nirpal Dhaliwal (2007) asserts that 'the riot that broke out when the National Front tried to march through the high street in 1979 is a basic part of Southall folklore.' See <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article2115361.ece>.

exploitation. Now,' she alleges, 'the police are taking over this military role towards black people in this country' (SR 84: 33).<sup>35</sup>

In the second half of her article, Dhillon shifts her attention to the organised protest that stemmed from this event. She states that 'black women are rejecting [the] stereotype of themselves as passive victims,' something that she feels the protest exemplified (SR 84: 33). She believes that 'many local community women's groups came on [the] demonstration, because the issues were about their everyday experiences' (SR 84: 33). As an example of these everyday experiences she references a passport raid that had taken place just a few weeks beforehand in London. Dhillon explains that 'when police came at night to demand passports, [they] searched houses using the most brutal methods and took people to the police station without ever charging them' (SR 84: 33). She states that incidents such as this brought on feelings of 'anger' and 'worry' in many of the women with whom she had talked. She reports that the police were seeking an increase in their authority and believes that if granted greater power, the harassment would only worsen. For Dhillon, the number of 'sus' arrests is proof that there is cause for concern: 'the law [permits people to] be arrested, not for committing a crime, but for looking as if you might, or arrested for looking as if you might be an illegal immigrant. In other words, a law that allows police to arrest anyone they don't like the look of. West Indian and Asian youth are picked up on SUS all the time' (SR 84: 33).

Dhillon's article is, essentially, a first-hand account of the horrors faced by racially diverse women in their local communities. She uses the term black interchangeably and inclusively. The confrontations with the police are on their own clearly enough cause for feelings of 'anger' and 'worry.' But the police represent a much larger problem of institutional racism, which affect all racially diverse people. Dhillon traces this form of racism back to 'the days of Empire' and the colonial exploitation of racially diverse people. This expresses the magnitude of the situation – racially diverse people are not just fighting the police, but hundreds of years of racist ideology that their behaviour embodies.<sup>36</sup>

Dhillon's article also speaks of the empowerment of black women. She strongly asserts that these women are not 'victims' and that they are 'rejecting [the] stereotype of themselves as passive' (SR 84: 33). This is quite a significant shift from the earlier articles on the servitude, silence and passivity of specifically Asian women. The Black Women's Conference and the autonomous organising of black women reveals their refusal to fall prey to feelings of 'anger' and 'worry' and instead use them to strengthen their desire to overcome the racism of their 'everyday experiences.'

Despite both the decision for black women to split from the WLM and organise autonomously, and Dhillon's painful account of the traumas black women face, these issues were not initially

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<sup>35</sup> See 'Policing the Crisis' (1978) by Stuart Hall et al. and Stanley Cohen's *Visions of Social Control: Crime, Punishment, and Classification* (1985) for police relations to black communities.

<sup>36</sup> This kind of concern resurfaces again and again, particularly in relation to Afro-Caribbean experiences. See James' *Strangers and Sisters* (1985) for early accounts of racial harassment by the police; see also the Scarman Report (1981).

pursued by *SR* magazine. As mentioned, it was Perminder Dhillon who wrote the letter that was published back in April stating that the whole of the WLM should be in 'uproar' over the 'virginity tests.' It is not known whether *SR* asked Dhillon to report on the events of April 23, or if Dhillon wrote the article and then asked *SR* to publish it. In either case, there were neither any correlating readers' letters printed regarding this article nor any related subsequent articles specifically concerning the topic of police brutality. One possible explanation could be the racial make up of *SR*'s readership, which appears to have been predominantly white. Another possibility for this comes from two readers' letters published, suggesting the white, middle-class ethos of *SR*.

The first letter was published in the August 1979, the month after the issue in which Dhillon's 'They're Killing Us in Here' was featured. Reader Miriam Yagud's letter, entitled 'Racism,' expressed her dissatisfaction with the way in which *SR* neglected to highlight the issue of racism in an article on Margaret Thatcher's political agenda. She writes that she 'was very shocked that no mention was made of the fact that Thatcher [stands] on a specifically racist platform, and won the election because of the racist immigration policies of her party. Why was this so obviously ignored?,' Yagud asks. 'Was your collective afraid of upsetting or offending its white middle-class readership?' (*SR* 85: 4) She then orders the collective to give up their habit of 'shoving these issues under the carpet,' cautioning them that 'it's been worn threadbare' (*SR* 85: 4). Yagud states that women involved in the movement 'must recognise the signs for what they are, and organise to oppose them' (*SR* 85: 4). To end her letter, she offers one last piece of advice to *SR*: 'I hope you will be publishing more articles *by* black sisters, and not just about them' (*SR* 85: 4).

At the time Yagud's letter was printed, *SR*'s editorial, informing readers that controversial topics had always been a problem for the collective, was still a year away into the future. Yet the magazine's tendency to skirt around contentious topics was already noticeable – to the extent that Yagud believed that the carpet under which all the issues were shoved had been worn 'threadbare.' When Yagud writes that she hopes *SR* will start 'publishing more [...] *by* black sisters,' her language communicates the demand for black and Asian women to be enabled to articulate their concerns as *subjects*, not objects of their texts.

*SR*'s decision to print Yagud's letter indicates that they were aware of the risks in continuing to 'ignore' issues of racism. Yet, in the next year, the only articles to appear on the topic of race, racism or black women's experiences, were two reports on the Black Women's Conferences of 1979 and 1980. The first report, 'Black Women Together,' was featured in October 1979. With the exception of including information on the various black women's groups that worked alongside OWAAD to help organise the conference, the report is a near duplicate of the original report on the conference back in June 1979. The second report was on the 1980 conference. It was half a page in length and detailed the growth of black women's community groups over the past year, the improvements made in conference organising, the topics discussed at the conference, and the inspiration it provided for the women in attendance. The second half of the page is devoted to the

history of OWAAD – how it was formed, what it seeks to do, and its involvement with the Black Women's Conference.

In between the two reports on the National Black Women's Conferences, in February of 1980, the second reader's letter which criticised the magazine for its white, middle-class-centredness was published. Janice Zoots wrote expressing her 'disgust' over a review of *Roots* featured in *SR*'s October issue. Zoots states that in her opinion, the review 'only [...] highlights the white-middle-class orientation of the feminist movement' and is therefore a 'slur not only against black women in this country but against the whole black community' (*SR* 91: 5). She argues that 'it is time *SR* dropped its white-liberalism' and 'suggests' that 'next time [*SR*] get a black woman to review any events of black culture – if [they] can find any in the WASP feminist movement' (*SR* 91: 5).

Zoots' letter echoes the point made by Yagud: *SR* should have black women writing articles about the experiences of black people because without that, they are espousing the white, middle-class 'imperialist' 'orientation' of the women's movement, and, ultimately, the racist ideology so pervasive in their experiences of living in Britain. Given this second piece of advice, it is surprising that *SR* did not report on the race riots that took place in Bristol two months later, on 2 April 1980. The riots were yet another example of the increasing tension between the British police and racially diverse communities. Despite encouragement from their readers to take on issues of racism, and previous reports on police brutality, *SR* again neglected a serious issue in the racially diverse communities in Britain when it chose not to report on the riots. As mentioned, in July 1980 the collective published their editorial on the difficulties the magazine faced when approaching controversial topics and articles. But as explained in Chapter 2, that editorial was in reference to Ann Pettitt's 'Feminism For Her Own Good' article. The 'controversial' topic *SR* was debating was anti-lesbianism, not racism. On the surface, *SR*'s position was still one of a 'universal sisterhood'. However, racially diverse women were increasingly demanding more acknowledgment of their issues from white women in a way that challenged white women's awareness and privilege. Yagud and Zoots criticisms situating *SR* amongst the white, middle-class 'imperialist system' signalled that *SR* would not be exempt from responding to this challenge.

### Section 3.4: Acknowledgement of Black Women's Issues

Between December 1980 and April 1983, *SR* made advances in acknowledging the importance of incorporating an analysis of race and racism into their own self-analysis as a collective. The first step towards this acknowledgment was 'What, Me Racist?,' a four-page spread featured in December 1980. The piece included a collaboratively written readers' letter, a reflection piece by collective member Sue Hemmings on how she came to realise her internalised racism, and a list of twenty-seven 'myths about racism' – such as 'It's better to think of ourselves as all the same

under the skin' and 'I've been to racism workshops. I've worked on my racism for two years, what more do they want?' – that comprise 'The Wonderbread Woman's Excuse Closet' (SR 101: 25) (see fig. 7). The feature begins with an explanation from the magazine collective regarding the topic presented. They stated that 'many white women grow up believing that racism is something nasty "out there."' Whilst they admitted that 'it's difficult for [them] to face up to the possibility that [they] may be oppressing some of [their] sisters, [...] avoiding the reality will not make it go away' (SR 101: 24). SR added that although racism 'is not necessarily our fault, it is our problem' (SR 101: 24). They hoped that the contributions of 'two women's views' would bring about 'the beginning of debate and exploration of opinions in *Spare Rib*' (SR 101: 24).

The reader's letter, written by Jane McKenley, as a result of a discussion she had with Mo Ross and Judi Shaw, describes McKenley's disappointment with the movement. McKenley writes that her impression is that women involved in the movement have their own interests and priorities, and it is only those individual interests that determine where women will place their energy and effort. McKenley argues that 'it's becoming more and more clear [to her] that like the male left, the WLM takes on issues when they are "trendy," "topical" and "ideologically sound"' (SR 101: 24)<sup>37</sup>. Whilst she believes that there is a group of women within the movement who work hard to fight racism and other 'specific issues [...] the rest of the [women] flit in and out depending on where it's the IN place to be seen.' She goes on to state that due to the movement's neglect of the topic of racism, she is 'beginning to feel invisible within [it].' This feeling of invisibility frustrates McKenley:

[I'm] having to work myself up to making 'heavy' statements that will embarrass sisters in meeting – I can see the eyebrows going up already – 'Not racism – that old chestnut again – it's so boring.' Well, if it's boring for you, white sister.... Yes, there is a Black women's movement which I feel part [of], but a little bit of me feels you're being let off the hook lightly. I've got no monopoly on dealing with racism – it's your problem too. You know a lot of the arguments too. I'm not going to drag them up but how about taking them out of the 1978 file and looking at them again because I'm very much 1980/81 and I'm very visible. And if you don't take that file off the shelf, I hope it falls on your bloody head, so don't say you haven't been warned!

McKenley never identifies herself as 'black' but she does identify herself as 'part of the black women's movement and in contrast to her 'white sisters.' Her letter expresses extreme frustration at the apathy of white women within the movement. She is reluctant to let white women 'off the hook' and reminds them that racism is their problem too – that they know the arguments and need to start making use of them. For McKenley, racism is not a 'boring' issue from 1978. She declares that it needs to be acknowledged and dealt with *now*, in 1980/81. Her warning about what will follow if black women and the issue of racism continue to remain 'invisible' echoes those previously articulated by Yagud and Zoots to SR.

McKenley's letter fills up half of the first of the four pages of the feature; the remaining three are given to Sue Hemmings' piece, which functions as a response to McKenley's views, in that it

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<sup>37</sup> All direct quotes to McKenley's letter are from SR 101: 21 unless otherwise indicated.



## Fig. 7. Some Myths About Racism

in examining who I was and how that related to racism, Black people were facing all the day to day miseries of that oppression — and it was worsening.

**B**y now the economic climate was drastically changing and unemployment was beginning to rise. All through the '50s and early '60s the government had actively sought out workers from the commonwealth, Ireland, and other countries, mainly for jobs white workers here didn't want — especially in transport, building, and in the health service. Thousands came over — although the government made no proper housing or other provision for them. But things began to change as the labour market shrunk. In 1971 parliament passed the Immigration Act, which discriminated against Black people more than ever before (and yet simultaneously made it easier for white ex-commonwealth people to become resident here). This law saw a new kind of respectabilising of the racism which already widely existed here. The cry heard everywhere was, "This law is not racist — it's realist. We can't just let anyone in. . . ." and culminated in Margaret Thatcher's speech about being "swamped by an alien culture" in 1978.

The general election of 1974 saw the arrival in the media of the National Front — again, they'd been around a long time, but to see them on your TV screens, given party political broadcasting rights, was to see them

'normalised' as having bona fide political status. The extreme right had arrived, and their ideas were already becoming not only respectable, but legal.

I was born in the war. But we weren't ever told anything about the Nazis. At school I went through the whole history course without fascism being mentioned. No one would talk about it. It was only later, at college, on making friends with some Jewish women, that I grasped the horror of it. And several years later, after I became a lesbian, I also began to realise what the Nazis had done to homosexuals — put them to death in their thousands, along with communists, gypsies and people with disabilities.

**T**hese ideas were jumbled in my head, plus some important new factors. Not only did I now have daily experience of oppression as a lesbian, but as a feminist I had some idea of how sexism works. I was now living with a (white) woman and her son, a young Black man. Also I had a close friendship with a Black woman who influenced me politically a great deal. All these factors got me down to my local shopping centre, Wood Green (N. London), in April 1977 to oppose one of the National Front's first big national rallies.

When I actually saw these fascists on the streets a lot of these ideas fell roughly into place. I began to realise how complex systems of oppression are

— and how all privileges (by which groups amass power for themselves) are actually acquired by denying other people their rights — rights like being able to choose where to work and live, having a decent standard of education and housing, freedom to walk about the streets without harassment. The Front's vicious struggle is an attempt to scrape together for themselves a pile of power based to a large extent on ideas about racial supremacy and purity of white over Black — which means the subjection, and elimination (at least via repatriation) of all Black people. It is important for us to realise that if we only take the narrow definition of racism — white versus Black — we fall into the trap of focussing, like the Front and the state now, on one group alone — at the expense of other groups, like Irish and almost all non-British working class people, engaged in similar struggles against racism.

What I was really shaken by at Wood Green, and later at Lewisham, where the police virtually marched with the Front in a horrific display of state racism, was the depth of my emotions. I so *hated* the sight of them — in fact, it released in me levels of hate I'd never felt before. I could hardly cope. Because — all the marchers were white. And some were women. The inevitable question arose. How am I different from them? And how am I the same? I shook — part of that overwhelming emotion sprang from those parts of *me* represented by those marchers. ▷

### SOME MYTHS ABOUT RACISM OR THE WONDERBREAD WOMAN'S EXCUSE CLOSET

1. Women of color have to make it safe for me to change.
2. White women are assertive, women of color are hostile.
3. Fighting for justice on a societal level will clear me on a personal level.
4. I can't do it without women of color.
5. Two positions on our board and one scholarship will get us by.
6. I should get credit for marching in Selma in the 60s.
7. I should get credit for marching now.
8. I'm damned if I do, I'm damned if I don't.
9. The process doesn't have to be so painful.
10. I can probably change my racism without feeling as strongly about it as I do about feminism.
11. Women of color sabotage their efforts by being so radical.
12. I'm not so racist, I am/was lovers with a woman of color.
13. It's better to think of ourselves as all the same under the skin.
14. What can you expect from me, I was brought up in a racist society.
15. If women of color would only be more moderate I could work on my racism more easily.
16. I have so many issues to work on.
17. I'm not racist, some of my best friends are, though.
18. I don't have to be accountable for my racism, I will not be intimidated.
19. Women of color are themselves racist.
20. Women of color have choices about whether or not to deal with racism, whether or not they have to be so angry and whether or not they have to be so blatant.
21. It's not that I am afraid, it's not that I would cop out if push came to shove, it's just that I can't handle anger and intimidation.
22. I've been to racism workshops. I've worked on my racism for two years, what more do they want?
23. The reason I don't confront my friends on their racism is because they don't care.
24. The reason we don't have any women of color on the upcoming program is because we couldn't find any. I'm really sorry I'd like to own my responsibility in that . . .
25. I will jeopardize my job or my position with groups I belong to by coming on strong about racism or anything.
26. I am not hypocritical and I am not spineless, I am practical and moderate and how else can I get along in this world?
27. There is no love in the energy the women of color put out on this issue.

Yolanda Retter, reprinted in *Spinning Off*, monthly women's newsletter in Los Angeles, special issue on 'Racism in the (white) Women's Movement', May 1980.

Spare Rib 25

Source: *Spare Rib*, 101 (December 1980): 25.



is about Hemmings' recognition of her own racism. The content of Hemmings' piece can be divided into two categories: racism in British society and racism in the WLM. The first category is marked by Hemmings explaining racism to white women, 'teaching' them why it is important to recognise it in oneself and why white women have tended to think their racism is justifiable. She recalls 'the first time [she] came up against the reality of [her] racism' (SR 101: 24) and reveals that whilst she was slow to realise the implications of her newfound awareness, she nonetheless realised that black people were facing the effects of her internalised racism in their 'day to day miseries.'<sup>38</sup> Hemmings then goes on to point out how 'Britain and other imperialist nations have built their economy by exploiting other peoples' labour and resources, getting rich from keeping them poor.' She explains that most of the country's natives 'have grown up thinking this is justifiable,' referencing the 'propaganda' that most British people have been exposed to, informing them that black 'people are savage, stupid, unreliable and backward' (SR 101: 26).

In the second section, Hemmings turns her attention towards providing examples of her experiences of recognising racism within the WLM. She writes:

I've been in women's liberation conference workshops where white feminists seemed really shocked by [the] sentiments expressed by angry Black sisters. Workshops where white feminists go on about how difficult it is to get Asian sisters to see how dreadful arranged marriages are . . . or how hard it is to get Black women to come to CR groups because their husbands are so sexist they won't let them out. (SR 101: 26)

She admits that 'white feminists [have] been slow to grasp the significance of Black sisters' criticisms. We are loath to accept that we are oppressors' (SR 101: 26-27).<sup>39</sup> Hemmings points out that white feminists always speak of the movement as if they own it, or as if it belongs to them. She states that whilst she and other white feminists have debated on how to expand the range of topics addressed by the movement in order to increase its 'appeal,' she realises that what black women most want from the movement is for white women to 'examine [their] own relationship to imperialism' (SR 101: 27). In order to change the dynamics between black and white women in the movement, white women need first to listen to and believe black women when they speak out about their experiences.

The 'two views' that SR presents in this feature reveal two sides of the conflict between 'black' and white women within the WLM. In later articles, it is clear that 'black' is used to refer exclusively to Afro-Caribbean women. Nothing in the SR text identifies McKenley as Afro-Caribbean; 'black,' continues to be used to refer to Asians, Afro-Caribbeans or both. Yet, it is clear

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<sup>38</sup> Hemmings' self-examination of her racism is similar in trajectory to other white women who engaged in this process. See, for example, Ellen Pence's 'Racism – A White Issue' (1982).

<sup>39</sup> Hazel Carby uses similar language in her article, 'White Woman Listen!' (1982), when she states that 'white women in the British WLM are extraordinarily reluctant to see themselves in the situation of being oppressors.' Carby, however, takes Hemmings' acknowledgment further when she postulates that this reluctance is because white women 'feel [concentrating on their role as the oppressor] will be at the expense of concentrating upon [how they are] oppressed' (Carby, 72).

that a total recession of Asian women's issues has occurred. The early focus on Asian women's passivity, work situations and arranged marriages has disappeared; the emphasis is on 'black versus white.'

When Hemmings explains her awareness of her internalised racism, she tries to take responsibility for the ways in which white feminists have been slow to 'grasp' the significance of their own racially oppressive tendencies. She attempts to respond to black women's criticisms of 'invisibility' by making visible the dominance of white women in the movement. Hemmings tries to shift white women's thinking from that of ownership of the WLM to ownership of their racist ways of positioning black women within it. She rejects the 'missionary' attitude associated with uninformed assumptions regarding the experiences of black women. Instead, she emphasises white women's need to listen to black women and be willing to accept criticism and make changes.

However, the possibly ironic title of the feature, 'What, Me Racist?' communicates that there is still a resounding sense of naivety and surprise regarding the debates on racism within the movement. It is almost as if Hemmings and the other white women are as surprised by their own internalised racism and black women's frustrations, as black women are by white women's failure to recognise it in themselves in the first place. To be clear, women's racial oppression by other women is not the same as women's gendered oppression by men. Thus, this sense of 'surprise' indicates the recognition in women of a shift within the women's movement from the critique of others (men) to critiques of themselves.

SR was not excluded from this critique. Two months later, in February of 1981, a letter was published that heavily criticised SR for its 'What, Me Racist?' feature. In her letter entitled 'Racism,' reader Kum-Kum Bhavnani<sup>40</sup> states that she feels 'rather confused' by [SR's] publication of two pieces on racism' (SR 103: 22)<sup>41</sup> and angry that the debate on racism has not happened sooner. Bhavnani reveals that two and a half years previously SR rejected an article that she and a Black sister wrote and submitted to the magazine on the topic of racism within the movement. She explains that instead of encouraging her to 'develop the ideas in that article,' SR simply told her that her ideas were 'wrong' and, consequently, 'nothing was published on the subject.' She is furious that after all this time, SR has decided to 'publish a brief letter by a Black woman and a long article by a white woman,' and condemns the magazine for not publishing an article written by a black woman alongside, or prior to, Hemmings' piece. What is more, she finds it 'ironical [...] that a white woman's article in which she is writing as an individual is seen as appropriate to INITIATE the "debate" on racism in the women's liberation movement.'

Bhavnani continues her criticism by stating that because Hemmings did not reference any of the groups such as WARF (Women Against Racism and Fascism) she 'seems to imply in her

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<sup>40</sup> Bhavnani is now (2009) a women's studies professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She completed her PhD at King's College in Cambridge and is the author of several books, including *Politics: A Psychological Framing for Views From Youth in Britain* (1991) and *Race-ing Research: Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies* (2000).

<sup>41</sup> All direct quotes to Bhavnani's letter are from SR 103: 22 unless otherwise indicated.

article that she is the only white woman to have discovered racism.' Bhavnani then states that she does not even consider 'racism as an issue for "debate".' She writes that 'it is not *if* the WLM should challenge racism and build in an anti-imperialist perspective into all its activities, but *HOW*, and on what political basis it does so.' Bhavnani explains that this 'politics basis' must take into account black women's need to organise autonomously and that the WLM needs to recognise the many different types of black women who 'view themselves as part of this Black movement.'

Bhavnani's letter expands on many of the points put forth by McKenley, particularly regarding the need for white women to take responsibility for their racism and the need for them to listen to the concerns of black women. Specifically, Bhavnani reminds readers that challenging racism on black women's terms involves listening to black women's experiences. She also emphasises that white women must be responsible for their racism. After all, she argues, 'racism is a WHITE problem.' Bhavnani elaborates on how white women must demonstrate that they acknowledge this problem fully by, for example, challenging the racism in other whites and by doing their 'utmost' to support their black sisters.

Immediately following Bhavnani's letter is a response from *SR* and a response from Hemmings. *SR*'s response is very brief. It takes up just two of Bhavnani's criticisms: *SR*'s rejection of the article she submitted two and a half years previously and the magazine's decision 'to publish a white woman's article on white women's racism as an opening to [the] discussion' (*SR* 103: 22). Regarding Bhavnani's article, *SR* agree with her on the way in which they rejected her submission. On their decision to publish a white woman's article to help initiate conversations on racism within the WLM, *SR* explain that the decision was made following 'lengthy discussions with Black sisters who felt strongly that this was the way to begin' (*SR* 103: 22). Hemmings' response is described as an addition to *SR*'s, and focuses exclusively on her decision to not reference 'WARF and other anti-fascist/racist/imperialist groups' (*SR* 103: 22). She explains that had she done so, she might have given the impression that white women do not need to confront their own internalised racism because there already exist groups that do this effectively. Hemmings does, however, agree that 'looking at the history and practice of WARF groups (and others) would very much help [in the development of] ideas on how to confront/combat racism' and invites women to pursue this area of the topic further (*SR* 103: 22).

The publication of Bhavnani's letter and the responses from *SR* and Hemmings in a sense do exactly what *SR* was hoping to do – they extend the 'debate' that *SR* wanted to 'initiate' when they published the 'What, Me Racist?' feature. At first glance, it appears as if *SR* believe Bhavnani's criticisms are misguided. Whilst the editors agree with Bhavnani regarding the way in which her letter was rejected they neither apologise nor retract their original assessment that Bhavnani's views were 'wrong.' Perhaps the inclusion of her letter suggests that *SR* are willing to take responsibility for their past neglect of the issue of racism within the movement and truly 'listen' to the concerns of black women. But *SR* and Hemmings do not respond to many of Bhavnani's criticisms. Despite addressing 'HOW' they decided to challenge racism through making the

process of 'What, Me Racist?' explicit, *SR* never explains why it is only now that they are taking up the topic and they never acknowledge that their previous disregard may have been racist. Hemmings does not engage with Bhavnani's criticisms at all except to defend her reasoning behind omitting references to groups such as WARF. Also, *SR* stick to their decision to initiate discussion with Hemmings' article by stating that the decision was made only after 'lengthy discussions' with a black woman. This explanation not only gives the impression that *SR*'s decision was the right one because they had 'permission' from a black woman, but that Bhavnani is again 'wrong' in her assumptions that the decision-making was exclusively done by *SR*.

As Bhavnani maintains that racism is not up for debate – that it is not a matter of 'if,' but a question of 'HOW' racism is acknowledged – her critiques are primarily about *SR*'s accountability and handling of the issue. *SR*'s response does not suggest full comprehension of Bhavnani's criticisms. It is worth noting that the February 1981 issue of the magazine was the same issue that contained the reader's letter 'Give Us Disputes' and Amanda Sebestyen's resignation letter. This fact provides an additional perspective on my analysis of *SR*'s response to Bhavnani. It suggests the possibility that *SR*, already dealing with the controversy of the lingering 'Feminism For Her Own Good' debate and a severely divided collective, was well aware that it needed to do something to engage with the issue of race but it did not know what. Printing both Bhavnani's letter and the defence of their position presumably seemed like a good solution. It would allow a black woman to speak for herself, indicate that *SR* was willing to take responsibility, diffuse some of the tension, and allow the magazine to engage in the debate without jeopardising too much.

From about April 1981, 'black' women's issues in *SR* focused almost exclusively on the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women, and the term only occasionally included Asian women. This was largely due to the eruption of the Brixton race riots.<sup>42</sup> The uprisings revealed that the issues surrounding racism in Britain had reached a new level of contention. As past *SR* reports had shown, police harassment was not unusual in certain neighbourhoods with racially diverse communities. The Brixton uprisings were an attempt by predominantly local Afro-Caribbeans to resist 'increased pressure on the Black community by the police and the state' (*SR* 107: 18).<sup>43</sup> The result was that hundreds of residents were arrested and beaten, followed by protests and uproar among the local black community. The riots essentially made the issue of race unavoidable. It was a topic of national news attracting the attention of many government officials, and the state responded by launching an investigation of the events by Lord Chief Justice Scarman<sup>44</sup> and increasing police community involvement.

*SR* did not allow the uprising to go unnoticed, but the approach to the issue was similar to the response given to Bhavnani three months earlier. To be specific, despite the level of public attention that the riots received *SR* did not prioritise or fully engage with the issue. In June 1981

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<sup>42</sup> See Howe (2000) and Vallely (1995) for details on the 1981 Brixton riots.

<sup>43</sup> See Selma James' edited *Strangers and Sisters* (1985) for discussions and examples of the hostile interactions between black women and the police that took place in Britain in the early 1980s.

<sup>44</sup> For details on the Brixton riots and the resulting investigation by Scarman see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/bbc\\_parliament/3631579.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/bbc_parliament/3631579.stm).

*SR* did publish a short, two-page report which was, in fact, written by the Brixton Black Women's Group, indicating that *SR* had perhaps finally taken on the advice it was given to publish more articles by black women. However, the only further mention of the uprisings, which appeared in the July (1981) issue of the magazine, was a very short write-up of the third National Black Women's Conference that took place in May in Islington. Written by OWAAD, and occupying approximately one-quarter of a page, the report stressed the conference's importance given the 'context of the increasing attacks upon the Black community' (*SR* 108: 15). This brief reference is somewhat ironic, as it was in the month of July 1981 that the second, more disastrous, Brixton uprising occurred.

In September (1981) *SR* published a more substantial feature on the uprisings. 'A Revolutionary Anger: Against Racism and Police Harassment All Over Britain' was a series of reports written by various black women from around the country, detailing the 'street fighting' that had erupted in suburbs and cities such as Southall, Liverpool, Manchester and Brixton. There was little commentary from the magazine, with the exception of a short introduction which stated that the collection of reports 'show that the causes [for the uprisings] lie not just in the current economic crisis, but go back through years of racism, and, in particular the state racism of the police force' (*SR* 110: 16). The report on Southall does indeed refer back to 1979 when the National Front held their elections at the Southall town hall as evidence of the prelude to its subsequent disturbances. However, the majority of the reports focus almost entirely on the events that occurred in particular places within the previous few months. Nonetheless, as the report on Liverpool asserts, the uprisings 'are the direct result of the anger and frustration and fear felt by the community at the constant harassment experienced by them at the hands of the police; the "riots" were an inevitability' (*SR* 110: 17).

With regards to Brixton, where the most tumultuous uprisings happened, an anonymous 'South London Black Feminist' writes that the city 'is in a state of civil war.' She claims that 'what was once a community for the people who live [there] now appears to be a wrecked ghetto' (*SR* 110: 18). Another unidentified 'South London Black Feminist' writes that 'Black women and men were, and still are, being picked up, convicted, fined exorbitant sums, imprisoned – the charge being that [they] dare to exist' (*SR* 110: 19). In her report on Brixton, the writer wonders whether or not black women and men can 'realistically participate on equal terms' (*SR* 110: 19). She states that black women are affected by the uprisings in a different way than black men, primarily because it is men who are out on the streets fighting. Whilst women want to provide their full support for the black men in the community, they feel uncomfortable with the actual physical aspects of the violence, and are therefore unsure how to help the men fight back. The writer then states that she feels solidarity with *all* black people, but that her strongest connection is with black women. She sees the uprisings as representative of the 'war' that is taking place in black communities across Britain – a war that results in black people 'being attacked, degraded, humiliated [and] killed' (*SR* 110: 19). She expresses her belief that 'the time has come when an increasing number of Black

women will organise to fight [their] oppression.' Together, they will 'lead a struggle on [their] own terms' (SR 110: 19).

The series of reports on the uprisings in Brixton and other areas across Britain capture the effects of the explosion of race-related tension in Britain that had been building up for years. The fear, anger and frustration felt by black residents propelled them into defensive action and increased the feelings of solidarity amongst black men and women. The actual physical violence experienced by the black communities at the hands of the police strengthened the women's conviction to continue in their support of the men who experienced the attacks firsthand. However, the violence, and black women's discomfort with engaging in this violence, also caused them to question whether or not they could 'realistically participate on equal terms' with the men in their communities. The questioning of their ability to participate equally with the men they so strongly wished to support highlighted black women's feelings of isolation and uncertainty about their value or 'relevance,' even within their own communities. Their unique experiences as black women in the fight against oppression encouraged them to define their 'struggle on their own terms.' Thus, the connection black women had with one another was strengthened as they responded to the events around them.

Whilst the report on the uprisings effectively conveyed the atmosphere in the cities where the riots had taken place, the magazine itself offered no attempt to contextualise the events within the larger discourse of racism within the movement that SR had started to 'initiate' only a few months beforehand. In some ways, the uprisings redirected the criticism and attacks brought against SR back towards the police and the racism of British institutions. In this sense, SR probably welcomed the opportunity to return to 'reporting' on the problems of black people in general.

This suggestion is strengthened when considering a report on the Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) conference featured in the January 1982 issue of the magazine. The conference, which had taken place back in November of 1981, was the first national congregation for WAVAW and approximately eight hundred women attended. As was typical for SR magazine, the report comprised of several individual reports written by women who had attended. The reports were placed within one of six categories, including 'Prudes and Puritans,' 'Rape in Marriage,' 'Political Lesbianism,' 'Erotica,' 'Pornography' and 'Racism at the Conference.' The reports were anonymously written, and only a few paragraphs in length. Whilst most were topical, recalling the discussions that had taken place at the conference on, for example, the relationship between violence and pornography, the report 'Racism at the Conference' was a critique of the conference itself.

The report stated that 'the conference that [had] hoped to discuss, analyse and take action against violence against women' did not do so sufficiently as the ways in which 'sexual violence against Black women is so inextricably linked with racism' were never addressed. Black women's experiences of violence are often 'racist violence.' Thus, the report claims that because one of WAVAW's most basic 'principles is to take action against men's violence against women,' there is

no hope for the 'racist violence done to Black women by white women' to be dealt with. Accordingly, 'Black women at the conference spent two days being ignored, rendered almost invisible; feeling isolated, frustrated and angry. For some it was their first women's liberation conference, for some it may be their last' (SR 114: 14). The report reveals that many of the black women did not return for the second day of the conference. Those that did, decided to organise to meet after the conference had ended, to try and give themselves the 'space and time to express the anger [they] felt' (SR 114: 14). As a result of this meeting, the conclusion was reached that 'the movement must take responsibility to alter this situation, to deal with its racism and white-defined feminism, as a matter of urgency' (SR 114: 14).

As indicated by the report, the antagonisms between black and white women in the WLM had not subsided. Yet, SR remained 'absent' from the reporting and offered no direct commentary on the report's content. The report on racism at the WAVAW conference is significant for the ways in which it demonstrates how the racist violence experienced by black women informed their critiques of the women's movement. Black women incorporated the 'degradation,' 'humiliation' and death they encountered in their everyday lives into their feminist politics and they used this to underline their 'demand' that the 'white-dominated' movement take 'responsibility' in altering this 'urgent' 'situation.'

Despite SR being relatively uninvolved thus far in this Chapter, SR did begin to adopt a position that seemed less interested in 'debating' the racism of white women in favour of stating the need for acknowledgment and discussion. The latter was followed by the provision of space in the magazine for black women to elaborate on their concerns. This was first evident when, in February 1982, SR introduced the first of a series of three articles written by Kum-Kum Bhavnani 'in which she explain[ed] some of the background to the [new] Nationality Bill [...] and provid[ed] a theoretical framework for examining Britain's racism' (SR 115: 3). The introduction to 'Racist Acts,' was by means of a special editorial explaining the importance of Bhavnani's series in the context of the uprisings and increased legislation determining who did and did not 'have a right' to live in the country. SR states that the proposal of the Nationality Bill only adds to the harassment and pressures that black women have 'suffered' and therefore, whilst its legalities are difficult to understand, the 'history,' 'implications,' and 'ideology' embedded within its measures must be challenged by the WLM.<sup>45</sup> SR claims that 'it isn't enough for white British feminists to work out the ways in which they individually oppress Black people [as] oppression does not spring merely from

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<sup>45</sup> In his introduction to his book *Out of Place* (1999) Ian Baucom writes that one of 'the act's most crucial features [...was that] for would-be immigrants to the United Kingdom, against whom most of the act's provisions were directed, the central aspect of the law was the substitution of the principle of "patriality" for the law of the soil in the determination of nationality' (Baucom, 12). This substitution made British citizenship something dependent on familial ties, and therefore something needed to be proved rather than guaranteed as a result of the geographical location of one's birth. Many believed the 1981 Act was a racially motivated further attempt by the government to restrict the immigration of people from the former Commonwealth to Britain. See, also, David Dixon (1981) 'Constitutionalising Racism: The British Nationality Bill 1981.'



individual acts and attitudes. White feminists' they argue, 'need to understand much more about how racism is structured into the whole of British society' (SR 115: 3).

SR's introduction to Bhavnani's series marks quite a shift in focus within the Movement in emphasis on multiple forms of oppression. It is worth remembering that, in August 1978, the Brighton Women's Liberation group argued against racially diverse women's claims of racism in the Movement. At the time, they considered the source of women's oppression to be 'men [...] and not some abstract "system"' (SR 73: 21). Here, it is noticeable that 'the whole of British society' is being included in discussions of racism. SR is picking up on the issue of individual versus structural racism/oppression.

With regards to Bhavnani's 'Racist Acts' series, there are two key points: the relative status of different issues and the emphasis on white women facing their racism. The first concern refers to women's hierarchy of oppressions<sup>46</sup>, or, in other words, which issues should be prioritised and dealt with. Bhavnani details the difference between 'racism' – 'the *institutionalised* practices and patterns which have the overall effect of developing the system which places Black people at a disadvantage,' such as the police, schools and hospitals – and 'racialism,' which she uses 'to refer to *individual acts of discrimination* that many white people carry out in an attempt to "put down" and harass and humiliate Black people' (SR 115: 49). Bhavnani seeks to make clear how racism and racialism have become intertwined in British society, referencing the ways in which the 'swamping' speeches, expressing fear over the potential calamities of allowing large numbers of black immigrants to enter the country (SR 115: 51)<sup>47</sup> and the 'racist laws of the 60's and 70's' (SR 116: 26) contributed to the view that immigrants should abandon their culture and 'assimilate' to the 'British lifestyle' (SR 116: 26-27). Bhavnani explains that when neither assimilation nor integration was able to diffuse the racial hatred so deeply rooted in British culture, evidenced by the myriad abuses experienced by racially diverse communities.

It is here that Bhavnani's second concern factors in. She turns to the trade unions, where many black immigrants initially sought employment support, in order to demonstrate 'the ways in which Black peoples' struggles in Britain have been consistently marginalised' (SR 117: 24). She draws parallels between the organisation of black unions and anti-Nazi and anti-abortion campaigns. In both cases, she writes, the fight against racism is often secondary to other issues. Bhavnani argues that this is precisely why it 'must be taken up by white people as an integral part of their political activity, whether in women's groups, trades unions, political parties [or] groups' (SR 117:

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<sup>46</sup> The concept of 'hierarchy of oppressions' has since been replaced by the theory of 'intersectionality.' See Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and Leslie McCall's 'The Complexity of Intersectionality' (2005).

<sup>47</sup> 'Swamping speeches' warned of the negative influence of large numbers of immigrants 'swamping' the country. Here, Bhavnani traces these speeches back to Elizabeth I. However, as recently as 1978 Margaret Thatcher gave a speech in which she also used this phrasing, which is perhaps why Bhavnani mentions it. See Sivanandan's article 'From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain' (1981) for commentary on Thatcher's 1978 speech, and Charteris-Black's article 'Britain as a Container: Immigration Metaphors in the 2005 Election Campaign' (2006) for the use of metaphor in political discussions of immigration.

26). As she argued in her February 1981 letter critiquing *SR*'s 'What, Me Racist?' she reminds readers that 'racism is a *white* problem,' and asserts that it is therefore 'essential that white people are involved in anti-racist work' (*SR* 117: 27). This work, she believes, 'includes developing anti-racist perspectives in [both] the workplace [as well as in] campaigns' and acknowledging that black people – their struggles and their growing resistance – exist (*SR* 117: 27).

Bhavnani's series reiterates many of the arguments previously presented by black – and, indeed Asian – women in *SR* magazine. This reiteration would suggest that Bhavnani perceives a lack of improvement in the lives of black women and therefore perhaps explains why she feels compelled to state again that racism is a white problem, and one that should be of particular concern to white women in the Movement. Underscoring this suggestion is the fact that Bhavnani's series drew very little response as presented in *SR*; only after six months had passed were two readers' letters published.

Both letters, featured in the August 1982 issue, praised *SR* for including the series, expressing their 'delight' with the focus on racism and stating how impressed they were with Bhavnani's research and knowledge. In the first letter, Sally Sayer stressed the importance of recognising the types of institutionalised racism Bhavnani outlined, arguing that 'the refusal to face up to [it] is part of its perpetuation' (*SR* 121: 4). "Race," she explained, 'is not a separate issue to be tacked on the edge of other things. Racism is at the heart and history of Britain' (*SR* 121: 4). The second letter, however, in addition to its support, also put forth a challenge for *SR* to 'face up to' its own racism, suggesting that the magazine 'question' itself, and its 'assumptions especially' (*SR* 121: 4). 'Dorotea' stated that 'the magazine should be more inclusive of Black women, not just in specific articles or "specials" but in general terms too' (*SR* 121: 4). Although she admitted that *SR* had 'improved a great deal' since she first starting reading the magazine, she expressed feeling 'alone as a Black feminist' and pointed out that because the 'magazine might be someone's first contact with the feminist movement it would be good to know they could identify themselves in [its] pages' (*SR* 121: 4).

It is not clear whether *SR* had in fact received just two letters in response to Bhavnani's series or whether they had received several letters, but decided to publish only these two. For whatever reason, *SR* decided to publish Sayer's and Dorotea's responses to Bhavnani's series, thus providing valuable insight into the kind of feedback *SR* was receiving. Yet despite Sayer's praise and Dorotea's suggestions, *SR* did not feature any additional articles that addressed the topic of racism for another seven months, and when 'Racism and Sexism in the New Nationality Act' was published in April 1983, it was uncannily reminiscent of *SR*'s articles on 'racism and sexism' from the late 1970s.

This similarity was, on the one hand, due to the fact that there were new legislative developments that expanded on the immigration acts from the previous decade. There were new rules regarding the right of entry for husbands and wives of British and non-British citizens, children under the age of eighteen, as well as the removal of a woman's 'automatic right to get UK

citizenship on marriage to a British man' (SR 129: 32). Thus, the issues related to racism and sexism within immigration policy were just as pertinent as they had been ten years before. However, SR and the WLM had both witnessed and experienced a great deal of change over the course of that time, much of which had been brought to the attention of SR, and much of which SR had brought to the attention of their readers. Consequently, their failure to engage with the topic of 'racism and sexism' by incorporating all of the events, debates and revelations that had taken place in the collective and the WLM since the magazine first published articles on racism and sexism, seemed to indicate that SR did not quite know *how* to 'question' itself.

### Section 3.5: Black Definition and Struggle

As the 1980s progressed, the shift from identity politics to the 'difference' politics of the mid-1980s and 1990s was evident in the material presented in SR. This was clear from about May 1983, when SR published – along with yet *another* article on racism and sexism – an editorial announcing that 'women of colour [were] now one half of the collective.' 'Black' had been replaced with the US term 'women of colour.' This definition proved problematic as the relative status of different issues for different women continued to be debated. Throughout the next few years, the articles published in SR still tended to polarise race issues in a black versus white discourse. Once 'women of colour' were given space in the magazine to articulate their frustrations with what they perceived as the failure of white women and the Movement in general to fully account for their racism, they actively sought redemption in the features they wrote. Along with their anger and intensity, their struggle to make sense of the differences in their racial identities, and how those differences factored into their antagonism with white women, and, increasingly, each other, was also apparent. As I shall demonstrate in the remainder of Chapter 3 and again in Chapter 4, race and racism as issues overwhelmed the magazine.

The May 1983 editorial, in fact written by the SR women of colour, stated that 'differences and struggle are never easily faced and engaged in,' and that whilst these differences and struggles had divided the collective, ongoing discussions regarding the direction of the magazine, the topics addressed and how those topics are presented, were taking place (SR 130: 4). At this point, SR had already publicly admitted that they were experiencing difficulties working as a collective, as previously mentioned in Chapter 2. However, this editorial is the first time these difficulties had been voiced in the context of discussions specifically on the topics of race and racism. The editorial also revealed that the women of colour had been working on the SR collective for the past seven months, and that because 'the *Spare Rib* collective is committed to feminist policies within an autonomous women's movement in [Britain] and internationally' they had accordingly 'taken a strong anti-racist line.' The collective's women of colour did not elaborate on the details of this 'line,' and it is not clear whether it was developed as a result of the inclusion of women of

colour onto the *SR* collective or whether they were included as a corollary of it being taken. Similarly, the collective did not explain what changes readers might expect as that line becomes incorporated into the content of the magazine, and when the women of colour state that their aim is 'to see every form of racism and sexism combated' (*SR* 130: 4), they do not go into much detail regarding the ways in which they intend to do so. These aspects of the editorial are significant, particularly as previously, *SR* had been reluctant to take up any line and, also, despite the women of colour having been part of the collective for the past *seven months* this was only now being acknowledged.

Explanations for all of these 'unknowns' were never given in the magazine. Yet, the editorial marked a definite shift in the magazine, as over the course of the next year, in almost every issue of 1983, the magazine published a feature written by one or more of the *SR* women of colour, in which their personal views on racism were put forth. These features were not the usual 'reports' or articles featured in *SR* on some topic or event related to race, written by a black woman. These articles were of a completely different nature. Direct, unapologetic, fiery and full of rage – each piece clearly revealed the depth of black women's pain and resolve, bringing the issue of race to the pages of *SR* in new and shocking ways.

The first example of this was an article written by collective member 'Sona'<sup>48</sup> published in June 1983. The article, entitled 'Mixed Race...So What!', explored Sona's annoyance at the term 'mixed race.' She explains that originally, the article 'was going to be called "Women of Mixed Race."' However, 'after many discussions' she changed her mind, realising that she found the term itself 'racist' (*SR* 131: 58)<sup>49</sup>. Sona states that 'there are no genetic differences between Black and White people' and that 'even anthropology does not include the concept of race.' She believes that race is a 'specific term of abuse,' and thus 'the [very] concept of "mixed race" is racist' because it suggests that 'there is a pure race, an idea reminiscent of "*Mein Kampf*" and fascist ideology.' Sona goes on to question the intentions of those who insist on using the term, wondering if they perhaps find it 'exotic' or 'romantic.' To those people, she writes:

To Hell with the lot of you! Those are your LABELS, your racist interpretation, your fears internalised and LAID on. I don't care anymore,' she adds, 'do what you will, think what you will, safe in your whiteness, your blackness, your superior purity! I am ME and I will always stay ME. I will never be white, Anglo-Saxon and PURE. Sorry, you'll have to make do.

In anticipation of her readers' reaction, Sona then addresses her obvious anger. After all of the 'taunts, fights, bloody noses, put-downs, comments and insults,' she asks the readers, 'Wouldn't you be?' She describes how she has forever felt 'unwanted' living in Britain but that despite being 'denied [her] right' to live here, and consistently being told "Go home Paki!," her 'home is HERE, and [she] intend[s] to stay.' With this decision to 'stay' she abruptly concludes her article, telling

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<sup>48</sup> Sona Osman is the author of 'Should It Be Unlawful to Incite Sexual Violence?' (1988) and 'Full Circle: 1968-1988: Rivers of Blood' (1988).

<sup>49</sup> All direct quotes to Sona's article are from *SR* 131: 58 unless otherwise indicated.

the reader that she 'refuse[s] to give [...] any more analysis of the situation from [her] point of view.' Instead, she finishes with a personal assertion: 'In Britain I am Black and I am PROUD of that.'

Sona's article expresses a level of anger that had not previously been included on the pages of *SR* magazine. She draws a comparison between the racism of the term 'mixed race' and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and 'fascist ideology.' In doing so, she suggests that the underlying thinking of the racism she has experienced in Britain is comparable to the type of thinking that contributed to the Holocaust. Sona's article also indicates a possible reason for *SR*'s shift in their May editorial from 'black women' to 'women of colour' is indicated. Sona is not 'purely' black or white. Accordingly, she lashes out at the 'pure identity' of both black and white women. She declares that whilst she will 'never be white,' she ends up labelling herself and identifying as black, something she claims she is 'PROUD of.'<sup>50</sup> Sona adamantly insists that racism is the 'problem' of the people who try to 'label' her identity and project their 'fears' onto her. Despite feeling unwanted, she writes that she will not 'go home,' declaring instead that she 'intends to stay.' Her emotions are so intense that she repeatedly uses capital letters to convey her feelings. What is more, when she exclaims, 'to Hell with the lot of you!' and with 'I don't care anymore,' she reveals her desperation. Sona is not willing to let readers 'off the hook lightly' by taking it upon herself to provide a full 'analysis of the situation.' It is almost as if she is echoing McKenley's perspective that her readers 'know the arguments too' and must therefore be willing to take responsibility for themselves. Her decision to title her article, 'Women of Mixed Race...So What!' rather than 'Mixed Race,' a term she finds racist, demonstrates her insistence on defining her 'struggle' 'on her own terms.' It also demonstrates the continued binary between black and white, whilst, simultaneously, definitions of race and experiences of racism are beginning to broaden.

This broadening was evident in the next month's issue of the magazine (July 1983). That month's feature was written by women of colour collective member Manny, who identified as Iranian, not black or Asian.<sup>51</sup> In 'Lonely Among the Feminists: Racism in Feminism' Manny expanded on many of Sona's sentiments but directed her attention towards racism within the WLM. She writes that 'of all the racist oppressions that [she has] suffered as a result of the ideological/cultural apartheid in [Britain], none has been so painful as those inflicted by white feminists' (*SR* 132: 58). Like Sona, Manny also suffered from ridicule, abuse and taunts. But she explains that 'it took [her] years to connect what [she] was told by the white man in the street "foreigner, why don't you go home?" with the reality of [her] life among feminists' (*SR* 132: 58). In other words, she feels that the racist oppression she encounters in British culture more generally is the same type of oppression that she has encountered within the movement. Despite its ideal of

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<sup>50</sup> As Yasmin Alhibhai-Brown demonstrates in her book *Mixed Feelings: The Complex Lives of Mixed-Race Britons* (2001) people of mixed-race have historically been constructed/construct themselves as black rather than white.

<sup>51</sup> This diversity in women's racial and ethnic identities is also represented in Selma James' *Sisters and Strangers* (1985) as women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds share in their experiences, specifically as immigrants.

'sisterhood,' Manny expresses her feelings of isolation when grouped with other feminists. She states that 'solidarity' is something that white women have cultivated, and that it 'is achieved and consolidated in spite of, and at the expense of, coloured women' (SR 132: 59). The exclusion she experiences within the movement has radically altered her perception of her own identity and has shown her that racism can exist in many different forms. She reveals that 'previously [she] thought coloured people stood out more, [and that] that was why they were always arrested by the police' (SR 132: 59). However, through white feminists' role within the movement, she realised that women of colour 'can be made invisible too' (SR 132: 59). Towards the end of her article, she asserts that she has 'survived the Shah's government, Khomeini's men, and British institutions' and intends 'to survive the racism of feminists too. At a price – yes!' – but she refuses 'go home' (SR 132: 59).<sup>52</sup>

Manny points out that solidarity is something white women have 'achieved and consolidated' at the 'expense of coloured women.' This statement, taken together with the title of her article, 'Lonely Among the Feminists' indicates that she does not in fact fully identify with *any* of the other feminists in the movement – that her position of inclusion amongst other women of colour is as a result of her racially divergent status, but this alone does not automatically provide her with a sense of 'solidarity.' Yet, she has chosen to join the SR collective as a woman of colour, thus suggesting that despite the differences between her and other women of colour, it is still important for racially diverse women to unite under the term 'black' – which was still used as an 'umbrella term' for all such women – and develop a coalition politics.

Evidence of this was undeniable in September 1983 (two months later) when collective member Arati's piece on 'the debts of the women's liberation movement' was published. Entitled, 'The Roots of Women's Liberation: What White Feminists Owe to Us Black Women,' Arati's feature is a list of fourteen 'debts' she feels are owed to black women for their contribution to the WLM (see fig. 8). She provides no introduction, conclusion or explanation to accompany the list, which includes some very poignant examples:

You owe us your feminism; for you have been allowed to go on breathing – because we have been facing the threat of extinction.

You owe us all the experience that leads to revolt; for without our labour, our risks, our torments – you would not have reaped the benefits of colonisation; *and without that benefit* you would not have had the facility to formulate and articulate your theories of patriarchy.

When hundreds of years ago, European Conquistadors butchered to death the "native" people of the Caribbean Islands, those butchered people wrote your feminism – *way back then*. And you have misappropriated that authorship.

We black people HAVE BEEN EXTERMINATED – in various parts of the earth – so that you may continue to give birth to 'pure' white people. **We made space for you; we built your feminism.**

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<sup>52</sup> For more contemporary cultural discussions on that Iranian history, see Marjane Satrapi's film *Persepolis* (2007), based on the autobiographical graphic novel (2000) of the same title.

Even now as you read this, all the black women that scrape a living in illiteracy and malnutrition – so that you white women can TAKE FOR GRANTED shops full of books and food – **it is those black women that still write in blood – your feminism today.** When will you credit them?

**'It is our history that burns bright with such invincible ferocity, that anybody's oppression ceases to be invisible. So dear white feminists, do not think of helping us in our "backward" societies – but think instead of you acknowledging your debt to us. NO OTHER ASPECT OF CONSCIOUSNESS IS MORE RELEVANT TODAY. (SR 134: 47)**

The 'price' that Manny states she will have to pay for attempting to 'survive the racism of feminists' is detailed in Arati's list. Just as Sona draws comparisons between her experiences of racism and *Mein Kampf*, Manny references the Iranian Shah government and the political leader Ayatollah Khomeini, Arati references the European Conquistadors when describing the magnitude and variety of racist oppression she feels is imbedded within the British WLM. Both Manny and Arati trace the racism of feminism back to Britain's colonial and imperialist past. They believe this past has not only rendered them 'invisible' and has caused them to 'face the threat of extinction,' but is what has allowed white feminists to develop the sisterhood and 'solidarity' that comes 'at the expense of coloured women.' Arati is clearly irate. She indicates the urgency of her feelings and demands through the varied fonts she uses, through the direct address she employs, through the binary structure ('you' and 'we') she deploys. It is a style that is repeated elsewhere by the black women. Here, it functions in helping her prove how much she wants this 'expense' to 'be acknowledged' and to know when black women will be 'credited' for their 'labour' and 'torments' that have allowed white feminists the 'benefit' of being able to 'formulate' their feminist theories and critiques of patriarchy. Unlike Rachel Williams who in her report on the 1977 National Women's Liberation Conference explained that black women do not consider themselves to 'have a cause relevant to the women's movement' Arati is *demanding* that 'NO OTHER ASPECT OF CONSCIOUSNESS IS MORE RELEVANT TODAY' than the consciousness of the black woman's cause, the exploitation that contributed to it, white women's participation in that exploitation, and the resulting debts owed to their 'coloured sisters.'

The October 1983 issue of *SR* further broadened the discussions and definitions of race and racism. The issue was declared a 'Special Black Women's Issue' (see fig. 9). The editorial states that the issue 'is devoted to Black/Internationalist politics' and that 'the Black/Third World Women on the collective have had editorial control' (*SR* 135: 3).<sup>53</sup> There is absolutely no comment from *SR* on the expansion of race politics to an international level, nor how the category of 'third world women' has now come to be synonymous with 'black,' included in the editorial or anywhere else in this issue of the magazine. The 'Black/Third World Women' of the collective write that the previous

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<sup>53</sup> Whilst now it is much more contested, here the term 'third world women' represents an awareness, popularized in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), that third world women's views must be taken into consideration. See, also, Mohanty et al.'s *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991).



Fig. 8. The Roots of Women's Liberation



**The Roots of Womens Liberation Movement**

**THE ROOTS OF WOMENS' LIBERATION MOVEMENT - IN OTHER WORDS - WHAT WHITE FEMINISTS OWE TO US BLACK WOMEN. . . . .**

- 1) You owe us your very existence; for had we not been available, the wrath of the white lord would have decimated you. We absorb the subjugation - you 'enjoy' the trinkets that patriarchy hands to you.
- 2) You owe us your feminism; for you have been allowed to go on breathing - because we have been facing the threat of extinction.
- 3) You owe us all the experience that leads to revolt; for without our labour, our risks, our torments - you would not have reaped the benefits of colonisation; and without that benefit you would not have had the facility to formulate and articulate your theories of patriarchy.
- 4) It is because you have taken so much from us that you saw that white men have taken more. That seeing, gave birth to group consciousness - which is the bed-rock of feminism.
- 5) You have taken for granted your 'luxury' of protest. Little do you know that you have been protesting while sitting on our backs. We pay the price of protest - torture till death.
- 6) When the nuclear bomb was tried out in 'chinky-land' in 1945 - where was your peace demo then? The victims of Hiroshima wrote and continue to write your feminism - and you have misappropriated that authorship. 'Nuclear-free Europe' - you cry now - do you not know that human beings live elsewhere?
- 7) When will you say 'Imperialism-free Europe'?
- 8) When hundreds of years ago, European Conquistadors butchered to death the 'native' people of the Caribbean Islands, those butchered people wrote your feminism - way back then. And you have misappropriated that authorship.
- 9) When Black African Slaves were forcibly taken to replace those 'native' Caribbean people - hundreds of years ago - those Black people wrote your feminism. They had the suffering - you have the words.
- 10) We Black people HAVE BEEN EXTERMINATED - in various parts of the earth - so that you may continue to give birth to 'pure' white people. We made space for you; we built your feminism.
- 11) When black peoples' social progress was viciously held back - so that white peoples' technical progress could continue - then was your feminism writ. When quaint practices were inflicted upon non-white people - so that you would find anthropology interesting - then was your feminism writ.
- 12) When you remained silent - 'cause it was not your problem - while we were bleeding, crying, dying - in India, Africa, north and south America, Australia, China, then it was US non-white women that built feminism - NOT YOU.
- 13) Even now as you read this, all the black women that scrape a living in illiteracy and malnutrition - so that you white women can TAKE FOR GRANTED shops full of books and food - it is those black women that still write in blood - your feminism today. When will you credit them?
- 14) It is our history that burns bright with such invincible ferocity, that anybody's oppression ceases to be invisible. So dear white feminists, do not think of helping us in our 'backward' societies - but think instead of you acknowledging your debt to us. NO OTHER ASPECT OF CONSCIOUSNESS IS MORE RELEVANT TODAY.

Arati

**What White Feminists owe to us Black Women . . .**

Spare Rib 17

Source: Spare Rib 134 (September 1983): 47



Fig. 9. Special Black Women's Issue



Source: Spare Rib, 135 (October 1983).

year (1982), *SR* invited them 'to join and to change the collective' (*SR* 135: 3), suggesting that the focus on internationalist strategizing politics and the introduction of 'third world women' was at their suggestion and that it is a 'change' that is positive in nature – one that *SR* appeared to be open to, or at the very least deemed necessary, as indicated by their 'invitation' to the black/third world women/women of colour.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, despite this recognition of the need for change in the racial composition of the collective, and the resulting invitation for racially diverse women to join the collective, the editorial explains that since the black/third world women/women of colour have joined the *SR* collective, the previous members have encountered a number of difficulties as they adjusted to the new members. This process of adjustment is described as 'painful for various reasons.' One reason has to do with the shift in power from the former to the new collective members. Another reason is that whilst 'there have been political differences between the Black/Third World women and the white women, there have also been splits among the Black/Third World Women. One [of the] main areas of division has been around the questions of what is Black? How do we define a Black/Third World Woman?' They ask: 'What is the definition of Black Feminist politics? What are the different strands in Black Feminism?'

The Black/Third World Women of the collective admit the 'danger' in exploring the uncertainties that cause 'splits and divisions' (*SR* 135: 3). However, they also express their concern that the splits and divisions will only worsen if they are not confronted. It should be noted that there is nothing overtly different about the remainder of the October 1983 issue (other than the front cover of the magazine and the editorial I mention here) that would suggest that it is 'special' or 'devoted to Black/Internationalist politics.' In addition, it is worth stating that this is the second time *SR* does not provide much further explanation of the issues raised in its editorial. To be specific, they do not state why the magazine decided to publish a 'Special Black Women's Issue,' or why they decided to call it a 'Black Women's Issue' despite their previous use of the term 'Women of Colour,' the introduction of an 'internationalist' focus and another term – 'third world women' – and their present uncertainty over 'what is Black.' They also do not explain why it was important for the Black/Third World Women to have editorial control, how that control was used or how it compares to the usual processes of editing the magazine. Finally, nowhere in the remainder of the 'Special Black Women's Issue' does *SR* attempt to confront the splits and divisions among the Black/Third World Women of the collective. Here the recurring theme of needing to acknowledge the divisions and splits, but fear about placing too much emphasis on what divides them versus what strengthens their 'sisterhood' resurfaces. Questions surrounding how to define 'Black/Third World Women,' 'Black Feminist politics' and the 'different strands of Black Feminism,' are raised, but

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<sup>54</sup> As stated in the editorial for the Autumn 1984 issue of *Feminist Review*, 'in June of 1983, several Black women were approached by a member of the *Feminist Review* collective, with the suggestion of doing a special issue on Black women in Britain.' Like the *SR* women of colour, the Black women who were asked to do the special for *Feminist Review* – and who wrote the editorial – were also given 'complete editorial autonomy' for that particular issue of the journal. For further information see the full editorial, written by Amos, Lewis, Mama and Parmar (1984).

they are not specifically addressed until the next month's issue, only further underscoring *SR*'s trepidation. It is clear that the *SR* collective was trying to maintain control over the collective domain versus the magazine domain. However, problems amongst the collective members, and their attempts to deal with them, became apparent in the editorial.

The uncertainty over what 'black' meant, and the urgent (re)surfacing of differences among women *within* larger racialized groupings, and the diversification of fronts (black versus white, black against black) was evident in 'Black to Black: Which Way Now?' featured in the November 1983 issue of *SR*. It was another piece written by collective member Arati, in 'the hope of opening up debate among Black Women/Women of Colour . . . Internationally . . .' on the topic of 'differences' amongst those women who define themselves as 'black.' Her article begins by explaining her belief that 'black women have been uniting AGAINST their own interests,' and they have done so, primarily, because they 'have *pretended* that [their] differences as Black Women are not real' (*SR* 136: 17). Arati states that, 'the time is long overdue for [the] differences [of] Black Women to be openly debated, [as it is] only when differences are dealt with [that] can Real Solidarity [can] begin' (*SR* 136: 17). Arati then writes that because this debate has not yet happened, the solidarity of black women 'has short-circuited.' This short-circuiting consequently increases the power of white women in the WLM because '*they know* of the differences' dividing black women and 'use that knowledge to control [them] – deliberately or by habit.' She associates this control with imperialism, stating that imperialism 'distorts the psyche' of black women so that they are more inclined to 'assimilate' than 'resist' (*SR* 136: 18). Furthermore, Arati claims that as a result of their experiences of 'racism black people have internalised white supremacy to such an extent that black people's relationships between themselves centre on "whiteness"' (*SR* 136: 18). Thus, she concludes that 'the important difference [...] between Black Women is *colour* – is [that] the "blacker" a woman is the more oppressed she is. And following from that, the paler she is, the "less" is the hate she experiences' (*SR* 136: 17).

Arati's piece is important because it sheds light on some of the questions the *SR* Black/Third World collective members put forth in the editorial of the special issue from the previous month. Arati explains that 'black' is not simply black, and that the variations in colour amongst women who define themselves as black have caused some women to experience more racial discrimination than others. This helps make clear why the term 'Women of Colour' might seem more suitable than 'Black Women,' and why the question, 'what is Black?' needs more consideration.

Arati's article is also significant for the ways in which it demonstrates changes of black women's organisation and self-definition. In the May 1977 issue of *SR*, the Bradford Women's Group reported their irritation with the 1977 National Women's Liberation Conference for the ways in which white women assumed that 'West-Indian and Asian women [...] share the same racist experiences' and how 'they are [consequently] lumped together because they are black.' The Group felt that this 'lumping' communicated a lack of 'awareness of their dissimilar cultural backgrounds.' In the report on the first black women's conference featured in the June 1979 issue,

black women chose to come together in the belief that organising autonomously around their shared experiences of racial discrimination was a more effective use of their energy in the fight for women's liberation. In the November 1983 issue, Arati suggests that despite this assumed unity black women no longer feel as though the differences among themselves must be denied in order to make their cause 'relevant' to white women in the movement or as a means of strengthening their need for autonomous organisation. As she wrote in the September 1983 issue, the most 'relevant' aspect of women's consciousness is for white women to take responsibility for their own racism and the ways in which that racism both contributes to their privilege and has historically oppressed black women. This is why she critiques black women's focus on 'white-centred' analyses of their oppression. In her view, this focus only adds to the power of white women within the movement whilst further inhibiting possibilities for the development of real 'solidarity' amongst black women. The most important difference between black women is their 'colour.' Arati's article, taken with the October editorial and Sona's 'Mixed Race...So What!' feature back in June, reveal an important shift towards the definition of black women's identity – or, in other words, now that black women have secured the 'microphone' and are 'making demands of their own' they can start to interrogate, for themselves, what it means to be black.

As with past debates on the topic of race and racism, the SR collective had to negotiate its involvement with and response to the shifts that were taking place. In the December 1983 issue, SR published a short editorial that gave some brief insight into that involvement and response. The editorial ominously cautions, 'we hope that you are sitting comfortably as you read this' (SR 137: 3)<sup>55</sup>. The collective reveals that they have received a great deal of feedback on the recent changes in the magazine and that as a result of this feedback, they have made the decision that from now on, 'Spare Rib is no longer a white women's magazine.' The collective does not go on to explain what, exactly, that announcement means; in what way the magazine was white before, and how it has become white no longer. Rather, they state the belief that all of the issues of the women's movement 'have connection' and that accordingly, they feel as though they 'must pursue that recognition.' However, they are quick to point out that their recognition of the interconnectedness of all issues does not mean that they are unwilling to provide space for issues specific to Black/Third World women. They go on to express their understanding at the 'difficulty' this might bring to their 'white readers,' but explain that this 'challenge' is 'long overdue.' They point out that whilst SR is 'committed to feminism, to women's liberation' this commitment does not come 'at the expense of fighting racism' – including the racism of 'white feminists.' Eventually, the editorial concludes with the collective asking their white readers to 'learn' and 'engage' in this debate 'with [SR] in the process of [their] change.' They state that they need the support of their readers 'in order to survive.' However, they write that they must also 'meet the urgent realities of racism (and other injustices) in order to survive and grow as feminists.'

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<sup>55</sup> All direct quotes to SR's December 1983 editorial are from SR 137: 3 unless otherwise indicated.

Here, the collective make a point of stating that unlike at previous times within the WLM, commitment to feminism and women's liberation does not come at the expense of fighting racism. Yet, the final two sentences quoted from the editorial, taken together, almost suggest that *SR* can either garner the support of their readers or meet the urgent realities of racism and other injustices and grow as feminists. This is perhaps an indication of *SR*'s readership. To be clear, that the collective also felt that they needed to tell readers to 'sit down' before reading the editorial, and that they felt compelled to comfort their white readers by acknowledging the 'difficulty' they might face in coming to terms with *SR*'s decision to abandon its 'whiteness,' suggests that a good majority of *SR*'s readership was assumed to be white, and that those white readers struggled, like *SR*'s white collective members, to 'hand over their power' of the magazine. It seems as though the 'surprise' of confronting racism within the Movement was still a reality for some women. Therefore, it can be argued that the 'process of change' that *SR* asked its readers to learn and engage in with the collective was still about acknowledging the oppression of women by women.

*SR* published yet another editorial on the same topic the very next month (January 1984) revealing that 'there are now [just] three Black women on the collective' and that the magazine is 'appealing to other Black women to help arrange a readers' meeting' so that 'women of African and Afro-Caribbean descent and [...] women from the Indian sub-continent' could 'define [on their] own terms what "Black Feminism" is' (*SR* 138: 3). The editorial, entitled '1984 Black Women So Far...', states that as '*Spare Rib* is a Women's Liberation magazine which is trying to develop the politics of anti-racism from a feminist point of view,' they therefore 'need positive and critical support especially from Black readers, [in order to ensure they] fulfil [their] commitment' (*SR* 138: 3). The tone of *SR*'s editorial suggested that something was awry. There were now only three women of colour on the *SR* collective, and they, the white women on the collective, or the collective as whole, felt it was important to publish an editorial stating this information. They also felt it was important to inform readers that they needed the support from their specifically black readers in order to ensure *SR* 'fulfil their commitment' to 'a politics of anti-racism from a feminist point of view.' These two points indicate that *SR* may not have had the support of its black readers, and, it seemed, it was losing the support of its black collective members.

As I shall go on to explore in Chapter 4, the *SR* collective, at this time, was completely overwhelmed by their third major debate over the issue of Anti-Semitism/Zionism. As a result of this third debate, the collective became divided, primarily along racial lines, and the magazine was in a state of crisis. Whilst a more detailed analysis of this is presented in my fourth Chapter, in the context of my discussion in Chapter 3, it is important to note how this editorial in many ways addresses the conflict of that third debate. To be specific, *SR* state their disapproval of the continued ways in which white women 'colonise' black women, and point out that it is the privilege that comes from this colonisation that prevents white women from seeing 'the relevance of Black politics in *Spare Rib*' (*SR* 138: 3), they are speaking directly to criticisms from the collective's women of colour. The collective states that white women must take responsibility for their

internalised racism, claiming that to simply 'dump the "problem" onto the Black collective members and readers of *Spare Rib* [...] would be a racist response' as the work of the black collective members is already 'at least ten times harder than' the work of the others (SR 138: 3). With regards to Chapter 3, in articulating this perspective, the importance of the role of white women in helping to bring the 'anti-racist struggle' to SR is stressed. At the end of the editorial, the collective express their hopes for engagement with this struggle, and their 'willingness' to be 'open' and 'learn' as they 'try to do the best [they] can.' Finally, they encourage readers to be critical of their efforts, but remind their white readers to consider their own racism before offering their comments.

Tracing the history of full- and part-time collective members, as listed on the contents page of every issue, reveals that in the eight months between May 1983 and January 1984, six of the fourteen women comprising the SR collective left: Anny Brackx had left by June 1983, Jan Parker left by August 1983, Roisin Boyd left by September 1983, Louise Williamson by October 1983, Sue Hancock by December 1983 and Petal Felix by January 1984.<sup>56</sup> In May, SR was beginning its run of special features written by women of colour collective members Sona, Manny and Arati. Now the magazine had to appeal to other black women to help them in their efforts to arrange a meeting for women of colour to discuss their definitions of black feminism. What is more, in January 1984, the SR collective felt that they needed to justify the 'relevance' of Black politics in the magazine – a gesture that is somewhat peculiar given all the previous articles published in 1983 which very explicitly expressed why black women's issues were 'relevant' to the magazine, the readers and the movement. SR's plea for a critical response from their black readers in particular indicates that the magazine collective was very self-conscious about its ability – or inability – to 'meet the urgent realities of racism.' When they write that they are trying to do 'the best that they can' they communicate that there exists the possibility that they might not get it right.

The March and April issues of 1984 revealed just how tricky it was for SR to balance the changes in the magazine, the struggles to address the differences amongst black women and the recognition for their desire for self-defined identities and SR's predominantly white readership. In March, a letter from reader 'Pauline Isabel' was published which expressed her opinion that January's editorial was nothing but a 'terrible spectre of Tokenism [...] stalking the pages of *Spare Rib*' (SR 140: 4)<sup>57</sup>. She writes: 'tokenism is the hallmark of the coloniser; the principal tool of the torturer; and a mocking mask of liberation worn with pride by the oppressor. It is the act of appearing to open doors but in fact, allowing only approved agents through who, once admitted, discover that the coloniser still wields *all the power!*' She argues that the only thing that SR is concerned with is '*the reader*' whom Pauline describes as 'non-black, non-working class woman.'

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<sup>56</sup> Parker is a staff member at The Institute of Educational Technology, part of The Open University in Milton Keynes; Boyd is a journalist who has worked for the RTÉ (Radio and Television of Ireland); Petal Felix, along with Jacqui Roach, is the author of 'Black Looks' (1988).

Three women did, however, join the collective during this time: Maxine Angus, Rachel Lever and Loretta Loach all joined in October 1983.

<sup>57</sup> All direct quotes to Pauline Isabel's letter are from SR 140: 4 unless otherwise indicated.



She argues that the magazine resorts to tokenising black women because they are too afraid to 'shock' or 'offend' 'this delicate, liberal' white readership, for fear of how that would 'affect circulation figures!' She therefore claims that this fear-induced tokenism makes *SR* no different from 'any other patriarchal erection' and asserts that 'even if the Collective consisted of 95% tokens,' if the magazine continued to prioritise its white readers, 'nothing would change.' Pauline wonders what it is, exactly, that makes '*SR* feminist, liberated or liberating' and states that 'for *SR* to learn not to be woman-hating it would have to be a Collective of all black women [– women] who imagined the reader was similarly hated and abused. [Only] then,' she concludes, 'there would be some hope that most of the time the magazine would *not* be offensive (racist, etc).'

Clearly, Pauline was not as convinced as *SR* that it was 'no longer a white women's magazine.' She does not want to 'learn with' or 'engage in' *SR*'s 'process of change' as she does not believe that *SR* will discontinue prioritising its white readership, which she interprets – along with her perception of *SR*'s preoccupation with its circulation figures – as a form of racism.

In the same issue the magazine features a discussion between Farzaneh and Manny of the collective and the Southall Black Sisters<sup>58</sup>. The discussion, entitled 'Black Women: Definition and Struggle,' was initiated by Farzaneh and Manny as a means of addressing their 'current confusion about the best way to define [themselves] and [their] politics' (*SR* 140: 28)<sup>59</sup>. It captures 'Black/Third World Women,' exploring definitions such as 'Black, Women of Colour, Black Feminism and Third World.' The names of the women participating in the discussion are not provided; a single initial indicates which woman is speaking.

The discussion begins with the question: 'What is your definition of Black?' 'V' answers by stating that she 'feels there is a certain amount of logical confusion about what is meant by Black because [...] most people agree that its [*sic*] not skin colour, it comes out of the experience of racism and therefore, Black in a sense becomes political identity.' A third woman, 'G,' adds that 'there is a connection to be made between women of "colour" and "Black" women because they are both fighting anti-imperialist struggles.' A fourth woman, 'P,' from the Southall Black Sisters responds:

I think on the whole that the Black policy, and what we mean by Black is to incorporate all the ideas of racism, to look at our past histories, to look at imperialism and colonialism. The group itself has been quite flexible. We haven't as yet theoretically or otherwise, resolved the problem, but what we have done, is welcome women who will have faced similar histories and similar racism to Southall Black women's centre. We are still left with the problem of when exactly do we stop becoming such an insular group and start relating to struggles elsewhere? Do we relate to women who consider themselves neither Black nor white? For example, there are two women that I know who would be considered to be mixed race. They don't have family structures like Black people and therefore were excluded by both communities.

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<sup>58</sup> Southall Black Sisters was established in London in 1979 to provide support for Black and Asian women experiencing domestic abuse. See <http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk>.

<sup>59</sup> All direct quotes to 'Black Women: Definition and Struggle' are from *SR* 140: 28 unless otherwise indicated.

As the article continues, 'P' explains that she feels 'Black is a political term.' She states that Black is an identity that was formed by Black people in response to white society 'lumping' them together as Blacks. P states her desire to 'move away' from that assigned definition and re-appropriate the term 'positively to assess [black women's] past' (SR 140: 29). She points out that 'on the one hand you want to see it as a political term, and on the other hand you want to say that skin colour isn't really important when Black people get together.' However, she claims that 'at the end of the day colour is still important' for it is the thing that causes discrimination (SR 140: 29).

The discussion eventually moves to the differences between Black and Asian women, as well as women from other countries. P again speaks up and states that 'many Asians don't consider themselves Black.' She admits that by naming their group 'Southall Black Sisters' they have 'alienat[ed] a lot of Asian women.' P explains that many of the women who come to their centre consider themselves 'brown' as it is not acceptable for Asian women to call themselves 'Black' (SR 140: 29). G then adds that she thinks 'there is a problem about what "Asian" means.' She states that the Southall Black Sisters are not completely certain as to who is included in their definition of the term 'Black.' She explains that they are confused as to whether or not this definition includes people from other countries, and reveals that their group 'battled [amongst themselves] for ages about [both] the term [as well as about] calling [themselves] Black or Brown.' Ultimately, she expresses her belief that 'the term Black is about racism, imperialism in all its different permutations, and with all its different connotations – it's about Third World Women' (SR 140: 29). Yet, P responds to G by questioning if the Southall Black Sisters perhaps 'adopted the term Black as a convenient way of struggling in this country' and 'with the full knowledge that [they] were relating [their] struggles with the women in other countries' (SR 140: 29).

At the end of the discussion, Manny ('M') asks the group how they think their 'struggles against racism and imperialism are linked to those of the Third World' (SR 140: 29). G explains that 'there is no direct link with the Third World, only implicit support,' and V adds that the 'Southall black women [*sic*] group is fighting racism in Britain' and that the issues of racism are different in India (SR 140: 29). She concludes the discussion by asserting that before any concerted effort is made to 'link up' with women in India, women in Britain need to have a full understanding of those differences.

What the discussion between Farzaneh, Manny and the Southall Black Sisters reveals is how, over a period of time, differences between different groups of women became clearer and questions of alliances (strategic or otherwise) were problematized. In the context of this article, four specific groups are addressed – black, brown/Asian, mixed-race and third world – and the differences between them are acknowledged. Yet, it is clear from the discussions that no one term can encompass all women. Indeed, identity politics fragments the groups, leaving these issues very much unresolved.

Regardless of this fact, women – and particularly readers – still wanted answers, and they expected SR to provide them. In April 1984 SR published two letters indicating some of these

tensions. In the first reader's letter Rasheeda criticises *SR* for its handling of race in a recent movie review. Most of letter focuses on details of the movie but at one point she asks: 'Who do the *Spare Rib* Women of Colour/Black Women Speak for?' She asks this question because, 'as an Asian woman[, she] strongly resent[s] other women of colour making sweeping political statements on [her] behalf' explaining that 'there is *no* single political line shared by all Black/Asian women' (*SR* 141: 5).

The second reader's letter criticises *SR* for using Arati's 'Black to Black' article back in November 1983 to initiate the debate amongst Black women and Women of Colour on their differences. The letter is entitled, 'A Response to "Black to Black" from Black Women' and is written by Shaheen Haq, Pratibha Parmar, Hansa Chudasama, Shaila Shah and Rada Gungaloo.<sup>60</sup> The women claim that Arati's article 'was [...] full of historical, factual and cultural inaccuracies; full of generalised statements which reveal an ignorance of issues within the Black Women's movement in Britain [and] contains statements which unfortunately reveal that the writer is a victim of racist stereotypes fed to [black women] by white society' (*SR* 141: 29)<sup>61</sup>. With regards to their first point of contention, they claim that Arati is at fault because in her article black is 'linked to skin tones and pigmentation rather than a political consciousness.' The women believe this mistake suggests that 'she does not recognise that it was British Imperialism that created and fostered divisions between different Third World people, thereby creating hierarchies of colour as an attempt to divide Black communities.' In essence, these 'Black Women' voice their rejection of biologism as cultural construct in favour of identity as socially and culturally relative. Their second criticism speaks directly to the ways in which *SR* has influenced this construction when the women write that they are 'astounded' Arati has claimed that a debate on the differences of Black women is 'long overdue.' They wonder how she could be 'oblivious of the fact that *such a debate has been and is ongoing amongst grass roots Black women's groups for over 5 years.*' The women argue:

just because these discussions have not been publicised in the pages of *Spare Rib*, historically a white feminist [*sic*] magazine, does not mean that these discussions have not taken place. The writer assumes that solidarity between Asian and Afro-Caribbean women is taken for granted, without acknowledging that many Black women have and are working towards creating a solidarity between ourselves well before *Spare Rib* 'discovered' this as an area of interest.

The women argue that Arati is a 'victim of racist stereotypes' and warn *SR* of the 'danger' of publishing 'such ill thought out articles which not only serve to perpetuate racist stereotypes in the

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<sup>60</sup> Pratibha Parmar is an award-winning filmmaker and author. She co-wrote 'Challenging Imperial Feminism' with Valerie Amos (1984), edited *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* with Shabnam Grewel, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis, and, with Alice Walker, made the film *Warrior Marks* (1993). She also published *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1996); Shaila Shah co-edited *Sweeping Statements: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement 1981-83* (1984) with Hannah Kanter, Sarah Lefanu, Shaila Shah and Carole Spedding; Rada Gungaloo is the president of SOS Femmes, Mauritius.

<sup>61</sup> All direct quotes to the letter by Haq, et al. are from *SR* 141: 29 unless otherwise indicated.

white readership, but also attempt to create divisions and hierarchies amongst Black women.' The authors of the letter agree that the current debates amongst black women *do* need to continue if their 'unity' is ever going to be achieved. However, they write, it 'is a shame that *Spare Rib*, rather than debate this area usefully, has done so in a way that reinforces stereotypes white women have of Black women, and does not attempt to acknowledge the many attempts' Black women have made to organise together.

The examples from the March and April 1984 issues of *SR* illustrate how it faced the challenge of juggling a wide readership, a feminist commitment to anti-racist politics and the black women's focus on identity and self-definition. *SR* was accused of 'tokenism' even as it tried to announce its 'strong' anti-racist stance and published articles by Black/Third World women. As a result of publishing the article by the women of colour collective members, they received more reader criticism. 'Black' was a contested term – was it political? Based on skin tone? Did it include people of mixed race? People in India? – and *SR*, which presented the current debates amongst black women and those participating in the WLM, was contested alongside it. *SR* knew that they must engage with the issues. Past attempts to avoid 'controversial topics' only called attention to the magazine's fear of 'shocking' or alienating readers. Even if it meant that they could do nothing more than 'try the best they could' they would have to get involved. But once that decision was made, readers demanded to know just 'who did the *SR* women of colour speak for?' Black women? The WLM? And how representative of the debates and issues was *SR*? As pointed out, just because an issue did not appear in the magazine this did not mean that that issue did not exist or had not been debated elsewhere. Also, the charge was made that even if *SR*'s collective was made up of '95% tokens' the magazine would still be white and oppressive if the content did not change and white readers were not made responsible for their racism. If *SR* was a 'white feminist' magazine, how was the collective to go about challenging their white readership without jeopardising their circulation? Addressing the debates 'relevant' to black women, the evolution of the movement and appeasing their readers were all necessary for the magazine's 'survival.' *SR* was in a precarious position, trying to figure out what to do and how best to do it. Over the next two years, *SR*'s struggle worsened, making it clear that its handling of these issues remained problematic. The fronts were multiplying and *SR*'s strategies for tackling them were only partially effective.

### Section 3.6: Issues Unresolved

In March 1985, *SR* began running a column entitled 'Hersay.' Hersay provided *SR* readers with the opportunity to express their thoughts in a short personal essay on a topic of their choosing. Every month featured a one-page piece written by a different reader on a different topic. In March 1985, reader Esther Goulding's essay, 'Racism in Feminism,' was published. Goulding begins her

essay by stating that she is 'an angry black woman' (SR 152: 31)<sup>62</sup>. She explains that she is angry because of the perpetuation of oppression by 'so called "aware white sisters".' This oppression – both within the WLM and in black women's 'everyday lives' has been repeatedly 'ignored' and Goulding therefore supports her 'black sisters who espouse to segregate.' In her view, white women feel that racism 'competes' and 'detracts' from feminism, causing them to force black women to 'prioritise' their focus on either racism or sexism. She claims that white women make many assumptions about black women's struggles. 'Rights,' she states, 'is another assumption made regularly by white women.' Goulding explains that white women have a great deal of privilege in society, so when they speak about their lack of 'rights,' they in fact speak from a position that is already entitled to a number of rights. 'Black women,' however, 'are fighting for A RIGHT TO HAVE RIGHTS. Black women in this society have been put at the bottom of the heap: economically and socially [they] have been kept at the periphery.' Goulding declares: 'WE HAVE BEEN MARGINALISED BY YOU.' She writes that she has 'no intention of being delicate, or making placatory noises.' Rather, she restates her anger and tells her readers that she wants them to know why. Goulding then provides a few examples of the things that white women do to black women which she finds infuriating. She suggests that when white women tokenise black women and make judgements about which black women are 'ok' they are 'playing innocent.' She also criticises 'white organisations,' which she says are racist and operate 'in a very patriarchal way.' Goulding explains that 'if [white women] wish to dialogue with black women, it CAN NOT BE ON [WHITE WOMEN'S] TERMS.' Finally, she admits that the issues she has raised are part of a 'deep struggle that is currently happening and in some ways is to come [– a struggle that] could destroy the women's movement.' She ends her essay by arguing that white women in the movement 'will have to make a decision on whether it is a movement for ALL women,' and suggests that if they are genuinely interested in working towards a more inclusive movement, white women should 'try listening' – not 'the superficial listening' she and her black sisters are so familiar with – 'but real IN DEPTH LISTENING.'<sup>63</sup>

In July 1985 reader Maggie Hobbs writes on another topic previously presented in SR magazine. In her letter, entitled, 'What's My Identity?' Hobbs reveals her confusion over her mixed race identity. She states that she is not sure how to 'classify' herself as she feels 'neither black nor white,' nor does she 'consider [herself] an ethnic minority' (SR 156: 26). She writes that because she was born in Britain, she considers her nationality to be British, but explains that she is 'neither fully accepted by white people, nor by black[, and that] this is especially difficult [for her] when discussing the issues of cultural identity and belonging' (SR 156: 26). She reveals that she is 'saddened by the lack of mention of the problem faced by women of mixed race parentage in' SR. Hobbs wonders if there 'are any women out there who share [her] concern,' as she 'would be interested and pleased to hear from them' (SR 156: 26).

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<sup>62</sup> All direct quotes to Goulding's essay are from SR 152: 31 unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>63</sup> Of course, Hazel Carby's article 'White Woman Listen!' (1982) is relevant here.

Neither Goulding's essay nor Hobbs' letter introduce new race-related issues to the magazine or its readers. Goulding's essay repeats many of the previously presented issues related to black women's experiences of white women's oppression, both with the WLM as well as in their 'everyday lives.' Again, the struggles of black women are assumed, white organisations are criticised for their racism and patriarchal structures, white women's privilege and complacency or 'innocence' is interrogated and they are reminded that if they want to 'dialogue' with black women, they must really 'listen' to the experiences of black women and not expect that dialogue to take places on 'WHITE WOMEN'S TERMS.' Similarly, Hobbs feels out of place and unaccepted. She is neither 'purely' black nor white and her British identity only complicates her ability to 'classify' herself. But whereas in the past, other readers or collective members have only suggested that the 'divisions and splits' between black and white women could worsen if women's differences are not recognised, Goulding very clearly states that if the movement does not 'change' and become a movement that is inclusive of 'ALL women,' the current struggles 'could destroy the movement.' Hobbs' letter, expressing her disappointment with *SR*'s lack of attention given to issues related to mixed-race identities, illustrates the magazine's relationship to the movement, and that if the magazine did not become inclusive of 'ALL women' it too could be destroyed.

*SR* indicated that it was aware of this danger when, three months later, in November 1985, *SR* tried to reinvent itself. It changed both the look and the content of the magazine (see fig. 10). In an editorial, the collective wrote that '*Spare Rib* can proudly claim to be the first and only women's liberation magazine in Britain[, and that] since first appearing on newsagents' shelves thirteen years ago, [the magazine] has sought to reflect the wide body of opinion that exists in the contemporary women's movement' (*SR* 160: 4)<sup>64</sup>. The collective explains that 'though *Spare Rib* is a familiar name,' their 160<sup>th</sup> issue of the magazine, 'marks a departure from the old and the birth of something new.' They reveal that the magazine will now feature 'expanded news coverage' and will continue to run the 'Hersay' column as well as the readers' letter page. In addition, they have added sections on health and parenting and the arts section has been revamped and renamed 'Culture Shock.'<sup>65</sup> The collective state that the changes they have made to the magazine were 'on the basis of [readers'] interests and suggestions' and 'hope that it will offer more to both regular readers and women who are new to feminism.' *SR* claim that although there have been 'many advances' since the magazine first began, 'the worldwide position of women leaves much to be desired.' They declare that feminism is 'not a passing phenomenon' but is instead something that is a 'concern' for all women. 'The struggle continues,' they write, and stress that '*Spare Rib* is as relevant today as it was at its birth.'

The ongoing difficulties that *SR* faced as a result of racial conflict within the Movement and the magazine were present in other feminist publications at the time. Indeed, in the May 1986 issue of *SR* a report was published on the break up of the Merseyside Women's Paper (henceforth MWP).

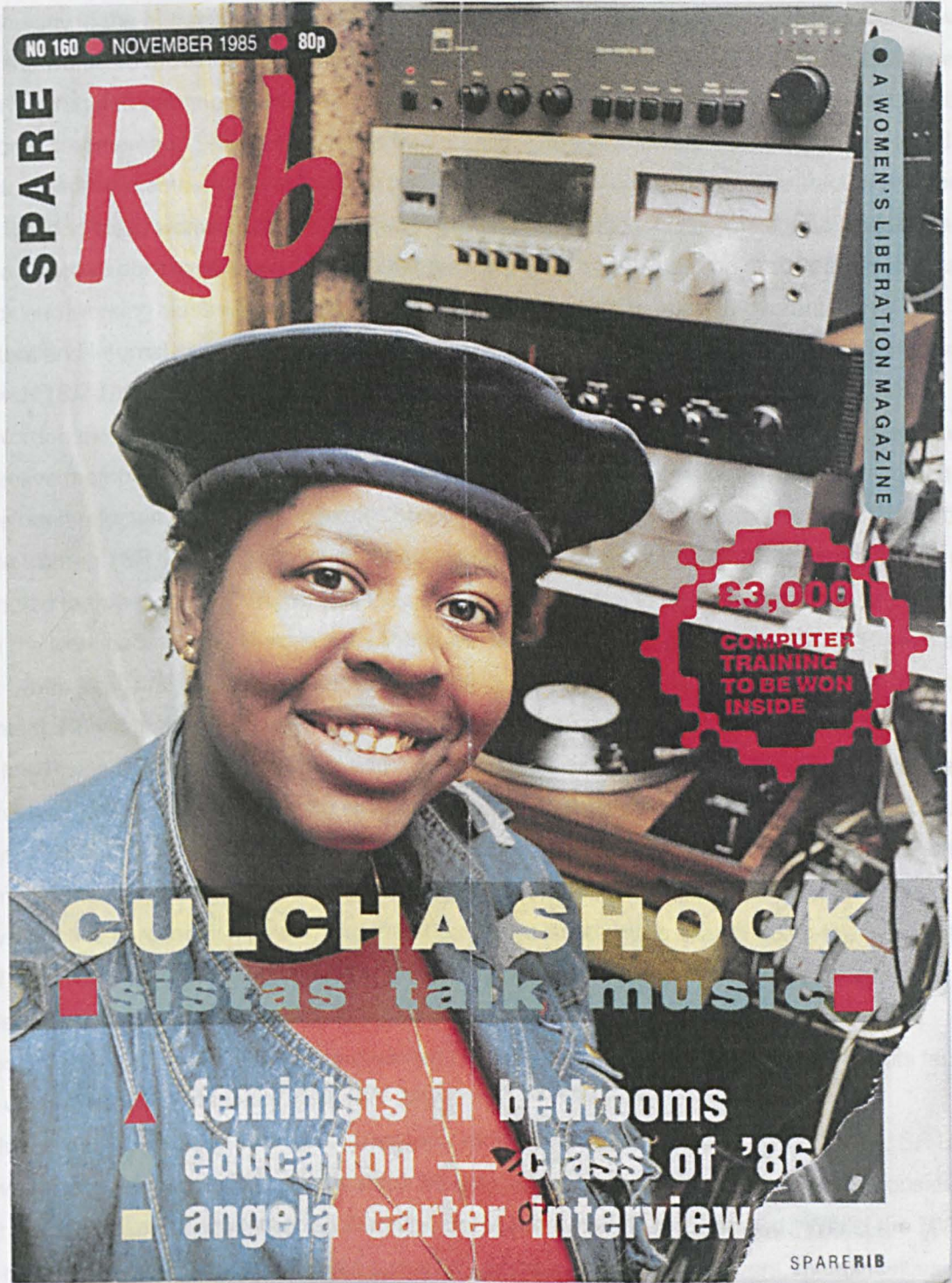
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<sup>64</sup> All direct quotes to *SR*'s November 1985 editorial are from *SR* 160: 4 unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>65</sup> The new 'Culture Shock' feature was, however, referred to as 'Culcha Shock' on the front cover of the November 1985 issue.



Fig. 10. Culcha Shock



Source: Spare Rib, 160 (November 1985).



The article, entitled 'City of Splits,' documents the end of the Liverpool magazine. *SR* collective member Barbara Norden states that 'the folding of the MWP seems to reflect a time of crisis particularly in the Merseyside Women's Movement, but there are plenty of parallels to be drawn with the women's movement in general' (*SR* 166: 36-37). Norden explains that whilst the paper always struggled with money-related difficulties, the collective producing the paper had recently become 'fragmented.' She attributes this fragmentation to the tensions between the white and black collective members, revealing that for a long time the MWP had tried to attract more black and working-class women to the collective in the hope of making it less 'white' and 'middle class.' But as Norden observes, whilst 'it is one thing to advertise a paid job, and make efforts to attract Black and working class women to apply [...] this in itself is not enough to guarantee that the content and internal structure of the paper will truly reflect the voices of Black and working class women' (*SR* 166: 37).

Norden then shifts to a sequence of excerpts from her recent conversation with former MWP collective member Sue Ryrie. Ryrie explains that the collective understood 'that Black women have been reluctant to put their energies into what they perceived as a paper written for and by white women' (*SR* 166: 37). However, when the tensions could not be resolved, and the collective dwindled to three women<sup>66</sup>, Ryrie and the other two women could no longer manage to keep up with the workloads. When Norden asks Ryrie about her feelings regarding the WLM, Ryrie states that 'when [she] first got involved with the Women's Movement, it made [her] feel better about [herself]. Now it makes [her] feel worse' (*SR* 166: 38). She reveals that she feels the 'collapse' of the MWP was somewhat 'inevitable' and claims this inevitability is a result of 'years of domination of the women's movement by white women and white women's concerns' (*SR* 166: 38). Ryrie states that she is not at all 'surprised' by the anger of black women. She admits that many white women seem very 'reluctant to change' but thinks that 'this reluctance is [not] just an unwillingness to relinquish power,' but that it has more to do with a 'fear of doing the "wrong" thing' (*SR* 166: 38). The discussion between Norden and Ryrie concludes with Ryrie explaining her belief that 'this fear is the result of an increasing intolerance and an atmosphere of rigid "ideological purity" in the women's movement [...] and that it is one of the greatest threats facing the women's movement today' (*SR* 166: 38).

In the past, *SR* had to prove the 'relevance' of certain *topics*. In this issue's editorial, *SR* has to prove its *own* relevance. This point cannot be emphasised enough, particularly when considering that the MWP – another Women's Liberation publication – recently 'collapsed.' Whilst the MWP did not 'collapse' because it could not prove its own 'relevance' to its readers, the difficulties it faced reflected a crisis that was paralleled in the larger WLM and part of those difficulties were related to the MWP's inability to prove its relevance to black women. As Norden observed, simply employing black women was not enough. But *SR* could not seem to figure out for themselves

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<sup>66</sup> It is worth remembering that in May 1983 there were *fourteen* full- and part-time women comprising the *SR* collective.

what was enough. Their publication of Hemmings' realisation of her own racism was not enough for Bhavnani, who felt that *SR* was misguided in attempting to initiate the debate on racism by printing an article written by a white woman. As argued by Pauline Isabel, a mostly black collective did not guarantee that the content and 'internal structure' of a publication would convey the concerns of black women. Like the MWP, *SR* could not sustain its black collective members, so Pauline's only solution – that the entire collective consist of black women – was not a possibility. Whilst *SR*'s inclusion of Goulding's personal essay allowed her 'anger' to be expressed, it was uncertain how long *SR* would be able to attract black women to their magazine that was, as Shaheen Haq and her friends commented in their letter referencing Arati's 'Black to Black,' 'historically a white feminist's magazine.' Ryrie claimed that she believed it was 'increasing intolerance' and 'ideological purity' that was the biggest threat to the movement. However, one might argue that it was 'rigid' concepts of 'purity' that could be traced back to Britain's colonial and imperial history, which made it difficult for women like Sona and Hobbs to make sense of their 'mixed race' identities. The weight of this influence, and the cultural burdens of British society, are perhaps why Ryrie thought that the end of the MWP was 'inevitable.' This was also, perhaps, why *SR* tried to 'prove' to its readers that it was capable of reinventing itself – of departing from the old and birthing the new – even though other feminist publications, which similarly 'tried to develop the politics of anti-racism from a feminist point of view' – had collapsed. However, as the next few months revealed, *SR* was unable to negotiate the 'anger,' the tensions, the competing definitions of 'black,' the women of 'mixed race,' the ideological purity, intolerance, assumptions, their readers, their 'strong anti-racist line' and the inevitability of their efforts always being 'not enough.'

The May 1986 issue of *SR* also featured an article on Liverpool's Black community. Written by Liz Drysdale 'Black Resisters' described the city's racial history and the 'deprivation and oppression [faced by] all Black people in Liverpool,' particularly the women (*SR* 166: 22). Drysdale explains that the black community of Liverpool 'is the oldest one in Britain.' Yet, despite the history of the black community, 'racism is more entrenched in Liverpool than in other parts of the country' (*SR* 166: 22). She cites problems such as unemployment and discriminatory housing policies as some of the examples of 'institutionalised racism' in the city.<sup>67</sup> In order to cope with these problems, Drysdale states that many black women's groups have been started. One such group is Liverpool Black Sisters, which she then goes on to profile. Drysdale describes how Liverpool Black Sisters have become very involved in the community, running 'a variety of courses for Black women including Black women and health, Black women in history and Black women and trade unions' (*SR* 166: 23). The group also addresses 'issues such as deportation, harassment of Black families on council estates' (*SR* 166: 23). Drysdale explains that whilst 'in the short term these organisations offer some hope to Black people [...] they do not force change on the mainstream' (*SR* 166: 40). She writes that 'within this context the work of women's organisation

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<sup>67</sup> The history of the black presence of Britain has been acknowledged by the opening of the International Slavery Museum in 2007. See <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism>.

must surely be to politicise women' so that they 'are able to make demands from a position of strength' and concludes that 'the ability to view things in a clear way can and should come out of that political process and the struggle of our lives' (SR 166: 40).

The article on Liverpool and the Liverpool Black Sisters provided a useful example of the kinds of institutionalised racism that was still being experienced within the British black community, and the ways in which women within that community organised themselves into positive, effective and educational activism. The article was also important for the reader response it drew. In the July 1986 issue of the magazine, reader Stephanie Mathivet's letter, 'Virtual Untouchables,' was published. She stated that she read the article 'on the women of Liverpool with mixed feelings. That Black women are organising and are a strong dynamic force of the Black community and its resistance deserves such positive coverage. That white women are, at last, having to deal with their personal and collective racism also makes welcome reading' (SR 168: 4)<sup>68</sup>. However, Mathivet wants to point out that a 'major and quite unique characteristic of the Black community in Liverpool' was 'ignored' in Drysdale's article (SR 168: 4). Mathivet goes on to explain that Liverpool 'has the largest community of Black people of mixed race in England [...] which is due to the particular historical development of Black settlement in [the city].' She points out that Liverpool was at the heart of the slave trade, and as the city began to 'grow as a major seaport and centre of colonialist imperialist trade, Black seamen passing through the port sought the company of strong drink 'n women, according to the traditions of merchant seamen the world over.' Mathivet claims that many of the local white women turned to prostitution out of poverty and lack of education. These women, she writes, therefore 'played their part in building the foundations of a Black community' – a 'story' which is often 'untold.' Mathivet then turns her focus to the magazine itself. She criticises *SR*, stating that it is 'supposed to reflect the lives and experiences of all women, yet [it] excluded the lives and experiences of a large number of women who remain hidden and ignored, yet who nevertheless form an important part of the Black community in Liverpool.' She argues: 'you ignored the story of Black women for so long and that is only now beginning to change. How long are you going to ignore the story of other women who do not fit your definitions of who constitutes women in struggle?'

Mathivet's letter adds a historical context to Drysdale's article, and also challenges *SR*'s ability to address the concerns of *all* women. Britain's colonial and imperialist past, and the immigration of 'coloured' people that the country experienced as a result of this past, is still being drawn upon in the same ways it was in the first years of the magazine. *SR* is still being confronted with this inherited legacy, and after being criticised for 'ignoring' the story of black women, they are now criticised for ignoring the story of certain white – as well as mixed-race – women.

This last point is particularly interesting, given the fact that the cover of the July 1986 issue of the magazine was a photograph of two women – one white and one black – with the question spread across the page: 'Black and White Women: Can We Work Together?' (see fig. 11) Inside

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<sup>68</sup> All direct quotes to Mathivet's letter are from *SR* 168: 4 unless otherwise indicated.

Fig. 11. Can We Work Together?



Source: *Spare Rib*, 168 (July 1986).

the magazine was a corresponding feature article. In the introduction to the article, the *SR* collective wrote that 'the challenge [*sic*] that Black women have made to the assumptions of the white Women's Movement have been crucial to the politics of working situations. *Spare Rib* is asking Black and white women in four different organisations how they found ways of co-operating' (*SR* 168: 18). The remainder of the article is a collection of three – not four – reflection pieces written by women at Sheba Publishers, the Women's Unit at Camden Council and the Third World Women's Working Group.

*SR*'s decision to publish the feature, 'Black and White Women: Can We Work Together?,' was something of a contradiction. On the one hand, the magazine seemed to acknowledge the tensions that led to the collapse of the MWP, the 'whiteness' of the WLM, *SR*'s tendency to 'ignore' black and, according to Mathivet, certain white women. On the other hand, *SR* seemed to be diverting their engagement with the issue by asking other women's organisations how *they* 'found ways of co-operating.' This conflicting presentation of the topic suggests that either the *SR* collective had not been able to find ways of co-operating amongst themselves, or that they felt too vulnerable to personally engage with the issue. Towards the end of this issue of the magazine *SR* printed an advertisement for a '*Spare Rib* workshop' of the same title as the cover image and the feature article. The workshop was part of 'Women Alive,' described as 'a weekend of feminist discussion, debate and entertainment organised by women in the Communist party' (*SR* 168: 43). The advertisement gives the impression that *SR* actually *were* willing to engage with the issue. However, as two letters published in September 1986 suggest, at this point, the 'inevitable' had already arrived.

The first letter was from Liz Drysdale, who wrote the article on Liverpool, 'Black Resisters.' Her letter was a response to Mathivet's letter on the history of Liverpool and *SR*'s ignorance of the role white female prostitutes had in the evolution of the city's large 'mixed race' population. Drysdale's letter begins with her stating that 'as one of the contributors to the May 1986 issue [she] was disgusted and angry to read the letter entitled "Virtual Untouchables"' (*SR* 170: 4)<sup>69</sup>. Drysdale calls Mathivet's letter racist and 'full of sweeping generalisations, stereotypes and offensive language.' Yet, she explains that 'whilst there are many, many other points within Mathivet's letter that [she] would like to protest about,' she concludes that 'the main thrust of [her] anger should be directed towards **SPARE RIB**.' Drysdale argues that the magazine should 'not have published it, and in doing so have merely perpetuated the racism that [she] as a Black woman face[s].' She expresses her anger, and claims that many other white women, such as her friends and her own mother, were upset by the way in which Mathivet portrayed the interracial relationships between white women and black seamen. Drysdale denounces Mathivet's historical contextualisation, claiming that she does not have 'accurate information about the Black community in Liverpool,' signing off on her letter with, 'yours in disgust.'

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<sup>69</sup> All direct quotes to Drysdale's letter are from *SR* 170: 4 unless otherwise indicated.



The second letter, from reader Tina Janis, critiques the 'Cover Image' of the July 1986 issue of the magazine (see fig. 11). Janis explains that whilst she can 'appreciate the professional quality of the photo' she finds 'it necessary to point out the racist subtleties which it embodies' (SR 170: 5)<sup>70</sup>. In her opinion, the white woman in the photograph looks far more relaxed than the black woman. She states that the white woman appears to be 'leaning comfortably against the back of the Black woman' and that this positioning enables the white woman to look 'directly and confidently into the camera.' The black woman, in contrast, looks 'awkward' to Janis. Because of the angle of the black woman's face, her gaze is more indirect. In addition, the white woman's head is tilted upwards, thus receiving more of the light source. Janis claims that the black woman 'not only [...] appear[s] to be standing behind the white model, she is effectively presented as standing in her shadow.' The black woman's hair is not discernible and 'the shade of green she is wearing is also subdued by the shadowy area she occupies and does little to enhance or compliment the warm tones of her skin.' However, the white woman is wearing a black shirt, which Janis states 'obviously enhances her white skin.' Like Drysdale, Janis then turns her attention to the magazine itself. She states that when SR 'as a Women's Liberation Magazine [...] ask[s] the question "Black and White women – can we work together?," [she] would say' no. She concludes that it 'is highly unlikely as long as your magazine continues to present such stereotypical images of Blackwomen [sic], essentially controlled and therefore subjugated in a white power structure.'

I agree with several of the points Janis makes in her interpretation of the photo. The white woman is positioned slightly in front of the black woman, occupying most of the frame. Her placement and relaxed posture, coupled with the light source originating from her side of the image's frame, does indeed give the impression that the black woman is standing in her shadow. Furthermore, it is true that the black woman's hair is not 'discernible' and that her expression is 'awkward.' However, I do not think that the black woman's shirt colour makes much difference to the overall photograph, nor do I think that her gaze is more 'indirect.' On the contrary, because the white woman's head is tilted up and the black woman's head is straight, the impression is that the white woman is in a more 'submissive' position than the black woman in relationship to the photographer or lens. It is in my view that SR did not purposely create a debatably racist image. However, it is undeniably a photograph of poor technical quality and this, combined with the improper formatting and layout of the cover image, and, of course, the phrase 'Black and White Women: Can We Work Together?' understandably drew concern from some readers. Had these factors – such as the light source or the placement of the vertical yellow bar reading 'A Women's Liberation Magazine' – been addressed more carefully, SR would have been less likely to receive such criticism.

SR response to both letters was brief. In response to Drysdale's letter, SR tried to explain that Mathivet's letter 'was published [...] primarily because of its criticism of *Spare Rib*'s failure to reflect the experiences of white women with Black children in Liverpool' (SR 170: 4). The

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<sup>70</sup> All direct quotes to Janis' letter are from SR 170: 5 unless otherwise indicated.

magazine then states that it 'accepts full responsibility for the publication of the letter which Liz Drysdale so rightly criticises [and] apologise[s] for [their] mistake and for the offence caused particularly to the women of Liverpool' (SR 170: 4). In response to Janis' letter, SR simply writes, 'The two women in the photograph are not professional models, but films makers – follow our SCREEN section for news about their work' (SR 170: 5).

This was not the first time SR was criticised for publishing an article that was considered factually inaccurate and racist. In May 1984, when Shaheen Haq and her friends' response to Arati's 'Black to Black' was published, one of their major points of contention was that Arati's article 'was [...] full of historical, factual and cultural inaccuracies; full of generalised statements which reveal an ignorance of issues within the Black Women's movement in Britain.' Whilst to some extent this may have been a matter of lack of fact-checking, the point that SR was still dealing with issues from two years beforehand which were issues that they had put off dealing with from the very beginning of the magazine remained. SR's acceptance of responsibility for publishing Mathivet's letter, and their apology to both Drysdale and the women of Liverpool communicates that SR, 'historically a white feminist magazine' was struggling to grapple with the 'fear of doing the "wrong thing"' that Ryrie believed made white women seem very 'reluctant to change.' In fact, SR's lack of a sufficient response to Janis' letter suggests that the magazine was almost paralysed by fear. Instead of engaging with her, they dismissed her criticism by stating that the women who appeared in the photograph were not professional models. Once again, SR's nervous attempt to engage with the debates and the 'controversial' subjects, were simply 'not enough.' The issues were not resolved, and, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 4 of this thesis, race was ultimately the undoing of the magazine. SR's third major debate was on the topic of Zionism and anti-Semitism. However, it was race that polarized the collective members in their negotiation and handling of that debate.



### Section 4.1: Introduction

The focus of my third substantive Chapter is the third debate presented in *SR*: Zionism/anti-Zionism. As I shall demonstrate, the Zionism/anti-Zionism debate began following *SR*'s publication of the article 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism,' in which one of the three authors declared that feminism necessitated a political commitment to anti-Zionism, in August 1982. The conflation of feminism with anti-Zionism sparked off intense reader response from primarily Jewish women who argued that anti-Zionism was a form of anti-Semitic Jewish oppression. As a result, *SR* was 'flooded' with readers' letters demanding some sort of intervention from the collective. *SR*'s editorial decision-making was once again tested. The collective became severely divided along racial lines with clear divisions between those who described themselves as Women of Colour and the remaining white collective members over the decision of whether or not to publish readers' letters. *SR*'s inability to come to a decision about publishing the majority of the letters resulted in withholding publication of *all* letters and as I shall show, when the collective reached the pinnacle of what would later be repeatedly described as 'deadlock,' it became clear that race dominated the debate, operating in part under the guise of the Israel/Palestine conflict.

*SR*'s internal debate was brought fully into the public domain through the publication of individual collective members' reflection pieces in 'Sisterhood is Plain Sailing' in July 1983. As demonstrated in my previous two Chapters, and here with the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate, in many ways the overarching question at hand was how to deal with difference. This Chapter demonstrates that the conflict amongst collective members was indicative of much larger questions regarding identity politics. In the case of *SR*, just whom the magazine represented, and what issues should be prioritised, was essentially the challenge of maintaining unity between different constituents with different ideas about what was politically important to feminists. As the acute tension faced by the collective, as the threat of *SR*'s dissolution – as a collective as well as a magazine – grew, the terrible personal acrimony that became a constant within the magazine only further entrenched *SR* in the irreconcilability of issues. As this Chapter demonstrates, it was the Israel/Palestine debate and the anti-Semitic/anti-Zionist arguments that ultimately undid the magazine. The igniting or underlying factor was, inherently, race, racism, and the racial divide.

### Section 4.2: Background

As Edward Said writes in *The Question of Palestine*, 'A great deal has been written about the turmoil in Palestine from the end of World War II until the end of 1948' (Said, 100). It is not my intention to engage in the complexity of the Palestine 'question,' which is in fact not one question

but an extensive cluster of questions that includes, but is by no means limited to, a debate regarding which people have an inalienable right to settle and live on a piece of land now commonly referred to as Israel. What I am interested in interrogating is not the intricacies of the much too simply put 'Israel/Palestine conflict.'<sup>1</sup> Rather, I am interested in pursuing the ways in which this conflict manifested itself on the pages of *Spare Rib* magazine, against the backdrop of the debates within the WLM. However, in order to pursue this, I shall briefly retrace some of the more factual history of the conflict, particularly as it relates to Britain.

Although Britain's historical involvement with the Middle East extends for centuries, I have chosen to begin my delineation in 1917 with the Balfour Declaration. The Balfour Declaration was, in essence, the platform on which the British Mandate for Palestine, written in 1920, was based. When the League of Nations approved the Mandate in 1922, Britain was formally given control of the land called Palestine, and its governing responsibilities were outlined. Perhaps the most important of these responsibilities was the declaration that Britain must impart a homeland to the Jewish people. This, in effect, meant that the Palestinians, who were the then occupiers of the land, would be forced to relinquish some of that land to enable Britain's responsibilities, as described by the Mandate, to be fulfilled. As Said states:

What is important about the declaration is, first, that it has long formed the juridical basis of Zionist claims to Palestine and, second, [...] that it was a statement whose positional force can only be appreciated when the demographic or human realities of Palestine are kept clearly in mind. That is, the declaration was made (a) by a European power, (b) about a non-European territory, (c) in flat disregard of both the presence and the wishes of the native majority resident in that territory, and (d) it took the form of a promise about this same territory to another foreign group, so that this foreign group might, quite literally, *make* this territory a national home for the Jewish people. (Said, 15-16)

Indeed, from the 1920s to the early 1940s, there was a large wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine, where Jews tried to establish, or 'make' for themselves a national home. Most of these immigrants came from various European countries where anti-Semitism was rife. They considered Palestine to be their 'promised land' and sought a new beginning in their lives, with the hope for peace and safety from anti-Semitic offences. Unsurprisingly then, during the time leading up to World War II when anti-Semitism was on the rise in Europe, the numbers of Jewish people wanting to immigrate to Palestine swelled. The influx of large numbers of Jewish immigrants only increased the aggravation felt by Palestinians at having been displaced, and hostility between the two groups escalated.<sup>2</sup>

Britain tried to maintain a sense of order in its governance. However, there was no clearly defined system of rights guaranteed to either Jews or Palestinians, and British institutions and

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<sup>1</sup> For information on this conflict see, for example, Kedourie and Haim's edited *Palestine and Israel in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (1982), Nafi's *Arabism, Islamism and the Palestine Question 1908-1941* (1998) and Schultze's *The Arab-Israeli Conflict* (1999).

<sup>2</sup> See Dowty's *Israel/Palestine* (2005) and Karsh's *The Arab-Israeli Conflict* (2008) for more information on this issue.

officers eventually suffered attacks at the hands of both parties. The Arab revolt following the Peel Commission of 1937, which recommended a partition of the land be dedicated to Jewish settlement, garnered the British some Jewish support. However, the Commission also intensified the tumultuous relationship between Jews and Palestinian Arabs, making it clear that a resolution between the two for a peaceful division of the land was improbable. The British issued a White Paper in 1939 abandoning the originally proposed partition and arguing that Britain had met its responsibility to provide land for the Jewish people. They recommended the move towards Palestinian independence. As the White Paper explained, an independent Palestine would consist of native Palestinian Arabs and Jewish settlers coexisting on a shared territory. Fully aware of the disturbances caused by the large influx of Jewish immigrants, and the consequent quarrels over the reissuing of land, the White Paper severely restricted not only the number of permissible migrants but also forbade future land exchanges.

With the onslaught of World War II, and the systematic persecution of Jewish peoples in Germany and Central Europe, Britain was caught in a double bind. 'From the late nineteenth century a significant factor in the politics of immigration was the arrival of large numbers of largely Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe' (Solomos, 40). During World War II anti-Semitism was at its peak (Kushner; Lebzelter; Goldman). Yet, 'despite evidence of the plight of Jews in Germany there was political reluctance to act decisively to help Jewish refugees because of widespread anti-Semitism in British society' (Solomos, 44; see also London, Cesarani, 1990). In addition, in the mid-1930s, leading up to the war and the heavy increase of Jewish immigration to Palestine and parts of Europe, 'Britain did not have a refugee policy' (London, 164). Therefore:

to the British government, Jewish refugees fleeing Nazism and seeking entry into Britain were first and foremost an immigration problem [– one that was] complicated by anti-Semitism' and it was thus 'an immigration-based approach [that] dominated British responses to the question of admitting Jewish refugees to the United Kingdom. To be specific, this approach classified them primarily as immigrants, and only secondarily as refugees. (London, 163-4)

In this sense, then, Britain had two parallel issues regarding Jewish immigration to contend with: the regulation of Jewish immigration to Palestine and the regulation of Jewish immigration to Britain itself.

Within Britain, 'Jews were accepted not for who or what they were, but according to terms set by the English majority' (Cesarani, 2). Conservatives espoused their anti-Semitic beliefs by means of exclusion, whereas the more 'liberal critique' of the Jewish immigrant 'was the belief that anti-Semitism would only end when society started to tolerate Jews and the Jews in turn gave up their distinctiveness' (Kushner, 202). The 'corollary' to this 'liberal critique' was that the problem of anti-Semitism was considered the fault of the Jews themselves, and that the 'problem,' therefore, 'must be contained by limiting total Jewish immigration to Britain, carefully selecting who came' (Kushner, 202; London, 165). In contrast, with regard to Palestine, Britain was unrelenting in its

decision to restrict Jewish immigration. As a result, of the many thousands of Jews fleeing persecution, only a small percentage were 'carefully,' 'selectively' admitted into Britain whilst the remaining refugees who could not afford the cost of travelling to America, or the entrance fee required as part of the immigration procedure for Palestine, were displaced throughout Europe.

Britain officially ended their Mandate for Palestine in May 14, 1948, when the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) formally approved the decision for an independent state of Israel. Immediately following the announcement, fighting between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs escalated once more, and has continued to this day. Over the second half of the 20th century, leading up to the beginning of *SR* magazine in 1972, the territory of Palestine/Israel experienced enormous upheaval. The Palestinian Arabs never ceased in their fight for their land. In 1964 the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed, seeking recognition from the UN in the pursuit of Palestinian territory. Three years later, in 1967, Israel invaded the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the 6-Day War, causing mass Arab destruction. In 1972, the Arab/Israeli battle was brought to Europe, when during the Olympic games in Munich, 11 Israeli athletes were kidnapped and killed by Arab guerrillas, and in 1974 the PLO was officially recognised by the UN, where it again expressed its pursuit of a Palestinian land of independence.

Due to Britain's extensive history of involvement with Palestine/Israel, and its long-standing involvement with regulating Jewish immigration to both Britain as well as Mandated Palestine, there is a certain cultural awareness in Britain of the Arab/Israeli conflict and of Zionist rhetoric. With regards to Zionism, on the one hand, this rhetoric was generated amongst Jewish immigrants, almost as a coping mechanism for experiencing anti-Semitic oppression.

The influx of Jews from Eastern Europe consisted mainly of lower middle-class and artisan strata, and the immigrants tended to settle in industrialized urban areas, particularly in London, Manchester and Leeds. Their regional and occupational concentration was enhanced by their cultural individuality, their Yiddish language and orthodox faith. This, together with the rejection from the host society and heavy economic pressures, predisposed the immigrants towards Zionism and radical movements [...]. (Lebzelter, 8)

On the other hand, Zionism worked as an effective solution to British anti-Semites who were not content to accept, or even tolerate, Jewish immigrants. For these people who believed that 'Jews led a parasitical existence, corrupted industry, banking and trade, undermined the traditional cultural values, and deprived native Britons of their jobs, women and homes,' the solution for 'get[ting] rid of the "Jew-menace" was seen in segregation in the form of compulsory Zionism' (Lebzelter, 60).

Thus, British Jews were situated at the centre of the Arab/Israeli conflict and Zionist propaganda. But their relationship to both of these issues was not easily navigated, due to the ways in which either could be used simultaneously as both a defence and an offence in relation to experienced anti-Semitism. British Jews' 'devotion to Israel's welfare' did not guarantee their unwavering support for Zionism.

'Few Jews, either before or after 1948, accepted the East European-rooted Zionist analysis of the condition of Diaspora Jewry. They did not believe that emancipation in Britain was a failure and antisemitism an ineradicable threat to their security or that an authentic, fully Jewish life was possible only in the Jewish homeland' (Endelman, 234-5). Accordingly, the British Jewish experience was fraught with contradiction: Jews had a vested interest in Zionism, they had been persecuted and believed in their right to the security of a safe space, free from the possible repeat of annihilation; at the same time, they realised the ways in which British Zionist support was merely a charade for anti-Semitic sentiment and felt strongly that it was anti-Semitism at its root that endangered Jews, and that it must be tackled wherever it was planted.

### Section 4.3: Early Articles in *SR*

It is against this background that the debates in *SR* need to be considered. The first two articles to appear in *SR*, 'Daily Life in Palestinian Camps' and 'Being Jewish: Anti-Semitism and Jewish Women,' addressed the Arab/Israeli conflict, specifically with regard to displaced Palestinian women's experiences in Arab refugee camps and Jewish feminists' experiences of anti-Semitism in Britain, respectively. 'Daily Life,' appealed to readers engaged with the turmoil in Palestine as well as British feminists' concern for women in an international context. Its publication communicated that *SR* felt its readers were, or should be, invested or at least interested in the conflict, something which was emphasised by the fact that the article was written by a British woman who had visited the camp area in order to report back on the situation. Similarly, 'Being Jewish' stressed the relevance of an awareness of anti-Semitism in Jewish women's experiences of living in Britain to the WLM. In particular, 'Being Jewish' focussed on Jewish women's negotiation between their cultural traditions, social commitments and political persuasions. Both articles also addressed the intersections between their culture and their gender roles, as well as the Arab/Israeli clash. Specifically, they both demonstrated how this clash and the Zionist agenda in turn affected women in Palestine as well as in Britain. Taken together, they connected the Arab/Israeli issue with women in Britain and anti-Semitism.

The first article, 'Daily Life in Palestinian Camps,' by Rosemary Sayigh, appeared in the January 1978 issue of the magazine. Sayigh, 'who lives in Beirut and is married to a Palestinian economist[,] carried out her research [for the article] in Palestinian camps between 1973-75' (*SR* 66: 42). In the first part of her article, Sayigh provides background information to the current conflict. She explains that 'in 1948 the Arab population of Palestine [...] was made stateless by the creation of the state of Israel.' As a result, 'more than half' of its original inhabitants were displaced and, 'according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), "deprived of their livelihood"' (*SR* 66: 42)<sup>3</sup>. Sayigh writes that many refugees

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<sup>3</sup> All direct quotes to 'Daily Life' are from *SR* 66: 42 unless otherwise indicated.

'travelled to TransJordan, Syria and Lebanon,' and that Lebanon, 'was the most disturbed by the influx of Palestinians, since, being mainly Muslim, they threatened the country's precarious Christian supremacy.' This perception of threat led to limitations in the refugees' daily lives, and it was not until after the 6-Day War that refugees were no longer 'arrested, beaten, imprisoned – sometimes tortured and killed' – if they were suspected of any activity that could potentially disrupt the Lebanese order. Sayigh reports that 'UNRWA statistics give a total of 171,500 Palestinians in Lebanon, about half of whom are living in camps, and half outside them,' but she believes that 'these figures are certainly underestimates.'

The article eventually shifts to a descriptive account of one Palestinian woman's daily life in a refugee camp. Sayigh details the waking hours of Um Ali over the course of what appears to be a few days. She explains Ali's family history, the death of her mother and husband and the lives of her children. Sayigh conveys Ali's exasperation at her struggles: 'hard work has made her irritable and domineering[;] there is constant conflict[; her] back aches permanently, and her hands are red and scaly' (SR 66: 44).

Throughout the article, Sayigh comments on what she sees as an oppressive distinction between men and women's roles in the camp. She claims that 'there is no doubt that the poverty and oppression of the Palestinian working class weighs most heavily on women. It is they,' she argues, 'who bear the brunt of low wages, unemployment, and job migration. It is they who suffer most [...]' (SR 66: 45). In addition, women are regarded as responsible for the maintenance of family life within the camps, the importance of which Sayigh stresses. Due to the fact that just 'one male wage-earner supports a dozen or more children and non-earning adults,' women are primarily needed in the home (SR 66: 44). Sayigh notes the pressures for young men and women to marry, and the tremendous emphasis placed on childbirth as a result of high death rates.

Here, Sayigh is trying to establish a connection between Palestinian women and SR readers by focussing on women's experiences and domestic responsibilities. This is emphasised when she elaborates on some of the ways in which traditional male and female roles are changing within the camps. She states that many 'Palestinian women are undertaking direct political action.' This has caused them to question whether or not women should 'only take part in the struggle in traditional ways that do not disturb the social order [...] or should they have a direct role, one they themselves choose, based on a theoretical equality with men?' (SR 66: 45) Sayigh writes that she thinks Um Ali is an example of a woman who 'balances' her political beliefs with her traditional family commitments – a struggle that surely resonated with many SR readers and British women involved in WLM. When Sayigh asks another 'politicised Palestinian girl if a society can win a liberation struggle whilst segments within it are oppressed, [the girl] replies that the struggle for national and female liberation is one' (SR 66: 45). The implication of this statement is that the fight for national liberation is the same as the fight for women's liberation. By referencing the Palestinian girl's reply, Sayigh urges the Palestinian cause in a manner that makes it relevant to SR readers.

The second article, 'Being Jewish: Anti-Semitism and Jewish Women,' operates a similar tactic through asking what issues are important to women and the WLM – this time from Jewish women's perspectives. Featured in the February 1979 issue of the magazine, *SR*, in the introduction, states that the article was produced after 'Rozika Parker talked with Jewish feminists about the way anti-Semitism lives in [British] society' (*SR* 79: 27). Parker begins by informing readers that there has been a recent wave of increased anti-Semitism in Britain. She recalls hateful graffiti informing Jews that they are not welcome, and refers to the 'desecration' of hundreds of Jewish graves in a North London cemetery. Parker explains that as a result of these recent events many Jewish feminists feel conflicted about the relevancy of their experiences to the WLM. They wonder what importance experienced anti-Semitism holds for the Movement, specifically whether or not anti-Semitism should be 'ignored' in favour of 'more obvious and urgent' issues, such as the racism experienced by black people. Alternatively, they question whether or not the silence surrounding Jewish women's experiences is an issue in itself. Parker explains that this question arises because despite the evidence of increased anti-Semitism in Britain, Jewish women feel their concerns are treated with 'insignificance' (*SR* 79: 27). Whilst Parker admits that some feminists have indeed begun to address the issues of anti-Semitism, it is her belief that "Jewish" identified and "feminist" are incompatible' (*SR* 79: 27).

Like Sayigh, Parker eventually goes on to draw connections between the Jewish women's experiences of anti-Semitism and gender roles – the latter an 'established' concern of feminism – as a way of highlighting the relevance of Jewish women's issues to other women. Parker believes that there is little acceptance of Jewish feminist engagement within the movement by some women who view Judaism as a form of patriarchy. These women think that feminists who do not reject their Judaism must therefore be choosing to participate in a fundamentally oppressive belief system and lifestyle; a 'choice' seen as a contradiction to the Movement's aims for equality. Yet, Parker points out that Jewish feminists themselves struggle with the some of the more traditional aspects of their religion and that consequently, most Jewish feminists are constantly involved in merging their feminism with their Jewishness. Jewish feminists consciously fight against the patriarchal, sexist aspects of Judaism whilst trying to retain some of their unique Jewish culture. At the same time, they are overwhelmed by British anti-Semitism, debating within themselves what must be ignored in order to achieve some sense of safety and acceptance, and what must be defended and protected from the abuses of which they are the target. Parker writes that when 'Hitler talks of *the* Jewish intellect, *the* same spirit [...] it's a technique familiar to women; sexism lumps us all together in a neat package against which men can define themselves' (*SR* 79: 28). She states that fighting the ways in which Jews have been stereotyped and oppressed by society is akin to fighting the ways in which women have also been stereotyped and oppressed.

Parker's article eventually makes it clear that whilst not all Jewish women practise Judaism, and their individual attitudes towards their culture and history vary, many Jewish women's experiences are unique specifically because of their Jewish identities. She explains that some of



the women she spoke with articulated their fear that at any point in time, a seemingly innocent anti-Semitic gesture could turn into a repeat of the Holocaust. This fear has consequently prohibited many Jewish women from feeling fully liberated, especially when they come from families where their parents immigrated to Britain as refugees fleeing persecution (SR 79: 29). Thus, Jewish feminists feel doubly excluded from women's liberation: Jewish women feel their fears and concerns are ignored within the WLM and even when those concerns are acknowledged, the assumptions other women have about Jewishness prevent Jewish women from feeling fully accepted.

Finally, Parker connects the question of Jewish women's sense of identity to the complicated issue of Israel and Zionism. She writes that 'one of the historical reasons why Israel exists is the massive anti-Semitism of the last hundred years and the refusal of countries, including Britain, to accept Jewish refugees.' Parker reveals that none of the women she spoke with were 'able to come up with any clear analysis of their feelings towards modern Israel – their emotional response tended to clash with their political analysis' (SR 79: 31). She explains that for some of the women, 'the existence of Israel has made anti-Semitism worse.' For example, one woman named Miriam thought that 'it allows people to see her as not belonging in this country, as out of place.' In contrast, 'others [said] Israel makes them feel "safe" because anti-Semitism is based on fear and weakness [...and] if anti-Semitism becomes violent there will be a country prepared to take [them] in' (SR 79: 31). Parker wrote that most of the women she spoke with agreed 'that this sense of safety is irrational [...]. But then,' she argues, 'so is anti-Semitism' (SR 79: 31).

Sayigh and Parker's articles are important because of what they communicate about the issues at this point in the unfolding of the debate. Both 'sides' of the eventual debate are given importance here – Palestine and Palestinian women and Jewishness and Jewish women. Here, their relevance needs to be proved and is consequently articulated in terms of their connection to gender roles and sexism. Yet, it is important to note that the two articles function as separate set pieces rather than as imbricated: there is concern for Palestine and Palestinian women; there is also an acknowledgment of Jewish women's experiences of anti-Semitism in Britain and in relationship to the WLM, as well as the complexity surrounding Jewish women's political and emotional response to Israel and Zionism. As the debate unfolds, feminism is conflated with anti-Zionism and the issue of Palestine and Palestinian women is displaced by debates on Zionism/anti-Zionism primarily as it relates to British Jewish women. To be clear, once the conflation between feminism and anti-Zionism is made, Jewish readers immediately challenge the basis of this conflation for its potential anti-Semitic implications.

An early example of this challenge takes shape – on a much smaller scale – in a report on the United Nations Conference on Women, and a response to this report by SR readers Anita and Joy. In the introduction to an interview with Leila Khaled,<sup>4</sup> included to compliment SR's September

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<sup>4</sup> Leila Khaled belongs to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. She is notorious for her role as a beautiful Palestinian militant; most notably for hijacking the TWA flight from Rome to Athens in

1980 report on the Conference, *SR* informed its readers that 'Palestine was a big issue at the official conference' (*SR* 98: 11) and explained how women repeatedly tried to turn the Conference conversation to the Arab/Israeli conflict. In her conference report, entitled 'United Nations Notices Women,' Jill Nichols states that whilst some of those attending the conference 'loathed the PLO's cause and wanted to steer clear of politics – seeing women's issues as safely apolitical [...], 'many of the more feminist delegates [...] claimed some sympathy for the PLO' (*SR* 98:13). Yet, *SR* adds that even those expressing some interest in Palestine 'wished it weren't taking so much time at the one conference in five years aimed specifically at women' (*SR* 98: 13).

The implication of Nichols' statement is that a conference on women – especially one that happens only once in five years – should be focussing on *women*. Taking this further, the inference is that Palestine is not a women's issue. However, as the report says that the more feminist delegates claimed some sympathy for the PLO, Nichols suggests that the opposite of seeing women's issues as apolitical is not 'political' in the sense of having awareness of the issue. Rather, 'political' has some connection to sympathy for the PLO. This suggestion is strengthened when Nichols concludes by stating that one of the 'main struggle[s] at the conference was to get "Zionism" added to the list of –isms that keep women down.' An explicit link is constructed between sexism and Zionism when Nichols reports that the struggle to get Zionism added to list of isms resulted in arguments that were both 'predictable and passionate' as 'sexism,' she explains, 'is still an embarrassing word' (*SR* 98: 13). The insinuation put forth is that Zionism was not recognised at the conference as an 'ism' that keeps women down due to the sexism of some conference participants. Therefore it is not only sexist to not recognise Zionism as anti-woman, but also, fighting sexism means fighting Zionism.

The conflation of nationalist and religious struggles with women's concerns proved contentious and, accordingly, drew criticism from *SR* readers. In contrast to the idea that Zionism is another one of the 'isms' that continues to 'keep women down,' readers Anita and Joy contend that Zionism is in fact something that helps *liberate* many Jewish women *from* oppression. In their January of 1981 response to Nichols' report on the UN Conference, the two women use sexism to argue in *favour* of Zionism. They explain that 'support for Zionism flourished because of a long history of suffering of Jews persecuted solely because of their Jewishness' (*SR* 102: 4).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, they put forth the question: if the same thing had happened to women – 'if six million women were slaughtered' simply because they were women, 'would there not be support amongst some feminists for a female-only state as a place of refuge and sanctuary?' In asking this question, they draw a parallel between the persecutions of the Jews and an imagined persecution of women in order to better illustrate their support of Zionism. This tactic suggests that anyone who views sexism as oppressive must also view the historical experience of the Jewish Holocaust as oppressive, and therefore prove this through their support for Zionism. To be clear,

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1969 and her iconic photo on the cover of a magazine, holding a gun and wearing a ring she made from the pin of a grenade. See Milne (2001) and Viner (2001).

<sup>5</sup> All direct quotes to Anita and Joy's letter are from *SR* 102: 4 unless otherwise stated.

Anita and Joy do not take issue with the view that sexism is oppressive, but rather that *SR* would espouse the perspective that Zionism is.

The UN Conference report and Anita and Joy's letter demonstrate well the complexity surrounding questions of Zionism and the multiple ways in which arguments for and against Zionist support could be constructed. Women's experiences – whether Palestinian or Jewish – could be used to justify contrasting positions as well as the relevance of those positions to the WLM. However, as evidenced even at this early stage in the unfolding of the debate, some forms of that justification disaffected particular groups of women. For example, Anita and Joy conclude their letter by writing that 'to single out Israel and Zionism as one of the causes of female oppression alienates Jewish feminists from the rest of the movement.' The two women explain that many Jewish women believe that the Israeli government is worthy of criticism, and that 'many Jews would like to see an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank, formed after a withdrawal by Israeli forces.' Thus, to continue to 'alienate' Jewish women by taking an anti-Zionist stance and equate the aspirations of Palestinians to feminism is to bring about further persecution to Jewish people. Therefore, Anita and Joy demand that 'the aspirations of the Palestinian people are in no way to be equated with feminism' (*SR* 102: 4). Instead, Anita and Joy are advocating for a prioritisation of Jewish women's experiences, essentially forging an equation between Zionism and feminism.

The question that re-emerges here – as, indeed, it has been acknowledged and discussed in my previous thesis chapters – concerns the focus of feminist politics. In other words, what is the WLM's priority? Which women's experiences are meant to be equated with feminism? Feminism could in many ways – by many different groups and for many different reasons – be equated with or determined compatible with pro-Palestinian, Jewish, Zionist or anti-Zionist discourse. But what relevance – what priority of relevance – does each of these complex and intersecting perspectives have to the women's movement (Alcoff and Mohanty, 6)? Answering these questions becomes increasingly complex as various groups of women push to make feminism compatible with one – and only one – position, whilst refusing to relinquish their claim on their position being *the* feminist position. As the degree to which certain groups were oppressed could be – and was – debated, it was difficult to prioritise one group over another and incorporate this into a feminist politics without this being interpreted as an attack, and consequently inciting some form of backlash.

*SR* had difficulty avoiding this hostility, especially as the topic of race and racism began to increase in presence in the magazine and complicate the escalating debate on anti-Semitism/Zionism. Just two months after the publication of Anita and Joy's letter, in December of 1980, *SR* published the 'What Me, Racist?' feature. The article, written by Sue Hemmings and Jane McKenley, examined Hemmings' internalised racism and McKenley's frustration with the movement's refusal to acknowledge its racist tendencies. I have discussed this feature previously in Chapter 3 for its importance in the development of the debate on racism. In this Chapter, 'What, Me Racist?' is significant primarily for the reader response which it drew. Before moving on to

'Women Speak Out,' I shall briefly analyse two reader's letters in order to demonstrate the ways in which the clash between issues of Judaism, Zionism, anti-Semitism intersected with race and racism at this stage in the unfolding debate.

The two letters, by readers Sue Wilson and Annie McDowall respectively, demonstrate that Jewish women, similarly to black women, thought their experiences of racism were being ignored, but those experiences of racism were quite different from the state and institution-based discrimination faced by black women. As indicated in 'Being Jewish,' oftentimes Jewish women felt ambivalent about their Jewish identities, and that made it difficult for them to understand and speak out about their experiences. In the following two readers' letters, this tendency is noticeable. In addition, another example of 'alienation' is presented as Jewish women make it clear that the escalating debate on race did not quite include Jewish women's experiences of anti-Semitic racism. Thus, as before, Jewish women had to prove the importance of their experiences within the context of a more 'urgent' issue.

The author of the first letter, Sue Wilson, states that she feels 'such a strong degree of frustration' when reading 'What, Me Racist?' Wilson goes on to explain that 'it infuriates [her] when women talk about racism only in terms of Black people oppressed by white. Of course Black people are oppressed,' she writes. 'They are the most noticeably oppressed group.' However, Wilson wonders about 'the racial oppression of Greeks, Chinese, mid-eastern people [...] and the oppression of religious groups, like fundamental muslims [sic]?' (SR 104: 5)<sup>6</sup> She also includes Jews in this category, and refers to anti-Semitism in Britain. She claims that 'even in the women's movement anti-judaism [sic] and anti-Semitism are often interchangeable concepts.' Wilson then writes that she is not black, but Jewish and declares that 'short of wearing a yellow star on [her] right arm [she] walk[s] unnoticed amongst the "racially pure!"' She cautions readers who might assume her invisibility is a form of protection, and equates her ability to go unnoticed with the oppressive invisibility familiar to lesbian and working-class women. Thus, she challenges the construction of 'racism,' arguing that it 'is not [only] written in black and white, but in black and white and yellow and brown and Moslem [sic] and Hindu and lesbian and women (in general) and Jewish and mentally ill and physically handicapped and male homosexuality etc etc etc....' Wilson demands: 'Stop patronising Black people and minimalising [sic] the issue. Racism is a great big multi-racial, sexual and religious issue and must be identified and fought as such.'<sup>7</sup>

The second letter is by reader Annie McDowall. She begins her letter by thanking the authors of 'What, Me Racist?' for their article, and for the opportunity to confront her own racism as a white, middle-class woman. She writes that she 'wants to challenge' racism and sexism in society,

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<sup>6</sup> All direct quotes to Wilson's letter are from SR 104: 5 unless otherwise stated.

<sup>7</sup> Whilst race and racism, at this time, was still primarily seen in black/white terms, particularly in SR, it is worth pointing out here that Wilson's letter, in many ways, articulates a much later shift in understanding constructions of race and racism. For example, in 1994, in the introduction to their edited book *Shifting Identities Shifting Racisms*, Bhavnani and Phoenix state: 'the forms of racism are varied and, indeed, racism itself is a set of processes whose parameters are shifting away from mainly biologicistic considerations to include cultural and national ones' (5).

and that in order to do so, she 'need[s] a bash on the head with a dusty file sometimes!'<sup>8</sup> (SR 104: 5)<sup>9</sup> But McDowall quickly points out 'that although [she's] white and middle class, [she is] also Jewish – not in the religious sense, but as an ethnic/racial definition.' She goes on to express her desire for women to consider anti-Semitism when examining their racism. McDowall states:

At one extreme the NF denies that the Final Solution ever took place, and are as menacing to the Jews as were the Nazis. At the more domestic level, sisters still talk about being 'as mean as a Jew' and then express surprise when I 'come out' to them. 'Oh, but you don't look it,' they say, (as if to reassure me??) Is my nose not long enough? My hair not dark enough?

It's time the women's liberation movement did examine racism. We can't just wave it aside and say, "oh, but I'm not racist." Isn't that what men do when confronted with their sexism?

Both Wilson and McDowall urge for more wide-ranging or inclusive definitions of racism. As it is, they do not feel as though their experience of racism is included in the black/white paradigm. Wilson and McDowall are not black – indeed, McDowall even identifies herself as white – but they still experience racism. This is precisely why they respond with criticism to the racism explored in the 'What, Me Racist?' article. Here, then, we are dealing with a different kind of racism from that discussed in Chapter 3: racism not based on skin colour, but rather a racism that is defined largely in terms of ethnicity. This is clear when Wilson argues that the racism experienced by black women is the most 'noticeable' and contrasts this with her feelings of invisibility. She and McDowall identify more closely with the oppressions of the working class and lesbians, whose identities may not be marked as overtly as skin colour is. Both women contemplate what it is that they need to do to make themselves, and in turn their experience of racism, more noticeable. McDowall employs the now familiar tactic of equating racism with sexism as a means of proving its importance. More explicitly, Wilson wonders if she should wear a yellow star on her arm and McDowall speculates that her nose is 'not long enough,' her 'hair not dark enough.'

The differences between the racism experienced by black women and Jewish women is further highlighted when McDowall references McKenley's warning about the 'race file' falling on women's 'bloody heads' if they refuse to examine their internal racism. McDowall writes that she herself 'need[s] a bash on the head with a dusty file sometimes' indicating that the racism McKenley is fighting is a racism that McDowall might need to acknowledge within herself, despite her own experiences of racism. With this acknowledgment, McDowall distinguishes her racist oppression from McKenley's. This distinction, coupled with Wilson's assertion that 'racism is a great big multi-racial, sexual and religious issue and must be identified and fought as such,'

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<sup>8</sup> In her letter, quoted in Chapter 3, McKenley writes: 'I've got no monopoly on dealing with racism – it's your problem too. You know a lot of the arguments too. I'm not going to drag them up but how about taking them out of the 1978 file and looking at them again because I'm very much 1980/81 and I'm very visible. And if you don't take that file off the shelf, I hope it falls on your bloody head, so don't say you haven't been warned!' (SR 101: 21).

<sup>9</sup> All direct quotes to McDowall's letter are from SR 104: 5 unless otherwise stated.

suggests that narrow definitions of racism are 'patronising' to all people – including black women – who are subject to this form of oppression.

#### Section 4.4: The Article That Started it All: 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism'

For the following year and a half, as outlined in Chapter 3, issues of race – in relation to black people's experiences in Britain – dominated the pages of *SR* magazine. The month after Wilson and McDowall's letters were published, in April of 1981, the first of the two Brixton race riots took place; the second occurred three months later in July. In September 1981 *SR* featured the article 'A Revolutionary Anger' on the details of the uprisings and the consequent police attacks. In January 1982, *SR* published a report on the WAVAW conference. This report included information on accounts of racism at the conference – on how black women had been ignored, and race had been omitted from the framework for interpreting violence against women. In February 1982 *SR* published the first of three features comprising Kum-Kum Bhavnani's 'Racist Acts' series, detailing the implications of the recent Nationality Bill and the history of racism in Britain. When the series ended in April 1982, the issue of race within *SR* magazine had taken on a new level of importance.

However, the increasing importance of race in *SR* was interrupted when the invasion of Beirut by Israeli military in June 1982 occurred. Indeed, absolutely no letters were published in response to Bhavnani's 'Racist Acts' until August 1982, the same issue which featured 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism.' Whilst it is entirely possible that no readers' letters in response to Bhavnani's series had been received in the six months between the 'Part One' of her series and the August 1982 issue of the magazine, given the steady increase in the attention given to race and racism in the magazine, this seems unlikely. Instead, as will be demonstrated, it is that the invasion by Israeli forces, which was of international concern,<sup>10</sup> temporarily took over the attention of the *SR* collective. Later, both the invasion itself and the implications of the article would be subsumed into issues of race and racism, splitting the collective apart based on racial lines.

'Women Speak Out' was in fact the transcript of a discussion between Roisín Boyd of the *SR* collective, 'Nidal, a Lebanese woman, Randa, a Palestinian woman, and Aliza Khan an Israeli [...] about what was happening.' Previously in *SR*, discussions about Israel/Palestine had tended to focus almost exclusively on British Jewish women's perspectives on Zionism and its relationship to anti-Semitism. 'Women Speak Out' is not much of a departure from that tendency. Indeed, it puts forth many of the same arguments and views as previously presented in *SR*'s readers' letters

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<sup>10</sup> Various newspaper articles published at the time evidence both the degree of destruction as well as the international implications resulting from the invasion. See, for example, Robert Fisk's 'Lebanon: Where No Power On Earth Can Keep the Peace' (1982) and Eric Silver's 'Israelis Attack by Land, Sea and Air' (1982), printed in *The Times* and *The Guardian*, respectively, immediately following the first bombings of the invasion.

and features, such as Parker's piece on Jewish women. For example, when Nidal remarks that it is worth remembering that not all Jews are Zionist (*SR* 121: 22), the reader is reminded that Jewish women do not constitute a homogenous group. Similarly, Aliza argues that Zionism is not necessarily pro-Jewish because the state of Israel was only created as a result of Jewish persecution (*SR* 121: 22).

However, 'Women Speak Out' does differ from previous features in that the tone of the feature is more overtly unfavourable towards Zionism. Whilst the three women briefly attempt to unpack the 'enormous difference between being Jewish and being Zionist' (*SR* 121: 22), in this context, it seems as though this attempt is made not in order to communicate something about Jewish women's experiences but in order to prove that it is acceptable to be anti-Zionist. The argument put forth is that because not all Jews are Zionist, feminists can therefore identify as anti-Zionist and not have to worry about being accused of anti-Semitism. In comparison to the UN Conference report where there is an explicit connection made between sexism and Zionism with the latter falling into the category of an 'ism' that keeps women down, thus needing to be fought if one is indeed opposed to sexist discrimination, Nidal, Randa and Aliza's argument seems reasonable – especially when considering the ambivalence of Jewish women towards Zionism. However, when Randa calls all 'sisters, to come together against the holocaust of the Palestinian and Lebanese people,' as she feels that 'there is no way we can sit quietly and do nothing about it' (*SR* 121: 23) she does not allow for much ambiguity in where she believes her 'sisters' loyalties should reside. This is proven when Aliza issues the damaging assertion that 'if a woman calls herself feminist she should consciously call herself anti-Zionist' (*SR* 121: 22).

Given the past bias towards the experiences of Jewish women, their views on having been alienated from the movement, their relative support for Zionism and negative reactions towards insinuations of anti-Zionism, it was perhaps predictable that Jewish readers would be upset by the feature. After all, what was made painfully clear in 'Women Speak Out' was that a 'conscious' feminist would not support Zionism. Since many, but not all, Jewish women were indeed Zionist, the assertion put forth as a result of the feature, as presented in *SR*, was that those Jewish women who were Zionist were not viewed as feminist.

*SR* had, in the past, many times received angry, critical letters from readers. However, as demonstrated, *SR* had no policy on how to handle conflict in terms of contradictory positions within the collective, antagonism from its readers, and methods for dealing with disunity amongst the collective. This was first revealed in September 1980 when the collective published their editorial stating that 'controversial topics have always been a problem for *SR*' (*SR* 98: 3). In that particular instance, with regards to Ann Pettitt's article 'Feminism for Her Own Good,' the collective became divided over questions of editorial control. With this third conflict in the magazine, and the publication of 'Women Speak Out,' this issue surfaced again. To be specific, *SR* eventually wrote that as a result of the publication of the 'Women Speak Out' feature, it was 'flooded' with heated readers' letters, which posed for them difficult questions regarding their own



political positions in relationship to anti-Semitism, Zionism and anti-Zionism. As a result, the *SR* collective experienced a 'deadlock' as they chose to withhold publication of readers' letters, until they could reach a unanimous decision about which claims were the most 'important' or 'urgent' and which position would be *SR*'s feminist position.

The lack of unanimity in *SR*'s perspectives on the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate is not surprising as it was an inherently complex issue. However, *SR* had a perception of themselves as needing to present a political analysis of the situation to their readers – and one that would suitably qualify as feminist. Because, instead, the collective was experiencing a deadlock, they were uncomfortable publishing letters that they could not justify with political analysis, just their sense of needing to have one. *SR* could have chosen to address this issue with their readers by admitting that there were no easy answers to the questions surrounding the Zionist/anti-Zionist issue, that the collective members maintained a variety of views and that the magazine does therefore not take a definitive stand. *SR*, out of recognition of the importance for readers to voice their opinions and discuss the issues further, could have published a small sample of letters, which could have been justified for the ways in which it would have presumably reflected the complexity of the debate and honoured the *WLM* in its aims to raise women's consciousness in the processes of articulating political awareness. *SR* could have indeed printed all of the letters and let readers decide for themselves whether or not they believed Zionism or anti-Zionist – or neither or both – equated with feminism.

Janice Winship, in her book *Inside Women's Magazines* (1987), comments on the responsibility *Spare Rib* [bore] towards women who are not familiar with feminism' (146).<sup>11</sup> She argues that due to this responsibility *SR*'s 'editorial role in relation to [these readers therefore had] to be a more pedagogic, authoritative one, introducing feminist ideas and politics, steering readers through possible conflicting positions.' But ironically, as Winship asserts, because 'the collective [strove] to be representative of the women's movement's groups and interests' this in turn meant that 'when differences [arose] in the women's movement they also tended to be ones between collective members.' Given this tendency, it was understandable how it became difficult for *SR* to maintain authority whilst simultaneously entangled in the very issues that they perceived their readership to need guidance on navigating. It also helped to provide insight into *SR* initial response to the reader reaction 'Women Speak Out' drew: temporarily defer their authority to someone else.

*SR* asked two groups of women, each representing one of the main 'sides' of the debate, to write an article on their perspectives of the conflict. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two 'sides' represented did not in actuality offer any new perspectives on the conflict. In fact, because the arguments put forth repeated those of previous readers' letters and articles on the issue, *SR*'s

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<sup>11</sup> All direct quotes in this Chapter to Winship's *Inside Women's Magazines* are from page 146 unless otherwise stated.

decision added to the polarisation of the main Zionist/anti-Zionist perspectives rather than opening up their complexity.

The first 'side' was an article written by the London Jewish Lesbian Feminist Group (LJLFG) and appeared in the October 1982, issue 123 of the magazine.<sup>12</sup> The article begins with one of the members of the LJLFG arguing that to declare that someone is not a feminist unless they are anti-Zionist is in fact an anti-Semitic statement. She writes that 'for as long as Jewish women have been involved in the women's movement in Britain, it has been virtually impossible to speak about [their] lives as Jewish women and [their] experience of anti-Semitism both within the movement and in the wider society' (SR 123: 20)<sup>13</sup>. Another member then states that 'as a white woman [she] would never say to a woman of colour what is and is not racist.' She claims that she would simply 'accept her version of racism.' She sees the unwillingness of women to accept Jewish definitions of racism as 'invalidating' Jewish women's experiences. Another member expands on this point when she writes that the 'messages [she receives from] the feminist movement are very contradictory.' She explains that 'on the one hand, being a feminist means demanding the space to become more articulate about [her] own oppression and trying ways of taking control over [her] life.' However, as a Jew, she is 'silenced on precisely these issues.' She states her impression that the consciousness-raising that is so heavily practiced within the movement is 'fine' provided that she does not spend too much time discussing her family history or how her being 'silenced' as a Jewish woman 'has shaped [her] experience in this society.' One woman then points out that her experience, as a Persian Jew, is 'schizophrenic.' She wonders where she 'fits in' – as an Arab or a Jew? (SR 123: 21) Whilst another member of the group admits that 'there are, there always are, exceptions, feminists who are open and respectful' she does 'not feel that is sufficient' (SR 123: 21). In her view, 'there has never been room [for Jewish women], as there must be, within the context of the Women's Liberation Movement' (SR 123: 21).

The second 'side' presented in response to 'Women Speak Out' was by the Women for Palestine and Palestinian Women (WFP). It was published in the next issue of the magazine, October 1982, issue 124. The introduction to the article states that the feature follows the 'Women Speak Out' feature and the article by the London Jewish Lesbian Feminist Group. The beginning of the piece elaborates on what will be presented in the article: '*Women for Palestine* express their horror at the atrocity that the Palestinians and Lebanese people have experienced, and [...] give an analysis of the Zionist movement and show how recent events are related to the political nature of Zionism' (SR 124: 38). The feature itself does not go into much detail about the Zionist debate, but rather describes the fighting taking place in the West Bank and Gaza, giving particular

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<sup>12</sup> For the year 1982, SR produced two October issues of the magazine; issue 123 and issue 124. Whilst I have referred to them in this manner in my thesis, it is worth noting that as issue number 122 corresponds to the month of September and issue number 125 to the month of December, it can be assumed that issue numbers 123 and 124 correspond with the months October and November, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> All direct quotes to the London Jewish Feminist Group's article are from SR 123: 20 unless otherwise stated.

attention to the Palestinian massacre in 1948 and the recent invasion of Lebanon (June 1982). WFP critique the Israeli Defence Minister Sharon for his 'brutal' strategies in handling the crisis as well as the idea that Zionism is 'a movement to free the Jewish people from oppression and persecution' (SR 124: 39). The WFP argue that 'the Jewish people around the world do NOT constitute one national entity [...]. Moreover, a liberation movement is a movement that fights the oppressor; whereas Zionism does not organise the Jews to struggle against anti-Semitism, but to emigrate to Israel!' (SR 124: 39) The group is dismayed by the ways in which 'the horrors of the holocaust [*sic*] have been used in a manipulative way to stop any criticism of Israel's attempt to eliminate the Palestinians as a people and a nation, and carve up the Lebanon' (SR 124: 39). 'The fight for justice and freedom of those Jewish people who died in the concentration camps,' they write, 'has been abused and trampled upon' (SR 124: 39).

The two articles taken together highlight the irreconcilability of the issue at hand and make explicit the various perspectives of some of the main constituents involved. The arguments presented are familiar: Jewish people around the world do not constitute one homogenous, national entity; Israel is oppressive to Palestinians; Jewish women feel alienated from and ignored within the WLM; there are several ways of approaching Zionism, some that originate in anti-Semitic rhetoric, some which promote a special place for the Jews; Jewish women's experiences of racism are different from those of black women. They also reveal the ways in which with the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate SR was caught again in a contradiction: the perceived responsibility to communicate authoritatively with its readers but destabilized by the recurring dilemmas of being torn between irreconcilable positions.

When SR finally spoke out about the unfolding conflict in the editorial feature, the majority of what they wrote communicated a great deal of confusion in the SR collective. SR began their January 1983 editorial by explaining to their readers that the two 'separate but connected articles' following the publication of 'Women Speak Out' were printed not only because of the 'international situation' concerning Israel/Palestine, but also as a result of the many letters received from mainly Jewish women who felt strongly about how their issues were being ignored, and believed that 'Women Speak Out' was too overtly anti-Zionist (SR 126: 4)<sup>14</sup>. SR states that the collective was 'faced with the problem of what was the best way to take the discussion forward,' and implies that it did not know how to do so. They explain that as a result, they took the decision not to publish the readers' letters and instead 'ask two groups of women to address themselves to the same set of questions concerning what was happening between Israel, Lebanon and the PLO *and* the very real threat and growth of anti-Semitism in western countries.' The collective states that since the publication of 'Women Speak Out,' they have been 'accused' of anti-Semitism. SR acknowledge that they 'must continually examine the politics of the magazine and be open to change' and [they] accept that [they] must answer the criticism of Black, Third World, Jewish, and other women who experience colonialism and imperialism' and

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<sup>14</sup> All direct quotes to the January 1983 Editorial are from SR 126: 4 unless otherwise stated.

state that they 'are searching for a militant way of opposing anti-Semitism here and now, and of opposing any imperialist oppression of the Palestinian people today.'

The collective then state that they were also accused 'of publishing criticism of national liberation struggles and asking what is in it for women.' *SR* explain that because they 'maintain that [they] have a responsibility to decide how to present struggles and difference *between women*' they needed to ask themselves that very question: what is their view on national liberation struggles and what is the incentive for women to invest or participate in those struggles? Specifically, *SR* writes that they 'wanted to know how feminism was part of any of [the] questions' related to the anti-Semitism/anti-Zionist debate.

However, *SR* were unable to form any coherent political analysis on the debate. This was made evident when they admitted that they were uncertain as to how to respond to the readers' letters and asked the two groups, representing the two 'sides,' to respond to a set of questions that they themselves presumably could not answer. Indeed, this suggestion is strengthened when, in the January 1983 editorial, the collective included a list of questions – *all* of which, they propose, 'the problem of a Palestinian homeland [...] has to be examined in relation to. The collective ask:

1. How do we deal with extreme differences which exist between feminists? How do we criticise but not discount or despise each other?
2. How does the fact that many of the questions we are asking which are tied up with patriarchal power, as well as imperialism and racism, affect our involvement as women?
3. What does Zionism mean, both historically and today?
4. Can women be anti-Zionist and fight anti-Semitism?
5. How can *SR* best combat anti-Semitism?
6. How can we find a way of criticising Israel's actions in Lebanon without being anti-Semitic or fuelling anti-Semitism?
7. What is a critical feminist support of Israel?
8. What is a critical feminist support of PLO?
9. How should European feminists support Third World, national liberation struggles?
10. How do we define imperialism?
11. Can any of these questions be discussed usefully without referring to the power and influence of the USA, Soviet Union, western European countries, and to the Arab states?

It is not made clear whether or not the list of questions presented in the January 1983 editorial were in fact the questions that *SR* had put forth to the London Jewish Lesbian Feminist Group and Women for Palestine and Palestinian Women when they asked them to write their features for the magazine. Regardless, in addition to highlighting the complexity of the Zionist/anti-Zionist issue, it also highlighted *SR*'s lack of editorial certainty in handling the debate. Following the list, *SR* explained that the questions presented were 'not "new" questions,' in the sense that 'they have come up around other complex and sometimes contradictory situations at *SR*.' Despite the fact that these were the types of questions that *SR* had come up against before, they were not equipped to resolve them at this point in time. In many ways, this was because several of these

questions were not resolvable. Dealing with extreme differences between feminists still continues to prove contentious even today. However, that *SR* were under the impression that, for example, the question 'how can *SR* best combat anti-Semitism?' must be answered in order to sort out the problem of the Palestinian homeland indicates not only how seriously *SR* took its authoritative responsibility but also how severely that role was being undermined by its inability to handle conflict.

Towards the end of the editorial, *SR* acknowledged that 'the process of developing a feminist politics which can deal with these questions is obviously ongoing.' When the collective question how this process relates to their editorial role, they conclude that whilst they are keen to accept 'responsibility as an editorial collective [they] also want to ask whether or not it is possible for *SR* to be an arena of debate without others blaming [them] and other groups of women rather than going to the roots of the conflict.' As articulated above, *SR* could have indeed chosen to print all of the letters, or picked five letters at random to be published in each issue of the magazine or announced that the issue was not only complex, but also comprised of a multiplicity of perspectives and that *SR* was therefore not printing any letters that were not written in the spirit of seeking to contribute to an understanding of the debate. However, because *SR* felt the need to present a coherent political analysis to its readers but could not in fact formulate one for themselves and consequently presented their uncertainty to their readers, they effectively lost themselves in the issues, making it impossible for readers to separate the magazine from the conflict – in part an effect of creating a single list of questions with the prominent use of the first person plural 'we', effectively bringing the issues back to the editorial team and the readers as a homogenized group.

The extent to which *SR* was imbricated in the issues they presented was evident in May 1983 when *SR* featured yet another editorial on the issue of the readers' letters and their decision not to publish them. The collective wrote that for *months* they had been debating what to do about the letters and the issues that were raised by them. They explained that the letters forced the collective to evaluate their political positions, and as a result they had become 'divided' as a collective. They pointed out that this division persisted despite the fact that since the publication of 'Women Speak Out' (August 1982), there had been major changes within the membership of the collective. The changes in membership of the collective – specifically, the hiring of several women of colour – was previously mentioned in detail in Chapter 3. Yet, in this editorial, *SR* do not explicitly state what those 'major changes' have been until the conclusion. They explain that as a collective, they all felt strongly about refusing to publish 'extreme Zionist letters,' but were very conflicted about the other letters. Some, they thought, might be interpreted as 'silencing' Palestinian women. Other letters could communicate a lack of support for Jewish women. It is understandable that *SR* felt conflicted about the majority of the readers' letters, given the complexity of the debate. Indeed, *SR* write that the letters contained a 'wide range of issues

including Zionism, its meaning and history' (SR 130: 4)<sup>15</sup>. Yet, SR reveals that 'after numerous and exhausting discussions' the collective was still very much divided. Consequently, SR 'decided ([although] not unanimously) not to publish *any* of the letters received' (emphasis added).

SR faced certain choices: either engage with the issue, and take a stand, unapologetically, one way or the other, or, refuse to engage with the issue, and instead present all of the varying sides and perspectives, and remove themselves from the conflict. However, perhaps because the collective was able to agree on some points, such as choosing not to publish any extreme Zionist letters there existed the belief amongst collective members that the situation would eventually resolve itself. Indeed, there were hints towards this hope: SR pointed out that whilst some members of the collective *were* in fact anti-Zionist, the collective itself was not, and despite being critiqued for 'aspects of [their] Palestinian coverage and struggles around anti-Semitism' and accusations 'of publishing anti-Semitic material in [their] pro-Palestinian articles, [SR took] a collective position on opposing anti-Semitism in [...] society, and in [themselves].' Yet, the futility of this hope becomes clear when SR admit to their readers – and themselves – that 'in trying to cover both [Jewish and Palestinian women's oppression], with their distinct and sometimes interlinked histories, [we] inevitably run into contradictions, all of which have clearly not been resolved.' To be specific, SR state that they 'do not accept Zionism as a strategy for the liberation of oppressed Jewish people at the expense of Palestinians. Zionism,' they continue, 'as it was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by European imperialism had no right to decide for the Palestinians and their land.' Nonetheless, SR goes on to express its 'understanding' of the ways in which 'European anti-Semitism was and is a contributory factor to Zionism's appeal.' The collective states that they are not wholly uncritical of the PLO, and that 'as a result' of their choice to take 'an independent and questioning line on Zionist feminism and the Palestinian liberation struggle,' they 'have been attacked from both sides.'

The conclusion of the editorial, which was mentioned in the context of racism in the previous Chapter, comes with the announcement that 'Women of Colour are now one half of the collective, and have been at *Spare Rib* for the last 7 months.' It is not clear why the collective only now chose to make this announcement. Given the eventual revelation that the collective was in fact divided along racial lines, perhaps some of the collective members felt the need to make it more overtly known that women of colour were also part of the debate. Or, perhaps this was an early form of explanation for the debate itself. Regardless, the importance of the race factor in this particular conflict is strengthened when the collective reassert their commitment to 'feminist policies' internationally and within Britain, and declare that they 'have taken a strong anti-racist line.' Furthermore, the SR collective admit that whilst 'differences and struggle are never easily faced and engaged in [...with] this [most recent] editorial [they] have tried to speak about some of the issues which have been occupying [them] for a long time.' They state that 'the collective remains divided' but 'it's not the end of the discussion for [them] or about what appears in the

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<sup>15</sup> All direct quotes to the May 1983 editorial are from SR 130: 4 unless otherwise stated.

magazine' and express their hope for 'SR to be open to a continuous dialogue between Jewish women and Palestinian and Arab women, carried through by them and for them.'

The publication of its second editorial on the suspension of the readers' letters was an attempt by SR at articulating an all-encompassing political position on the conflict about anti-Semitism, Zionism/anti-Zionism, Palestine, Israeli, British imperialism and, in addition racism. However, it is important to note that at this point, race and the racism debate was not directly connected to the ongoing Zionism/anti-Zionism debate. Rather, the influence of race is only hinted at when SR announce at the end of their editorial *on the readers' letters* that Women of Colour are now one half of the collective. Whilst SR does admit that the conflict over the readers' letters has divided the collective, the majority of the editorial focusses on the ways in which SR, in their efforts to take an 'independent' and 'questioning' line, have been 'attacked' by all sides.

For the remainder of the life of this particular third issue, the collective continued to refrain from putting aside their differences and instead stepping into their necessary role as editors of a magazine. This is not to suggest that the women on the collective should have held their political persuasions more loosely, and relinquished their 'claim' on maintaining *the* feminist position on the topic as in fact, there was no definitive feminist position on this conflict but rather a multiplicity of different and at times opposing views. But the SR collective were clearly unable to find a way of presenting these views without feeling imbricated in and attacked for them. Thus, whilst it was understandable that various SR collective members and readers defended and stuck by their views, this did little to move the debate forward. Indeed, it only further entrenched the different groups in the deadlock of conflict.

In addition, SR readers were unsurprisingly not assuaged by SR's attempt at explanation, and were unrelenting in their criticism of the magazine. In June of 1983 a group of 'Jewish feminists'<sup>16</sup> wrote to the magazine claiming that 'the fact that NO LETTERS WHATSOEVER' had been printed, was 'experienced by [them] as silencing' (SR 131: 26)<sup>17</sup>. They explained that 'a lot of statements were made in the articles defining Jewish experience,' and SR's 'refusal' to publish the letters written by Jewish women had consequently refused them their 'opportunity to answer these statements.' They assert that 'silencing' 'is a traditional weapon of anti-Semitism in a long history of anti-Semitism in Britain' and 'suggest that the collective seriously considers the implications of their actions regarding the Jewish feminist community.' At the end of their letter, the Jewish feminists state that they are unclear as to why the letters were not published and demand that they, and other SR readers, have 'a right to know.'

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<sup>16</sup> Self-identified 'Jewish feminists' include: Adi Cooper; Rosalind Haber; Francesca Klug, who is a professor at the London School of Economics and author of several publications such as *A Bill of Rights: What For?* (2007), 'Freedom of Expression Must Include the Licence to Offend' (2007) and 'The Long Road to Human Rights Compliance' (2006); Karen Goldman, Judy Keiner, who wrote the introduction to 'Mind That You Do as You Are Told' (1979) and 'Opening up Jewish Education to Inspection: The Impact of the OFSTED Inspection System in England' (1996); Sally Lawson.

<sup>17</sup> All quotes from the Jewish feminists' letter are from SR 131: 26 unless otherwise stated.



Below the Jewish feminists' letter is a short response from *SR* which states that their letter was written before *SR*'s last editorial. It proceeds to explain again the magazine's past decision not to publish the letters. *SR* claim that they are 'not "silencing" Jewish women but [simply] refusing to publish letters that are pro-Zionist and which ignore the consequences of that policy/ideology for thousands of Palestinians' (*SR* 131: 26). They then add that they 'have been under undue pressure over this issue [...and] do not accept that anti-Semitism is *above or in isolation from other oppressions*' (*SR* 131: 26).

By not publishing letters, the collective was accused of 'silencing' and censorship. On the other hand, choosing to publish letters that were 'extreme' might result in further accusations of racism and anti-Semitism. The situation had become ambiguous: *SR* refused to publish readers' letters on the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate but they agreed – or at least appeared to agree – on publishing letters that critiqued them for this refusal. A sentence at the very end of *SR*'s response to the Jewish feminists points out that the response to the Jewish feminists is in fact '*not a unanimous response from the collective*' (*SR* 131: 26). This statement leaves the reader with a sense of continuing conflict and confusion. In addition, it can also be argued that this sentence communicates that some members of the collective themselves felt 'silenced.' As *SR* state that the Jewish feminists' letter was written before the publication of the most recent editorial, its inclusion suggests that some collective members, unable to convince the others to publish any letters, possibly took solace in the publication of one reader's letter which addressed the very issue of not publishing letters. Other members, perhaps, who did not agree with the content of the Jewish feminists' letter, nor the decision to publish it, compromised in exchange for being allowed to state their disapproval by means of a non-unanimous response. Regardless, it was evident that that the collective were experiences extreme editorial conflict and with regards to the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate, neither silence nor speaking out was working.

#### Section 4.5: 'Sisterhood is Plain Sailing'

The next month, in July 1983, the seriousness of the collective's discord was made public in an extreme, unexpected manner with the publication of 'Sisterhood is Plain Sailing.' The feature, comprising of the individual reflection pieces from members of the collective, would have surely been a shock to readers. The Zionist/anti-Zionist debate, and all its implications – including its influence on the collective's decision to not publish readers' letters – was by now apparent to readers. However, the severity of this debate's effects on the collective and the cause of that severity was relatively unknown. There was nothing on either the cover or the contents page of the July 1983 issue that would serve as a clue to readers about the 'Sisterhood's' inclusion. In fact, as 'Sisterhood' was placed in the back of the magazine, immediately following a page of

cartoons entitled 'Humorous Feminists,' readers would have had no indication that this month's issue of the magazine would be any different from previous issues.

The topics of the letters that were published were very much representative of the past perspectives voiced in 'Daily Life,' 'Being Jewish,' 'Women Speak Out,' and the two subsequent responses by the London Jewish Feminist Group and Women for Palestine and Palestinian Women. Whilst they did address the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate and *SR*'s presentation of its 'sides' – rather than *SR*'s refusal to publish readers' letters about the debate – the content tended to focus on the heterogeneity of Jewish women's political positions on Zionism, the connection between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism and how the fight against anti-Semitism was similar to the fight against sexism. For example, reader Shelagh from Brixton writes to *SR* about the link between Zionism and imperialism. She argues that because of this link, 'Zionism is racist on two counts [...]. The first is the daily persecution of the Palestinian Arabs. The second, more subtle aspect is that it shares the same assumptions as anti-Semitism: anti-semites want the Jews to "go away," whilst Zionists want them to "come away"' (*SR* 132: 5)<sup>18</sup>. A. Kuttab's letter entitled 'Support Anti-Racism,' praises *SR* in its 'stand against anti-Semitism, racism and oppression of all kinds and wherever existing.' Kuttab particularly wants to offer her support to 'Aliza Khan in her statement, "If a woman calls herself feminist she should consciously call herself anti-Zionist,"' but she 'would like to add to anti-Zionist anti-racist as well...!' In another letter, reader Sharron very succinctly cautions *SR* about the homogenisation of Jewish women. Sharron instructs *SR* to 'please stop assuming all Jewish women are white' and suggests *SR* start to 'think carefully about Semitic races or do some research.' Finally, in the letter 'I'm Still Proud of Being Jewish,' reader Heather Dale describes some of her experiences as a Jewish woman and expresses her opinion on the Palestinian people and her views on how *SR* has handled the controversy thus far. She states that *SR*'s most recent editorial (May 1983) 'sickens and saddens her.' Dale writes that *SR* is 'ignoring' Jewish women just as men have ignored 'feminists for the past decades.' She argues that 'if Jewish women negate the struggles of Palestinian women by "silence in this area," then the resounding silence of *SR* must, by now, have made all Jewish women (and *SR*, get it straight, Jewish women need not be either Israelis or Zionist) at best invisible, but more likely, extinct.' Dale criticises the magazine for their 'vague comments' and their 'coverage of anti-Semitism.' She writes that 'when [she sees] Nazi graffiti, [or] hear[s] anti-Jewish jokes, [she] used to be able to feel strong in [her] sense of sisterhood with other women, to think that at least, here, [she] could be [as] proud of [her] Jewishness as [she is] of being a woman. Well, no more,' she states. 'I'm still proud of being Jewish. But sisterhood? *SR*, you've made it very plain: your sisterhood doesn't extend to me [...] thanks for the lesson.'

The collective offers no commentary or response to any of the letters nor do they explain why they have now so suddenly decided to publish readers' letters – and these letters in particular –

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<sup>18</sup> All direct quotes to readers' letters from the July 1983 (132) issue of *Spare Rib* are from page 5 unless otherwise stated.

on the debate. However, in the introduction to 'Sisterhood,' which immediately followed the letters, *SR* does apologetically state that the lack of notice for the feature is because the decision to publish the piece was one made at the last minute. To be clear, 'Sisterhood' did not have a formal placement in that issue of the magazine. It was not listed on the contents page, and, in fact, because of its last-minute inclusion, the contents page and the corresponding articles and page numbers of the issue were mismatched. This is worth noting, as it reveals that debate had literal ramifications that were noticeably disrupting the magazine's production. In addition, it is important to consider that had the collective not made the 'last minute' decision to include 'Sisterhood,' the readers' letters published in this month's issue would have been the latest 'update' in the controversy, causing many readers to guess about *SR*'s editorial decisions and their intended direction or aim in the handling of the debate.

However, even with the inclusion of 'Sisterhood' readers were likely to wonder about *SR*'s intentions. The experience of the reader as a witness, that was effectively drawn into *SR*'s drama of the debate, is not to be overlooked. Readers would not have been expecting 'Sisterhood' to follow the 'Humorous Feminists' cartoon page. Its appearance as they turned the page probably took them by surprise (see figs. 12, 13a, 13b). Indeed, it is almost ironic that the collective chose to insert the highly antagonistic 'Sisterhood' immediately following the light-hearted cartoon page. Nonetheless, readers were likely to have been bewildered by what they saw. The layout of the first two pages makes it so that the eye is drawn to the second page of the feature where there is a box bearing the title 'From the Women of Colour.' The title, placement and size of the box – comprising approximately half of one page – communicates the differentiation or separation of the Women of Colour from the remainder of the collective, but the reasons for this are not visually apparent.

In addition, the remainder of the introduction to the feature does not provide a great deal of information that would indicate to readers that 'Sisterhood' is an intervention in the debate unlike previous *SR* attempts to communicate their editorial dilemmas to readers. *SR* state – again – that 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism,' 'evoked a large response of letters' and that since 'then [members] have discussed and discussed the issue and tried to come to a *collective* agreement on the issues concerned; namely, Zionism and anti-Zionism and what the implications of those politics are, racism, anti-Semitism, "censorship" etc.' (*SR* 132: 24). *SR* explain that because their 'differences are too great on this issue' it has been difficult for them to maintain [...] consensus' (*SR* 132: 24). They hope that by 'outlin[ing] the various differing views [...] of the collective members that they can] inform [their] readers on what those differences are' (*SR* 132: 24).

It is reasonable to think that readers of the magazine were expecting to read the collective's views on the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate and to be provided with some additional insight into the reasons behind why the collective struggled in their decision-making with regard to the readers'

Fig. 12. Humorous Feminists



Source: Spare Rib, 132 (July 1983): 23.

# sisterhood... ...is plain sailing



In SR121 we published an article 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism'. It evoked a large response of letters. Since then we have discussed and discussed the issue and tried to come to a collective agreement on the issues concerned; namely, Zionism and anti-Zionism and what the implications of those politics are, racism, anti-semitism, 'censorship' etc. We have decided that our differences are too great on this issue to try and maintain this consensus. This article outlines the various differing views we hold on the *Spare Rib* collective and is an attempt to inform our readers on what those differences are.

The decision to drop other articles, to give over space to this issue and write this article was a very last minute one, made in the middle of going to press. We apologise for the disparity between this month's contents page and the contents.



Since last summer when the first article appeared on Zionism (Women Speak Out Against Zionism, SR121) the *Spare Rib* collective has been riddled with disagreement over this issue. Inevitably other issues such as Black/white racism and who has the control/power on the collective have been linked up to the main disagreement of whether or not the letters we received in response to the article should, or should not, be published. Issues of power and mistrust have become paramount, veiled behind the 'main' issue — and a resistance to changing the power relationships between white women and Women of Colour has resulted.

We have had Zionist and anti-Zionist letters, though the majority have been pro-Zionist. Because we were stuck in what seems like a time-warp over whether we should or shouldn't, nothing was published for a while in the letters page on the subject. SR doesn't have a letters policy, ie whether we should or shouldn't publish racist or sexist or anti-lesbian letters, and we came unstuck because of this.

I felt that Zionist letters should not be published in response to the article. Letters which did not mention the consequences of Zionist politics in the Middle East were, I felt, an insult to all the Palestinian women and men who had suffered and died as a result of US-backed Zionist policies. I do not believe (as SR has been accused of) that Jewish women have to refer to Israel or the Palestinians when they talk of their experiences of anti-semitism — that's racist. But the letters we received were in response to an article that discussed why Zionism is a feminist issue and why

it is vital to distinguish between anti-Zionism and anti-semitism.

It is depressing and destructive that so much of the debate around this issue has been distorted and that many of the issues involved have been ignored. At the SR readers' meeting — called to discuss changes on SR now that the collective is half white women and half Women of Colour, and how white women can challenge racism — the only response was to criticise Women of Colour on the collective — no attempt was made to grapple with different politics. There was a refusal to acknowledge that imperialism — when mentioned in connection with a definition of Zionism — affected and concerned women. It was dismissed as a male-identified term. I have no doubt that imperialism has been created by men but unfortunately that doesn't mean that women escape its consequences or that we can ignore it. As an Irish woman I feel angry that English and American feminists can so easily dismiss my experiences and those of thousands of other women, relegating us to the outer edges of the women's movement in Britain. Who are our sisters? Solidarity doesn't seem to be such an insurmountable problem when it concerns white English or American feminists.

I hope when readers have read all our very various responses that they'll respond to the issues raised. Is SR a platform for all women? What does solidarity really mean? What support will white readers give the Women of Colour on the SR collective?

Roisin Boyd

It's difficult to write as an individual white member of the SR collective within a situation which appears at

this point to be non-productive and far too close in style to sectarian fighting on the left. My position as a white woman has to take into account levels of privilege, control and ongoing struggles with my own racism within a group trying day by day to forge a practice as a mixed race feminist collective. On the other hand, I do have political beliefs and analysis which, although imperfect to say the least, I want to use. After a certain point, silence becomes a liberal cop-out.

Profound and serious differences threaten to completely divide us as women, whereas I believe that those very differences (understood and analysed) can serve to make possible points of common interest, help us fight common enemies, and give us glimpses of a totally different future. White liberal guilt can result in inertia and silence. Yes, I'm nervous and fearful of being wrong, of making mistakes but by saying nothing, ironically I remain 'protected' in my privilege and don't take responsibility for my politics.

In the present situation the SR collective is faced with attempting to construct an anti-racist magazine — a magazine which reflects Black and Third world women's lives consistently in its pages. At the same time we are being accused of anti-semitism for silencing the voices of critical Jewish feminists on our pages. I believe that anti-semitism is a form of racism; I also know that many Jewish women are Black. The contradiction is that these different forms of racism can divide women struggling within a white, male-dominated, anti-semitic society.

Given the splits between differently oppressed feminists, those of us who are white and not Jewish have to come to grips with our own racism, fighting



Fig. 13b. Women of Colour

White women, you are always talking about solidarity with the struggles of Black and Third World women. When have you ever put your neat analysis into practice? When we practically supported Palestinian people against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, we were continuously attacked and criticised for not sympathising with Zionism. But if Zionism is not imperialism in the Middle East, what is it? Zionism is racist and racism is the creation of imperialism and colonialism.

How can some feminists so blatantly criticise us for our imperialist/colonialist definition, saying it is a male concept? Since when has Zionism become a feminist concept?

Arab, Palestinian women and other Middle Eastern women are accused of anti-semitism by some American and British Zionist women. How dare you? Try challenging your own racism rather than lecturing Black and Third World women on what your view of racism is. Let me remind you that there has been a Black and Third World peoples' holocaust for centuries and it is still continuing in India, Africa and to native Americans. . . .

It seems that some feminists prefer not to show their solidarity and sisterhood with Women of Colour now. But when Palestinians become an extinct race (due to annihilation) then white women will study Palestinian women and get PhDs.

*It is significant that the division between white women and the Women of Colour on the collective at Spare Rib, had to come to a head over a white women's issue. This is a warning to our future solidarity work. When will we be allowed by our feminist 'sisters' to support Third World and national liberation struggles, against invading imperialist armies all around the globe?*

society's racism and the confusion of opposing views from different groups of oppressed women.

I was in favour of publishing a selection of Jewish feminist letters in SR. Also those letters which applauded the decision not to publish and also those letters which I felt certain would come in challenging aspects of all of them. I have argued this since the beginning. Even though I did not agree with all of them, I did not then -- nor do I now -- consider that they were all reactionary and/or racist. Those which were openly supportive of Israel's actions in the Middle East and denying of any reactionary policies within Israel, I felt didn't have a place in SR.

The SR Women of Colour group say that the letters we received were Zionist and/or racist, and that publication was

# from the Women of Colour



*I am personally hurt to see this treachery, at this moment of time. I am also disgusted to note that compromises have been ours alone. WHITE WOMEN CONTINUE TO REMAIN THE OPPRESSORS OF WOMEN OF COLOUR.*

The reasons why I don't wish to respond to the influx of letters any more is because I have been discussing the issue since I started work on SR. No other issue has been given so much time and energy. I am a Black woman and I was supposedly employed on SR to help develop an anti-racist policy and to give the magazine more credibility. So far this has proved to be well nigh impossible because of pressure to devote most of my energy on a single group that can insist on our devotion due to the great power that they have.

The racism of white women came to a head on this issue and the Women of Colour were forced to meet separately from the rest of the collective for a month. When will the collective give time to racism in their own office before jumping every time a Zionist woman says jump?

*As a Black woman, I am convinced that it is pointless to explain oppression as*

tantamount to buckling under to 'white-mal'. I think that some white Jewish feminists are ignoring their own racism in their refusal to discuss white racism. Still, some of the letters should have been published.

Obviously I do not have SR Women of Colour's experience and can never speak with their voice. I have to take very seriously their experience as well as their political analysis. But personally, unless I discount totally the seriousness of my own overall political analysis, I have to agree/disagree, question/confront, the political analysis of anyone else. This position comes loaded with possible problems. I may be wrong. I also want to learn. I also have something to offer. I understand that my 'freedom' to be 'confused' or to take an individual stance over race and class

NO AMOUNT of explanation will satisfy the racists/imperialists, and their allies -- of whatever colour/class. I can only appeal to all anti-racist and anti-imperialist groups to offer me their support, and solidarity.

**LET RACISTS AND IMPERIALISTS DO THEIR OWN BLOODY HOMEWORK. But whether they do their homework or not, oppressed people will go on struggling until power relations are just.**

Before I become involved in giving 'MY' position, I think there is a need for me to describe the situation. In coming to the collective I compromised my position as a Black woman in working with white women. I felt that compromise was necessary. It was important that Black women enter, learn to control, and act in a WHITE, FEMINIST MAGAZINE. I still believe that that is important. But coming to Spare Rib was an eye-opener to me. I was probably too naive and inexperienced; I believed that we would be working FOR WOMEN, around WOMEN'S ISSUES. God, what a mistake.

I am against imperialism.

I am against the oppression of all WOMEN. No one group of women have the RIGHT to exercise undue pressure over another group of WOMEN.

I am amazed that you Zionist women feel that I have the power to silence you. Define my power. Do I really have that amount of power? Am I really so terrifying and hate-evoking that Zionist/neo-fascist women feel the need to threaten me and the other Women of Colour on the collective? Who are you kidding?

I refuse to give this any more time. There are more important issues to me to fight for WOMEN, such as Paki-bashing, gay-bashing, Irish-bashing, and deportations of Black women.

issues is owed, in part, to my privileges as a white, middle class socialist feminist.

The letters' page in SR are the only 'open' ones in the mag where disagreements and differences of opinion surface regularly. We often print letters we disagree with. Given that there is disagreement between groups of feminists outside the collective over the present conflict, and given that another large group of readers are, for whatever reason, lacking in information, knowledge or understanding of the conflict, it is vital that SR carry this struggle between feminists on its pages.

It's not that I think all feminist views are 'equal' or exist outside of world events. It is for me, a way of working through confusion and conflict, of working with an acknowledgement that we are all starting at different places. >

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Source: Spare Rib, 132 (July 1983): 25.

letters they had received. Indeed, Roisín Boyd, Sue O'Sullivan, Jan Parker, Susan Ardhill and Louise Williamson – the white members of the *SR* collective – did openly discuss their opinions, offer their perspectives on the publication of the letters, present their political position in terms of Zionism, their perception of how *SR* had handled the situation thus far and the effects of this conflict on the *SR* collective. For example, Boyd begins by explaining that she was personally against the publication of Zionist letters and does 'not believe (as *SR* has been accused of) that Jewish women have to refer to Israel or the Palestinians when they talk of their experiences of anti-Semitism – that's racist' (*SR* 132: 24)<sup>19</sup>. In addition, Ardhill also refers to the Palestinian situation when she states her belief that *SR* has been satisfactory in its reporting of the problems faced by the Palestinians. However, she admits that 'the history and present reality of European anti-Semitism [...] gives rise to the possibility of anti-Zionist politics being used so as to reinforce anti-Jewish racism,' and that 'Jewish feminists, who stand in various relationships to Israel [...] might want to discuss [the issue] with other women' (*SR* 132: 26). For this reason, Ardhill was in favour of publishing some of the letters – 'particularly those letters [that] raised issues which have a rich importance for women, such as [women's] relationship to culture, nationality, religion, language' (*SR* 132: 26). Whilst Ardhill laments the recent criticism and 'abusive attacks' that the magazine has faced as a result of the current debate, she nonetheless stands firm in her 'anti-Zionist stance' (*SR* 132: 27).

However, in addition to their views on the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate and their opinions on decision-making with regard to the readers' letters, the white women of the collective also discussed the detrimental level the strife of the *SR* collective had reached. Williamson writes that she, too, was in favour of publishing 'a selection' of letters 'in order to forward the debate' (*SR* 132: 27)<sup>20</sup>. However, she explains that the decision not to publish came after 'months of continual meetings, huge arguments, confrontations with each other about [...] political positions, and what was to be done' and that 'when the decision was finally taken[,] that wasn't the end of it all' (*SR* 132: 27). Williamson states that many of the women on the collective 'felt very demoralised, not just because of the decision, but because of the huge damage the rift has caused us as a collective' (*SR* 132: 27). Similarly, Boyd writes that 'since last summer when the [...] article appeared on Zionism [...] the *Spare Rib* collective has been riddled with disagreement over [the] issue' (*SR* 132: 24).

Boyd relates the disagreement over the issue to *SR*'s editorial policies. She points out that because *SR* had no letters policy, it seemed that they were 'stuck in a time warp' over whether or not to publish the letters (*SR* 132: 24). O'Sullivan, however, relates the collective's editorial problems to the inherent complications of working on a mixed-race collective. She states that 'it's difficult to write as an individual white member of the *SR* collective within a situation which appears at this point to be non-productive' (*SR* 132: 24). O'Sullivan claims that she has 'to take

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<sup>19</sup> All direct quotes to Roisín Boyd's reflection piece are from page 24.

<sup>20</sup> All direct quotes to Louise Williamson's reflection piece are from page 27.



into account levels of privilege, control and ongoing struggles with [her] own within a group trying day by day to forge a practice as a mixed race feminist collective' and does not want her 'silence' to be misinterpreted as a type of "cop out" (SR 132: 24). She explains that this is no easy task when living in a racist society and confronting varying types and forms of racism. O'Sullivan states that she was 'in favour' of proceeding with the publication of the readers' letters, but that 'the SR Women of Colour group [said] that the letters received were Zionist and/or racist, and' she had to take seriously their assertion 'that publication was tantamount to buckling under to "white-mail"' (SR 132: 25).

Jan Parker's reflection piece expanded on how the racially diverse composition of the collective has contributed to the escalation of the debate. Parker writes that whilst she does not know 'how anyone can support the genocide of the Palestinians [...] rightly or wrongly, [she does not] believe that this has been the central issue of concern in *Spare Rib's* controversy' (SR 132: 26)<sup>21</sup>. Parker expresses her 'hope that the apparent deadlock of SR's situation will shift – as a result of both the statements by the collective this month as well as a future airing of "mixed feelings" on all the issues at hand' (SR 132: 26). She explains how after the Zionism controversy had begun several Women of Colour joined the collective. Eventually, the Women of Colour became frustrated with the 'assumptions and practices at SR changing too slowly,' called a meeting and soon after began 'working separately for a month' (SR 132: 26). She states that 'the [actual] decision on the letters was made the first time [the members] all met together again' (SR 132: 26).

Williamson, Ardhill and O'Sullivan also commented on how race was an influencing factor for SR's handling of the debate. Williamson states that the current debate at SR 'started before the Women of Colour came to SR and has now seemingly gone way beyond any of [the collective's] worst nightmares' (SR 132: 27). Ardhill explains that the Women of Colour's decision not to publish the letters 'came at the end of a long impasse, and at a time when things were particularly fraught for [them] all in terms of the power of racism as manifest in the white women's behaviour at *Spare Rib* and its effect on our working relationships' (SR 132: 27). When O'Sullivan states that she still strongly chooses to 'disagree with the Women of Colour of SR when they state that all of [the] letters were Zionist and/or racist,' she reveals one major source of the political divide: namely, the Women of Colour's interpretation of all letters as Zionist and/or racist demonstrates that amongst the collective members, Zionist/anti-Zionist support was determined mostly on the basis of one's race (SR 132: 26).

Parker, Williamson, Ardhill and O'Sullivan's comments were the first to reveal that the collective had split racially and discontinued working together. There had been no previous mentioning of this divide in the collective, and its announcement was likely to have been perplexing to readers who, through the 'Sisterhood' feature, were trying to piece together an understanding of not only the debate itself, but also the effects of that debate on the collective,

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<sup>21</sup> All direct quotes to Jan Parker's reflection piece are from page 26.

why it had divided *SR* racially, why that information was being revealed and why at this point in time. Furthermore, the views of the white women of the collective – and O'Sullivan in particular – suggest that it was race that was the underlying factor in determining how various collective members responded to the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate.

This suggestion is strengthened when considering the Women of Colour's contribution to the 'Sisterhood' feature. As mentioned, the entirety of the responses from the Women of Colour was contained in a box situated within the top two-thirds of one page. Each woman wrote short, angry responses, and none of them signed their names. Unlike the white women of the collective, the Women of Colour did not engage in a discussion of the debate. Whereas the white women of the collective presented their views on the pros and cons of publishing the letters, the possible causes of the debate and the complexities of Zionist/anti-Zionist feminist politics, the Women of Colour instead focussed their attention on what they felt was the blatant racism of Zionism and Britain's lingering white colonial and imperialist past, racism within the WLM and in white women especially and the influences of these factors on their roles as *SR* collective members.

The first Woman of Colour<sup>22</sup> writes that she is offended by the 'attacks' and 'criticism' the Women of Colour received when they expressed their support for Palestine, because she believes that 'if Zionism is not imperialism in the Middle East, [then] what is it? Zionism,' she states, 'is racist and racism is the creation of imperialism and colonialism' (*SR* 132: 25).<sup>23</sup> She explains that despite the ways in which 'white women [...] are always talking about solidarity with the struggles of Black and Third World women' they rarely 'practice' this 'analysis.' Taking this suggestion further, the second Woman of Colour remarks that she finds it 'significant that the division between white women and the Women of Colour on the collective at *Spare Rib*, had to come to a head over a white women's issue.'

The reasons why so many of the Women of Colour view the Zionist/anti-Zionist issue as a 'white women's issue' were made clear in the second and third Woman of Colour's response. The second Woman of Colour explains that as a Black woman, she was hired in order to 'help [*SR*] develop an anti-racist policy and to give the magazine more credibility. [However,] so far this has proved to be well nigh impossible because of pressure to devote most of [her] energy' to the issues concerning the white women of the collective. The third Woman of Colour reports that she is not interested anymore in responding to this issue or 'the influx of letters' simply because since joining the *SR* collective, 'no other issue has been given so much time and energy.' As the white women debated whether or not to publish the letters, the Women of Colour felt as though the original intent, purpose and willingness to compromise themselves in joining the collective had in some way been betrayed by the white women of the collective. As such, the Women of Colour had refused to engage with an issue that they had no investment in, with a group of women they

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<sup>22</sup> As the five reflection pieces from the *SR* Women of Colour are unnamed, I have numbered the authors of each piece – from the top of the page (as demarcated by the 'box' containing their responses) to the bottom, left to right – and refer to them in my analysis accordingly.

<sup>23</sup> All direct quotes to the Women of Colour's responses in 'Sisterhood is Plain Sailing' are from *SR* 132: 25 unless otherwise stated.

believed had no real investment in them or their experiences. This suggestion is reinforced when the second Woman of Colour writes that she is 'personally hurt to see this treachery,' and 'also disgusted to note that [the] compromises' within the collective – largely invisible to the reader – have been made most often on the part of the Women of Colour. For this reason she declares: **'WHITE WOMEN CONTINUE TO REMAIN THE OPPRESSORS OF WOMEN OF COLOUR.'**

The Women of Colour's perception of white women as the oppressors of other racially diverse women has caused the Women of Colour to disengage with the issue and, as the second Woman of Colour claims 'force [them] to meet separately from the rest of the collective for a month.' As the white women on the collective do not necessarily view the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate as one that is racist or fully understand the Women of Colour's 'disgust' over the continued energy devoted to it, the Women of Colour saw no possible form of resolution that would not require even more explanation and effort on their part. To be clear, the fourth Woman of Colour writes that she is 'convinced that it is pointless to explain oppression as NO AMOUNT of explanation will satisfy the racists/imperialists, and their allies – of whatever colour/class.' She believes that her best option is to 'appeal to anti-racist and anti-imperialist groups [...for] their support, and solidarity' and **'LET RACISTS AND IMPERIALISTS DO THEIR OWN BLOODY HOMEWORK.'** Similarly, the first Woman of Colour argues that white women should 'try challenging [their] own racism rather than lecturing Black and Third World women on what [their] view of racism is.' Finally, the fifth Woman of Colour simply 'refuse[s] to give [the debate] any more time.' She states that she willingly 'compromised [her] position as a Black women' by agreeing to work with white women on the production of *SR* because she thought 'it was important that Black women would enter, learn to control, and act in a **WHITE, FEMINIST MAGAZINE.'** However, she explains that she was willing to make this compromise because she 'mistakenly' 'believed that [the collective] would be working **FOR WOMEN, around WOMEN'S ISSUES.'**

As with many of the later articles referenced to in Chapter 3, the Women of Colour's anger is evident. Their language is forceful and they make sure that the readers understand their fury by capitalising their words. Yet, this capitalisation also indicates that the Women of Colour felt so silenced and disempowered that they had to make their words appear bigger so that their views would stand out to the reader. This implication is also touched on by the fifth Woman of Colour when she expresses her 'amazement' that Zionist women might feel 'silenced' by her, challenging whether or not, as a Black woman, she 'really [has] that amount of power?' She questions: 'Am I really so terrifying and hate-evoking that Zionist/neo-fascist women feel the need to threaten me and the other Women of Colour on the collective?' These questions communicate much of the underlying racism embedded in the white women of *SR*'s collective's preoccupation with the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate. The *SR* Women of Colour are arguing that as Women of Colour, their priorities are dealing with the racism that women experience on the basis of skin colour, a form of racism that they argue is directly related to Britain's imperialist past. They view these experiences as terrifying and hateful and, having been asked to join a collective under the impression that their

perspectives and concerns would be acknowledged, are hurt. Somewhat paradoxically, the inability of the white women on the collective to approach the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate as a race issue has consequently caused the *SR Women of Colour* to lose sympathy with Jewish women's racist experiences of anti-Semitism, arguing that it is not Jewish women but they themselves who are being 'silenced' and oppressed in the focus of attention on the debate. To be clear, they argue the racist undertones of the Zionist controversy not only for the ways in which Zionism is connected to Britain's imperialist history, but also for the ways in which the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate dominates the focus of the white women of the *SR* collective, thus shifting it away from specifically black women's issues – which is the reason they joined the collective in the first place.

Perhaps this perceived lack of investment on the part of the collective's white women for the issues and concerns of the *Women of Colour* is why the *Women of Colour*, unlike the white women of the collective, are uninterested in brainstorming on how to resolve the situation. Moya Loyd (2005) argues that 'feminism is an identity politics [...]. It articulates the demands of a particular constituency (women), united and galvanized on the basis of shared characteristics or experiences. [Therefore,] it is assumed that this common identity is enough to unify individuals and to lend coherence to policy' (37). In contrast to the *SR Women of Colour*, who for some time had been doubting whether or not they shared any characteristics or experiences with the white women in the *WLM* and now, of course, were questioning their involvement with *SR* magazine, this view underscored many of the white women's reflection pieces. Specifically, many of the white women of the collective maintained that if differences could be recognised, accepted and incorporated into the unified fight against women's oppression *SR* would be able to survive this debate and other future difficulties.

O'Sullivan, for example, states that whilst 'profound and serious differences threaten to completely divide [...] women,' her belief is 'that those very differences (understood and analysed) can serve to make possible points of common interest, help [women] fight common enemies, and give [them] glimpses of a totally different future' (*SR* 132: 24). Similarly, Ardhill recognises that working on a mixed collective where there are disagreements about topics has 'consequences for [...] readers and contributors' (*SR* 132: 26). She is often able to separate herself from 'material' which she 'personally dislike[s] or disagree[s] with, but think[s] is worth printing, and that which is oppressive to specific groups of women' (*SR* 132: 26). This particular issue made it difficult for her to do so. Yet, it was 'precisely' because she believes that the 'challenge' of negotiating differences between feminists is 'so important for feminists to take up in looking at racism here towards Black, Third World, Jewish and Irish women, that [she] wanted *Spare Rib* to give space to those arguments' (*SR* 132: 27). Likewise, Parker asserts 'that a major key for [...] survival – as a magazine and a movement – is to educate ourselves about the "differences" between us' (*SR* 132: 26) and Williamson believes that one of the ways in which *SR* 'could make [the] collective more representative of the women's movement' would be 'expanding the collective to encompass women with more varied and different experiences' (*SR* 132: 27).

Williamson also states that the rift has challenged her to re-evaluate many of her perspectives. She writes:

I always thought that the politics of experience was the factor in any argument, but what has happened with this issue is that there are two voices both talking with equal validity about their personal experience, but that 'clash' dramatically. An important reason for this 'clash' seems to have a lot to do with an inability within the women's movement to accept that there are differences between us (class, race, sexuality to name but a few), which are acknowledged, but only up to a point. Because of our various experiences in coming to the movement we all organise in different ways, but when one group's way is 'different' the accusations fly and shouts [...] boom out. (SR 132: 27)

To 'move' the debate 'forward' O'Sullivan advocates 'working through confusion and conflict,' (SR 132: 25) and argues that 'it is vital that SR carry this struggle between feminists on its pages' as she believes it is 'a way of politically engaging women in an honest recognition of the painful differences between [them]' (SR 132: 26). O'Sullivan feels that the debate, ultimately, 'will not be resolved and will resurface again and again unless we spell out and learn through that struggle to link up everything in more than words' (SR 132: 26). Ardhill writes that '*in retrospect*' she thinks the collective should have been more forthcoming about their differences, but hopes that readers 'will respect the constraints on [them] all, struggling with the politics of working as a mixed race collective' (SR 132: 27). She reveals that 'it's a big struggle [for her] to maintain any sort of clarity about what's going on' in the situation that the collective is dealing with (SR 132: 27). Yet, Ardhill 'think[s] SR is the sort of magazine that can allow for [...] contradictions (that is the strength of the Women's movement and of *Spare Rib*)' and 'hope[s] that in the light of publishing letters from various positions in the last two issues, and now writing [themselves], [they] can move out of what has felt [...] like a deadlock' (SR 132: 27).

Whilst it is true that differences between women in the WLM as well as controversial topics of debate had consistently proved problematic for SR, as indicated by several of the white women's reflection pieces the intense escalation of these types of issues as presented in the magazine was due to SR's editorial policies. Williamson proposes that SR reconsider the 'editorial control' of the magazine, but admits this is already 'being constantly challenged' (SR 132: 27). She expresses her desire for SR to become 'more accountable to [its] readership' but explains that this is complicated because as the magazine 'receive[s] so many conflicting comments it's difficult to know how to fit all [of them] into the magazine' (SR 132: 27). Williamson's piece suggests that SR are torn between wanting to use the magazine as a space where debates over internal – and external – issues can be explored and the aspiration for that process of exploration to not necessitate hostile reactions from readers. The amount of anxiety that this potential hostility conjures for some of the collective members is evident when the white women of the collective appeal to SR readers for their understanding of what SR has been through. Ardhill states her suspicion that 'the majority of *Spare Rib*'s readers, especially those outside of London, may not be aware of the dimension of the controversy which has enveloped [them] over [their] handling of the issues of Zionism/anti-Semitism' (SR 132: 26). Similarly, Boyd writes that her 'hope' is that as a result of the 'Sisterhood' feature, readers will have a greater appreciation of SR's situation and

'that they'll respond to the issues raised' (SR 132: 24) and Parker 'hopes' that readers will be able to understand 'how slow, painful and necessary change is and be aware of the implications of withdrawing support from a magazine brought out by one of the very few mixed-race collectives in the women's movement' (SR 132: 26).

Although Williamson, Ardhill, Boyd and Parker seem to demonstrate an awareness of the need to negotiate several conflicting viewpoints whilst simultaneously maintaining editorial responsibility to SR's readership, the general view put forth is that SR struggles in their efforts to do this, and in favour of editorial accountability, their solution is the externalised articulation of their internal conflicts and the expectation of continued patience and support from their readership as they engage in this process of articulation. However, as Winship (1987) points out: 'selectivity and simplification [were] essential to make *Spare Rib* readable; [...] readers [did] not want to be, nor [were] in a position to take on *Spare Rib*'s editorial dilemmas' and therefore when SR was unable to fulfil their editorial duties, 'judicial silence [was] preferable to a plethora of confusions.' Readers, in other words, presumably did not subscribe to the magazine in order to be confronted with the collective's conflict regarding editorial policy and racial tensions. Parker's plea for readers' understanding of the slow and painful nature of the changes the collective was undertaking is undermined by her allusion to the importance of SR being one of the few mixed-race collectives. Almost the entire 'Sisterhood' feature a testimony to the fact that the white and racially diverse members of SR cannot in actuality work together. What is more, because of the admitted lack of editorial policy in combination with the Women of Colour's refusal to engage in the 'constant challenge' of re-evaluating or modifying such policies, readers were not likely to have much confidence in SR's ability to recognise and build on women's differences. SR were perhaps aware of this, which is one possible explanation for Parker's indirect threat, in which she states her hope that readers are aware of the implications of withdrawing their support from the magazine. In addition to exposing their readers to their editorial dilemmas and collective conflict, involving them in the drama of the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate – in which they were likely to feel pressured to 'side' with either the white women or the Women of Colour – this threat placed an extraordinary amount of responsibility onto the readers. Its suggestion was that the success or failure of the magazine – and indeed, the success or failure of the few existing mixed-race collectives – was a result of whether or not readers were able to maintain the required patience necessary to see SR through its confusion.

#### Section 4.6: Reader Response to 'Sisterhood'

Readers reacted to this responsibility in a variety of ways as evidenced two months later when a total of twelve readers' letters were published in response to 'Sisterhood' in the July 1983 issue. Some readers were relatively supportive of SR. For example, the letter 'You Can't Please

Everyone,' from reader Barbara, is quite sympathetic to and encouraging of the magazine. She writes:

I am constantly amazed at the amount of criticism you get from your readers. I do not always agree with you, of course, but I'm so grateful that you exist at all. I'm sure you're under-capitalised, under-staffed, over-worked and struggling to cope with a lot of difficult situations most of us would just run away from. You can't possibly please everyone, and it's good to see that people want to help you to improve, but there's so much negative 'moaning' by people who don't seem too willing to have a go at producing a better alternative, that I get the impression that a lot of your readers are just spoilt, selfish people who want everything handed to them on a plate. At least you're all trying to do something!

Keep on, women, remembering that you can't do more than your best, and remembering that a helluva lot of women would be much depressed if *Spare Rib* ceased to be. (SR 134: 44)

Similarly, reader Hillary Britten believes that 'the anger and pain experienced on the collective over these issues does not have to be a non-productive stalemate,' as she 'see[s] it as a very positive opportunity for women suffering all kinds of oppression to fight together' (SR 134: 45). Britten asserts that 'all forms of oppression' that women experience must be fought and that SR, its readers and the movement 'must and can take on all women's struggles' (SR 134: 45). Reader Stella Williams emphasises the view put forth by Britten and offers her support for both the Women of Colour as well as the publication of the collective members' various viewpoints. In her letter, 'In Order to Change Everything Must be Opened Up,' Williams explains that hearing different perspectives helps her to formulate her own ideas on such issues, and that she favours the publication of the letters, because it gives women the opportunity to 'air their views and be heard' (SR 134: 45). She argues that ultimately people need to open themselves up to 'a multitude of opinions, be they sexist, racist, ageist, classist or whatever, before [they] can even think of what *could be*' (SR 134: 45).

However, most readers – including, but to a lesser extent, Barbara, Britten and Williams – were completely baffled by 'Sisterhood.' This was unmistakably clear when reader Lesley Saunders began her letter, 'Making Racism an Urgent Issue,' by writing that she '[has] no idea how [to] deal with what [the collective] have put before the SR readership at this stage' (SR 134: 44). In another letter, by The Faversham Women's Group, readers stated that 'as a group from outside London [their] first feeling was one of confusion and amazement that the Zionist/racist debate had caused such deep divisions in the women's movement – [they] were [not] aware that it had split the Collective' (SR 134: 44)<sup>24</sup>. Jane Bryce states that she is 'appalled' at the 'hurt' that is so apparently present amongst the collective members (SR 134: 46)<sup>25</sup>. In addition, Fran Wheat-Powys' letter, 'Not So Much a Women's Liberation Magazine,' Wheat-Powys points out that perhaps because many readers are, like herself, 'bewildered by the rapid changes and also

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<sup>24</sup> All direct quotes to the Faversham Women's Group's letter are from SR 134: 44 unless otherwise stated.

<sup>25</sup> All direct quotes to reader Jane Bryce's letter are from SR 134: 46 unless otherwise stated.



nervous of writing about their true feelings' (SR 134: 44) they are consequently reluctant to respond to collective member Jan Parker's hope that readers feedback to SR regarding the various changes they are undertaking. Whilst she admits to feeling more inspired since the publication of 'Sisterhood' as she believes that SR is indeed trying to broaden its readership appeal, she states that 'the issue threatening the magazine, as one member of the collective put it, has turned out to be a nightmare,' one that she 'hopes' can be 'resolved' (SR 134: 45).

Like Wheat-Powys, the Faversham Women's Group comment on the 'nightmarish' level of contention the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate has reached. However, the Group, like many other readers, were still fundamentally confused about the debate that they were drawn into. The Group explains that their comment stems from their puzzlement over how such an issue could cause such divisions and receive priority over other issues of importance. The Group writes that they feel 'angry, confused, and worried,' as well as 'very sad' that 'a deep and potentially irrevocable split in the WLM seems to have developed over an issue which is not one of the seven demands, and which [they] do not see as a central women's issues.' Bryce begins her letter 'Your Problems Are Our Problems Too,' by revealing that she is 'biting [her] nails over whether to renew [her] subscription and [thus] decided to write' to the magazine to explain her conflicting feelings. She writes that she 'support[s] and read[s] the magazine because it's the only open forum for feminists' (SR 134: 46). Whilst she appreciates a variety of perspectives, she claims that those perspectives must fall within the remit of 'the limitations of woman-identified politics.' Bryce does not elaborate on how she qualifies such perspectives as permissible, but the implication of her statement is that she is uncertain whether or not the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate and the perspectives it has generated extends beyond her personal political boundaries of investment.

Many readers who wrote to the magazine in response to 'Sisterhood' believed that they needed to take sides. For example, Bryce writes that from her own perspective of participating as a member in another mixed-race group, she offers sympathy to the possible 'burdens' placed on the Women of Colour at SR for being put in charge of 'defining what is and isn't racist.' Eva Lambert in 'Definitions Which Polarise,' also offers sympathy to the Women of Colour explaining that 'politically, the latest battle area (in SR)' has caused those who are uncertain of their positions in the debate to 'pick sides.' (SR 134: 46). Hillary Britten agrees 'with women of colour that racism is a white problem' and argues 'that it is the responsibility of white women to inform [themselves] of [their] own racism, and how it operates world wide' (SR 134: 45). Similarly, Penny Pattenden argues in 'Women of Colour Should Decide' that 'if we give imperialism a platform in what is meant to be a magazine for *all* women then we are in effect saying to Women of Colour, *you* must compromise, *you* must put away your bad feelings, because *we white* need to show how tolerant we are, how fair, even to the forces of reaction.' Pattenden explains:

The impression I am left with is that white members of the collective do not trust the judgement of the Women of Colour in deciding what is 'racist' and what is not. Isn't this white arrogance? How much longer can we undermine our black sisters and retain credibility as feminists? I say, I'm white and therefore don't have your

experience of racism, therefore I trust *your* judgement, *your* awareness. If Zionist women withdraw their support from *SR*, so be it. They must think their politics through, as we all must, and examine their own racism. Isn't it about time? (*SR* 134: 45)

In contrast to Bryce, Lambert, Britten and Pattenden, the Faversham Women's Group consider many of the white women's personal statements to be 'thoughtful,' whereas they believed the 'women of colour made cryptic assertions' that were 'hurtful,' and 'not explained.'

Readers also tended to feel frustrated by *SR*'s authority regarding the WLM combined with its lack editorial accountability. Bryce states that 'in this whole debate it seems as if question of editorial decision, open access, etc, have become confused with what, after all, is a political position on Palestine.' She confirms her decision to renew for another six months, but does so cautiously and whilst offering advice to *SR*: 'Please stop feeling you as a collective can or should solve all the attendant problems of definition just because you run a magazine. Your problems are our problems, and maybe it would help if you were a bit less purist, a bit more materialist, and had less sense of carrying the can for the movement.' Britten also addresses *SR*'s sense of authority when she writes that it is 'obvious' that 'a major part of the problem is the responsibility you feel you carry in representing the women's movement to *itself*.' In addition, *SR*'s focus on its internal conflicts contributed to a sense of alienation in some readers. The Faversham Women's Group, for example, state that they have noticed 'gradual changes in *SR* and [...] don't like some of them.' The Group explain that readers outside of London depend on *SR* for the 'energy,' 'inspiration,' and 'debate' and that for the women to whom they most often sell the magazine, their 'main feminist activity is reading [it].' Consequently, the decision to so explicitly reveal the collective's rift 'puts women off.'

In the end, the publication of 'Sisterhood' did little to clarify the complexities of the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate for readers. Consequently, some readers still tended to focus on the particularities of the debate itself. 'But You're Going in the Right Direction,' from Helen, argues that whilst she 'support[s] the [magazine's] recent move to an anti-racist, anti-imperialist awareness' she still has confusion with regards to the debate, specifically wondering how someone can be 'anti-Zionist and also against Jewish oppression' (*SR* 134: 44). In much the same way, the letter 'Israel Doesn't Speak for All Jews,' written by reader Magda Devas asks: what is the relationship between Zionism and anti-Semitism? She claims that 'after all the fuss about [the] collective not printing the now famous [...] letters, Zionist (i.e. pro-Israeli) women are now admitting that all the letters were supporting Israel' (*SR* 134: 46)<sup>26</sup>. This, she feels, is proof that *SR* was not 'being anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish) by not publishing them.' She argues that 'it is not being anti-Jewish to refuse to in any way support such an oppressive country as Israel, even though Israel tries to speak in the name of all Jews.' Devas goes on to explain how 'Linda Bellos, in an interview in the *Jewish Chronicle*, May 20, says "The [withheld letters] could not be described as Zionist unless you consider Zionism to be anything which supports the right of Jews to identify with other Jews and to

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<sup>26</sup> All direct quotes to reader Magda Devas' letter are from *SR* 134: 46 unless otherwise stated.

live in Israel” (Devas citing Bellos). To Devas, however, this is exactly the definition of Zionism: ‘the assumption that Jews can go into Palestine in massive numbers as they did in the early part of this century, then in 1948 kick out half the population of Palestine by a combination of violence and psychological terror, and then re-name the area “Israel.”’ She argues that not all Jews support Israel just because they are Jewish, and that in fact, ‘to this day, many Jews do not support Israel on political, religious or feminist grounds.’ Devas criticises *SR* for its ‘clumsy’ political position on the issue, but is ultimately appreciative of any coverage of or support for Palestine.

In addition to the ways in which Devas’ letter demonstrates that readers were still clearly invested in the debate and its implications, and that those implications were primarily the same issues of contention as presented in *SR*’s early articles – such as the turmoil in Palestine, Jewish women and their diverse view on Zionism, the connection between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism – it also conveys a sense of how the debate had extended beyond the collective and the magazine. Over the next three months, several more readers’ letters addressing the ‘Sisterhood is Plain Sailing’ article and the readers’ responses were published. These letters are primarily significant for how they communicate how extensive the debate had gotten.

Of the two letters appearing in the October 1983 issue of the magazine, the first letter, ‘Yom Kippur and Palestinians,’ revealed how geographically wide the debate had extended, as readers Ruby and Rhea wrote in from San Francisco to encourage women to take advantage of the peaceful and forgiving holiday and ‘resolve to further educate [themselves] about the history and current conditions in the Middle East’ (*SR* 135: 5). The second letter, ‘White Feminists Failed to Support Palestinian Women,’ written by the Women for Palestine (and Palestinian Women), revealed the animosity and hate they had received since their article appeared in the magazine. WFP write that their feature, which *SR* had asked them to write in response to ‘Women Speak Out,’ had resulted in ‘a barrage of insults, slanders and threats of violence’ (*SR* 135: 4)<sup>27</sup>. In their letter, the WFP very forcefully and defensively go on to ‘make a clear statement on the conflict within *SR* and the *WLM*’:

1. *We repudiate completely the charge of anti-Semitism made against our contribution to SR and all our collective public acts/writings.*
2. *We condemn the hypocrisy and cowardice of those on the SR collective who would call themselves anti-racist, anti-imperialist or socialist yet who have willingly printed and given credence to Racist and pro-Imperialist arguments.*
3. *We say shame on all so-called “Feminists” who rationalise or justify oppression – whether in Palestine, Ireland, South Africa, Brixton or elsewhere. Shame for this betrayal of all Black Working Class Women.*
4. *We congratulate the Women of Colour on SR for their stand and call on all sincere supporters of liberation struggles to give support to these women who some in the WLM are attempting to isolate and intimidate.*
5. *We call for support of anti-Zionist Jewish women (of whom there are many in spite of Zionist denials and harassment). We must support these women in their attempts to make their voices heard against the Zionist abuse of their own oppression.*

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<sup>27</sup> All direct quotes to Women for Palestine’s letter are from *SR* 135: 4 unless otherwise stated.

WFP express their frustration and their language is indicative of the intensity of their convictions. They take issue with the 'hypocrisy and cowardice' of some SR collective members as well as the 'so-called "feminists"' who do not share their anti-Zionist views regarding women's oppression and the 'betrayal' of black working class women. In addition, it is worth noting how WFP's 'clear statement' in many ways demonstrates WFP's efforts to take control of the debate that SR drew them into, frame it in the context of their position and then direct it back towards the collective as well as the 'so-called feminists' that have made them the recipients of the insults, slander and threats of violence they reference. In this sense then, the debate has almost, in a way, relocated from its existence in and between the SR collective to other, more peripheral groups of women.

This suggestion is evidenced in a series of letters published in the November and December 1983 issues. Jan's letter, published in November 1983, challenges 'Jewish women who purport to be anti-Zionist [to] *prove it*' (SR 136: 5) and in the next issue of the magazine this challenge was taken up. In 'Jewish – Anti-Zionist . . .,' Alison Sagar declares that she is a Jewish woman who, for 'the past 10 years since [she has] been aware of "Zionism" and its implication [has] been opposed to its nationalistic, separatist and oppressive politics' (SR 137: 4). Sagar explains that in the past it was quite difficult for her to be upfront with her Jewish friends about her anti-Zionist beliefs. Yet, even though this is changing, she writes, 'there is *no* way I am going to prove to *you* Jan that I am anti-Zionist. You might as well be asking women who purport to be feminists (including yourself) to prove that they are anti-imperialist, anti racist, anti heterosexist, anti classist, anti nuclear etc. etc.' (SR 137: 4). Similarly, the second reader's letter from the December issue of the magazine was also a response to a previously published reader's letter. In 'Israel – Another View,' Dena Attar responds to reader Magda Devas' letter arguing that the section of Devas' letter that did not focus on SR was inaccurate and she thus, [for the remainder of her letter,] seeks to 'set the record straight.' (SR 137: 5).

The 'debates' between fellow readers rivals those that originally took place within the collective. Consistently, the letters did nothing to move the debate forward or offer suggestions for resolution; to the contrary, they simply rehashed old arguments. The situation truly was a 'deadlock' and, in fact, as a third letter from the December 1983 issue demonstrates, it is reasonable to assume that a large number of readers were entirely exhausted by the issue. In 'Class and Race Contradictions,' written by 'A "sister" (at least I think so),' the author wonders what use the debate will have served 'even when/if [...it] is clarified, when all positions are stated, supported/boycotted, whatever.' The author questions SR and her fellow readers: 'what the hell help will it have been to the dead Palestinians, or the Jewish women who are still, now, the victims of white and Black anti-Semitism, or the Black women at SR at the brunt of white racism, or working class women in Israel or ....' The reader's tone, word choice and decision to end her letter with ellipses communicates that she is tired of and bored with the prolonged issue, questioning its

resolution and the usefulness of continued engagement with a conflict which is comprised of and effects so many factions.

Following the publication of 'Sisterhood' in July 1983, *SR* had remained publicly withdrawn from the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate. This was largely due to the fact that the racial divide within *SR* had overwhelmed the collective and issues of race and racism dominated the magazine. In the September 1983 issue, when twelve the readers' letters were published in response to 'Sisterhood,' Arati's 'The Roots of Women's Liberation: What White Feminists Owe to Us Black Women' also featured. The October 1983 issue of *SR* was declared a 'Special Black Women's Issue' of the magazine, and in November of 1983, Arati's 'Back to Black: Which Way Now?' was included. Finally, the December 1983 issue of *SR*, in which this last reader's letter – written by 'a Sister – at least I think so,' is the issue in which *SR* features an editorial announcing that it is officially no longer a 'white women's magazine.'

Race, in its various forms – as collective membership, as topic, as bone of contention – was truly dominating *SR*. However, internal conflicts clearly continued and in January 1984, just one month after *SR* declared itself no longer a white women's magazine, it published an editorial stating that only three Women of Colour remained on the collective. In the same editorial, *SR* invited its readership to a *SR*-hosted readers' meeting to try to move some way towards determining defining 'Black Feminists.' In the March and April 1984 issues of the magazine, the definition of 'black' was still being grappled with, and in April, in particular, 'Black' was declared a political term.

## Section 4.7: Issues Unresolved

In September of 1984, *SR* published an article entitled, 'Zionism, Anti-Semitism and the Struggle Against Racism: Some Reflections on a Painful Current Debate Among Feminists.' In the introduction to her article, Nira Yuval-Davis<sup>28</sup> explains that it was 'written as an intervention in a debate which has proved very painful and divisive to wide circles of feminists in Britain recently' (*SR* 146: 18). The title of the feature indicates that, two years after 'Women Speak Out' and over one year after 'Sisterhood' was published, the Zionist/anti-Zionist 'debate' was still 'current.' Similarly, as the title suggests, Yuval-Davis' article was indeed very much a 'reflection' in the sense that it in many ways is a written account of her recollections of all the previous arguments, perspectives and contradictions that the original articles, especially 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism,' first prompted.

In Yuval-Davis' view, as 'an antizionist [*sic*] Israeli Jewish woman, living in England and active in anti-racist anti-sexist struggles, to decide *not* to intervene would have been a political act' (*SR*

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<sup>28</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis is a visiting professor at the School of Social Sciences, Media and Cultural Studies at the University of East London. She is the author of several books, articles and translations including 'The Citizenship Debate' (1991) and *Gender and Nation* (1997).

146: 18). Yet, Yuval-Davis states that any intervention she took was probably futile because whilst 'anyone present in any of the feminist forums on these questions could not but be struck by the intensity with which they have been debated, shouted, quarrelled about [...] one of the most striking features of these debates [...] besides the fact that they made many women very upset, has been its deadlock' (SR 146: 22). Yuval-Davis goes on to elaborate on the factors contributing to this deadlock, focussing in particular on the arguments that have tended to, perhaps mistakenly, polarise the debate.

Yuval-Davis explains:

- (a) That antizionism [*sic*] is not a cover for antisemitism, although it can be, and sometimes has been, used in that way; support or rejection of zionism [*sic*] does not in itself predict whether or not a person is antisemitic.
- (b) That antizionism [*sic*] is a valid political position, not only because of Zionism's dispossession, oppression and exploitation of the Palestinians, but also because it inherently shares racist assumptions with antisemitism (and classical orthodox Judaism) about the eternal unbridgeable gap between Jews and non-Jews.
- (c) That antisemitism is a form of racism, even though it is not directed against Black people or primarily against lower economic classes. Racist oppression can have various forms and intensities in its exclusions and exploitations. Racism against middle class minorities (Jews and others) can take the elusive form of denial of differences in being.
- (d) That although antisemitism is not dominant in contemporary British racism, Jews are still vulnerable to it because historically it has been the model for modern racism.
- (e) That solidarity with liberation struggles is imperative; that keeping a critical perspective of the politics of the oppressed is also imperative.

Yuval-Davis eventually comments on what in her view was the primary cause of the debate's severity. She claims that 'the way each faction [...] clung to the medium of personal experience as *the* justification of their position, without being able to transcend their own perspective, and go into dimensions of the debate in which they had no personal stake' worsened the situation (SR 146: 22). She continues:

Taking personal experience into account is an organic part of feminist philosophy and practice. It is vitally important for examining "the personal is political" and for consciousness raising [*sic*] in groups. However, it is not without its problems. If done uncritically, it can develop extreme relativisation – there is no valid criterion from which to judge between the different perspectives developed by women who have undergone different personal experiences. This is of course totally opposite to the original intention of using personal experience in consciousness raising [*sic*], to induce general *truths* about the condition of women. (SR 146: 22)<sup>29</sup>

Here we see an articulation of the issues of identity politics re-emerge. Individual personal experience becomes the primary criterion upon which women align themselves politically. Whereas in the early stages of the WLM personal experience was used as the foundation for collective political organisation, now it is used to argue for *the* truth rather than a multiplicity of truths. Yuval-Davis seeks to not only point out this shift, but also to acknowledge how because it

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<sup>29</sup> See Gunew and Yeatman (1993), Bhavnani and Phoenix (1994), Lloyd (2005) and Alcoff, et al. (2006) for a discussion on various aspects of identity politics.

has taken place, and because 'there exist real divisions and relations of oppression and exploitation among women, notions of [previously assumed] automatic sisterhood are at best misleading' (SR 146: 22). Yet, just as most of the white women on the collective stated in their 'Sisterhood' reflection pieces, Yuval-Davis does not believe that the differences in women's personal experiences need not divide women politically. She argues that 'even if it means using analytic and ideological language as a bridge between the personal and the political, without forgetting the insights that analysis of personal experience has given us [...] recognising the internal divisions among women and the complexity of the issues involved does not necessarily have to paralyse [them] politically' (SR 146: 22). 'Complexities are, [after all,] inherent to most situations' (SR 146: 22). Consequently, Yuval-Davis reminds readers that '[they] should not forget this, but [instead] continue to struggle [...]' (SR 146: 22).

Following Yuval-Davis' article the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate was not addressed in the magazine for another three years. During that time, Esther Goulding's 'Hersay: Racism in Feminism' was published in the March 1985 issue of SR and mixed-race and identity would be interrogated by reader Maggie Hobbs in her July 1985 letter to the magazine. November of 1985 gave birth to SR's 'new look.' In May of 1986 the report on the break-up of the Merseyside Women's Paper in Liverpool and 'Black Resisters' was included in SR, and the September 1986 issue of the magazine featured a cover photograph of one white woman and one black woman, leaning against each other, back to back, with the question, 'Can Black and White Work Together?' printed across the bottom. Recalling the publication history of these features demonstrates that the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate was moved off the agenda as the issue of racism between the black and white factions of the WLM gained prominence.

When it did resurface again, in the February issue of 1987, it was clear that the debate that not been resolved. In her letter reader C. Evans states that her 'college's subscription to *Spare Rib* lapsed a while back, [and she] was putting forward a motion to re-subscribe.' Evans explains that when she did so, another student 'claimed that *Spare Rib* was anti-Semitic, something to do with Jewish women having to state their views on Zionism before anything of theirs was published' (SR 175: 4). Therefore, she asks SR to 'clarify' the issue, 'so [that] when [she tries] to put the motion through again [she has] the facts and reasons behind whatever position [SR has] taken' (SR 175: 4).

Below Evans' letter is a reply from SR, stating that 'a recent letter in the *Guardian*<sup>30</sup> also made a similar accusation.' SR wrote a response to the *Guardian* attempting to put forth their interpretation of the debate. However, as this letter was not published, SR informs Evans that they have decided to include it in their response to her to provide 'clarification' on the issue. The letter that follows explains that the present SR collective is comprised of different women from when the magazine endured 'the painful and difficult debate over anti-racism, anti-Zionism and anti-

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<sup>30</sup> I have not been able to locate the article by Juliet Pope that SR refers to in their response.



Semitism' (SR 175: 4).<sup>31</sup> The collective write that *Guardian* reader Juliet Pope<sup>32</sup> is wrong in her accusation that SR issued the declaration that "any woman who calls herself a feminist should consciously call herself anti-Zionist." SR explain that this was an opinion expressed by one of the women interviewed for the article 'Women Speak Out Against Zionism,' that SR itself was not anti-Zionist and 'were and remain unambiguous in their opposition to anti-Semitism.' The collective also point out that the decision made over whether or not to publish the readers' letter was 'not unanimous at the time.' Due to this lack of agreement regarding the publication of readers' letter, SR asked both Jewish and pro-Palestinian women to write a response to 'the same set of questions about a number of connected issues and, [in September of 1984 SR] published an article about Zionism, anti-Semitism and racism by an Israeli Jewish feminist.' Further on in their letter, SR refer back to their editorial from the May 1983 issue and restate that "[they] are concerned about the oppression of Jewish women and Palestinian women but in trying to cover both people's [sic] with their distinct and sometimes interlinked histories we inevitably run into contradictions.' They explain that these contradictions, 'have not been resolved not only in SR but in other groups and movements engaged in the debate.'"

SR's response not only demonstrates again how widely the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate had extended but also how it did so in such seemingly irrevocable ways. To be clear, Evans was writing to SR because as she had been told that the magazine was anti-Semitic, the response SR provided to Evans was in fact an unpublished letter that they had previously sent in to the *Guardian* as a response to Juliet Pope's accusations against the magazine. Also, SR reveals that the contradictions of the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate have not been resolved for the collective as well as other groups and movements engaged in the debate.' However, it is worth noting that SR's response mentions nothing regarding the influence of race or the collective's racial divisions in their recollection of the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate. This was perhaps because a great deal of the external criticism that they received over the debate was related to 'Women Speak Out' and its anti-Semitic implications. In addition, it was SR's possibly anti-Semitic character that Evans inquires about in her letter. Yet, SR reveals that the contradictions inherent to the debate have not been resolved in the collective it is not apparent whether or not those collective members continued to be divided racially.

However, five months later in the July 1987 issue, SR did briefly comment on some of the most significant aspects of the magazine's history. It was not specified who wrote the nostalgic reflection piece – the collective as a whole or the collective divided. This is worth noting as SR's introduction to 'Where We've Been: A Look at *Spare Rib's* History' explains that in celebration of the magazine's fifteenth birthday the collective have decided to reflect on some of the developments of the magazine during its existence. Given that much of the collective's history was marked by intense collective conflict, it is important to consider the probability that such

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<sup>31</sup> All direct quotes to SR's reply to Evans' letter are from SR 175: 4 unless otherwise stated.

<sup>32</sup> Juliet Pope is the author of *Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement* (1982) and 'Anti-Racism, Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism: Debate in the British Women's Movement' (1986).

'developments' were likely to have been of a greater or lesser interest or concern to certain members over others. For this reason in particular, it is interesting that one of the key 'developments' mentioned is the 'stormy' period of 'political wrangles both internally and with groups outside' (SR 180: 40). SR state that these political contentions were 'around the issues of sexuality, lesbianism, racism, anti-Semitism and Zionism' and point out that SR was not alone in their confrontation with these sorts of issues at the time. The writer(s) of the feature affirm that because many of the debates SR engaged with were also being confronted elsewhere 'what emerged, sometimes obscurely, into the pages of *Spare Rib*, sometimes to the bemusement and estrangement of readers, was only the tip of the iceberg,' of the conflicts the magazine was experiencing (SR 180: 40). Whilst the collective does not expand on the specifics of those conflicts they maintain the belief that 'much that was positive came out of that period, particularly from the struggles over racism and the position of Black women in the magazine and the women's movement at large' (SR 180: 40).

Despite SR's retrospective aspects of the feature, they go on to explain that 'many of the issues that have faced *Spare Rib* in the past are as relevant as ever.' SR write:

For the frequently changing collective, every issue is up for re-definition, the format of the magazine constantly open to re-assessment. The cropping of a picture or the positioning of an ad can give rise to intense debate from inside or outside the collective. The relationship of the magazine to readers, to contributors, to the women's movement, to women in general is constantly under question. (SR 180: 40)

At the time of its fifteenth birthday, SR was still struggling with editorial issues. The collective was not only engaged in a 'constant questioning' of its relationship to the Movement, its readers and women in general, but also the 'intense debates' that quickly emerged over formatting issues as well as the negotiation of increasingly diversified political positions which threatened their collective practice. SR's vulnerability was evident, and this was made more so when the collective admitted that currently 'the most pressing issue for the magazine is [...] survival' (SR 180: 40). SR explain that as 'the price of editorial independence from advertising [means that the magazine has to rely heavily] on sales, and therefore [...] our readers.' The collective state that they 'have applied to the funding bodies set up to provide replacement funding after the abolition of the GLC'<sup>33</sup> (SR 180: 40) and are hopeful that this will help their situation.

The future of SR, as a magazine and as a collective, was uncertain. The fifteenth birthday reflection piece seemed to signal a combined sense of nostalgia and trepidation about the constant challenges that SR encountered. At this point, SR had developed a reputation for its conflicts, and, perhaps, the collective was concerned about whether or not it would be able to withstand the changes that it so frequently implemented. Yet, for as much as SR professed its

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<sup>33</sup> For more information on the abolition of the GLC see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/31/newsid\\_2530000/2530803.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/31/newsid_2530000/2530803.stm).

consistent – and seemingly erratic – need for re-evaluation, its tendency to revisit and continue to engage with previous issues somewhat contradicted this.

Perhaps for the ways in which they contributed to the collective's 'stormier developments' such issues had continued relevance to *SR* and collective therefore imagined that if they revisited contentious or problematic topics they would be able to provide readers with insight into the importance of such topics. The article 'Jewish Feminism and the Search for Identity,' published in the November 1987 issue, indicates this suggestion. In the introduction to Jenny Bourne's<sup>34</sup> article, *SR* write that 'Jewish Feminism' 'retraces the historical 1982-3 split in the British feminist movement, and in retrospect [attempts to] shed new light on the current problems posed by blind adherence to identity politics' (*SR* 184: 22).

However, the majority of Bourne's article focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of Jewish women, rather than the multiplicity of viewpoints that were articulated and fought over in attempt to prove which women's experiences were *the* priority of the Movement and the magazine. To be specific, Bourne explains that the 'split' was in fact 'over the question of Israel's invasion of Lebanon.' She states that following this split *SR*'s support for Palestinian women 'is well known – not least for the reverberations it caused in [*SR*]' and that 'the withdrawal of Jewish women from the *Spare Rib* Collective [...] did not just signal the end of a saga. It was,' she claims, 'also the beginning of something new: the articulation of a specifically *Jewish Feminism* within Britain' (*SR* 184: 22). Bourne continues by taking up the 'new' issue of Jewishness as it relates to Israel and Zionism, explaining the difficulty Jewish women have at times had in determining where they 'stand.' Bourne asks: 'Did we support Israel and Zionism – in which case we were running against the feminist tide – or would we come out against Israel ourselves in the name of a larger feminist politics? Were we feminists first or Jews first? How could we stay true to both our feminism and our knowledge of ourselves and our history?' (*SR* 184: 22) For Bourne, the answer was to 'seek out an identity which would distance us as far as possible from Israel's excesses whilst allowing us to remain within the portals of feminism as Jews' (*SR* 184: 22). She argues that 'by calling attention to ourselves as victims of a particular oppression – anti-Semitism, we reinforced *our* claim to feminist sympathies and at the same time changed the terms of debate' (*SR* 184: 22).

Much of what Bourne writes about Jewish women and their struggles in their identities as feminists was presented in Rozika Parker's 'Being Jewish.' Nonetheless, Bourne argues that the 'culture' surrounding the Jewish feminist experience has changed since the debate. She references the development of the Jewish women's own journal – *Shifra*, their 'own conferences, study groups, etc.' (*SR* 184: 22) – and explains some of her views on Israel, stating that, about five years ago when the debates were taking place, Jewish women's 'non-position on Israel was effectively a position; and every time the Movement (and this journal in particular) took a stand

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<sup>34</sup> See also Bourne's 'Homelands of the Jewish Mind: Jewish Feminism and Identity Politics' (1987) in which she elaborates on her discussion here.

against Israel, or for Palestinian people, we countered with a plea for solidarity with us' (SR 184: 23).

As Bourne quite explicitly includes SR in her analysis of the ways in which the WLM 'silenced' and excluded Jewish women, perhaps SR's decision to publish her article is an opportunity for the collective to either apologise or take accountability for its past. Bourne writes that for 'Bev Gold, who was at the centre of the split in *Spare Rib*, anti-Zionism was "nothing more than a smoke-screen for anti-Semitism"' (SR 184: 23). This assertion is echoed by the U.S. Jewish Feminist study group, who argued that 'since "anti-Zionism demands the dissolution of the state of Israel ... [which] ... would give licence to increased anti-Semitism throughout the world and would endanger all Jews wherever we might live. Yet, when the argument that 'any anti-Zionist position is, therefore, anti-Semitic"' (SR 184: 23) is put forth, it is unclear how Bourne's article is evidence that the polarisation of the two 'sides' of the original debate have indeed shifted or evolved.

For this reason, it appears as though Bourne's article is in actuality a comment on the development of a specifically Jewish feminist standpoint, and the competition between this standpoint in relation to the standpoints of other feminists. This suggestion is strengthened when Bourne introduces her 'theory of equal oppressions.' Whilst she states that in her view 'it is wrong to rank oppressions' and that feminists 'could (and should) be, for example, against racism and against anti-Semitism' (SR 184: 24), Bourne also states that during the debate, 'some Jewish Feminists went further to imply an equation between the Jewish and the Black experience of racism.' Bourne is critical of this equation:

Because radical feminism had diluted the meaning of racism by personalising it, and changed it into a question of internalised attitudes, as opposed to regarding it as a structural and institutional issue related to state power and exploitation, the equation between racism and anti-Semitism appeared plausible. (SR 184: 24)

Bourne's insinuation is that whilst the equation between racist oppression and anti-Semitism at one time appeared to be 'plausible' they are in fact not to be equated. Perhaps Bourne, with her theory, is proposing that racism and anti-Semitism are both equally oppressive. Yet, this proposition is undermined not only by Bourne's previous assertion that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic but also by the examples of many readers, such as Alison Sagar, who in the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate argued that they were Jewish-identified anti-Zionists. Clearly, Bourne still prioritises certain forms of oppression over others. Nonetheless, Bourne writes that 'seeing [identity] as a means to an end, [...] as a goal in itself, [or...] as a political act of resistance' (SR 184: 24) is the wrong approach. She concludes her article by stating that 'we can only learn and confirm our identity [...] through our actions. What we do is who we are' (SR 184: 24).

In total, Bourne's article suggests that the Zionist/anti-Zionist debate created new – if productive – forms of factionalism, with Jewish women organizing amongst themselves. This move towards a stronger identity-based politics – which was partly what had fuelled all the

debates in *SR* – led to a kind of truce through non-engagement. It also heralded the factionalism that contributed to the undoing of the WLM and to the end of *SR*.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

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This thesis is concerned with the ways *SR* dealt with three controversies: anti-lesbianism, racism and anti-Semitism, Zionism/anti-Zionism. These controversies were not specific to *SR*. Instead, they reflected issues discussed in the WLM, in other women's publications such as *Shrew* and *Feminist Review*, as well as issues within British society and culture at large at the time.<sup>1</sup> *SR*'s handling of these controversies provides an insight into the practices of a collectively produced women's liberation magazine, as well as the opportunity for an analysis of how, and with what effects, such issues were dealt with and presented within that particular context. My analysis of these debates demonstrates how they highlighted factions within the WLM, led to fragmentation within the *SR* collective and ultimately indicated the demise of *SR*. In investigating these issues, I treated the magazine as an entity in its own right which, nonetheless, articulated, contributed to and reflected the feminist politics of its day.

In this conclusion, I shall first briefly address my structural choices in the organisation the material and chapters. Following this, I shall draw together a number of important patterns that emerge from my analyses in the preceding chapters. In particular, I shall address three aspects of these patterns: the development of the debates over time in *SR*, the process through which the debates were dealt with by the collective, and the life course of the debates. Next, I shall briefly discuss the final years of the magazine in order to show how the patterns that emerged in earlier issues dominated the magazine to the end. Finally, I shall conclude by highlighting the ways in which the magazine, despite its struggles, was highly successful during its decades of existence.

But first a word on how I decided to structure the material: *SR* was a monthly magazine, and, as such, I approached the organisation of my sources in a sequential manner. The ways in which the debates unfolded, and the dialogical nature of the magazine, suggested both a predominantly chronological and a thematic organisation of my material. Thus, because I chose to focus on specific debates, my chapters were also structured topically. This, however, does not imply that the debates I analysed occurred in strictly sequential fashion. Individually, they developed over time but, fundamentally, they are key issues of categories – for example race, or sexuality – that continue to preoccupy feminists to this day. To be specific: they recurred both intermittently and concurrently, rather like overlapping waves.

When considering the debates analysed in my chapters, closer examination reveals three patterns worth noting: the development of the debates, the processes by which the *SR* collective dealt with or managed the debates, and the relative 'shelf life' of each of the three debates.

The development of the debates, as presented in *SR* magazine and analysed in my thesis chapters all began with the introduction of a single-position issue, which then quickly mushroomed

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Parmar and Amos' 'Challenging Imperial Feminism' (2005) as evidence of the discussions taking place in women's publications and Malik's *India and the United Kingdom* (1997) and Karatani's *Defining British Citizenship* (2003) as evidence of the discussions taking place in British society and culture at large.

into a multiple-perspective debate that, for a variety of reasons, was irreconcilable. The anti-lesbian debate, discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, first began with a handful of articles, such as Lillian Roxon's news report on lesbians in the New York (October 1972), and Susanna Allen's lesbian adventures in Amsterdam (April 1973), which introduced lesbianism and raised questions on what is the nature of lesbianism. Gradually, more perspectives on lesbian identity were introduced as different lesbians articulated their positions. These implied critiques of others' viewpoints. *SR*'s interview with American feminist Kate Millet (November 1973) highlights the lessening timidity with which women involved in the WLM spoke out about their lesbian experiences and self-perceptions. By September 1974, just two years after the initial articles referencing lesbianism began to appear in *SR*, there was a noticeable tension emerging, as *SR*'s Leslie Gilbert reported on the Sixth National Women's Liberation Conference that women present at the conference 'spoke about the ways in which they felt threatened by each other, straights by lesbians and vice versa, in some detail' (*SR* 27: 17). Shortly thereafter, the debate fizzled out; the topic of lesbianism became, on the one hand more embedded or 'mainstream' in *SR* in terms of regular features; on the other, different types of issues became more contentious and prominent.

With regards to the debates in Chapters 3 and 4, the same observation of the development of the debates can be made. In Chapter 3 the debate on racism originally began with articles on Asian workers. These articles, such as 'Lottery of the Lowest: Asian Families in Southall,' written by Rosie Boycott and Christine Aziz and featured in the November 1973 issue of the magazine, introduced the struggles of Asian migrants who lived and worked in poor conditions, focusing on Asian women in particular. In this the authors indicated their socialist credentials. Racism as such was not yet discussed as an issue in its own right. However, again, two years after the first articles on the Asian immigrant experience, the issue had clearly evolved. In November 1975, *SR* featured the editorial entitled 'Racism and Sexism,' written by non-collective member Amrit Wilson, in which Wilson concluded: 'for the white women's liberationist who want to be involved in black women's struggles, there exists a minefield of misunderstandings' (*SR* 41: 8). With this statement, Wilson almost presciently suggested the drama that would eventually unfold as the conflict between white and black women escalated, following a period of strategic alliance of Asian and black women. It is worth noting that the early articles mentioned here centred on Asian women's experiences; however, once the racism debate started to take hold, it became almost entirely focused on tensions between white and Black women.

The debate examined in Chapter 4 began with *SR*'s introduction of two single-position issues, featured a year apart in the magazine: the experiences of women living in the Palestine region and of Jewish women living in Britain. 'Daily Life in Palestinian Camps,' (*SR*'s January 1978 issue), written by Rosemary Sayigh, highlighted displaced Palestinian women's experiences in Arab refugee camps. 'Being Jewish: Anti-Semitism and Jewish Women', an interview by Rozika Parker with Jewish feminists regarding their experiences of anti-Semitism, featured in the February 1979 issue. Both of these initial articles, whilst possessing the inherent potential for



conflict if the issues were to be combined, were, in the early stages of the debate, treated separately. However, by September of 1980, a further year on, a *SR* feature on the UN conference on women indicated the beginning of these two issues becoming intertwined, as *SR* reported that women at the conference tried to 'get "Zionism" added to the list of -isms that keep women down' (*SR* 98: 13). In January of 1981, *SR* published readers Anita and Joy's letter arguing in favour of Zionism because of their belief that Zionism helps liberate many Jewish women from their experiences of oppression. With the publication of this letter it was clear that the two initial issues were no longer separate, and that Jewish women living in Britain, Palestinian women, women for and against Zionism, as well as *SR* collective members and readers, were all now involved in the escalating debate.

The development of the debates from single-position issues, expanding – over the course of approximately two years for each debate – into multiple-perspective debates is clear. It is also worth noting that none of these debates were resolved. Rather, they developed into irreconcilable identity-based stances. The irreconcilability of the debates can largely be attributed to the fact that many of the debates were over issues related to identity. As the politics of any particular identity evolved, and women either forged alliances or diverged from one another, it became more and more difficult to reconcile the differences between them. However, as I have demonstrated in my thesis chapters, *SR* made many attempts to reach reconciliation.

The processes by which the collective dealt with or managed the debates were imbricated in identity politics. *SR* made a claim for itself as being part of the feminist/women's movement. However, 'movement' is not a party of constituents who necessarily share identical personal and political views. Therefore, *SR* could not simply adopt a single, quasi-party line with regards to the WLM. *SR* consistently, from its inception, wanted to appeal to all women. Over the course of the magazine's life, it sought to represent the perspectives of all women –those familiar with the goings on of the movement, the different factions within the movement and those women new to feminism and women's liberation. Therefore *SR*'s connection with the movement, and internal and external sources of pressure on *SR* to take a line, combined with the magazine's desire to appeal to and represent *all* women, presented an immediate irreconcilable contradiction. As I have argued through my thesis chapters, this contradiction manifested itself in the form of major debates. But in further examination of the processes by which the magazine dealt with and managed those debates, it becomes clear that for the life of the magazine *SR* veered between the two positions of taking a line versus trying to represent the perspectives of all women.

*SR*'s veering between these two approaches was most evident when considering the dialogic exchanges that took place between the varying parties involved in each debate. To be specific, as I have shown throughout my thesis, *SR* employed several democratizing tactics in their attempts to negotiate each of the major conflicts encountered by, and presented in, the magazine. These tactics effectively encouraged a dialogue amongst those engaged in the debates: collective members, readers, and individuals with outside or circumstantial involvement with the magazine –

such as women who were commissioned to write an article, or community members invited to a *SR* meeting – all were invited to have a say in the process.

As I have shown in each core chapter of my thesis, *SR* commonly asked particular women to write about or report on an aspect of an unfolding debate. In Chapter 2, I referenced *SR*'s May 1977 report on the Women's Liberation Conference of the same month. In order to stress this aspect of the dialogical nature of *SR*'s processes in managing the three debates, it is worth remembering that this report was written by several different women, all of whom were either interviewed by the magazine, or were encouraged to 'write down their impressions.' The result is quite a lengthy 11-page conglomeration of 'on the spot' news briefs detailing various workshops, conversations, and issues. Similarly, on several occasions discussed in Chapter 3, the magazine published short features on racism that *SR* commissioned black women to write, and as argued in Chapter 4, *SR* also asked Women for Palestine and Palestinian Women and the London Jewish Lesbian Group to write opinion pieces on the topic at hand (*SR* 126: 4). The effect of inviting particular women to participate in the production of the magazine enabled *SR* to present the issues from different perspectives. As such, *SR* incorporated diverse views in their magazine, increasing the breadth of positions for readers to identify with.

When *SR* wanted to step into this orchestration more directly, the publication of editorials allowed the collective members to express their views. Sometimes, the editorials would speak for, or represent, the collective in its entirety. In my second Chapter, I noted the July 1980 *SR* editorial in which the collective admitted that 'controversial topics have always been a problem area' (*SR* 96: 3). In this example, the collective – whilst perhaps not completely in agreement over the 'controversial topics' which they were then negotiating – decided to publish the editorial collectively in order to express to their readers the dilemmas they faced. In my third Chapter, I referenced the 'Special Black Women's Issue' of the magazine, published in October 1983. That issue began with an editorial written by only the black women of the collective, in which they were given the opportunity to reflect upon and communicate their experiences since joining the *SR* collective in the previous year (*SR* 135: 3). Finally, whilst it might not be 'strictly' classified as an editorial proper, the 'Sisterhood is Plain Sailing' feature, which I analysed in my fourth Chapter, is a strong example of how the collective chose – or chose not to – present their opinions and views on the debates as they passed through the magazine. Clearly indicative of the divide between collective members and individual in nature, 'Sisterhood' represented the collective's views as well as the collective views of the white women as a group and the black women as a group. As such, it was indicative of the frictions that governed the *SR* collective and *SR* as a magazine for much of its life.

*SR* sought to facilitate discussions about contentious topics through the inclusion of readers' letters in the pages of the magazine. Using the example of the editorial of the 'Special Black Women's Issue' from Chapter 3 that I have just mentioned, this editorial, like several others published in the magazine, put forth a number of questions at its conclusion. In this instance, the

questions addressed issues of racism. In particular, the women who wrote this editorial asked, 'How does one define 'black?', and 'What is the definition of Black Feminist politics?' (SR 135: 3) In my fourth Chapter, this same tactic emerged again as *SR*'s strategy for interaction with its readers. This time, however, the questions issued regarded differences amongst feminists, Zionism, anti-Semitism, Israel and 'What is a critical feminist support of PLO [*sic*]?' (SR 126: 4) These questions prompted reader responses that then, in turn, generated further, often further contentious, comments.

However, as demonstrated in my second Chapter, *SR*'s generation of discussion also took place outside of the pages of the magazine. To be specific, in Chapter 2, I mentioned that *SR* held a readers' meeting to discuss the splitting of the sixth demand. In addition, at the end of my second Chapter, I indicated that *SR* also held a meeting in which some collective members, readers and other persons of interest, read through Ann Pettitt's article 'Feminism For Her Own Good,' which was later discussed within the context of the magazine. However, face-to-face events only increased the complexity of the debates; when ideas talked about during such events were published in the magazine, some readers – and indeed some collective members – were unaware and thus unfamiliar with the most recent development in the dialogue on a particular topic. This factor made it even more difficult to tease out the viewpoints and positions of the debate as it progressed. Indeed, it is clear from all these interventions that managing the reader perspective cause *SR* its greatest difficulties. Whilst they could control the content of what they commissioned, they could not control their readers' responses. This then led to internal strife as the collective debated whether or not to publish readers' responses.

Lastly, it is worth noting that *SR* was not always the initiating factor in deciding to bring issues of conflict to the forefront of the magazine. As I have already explained, *SR* took many of its cues from the wider WLM. However, as a dialogical aspect of the magazine, the extent to which *SR*, at times, also took cues from its readers must be emphasised. In my second Chapter, preceding the March 1975 editorial in which *SR* pledged its support for lesbians, I indicated that the magazine had apparently received a large number of letters from readers, complaining about *SR*'s extensive lesbian coverage. The amount of coverage *SR* gave to 'lesbian topics' was a debate in itself. However, this particular editorial began with a reader's letter, questioning the magazine about its focus in this context. Accordingly, the editorial was, in effect, a response to this – and previous – letter(s). A similar trajectory unfolded in my third Chapter when *SR* responded to readers criticising them for having white women write articles about the black experience of racism, by hiring 'women of colour' to join the collective. In my fourth Chapter, the dialogical nature of this particular aspect was, at times, almost cyclical. The numerous letters *SR* received in response to the 'Women Speak Out' feature caused divisions amongst the collective. This eventually prompted the collective to write editorials on why they had chosen not to publish the letters. In turn, these editorials instigated several further letters from readers, which, in combination with other factors, led to the collective publishing 'Sisterhood is Plain Sailing,' in which the letters were

again addressed. *SR* tried to engage in the debates, to present differing viewpoints and to mediate among them. Ultimately, though, they had limited control over the course of the debates.

*SR* tried their best to espouse the ideas of the movement, whilst at the same time not alienating readers and maintaining their appeal to all women. The magazine was therefore faced with an inherent contradiction, and constantly veered between taking a line, and trying to represent the views of 'all women.' As I have demonstrated, as a way of dealing with this contradiction, *SR* attempted to present topics of debate by employing a dialogical approach. This dialogic involved asking specific people to report on particular debates and, at times, inviting individuals representing certain identity categories to join the collective. Most of the time, when *SR* presented a topic, it tried to highlight the different viewpoints or perspectives within each topic. Editorials sometimes functioned to allow collective members to express their individual opinions, as well as a means of generating discussion amongst readers. Indeed, readers were often given a considerable amount of influence over the magazine's direction and content, as their letters, preceding or following contentious editorials, articles or features, were published.

This dialogic process allowed *SR* to take on views and try to make changes. It, in turn, enabled the magazine to continuously 'reinvent' itself, another tactic in dealing with these issues that I shall come back to later on in this conclusion. But before moving onto the final of the three patterns I wish to discuss – the relative 'shelf life' of each of the debates – I would like to comment on the detrimental aspects of the processes which I have just outlined. In the example of *SR*, it is clear that the notion of the personal as political – or, perhaps, the political is personal – produced dilemmas. 'Personal' as identified as individual or category-specific, can – as *SR*'s experiences show – lead to an entrenchment of positions based on seemingly immutable traits. As such, the magazine, and its readers saw the issues at hand as deeply imbricated in their own personal positions. This was primarily due to the fact that most of these said positions *were* grounded in matters of identity and identity politics. There was no obvious possibility of reconciliation between two British Jewish women who shared experiences of anti-Semitic racism, but where one of the women declared herself feminist because of her anti-Zionist position and the other declared herself feminist because of her Zionist beliefs. This is why *SR* repeatedly faced a dilemma of irresolution, and why it was so difficult to develop a reconciliatory process for dealing with the debates.

In continuing this line of thought, I shall now address the final pattern that emerges upon closer examination of my three core thesis chapters – the relative 'shelf life' of the debates, or period of time during which the issues fuelling those debates remained current. The debates aired in *SR* were not just present in the journal but rather, were part of the changing environment of Britain and the British WLM. Therefore, as changes in political focus occurred outside the magazine the focus in *SR* also shifted. The most obvious example of this is discussed in my third core Chapter where the issue of the Asian women workers' struggles in the unions was, effectively, superseded by the issue of racism. Repeatedly, when a debate reached its end, *SR* was already so

completely caught up in the details and opposing perspectives of the debate that it started to lose sight of its direction and membership. *SR* did not succeed in asking itself questions regarding the ways in which identity invited or did not invite identification. To be specific, *SR* was producing material based on identity categories and some people found that material resonated with their personal experiences as women, whilst others did not. Indeed, all of the issues and tactics – *SR*'s role in the debate, the degree of editorial control the collective should maintain when dealing with controversial topics, how to negotiate differences amongst collective members, how best to enter a debate, and the publication of readers' letters – effectively revealed the complexity of the debates. However, it also revealed *SR*'s tendency to try to appease everybody and consequently overlook the ways in which this process impacted on its readership more generally. In fact, it alienated many readers, for whilst some readers identified with the specific positions presented, they nonetheless did not identify with the conflict that the magazine generated. Ultimately, contradictory positions remained unresolved, and as the debates extended beyond their shelf life, readers began to lose interest in *SR*'s inability to navigate the terrain it introduced. This is evident in the magazine's fate during the last five years of its existence.

The bulk of my thesis research covers the period from *SR*'s start in 1972 until the mid to late-1980s. However, *SR* was in publication until 1993. I would like to comment on the final years of *SR*'s publication, to reinforce what I have argued in this conclusion thus far. During the last five years of publication the magazine saw a definite shift in focus. As stated, the debates presented in *SR* were connected to the changing face of Britain and the British WLM and one of the effects of this connection was that the debates themselves had a shelf life. This remained true in the final years of the magazine, as a noticeable shift towards internationalism took place.

I would argue that this shift was most effectively represented by *SR*'s 'A Plan of Action' series. The series began in April 1989, just two years after Jenny Bourne's November 1987 article 'Jewish Feminism and the Search for Identity' – which concluded my previous Chapter – and only three years before the magazine ceased publication in the summer of 1993. For the series, several *SR* collective members and feminists external to the magazine discussed what 'action' both feminists and the magazine needed to take in order to cope with the changing terrain of global issues and women. Whilst it is not my intention to discuss the 'Plan of Action' series in great detail, I have chosen to mention it because of the way in which it represents a further example of the consistent pattern of irresolution and reinvention in *SR*'s coping with controversial issues and the changing face of the WLM.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the focus on internationalism came out of new movements arising within the British context. The 1975-1985 UN Decade for Women had significantly increased interest in the lives of women globally. That global interest extended beyond the WLM into areas such as environmentalism as well as organisations such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). In addition, several feminist texts addressing the international scope of

feminism emerged, including books such as *The Female World From a Global Perspective* (1987) by Jessie Shirley Bernard.

However, with regards to *SR*, readers did not identify in the same ways with internationalism as they had with other topics – indeed, the identities that had previously come to the fore – and this caused difficulty for the magazine. To be specific, *SR* readers had a limited interest in the issues affecting women outside of Britain. *SR* was a British magazine. As such, since its inception, it had catered mainly for a particular, nationally circumscribed readership predominantly based in Britain. Therefore, when *SR* noticeably shifted its focus towards internationalism, and *SR* opened up an international feminist agenda as a topic of debate, it lost the interest of many of these readers whose agendas now seemed to be displaced (see figs. 14a, 14b). Despite its increased coverage of countries and women living outside the UK, it did not gain any additional readership from these places. The dwindling British-based readership, combined with rising production costs, the economic recession and the introduction of new women's magazines, such as *Everywoman* and *Cosmo*, led to a sustained financial crisis. As I have demonstrated, *SR* had a particular way of doing things which created difficulties for them. I have already outlined several of these ways above. By looking at the 'Plan of Action' series, it can be demonstrated that these ways or patterns repeated themselves. This provides evidence that the magazine never found a way of doing things differently.

The series began with an editorial by the *SR* collective marking the 200th issue of the magazine (April 1989) and explaining the origins of the 'Plan of Action' (see fig. 15). They wrote that in the beginning of the previous month (March) '*Spare Rib* hosted a forum to which [they] invited eleven women representing a broad range of positions within the women's movement' (*SR* 200: 6)<sup>2</sup>. *SR* explain that the aim of the forum was to address 'some of the major difficulties facing the women's movement in [Britain] and worldwide,' claiming that the 'series will have a very definite focus: ways for the women's movement to evolve action which will have an impact on the current desperate situation in this country and globally.' *SR* did not elaborate on what the 'desperate situation' was. Instead, the collective referred to a previously published interview with June Jordan (November 1987). The collective state that in this interview, Jordan suggested "'develop[ing] habits of evaluation in whatever [is] attempt[ed] politically'." Jordan felt this was necessary, as she believed "'people get set into certain ways of doing things and they don't evaluate whether it's working or not'." *SR* added to Jordan's claim by asserting that 'this is very much what [the] forum and the Plan of Action series is about: to look at some of the problems we are facing as a women's movement and to evaluate our practice.' The collective argued:

Some of the underlying assumptions of the discussion published below, are that before we begin to talk about an international/global unity/movement we need to look at our own situation in this country, at our own 'political' community, which is international in terms of its make up, and the ways in which we operate or fail to

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<sup>2</sup> All direct quotes to the April 1989 editorial are from *SR* 200: 6 unless otherwise indicated.

operate together. This would be a first step in working towards forming international links and networks.

Further assumptions are that we are fragmented as a movement, and that unity, not a hollow unity which does not go beyond slogans, but an authentic unity established in a principled way, would enable us to have more of an impact in effecting change in our own communities and in turn worldwide.

At the same time, we recognise that unity is not enough and that we need to discuss strategies for action, ways of mobilising, organising etc. We have spent a great deal of time recognising analysing the political problems we face and comparatively less time looking at ways to get rid of them. We know our oppressions well – but that is not enough.

SR went on to state that ‘some of the topics [they] attempted to touch on were ‘differences between conceptualisations of feminism in the “West” and “Third World” historically and currently’ and ‘understanding that in the “West” and the “Third World” there is a diversity of women and ideological positions.’

The ‘diversity of women and [their] ideological positions’ and its ‘fragmentation and lack of unity within the women’s movement in [Britain] and elsewhere,’ was something that SR consistently tried to grapple with. With the Plan of Action series and the final years of the publication of the magazine, SR focused their concerns on the ‘fragmentation and lack of unity,’ not just in the WLM in Britain, but also ‘elsewhere,’ onto women’s international and global concerns. Now, instead of questioning to what extent feminism offered anything to Asian or Black, or lesbian or Jewish women in the movement, SR became interested in exploring ‘to what extent feminism offers a new way of doing things, of organising for change,’ and its ‘potential to effect real change in this country and globally.’

At the end of the introduction to the series, the collective listed the women who took part in the forum. They included:

Nadia Tarasi from the General Union of Palestinian Women; Celmira Salazar, from Chile, Fatima Babiker Mahmoud, from the Institute for African Alternatives; Savvy Hensman, from the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre; Elean Thomas, from the Jamaican organisation for Women for Progress; Juliette Joseph, from the International Women’s Day Planning Committee; Sarah Roelofs, from Women for Socialism; Noirin O’Riordan, from Women in Ireland; Elizabeth Carola, active in WAVAW and campaigns against child sexual abuse; Shaila Shah from the Outwrite Collective and Margot Farnham from the Trouble and Strife Collective.

The range of representation is worth considering: How representative were these women, and of whom? The participants certainly reflected the globally and politically diverse interests of women in the movement – from women against violence to representatives from Chile, to a member of *Trouble and Strife*, to a woman from the ‘Jamaican Organisation for Women for Progress.’ But if SR had difficulty maintaining harmony and an inclusive feeling amongst women when the issues addressed were British-based, this current representation of ‘international’ women suggests an agenda that was potentially too large to manage.



Fig. 14a. I Dream A World

**Spare Rib**  
MAGAZINE  
DEC 1991/JAN 1992 £1.80

**I Dream A World**  
*Reflections on a New World Order*

**DOUBLE ISSUE**

**TALKING WITH YOUNG DISCIPLE**  
Carleen Anderson

**'MAMA' NEW FICTION**  
by Terry McMillan

**PROSTITUTION**  
One Woman's Story

**BERNADETTE DEVLIN McALISKEY**  
On A United Women's Movement

**'SOMETHING ELSE'**  
from Artist Sonia Boyce

**CAN YOU AFFORD CHRISTMAS?**  
A Guide to Cut Price Prezzies & Places

**SPECIAL REPORTS:**  
ONE YEAR AFTER THE GULF WAR; HANDS OFF LIBYA; YUGOSLAVIA & EUROPEAN DIS-UNITY

**PLUS: SEXUAL FANTASIES - NANCY FRIDAY'S 'WOMEN ON TOP'; ENYA; ASTER AWEKE; MISSISSIPPI MASALA; 'DROWNING' WITH THE WOMEN'S TROOP; SWEET DESSERTS and FREE BOOKS, TICKETS AND TAPES**

12  
9 770306 797997

Source: *Spare Rib*, 230 (December 1991/January 1992).



Fig. 14b. 500 Years After Columbus



Source: *Spare Rib*, 238 (October/November 1992).



Fig. 15. Plan of Action

# Plan of Action

On Thursday March 9, Spare Rib hosted a forum to which we invited eleven women representing a broad range of positions within the women's movement. The purpose was to begin a discussion which would launch a PLAN OF ACTION series in the 200th issue of Spare Rib, and it is hoped that an ongoing debate will ensue - dealing with some of the major difficulties facing the women's movement in this country and worldwide. The series will have a very definite focus: ways for the women's movement to evolve action which will have an impact on the current desperate situation in this country and globally.

We are not expecting to come up with a definitive plan to seize power! but rather to begin to discuss some of the issues which are reducing the impact we are having.

In an interview in Spare Rib (November 1987, No 184) June Jordan stated,

I think we have to try to develop habits of evaluation in whatever we attempt politically. People get set into certain ways of doing things and they don't evaluate whether its working or not. Or if they do evaluate then it's to say it's not working but it's not our fault, there couldn't possibly be anything wrong with our thinking on this subject or this issue. The problem invariably is that the enemy is simply inflexible or impregnable. This is a doomed modus operandi. We have to find out what works.'

This is very much what this forum and the Plan of Action series is about: to look at some of the problems we are facing as a women's movement and to evaluate our practice.

Some of the underlying assumptions of the discussion published below, are that before we begin to talk about an international/global unity/movement we need to look at our own situation in this country, at our own 'political' community, which is international in terms of its make up, and the ways in which we operate or fail to operate together. This would be a first step in working towards forming international links and networks.

Further assumptions are that we are fragmented as a movement, and that unity, not a hollow unity which does not go beyond slogans, but an authentic unity established in a principled way, would enable us to have more of an impact in effecting change in our own communities and in turn worldwide.

At the same time, we recognise that unity is not enough and that we need to discuss strategies for action, ways of mobilising, organising etc. We have spent a great deal of time recognising and analysing the political problems we face and comparatively less time looking at ways to get rid of them. We know our oppressions well - but that is not enough.

Some of the topics we attempted to touch on were:

The differences between conceptualisations of feminism in the 'West' and 'Third World' historically and currently, while understanding that in the 'West' and the 'Third World' there is a diversity of women and ideological positions.

In a recent interview in Spare Rib (Dec/Jan, No 197), Toun Ilmoka from Nigeria said that 'the attitude of certain Western feminists is just a new and alternative kind of imperialism'. This imperialism continues to be an obstacle to unity

The fragmentation and lack of unity within the women's movement in this country and elsewhere, resulting in a severe lack of power, organisation and strategy in the face of a very powerful oppression.

To what extent feminism offers a new way of doing things, of organising for change. What is feminism's potential to effect real change in this country and globally.

The prospects for an international feminism - for a way of overcoming differences and moving ahead - networking, dialogue, solidarity and organising for action - in the face of what is clearly an international enemy.

With eleven women plus the Spare Rib Collective we were not able to cover all of these topics, but as has been mentioned this discussion is to launch a series which hopefully will discuss all of these issues and more. Due to lack of space we will be publishing the forum in two parts. Below we publish the first part. By the end of the evening some fairly concrete proposals were put forward and this part of the discussion will be published next month. We welcome contributions to this PLAN OF ACTION series.

Taking part in the forum (in the order they spoke) were: Nadia Tarazi from the General Union of Palestinian Women; Celmira Salazar, from Chile; Fatima Babiker Mahmoud, from the Institute for African Alternatives; Savvy Hensman, from the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre; Elean Thomas, from the Jamaican Organisation for Women for Progress; Juliette Joseph, from the International Women's Day Planning Committee; Sarah Roelofs, from Women for Socialism; Nairin O'Riordan, from Women in Ireland; Elizabeth Carola, active in WAVAW and campaigns against child sexual abuse; Shaila Shah from the Outwrite Collective and Margot Farnham from the Trouble and Stife Collective.

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Source: Spare Rib, 200 (April 1989): 6.

Following on from the question regarding the representation of the women invited to participate in *SR*'s forum is the question of which identities *SR* invested in when they took up an international agenda, and to what extent did these identities invite or not invite identification. When *SR* took up the topic of 'internationalism' it reflected the changing agenda of the period, and a dissipation of energy and focus within the movement. It also simultaneously broadened the concerns of the magazine to a global scale, and in general, as their letters showed, readers felt excluded and gradually reacted against this.

There was evidence of this reaction and of more of what was to come when a 'dialogue' began regarding *SR*'s decision to permanently remove the tag 'Women's Liberation Magazine' from its front covers (June 1989). In the February 1990 issue a reader's letter was published, asking 'why has the "A Women's Liberation Magazine" tag disappeared, and why so quietly or did I miss something?' (*SR* 209: 5) *SR* chose to answer the letter with a lengthy reply reinforcing their commitment to the ideas behind the 'Plan of Action' series and an explanation of their view on the state of the WLM. Instead of directly addressing their decision to remove the identifying label that the magazine once proudly used to market itself from their covers, they commented on what they thought was 'one of [the movement's] most serious failures: [...] its exclusion of the vast majority of women worldwide' (*SR* 209: 5). 'This exclusion,' *SR* went on to explain, 'has occurred in three major ways – on the basis of race, class, and as a result of the colonial relationship which typifies so many relations between the European Liberation movements and Liberation movements in the so named "Third World"' (*SR* 209: 5). *SR*'s removal of the 'Women's Liberation Magazine' tag that readers had grown to recognise, and their decision to respond to readers' inquiries about its removal by focusing on the exclusion of 'women worldwide' in a way indicated that *SR* had disconnected from its more local readers. To be specific, *SR* was interested in pursuing a course of action that would address what they believed were the movement's 'most serious failures.' They were expecting that readers would understand this, and consequently understand the ways in which this pursuit had led to their removal of the tag. However, readers did not understand. *SR* never explicitly articulated the relationship between their international agenda and the removal of the tag, and, within one year, the issue had mushroomed into a controversy.

In the August 1990 issue of the magazine, *SR* revealed that readers' 'letters have sparked off quite a dialogue' (*SR* 215: 4), one, which they said, had also been taken up elsewhere. But instead of focusing on the opinions and views of their readers, *SR* again situated their readers amongst all the other women in the world. The collective responded to the 'dialogue' by stating that 'the issues raised in this dialogue are issues which have been, and are presently being discussed by women worldwide, as some of the most crucial issues for an international Women's Movement' (*SR* 215: 4). When the magazine pointed out that '*Spare Rib* is just one nerve end in what is a very large raw nerve,' it was trying to move readers beyond their concern with the removal of a tag on a magazine, and instead expand their perspective on 'women's liberation'

beyond Britain and into the world (SR 215: 4). Yet, for eighteen years SR had equated itself with the WLM in Britain – had indeed carried the label of being a ‘Women’s Liberation Magazine’ – so it was therefore understandable that regular readers reacted against that removal. It can be assumed that, when later on in the same issue of the magazine, Sarah Meer stated that ‘The “dialogue” on the letters page of *Spare Rib* over the last three months (February, March and April editions), over whether the phrase “Women’s Liberation Magazine” carried too many connotations of white western interest, has pointed to what must become the central question of feminist activity: whose liberation is at stake?’, readers wondered about what ‘stake’ SR had in *their* liberation (SR 215: 6).

Indeed, in the very next issue of the magazine, in September 1990, there was a poignant example highlighting this perspective in the form of a reader’s letter. British reader Penny Gollings wrote that she did ‘a great deal of campaigning with Oxford University Women’s Committee on such issues as codes of sexual harassment, child care facilities, better safety, abortion rights and pornography, [and] began subscribing to *Spare Rib* because [she] expected to find articles of relevance to [her] life’ (SR 216: 4). She explained that she ‘wanted to read featuring [sic] [on] such issues as sexuality, work, education, sexism in the media, body image, child care, domestic violence and state power’ (SR 216: 4). However, she was disappointed, and thinks that the magazine ‘has too much of an international bias’ (SR 216: 5). She laments that ‘of the five features in the August [1990] edition, *none* were about the lives of ordinary women in Britain’ (emphasis added). Given this fact, Gollings argues that ‘*Spare Rib* must decide why it is in existence and change its emphasis to suit the majority of subscribers, who [she] imagine[s] will be involved in the same campaigns as [herself]’ (SR 216: 5). She asserts:

[SR] needs to stop ignoring the experiences of ordinary British women of all classes and races and include articles written by feminists with a variety of political beliefs, discussing topical issues from different perspectives. I sense that your political bias and emphasis on international struggles is alienating women in this country and making them feel as though their everyday experiences are valueless and not news-worthy [sic]. (SR 216: 5)

The exhaustion of a certain kind of politics in the changing face of the WLM and British society, and a choice of topic many readers did not entirely identify with, led to a sense of exclusion among British women readers. SR was not distributed abroad – women from Chile, for example, were therefore unlikely to buy it, and SR’s shift in focus thus did not generate any new readers living outside of Britain. Although SR engaged with an increasingly important topic, internationalism, it lost sight of its readership.

The three patterns that I identified as undercurrents in each of my chapters are also present in the final years of the magazine. The issue begins with the Plan of Action series and the focus on internationalism, and within the space of approximately one year, it had ‘sparked off a dialogue’ – or mushroomed – into an area of debate. In addition, SR employed dialogical tactics in trying to negotiate the issue. They started off by inviting a number of women to represent different

perspectives at the forum, and, whilst not addressing readers' questions about the removal of the magazine's tag, they did put forth their agenda to readers and make public that there was an ongoing 'dialogue' around the issue – both evident in the pages of the magazine, and, as they indicated, 'elsewhere.' Finally, the 'shelf life' of the issue was apparent as reader interest in the 'Plan of Action' series peaked and this time, being coupled with the financial troubles of the magazine, petered out with disastrous effect.

Indeed, the financial issues of the magazine cannot be overlooked. It can be argued that it was the loss of reader interest, coupled with resultant financial issues, set against the backdrop of the change in political agenda, which ultimately led to the magazine's closure. As early as August 1987 *SR* reported a 'funding crisis.' The end of the Greater London Council (GLC) was 'taking its toll' on several publications. *SR* wrote that 'OUTWRITE women's newspaper [...] suspended publication until the autumn, in the hope of raising funds in the meantime' and that 'at the time of going to press WOMEN'S REVIEW's future was uncertain, as they have been refused funding by the London Boroughs Grants Unit, the body supposed to replace GLC funding' (capitalisation as in original, *SR* 181: 54). A few years later, by the early 1990s, *SR* had begun including requests for monetary donations in its magazine issues, explaining in their October 1990 editorial that due to having 'to compete in a marketplace of Murdoch's money and *Elle's* offices and *Mirabella's* numbers' they simply had 'no money' (*SR* 217: 4). *SR* caught a glimmer of hope when they were given a 'trial' period by WHSmith, but their financial situation did not improve. From about 1990 till the final issue in the summer of 1993, *SR* therefore combined issues: January and February now comprised one issue instead of two, and this pairing continued throughout the year, resulting in a yearly production of just six issues in comparison to their previous twelve. This helped to sustain the magazine for a while, but it was ultimately not enough.

Throughout my thesis and in this conclusion, I have investigated how *SR* magazine negotiated and presented issues that were a source of debate within the WLM and beyond. I showed the many difficulties that the magazine endured, and demonstrated how many of those difficulties were a result of *SR's* particular way of managing topics of controversy. The debates I chose to examine were key concerns within the British context during the 1970s, '80s, and early '90s and beyond. Analysing several such debates made clear the extent to which the magazine's handling of the debates emerged as a pattern. The patterns discussed in this conclusion, as well as the example of the final years of the magazine, reveal that, broadly speaking, *SR* dealt with a combination of ideological concerns and practical issues which it could ultimately not resolve.

However, despite these setbacks, I want to end by celebrating what the magazine did do. It is true that there were other publications from the late 1970s that did better, such as *Feminist Review*, in terms of surviving to the present. But, unlike *SR*, such journals were academic, and did not engage with these issues in a similar manner. To be specific, these publications did not discuss processes, personal views, or collective editorial differences in public ways, and did not engage in a sustained dialogical relationship with their readers. At the same time *SR's* ability to

survive even whilst it made its inner workings public was truly impressive. The magazine managed to survive for two decades during a time when enormous changes were happening throughout the world and in Britain. It was the longest running and most influential Women's Liberation Magazine in the UK, and it did a remarkable job in its ability to sustain itself for the duration that it did. This is especially true when considering the dissolution of other similar publications of the time such as the Merseyside Women's Paper, which lasted for much shorter periods.

Perhaps it can be argued that *SR*'s longevity was precisely an effect of *SR* being so open to differing opinions, so willing to make changes and transform themselves again and again that prolonged the existence of the magazine. In the end, the issues were not reconcilable. Yet, it never gave up on its impetus to reach all women and promote liberation. As such, it remains an outstanding example of women's activism and political debates from the period associated with the WLM.



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