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## Purpose, power and profit in feminist publishing: an introduction

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# Purpose, Power and Profit in Feminist Publishing: An Introduction

*Abstract: Introducing a special issue about the business aspects of feminist and women's movement publishing, this article surveys the perennial tensions between cultural and political aims and the economic models necessary for sustainable operation. Addressing a range of beloved periodicals and book publishing ventures, including Spare Rib, Ms, Red Rag, Virago, Des Femmes, Honno, Sheba, Bogle L'Ouverture, Onlywomen Outwrite, The F-Word, The Vagenda, Feminist Frequency, Feministing, The Establishment, Crunk Feminist Collective and Cassava Republic Press, I identify a shared scene of hopeful activist enterprise within a complex ecology embracing the market, public funding, philanthropy as well as the feminist 'gift economy' of voluntary work and bartering. I argue that, where ventures failed, they nevertheless generally acted as socially responsible businesses, producing publications with a long tail of value which includes and exceeds the economic. I apply this lens to the case of Women: A Cultural Review itself, revealing its former incarnation as a feminist arts magazine Women's Review, which ran from 1985 to 1987, and the way its meaning, purpose and value has been preserved under new ownership. This raises general questions about the business of academic publishing, university markets and the paradoxes of platforms which enable protest about the terms of their production.*

*Keywords: journals, academic publishing, Women's Review, Feminist Review*

*Spare Rib, Red Rag, Outwrite, Our Bodies Ourselves, Finding a Voice, Fear of Flying, The Women's Room, The Color Purple, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', The Joys of Motherhood, Testament of Youth, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit,*

*Staying Alive, Tipping the Velvet, Fun Home, Gal-Dem and Girl, Woman, Other*: feminist texts can change lives. But the magic of such cultural transformation depends on a prosaic conversation that goes beyond writers and readers—where publishers, agents, distributors, publicists, fundraisers and investors get talking.

The love of words and design, the belief in their power, partly explains why women go into publishing—glossies, photos, handbag novels, coffee table anthologies, beloved reference books, or zines, cassettes, CDs, streams, songs and stylish rebel girls in animations or performances. Estimates suggest the publishing workforce is around three-quarters women, and it is to be celebrated that women now hold (just) over half of senior management or executive leadership positions. But the gender pay gap in the major publishing houses favours men by as much as 29.69 per cent, reflecting that women still disproportionately work in marketing, rights and lower level editorial rather than executive, technology and finance.<sup>1</sup> And as the recent manifesto for Black women's equal opportunities restated, many don't get there at all. Margaret Busby, co-founder of Allison & Busby in 1967 and the first Black woman publishing director in the UK, established Greater Access to Publishing to accelerate inclusion of BAME women in the industry in 1987, with Lennie Goodings of Virago and Ros de Lanerolle of The Women's Press. Nearly thirty years later, she despaired at having to repeat the message: Black women are still under-represented in the trade (Ellams 2015).

Setting up magazines, websites and publishing operations, has also seemed natural for activists: a way to work for, and even lead, cultural change. Many in the 1970s women's liberation movement, Black power, new left, lesbian and gay liberation fronts explicitly defined this as seizing the means of cultural reproduction. Eileen Cadman, Gail Chester and Agnes Pivot in their 1981 study of UK feminist print culture wittily expressed this as 'Rolling Our Own'. At the height of independent feminist publishing and media production they listed over 40 presses, dozens of magazines and bookshops, distributors and agents. Their interviews with feminists in publishing revealed another purpose, that of economic autonomy, where their politics had 'made them question their working relationship with men in this society and that without financial control it is impossible to succeed in developing a feminist enterprise' (Cadman, Chester, & Pivot 1981: 5).

Yet Cadman, Chester and Pivot also pinpointed the dilemma for many activists:

Feminist publishing, more than any other aspect of the book production process, seems to epitomise most clearly the problems and choices which face feminists confronted with a society which is both patriarchal

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/23/gender-pay-gap-figures-reveal-big-publishings-great-divide>. The Publishers Association's 2019 survey states that 53 per cent of executive positions are held by women and the workforce is 13 per cent BAME. However, 18.8 per cent attended an independent or fee-paying school. See <https://www.publishers.org.uk/publications/diversity-survey-of-the-publishing-workforce-2019/> (accessed 28 August 2020).

and capitalistic, in order to go about the business of disseminating feminist ideas. (Cadman et al. 1981: 29)

The Business of Women's Words (BOWW)—a three year research project at the universities of Sussex and Cambridge, partnered with the British Library—set out to analyse precisely such problems and choices, as feminist publishers struggled with working in unequal social contexts that were also racist, classist, ableist and London-centric. We aim to make sense of the ways that activist-entrepreneurs in the 1970s and 1980s creatively used business to promote the transformative aims of women's movements, even as they protested capitalist ideologies turbo-charging under a Thatcherist New Right. We also explore the insider-activism of women working within mainstream businesses, led by professional organizations like Women in Publishing (WiP) and Women in Media.<sup>2</sup> We believe that finding positive examples of where feminists have reconciled purpose with profit reveals a hidden side of movement stories which to date have focused on identity, campaigning and organization.

The papers in this special issue grew out of a BOWW conference in 2019, in which our team joined with others to fill these blanks, stimulating conversations across the humanities, business, journalism and digital media. Lucy Delap's contribution, 'Feminist Business Praxis and *Spare Rib* Magazine', sets out many questions from the perspective of the largest circulating (30,000 at its peak) Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) magazine. Delap explains 'business praxis' as the practical morality or wisdom involved in attempting to 'fuse economic success with political commitment and cultural visibility'. While *Spare Rib* quickly encountered financial difficulties (reflecting, partly, its refusal of sexist advertising and insufficient launch-capital), it remains an icon of commerce in political service and a major achievement in design, journalism, argument, photography. Moreover, it was an important marketplace for feminist business advertisers, such as the Lincolnshire-based women's Hen House, offering lovely accommodation and creative workshops. Indeed, as digitized by curator Polly Russell and colleagues at the British Library, in consultation with members of the former editorial collective, *Spare Rib* has gained a new global readership.<sup>3</sup>

The UK's social movement business ventures, as Delap notes, were never as developed as in North America, unsurprising given the USA's 'cultural ethic of entrepreneurialism', as Melanie Waters describes in 'Risky Ms.-ness? The Business of Women's Liberation Periodicals in the 1970s'. While *Spare Rib* was launched on a shoestring £2,000, *Ms.* debuted a few months earlier with the financial backing of Warner Communications. Co-founded by *New York* magazine columnist Gloria Steinem, *McCalls*

2 See <https://www.womeninpublishinghistory.org.uk/content/category/themes/the-beginning-of-women-in-publishing> (accessed 28 August 2020).

3 Sadly, this digitized resource had to be removed after Britain left the EU in 2021, as British copyright law does not currently offer the same protection for 'orphan works' which account for much of the resource's content. The British Library curated *Spare Rib* website remains available, however, with articles and images from the magazine and contextual images. See: [www.bl.uk/spare-rib](http://www.bl.uk/spare-rib).

editor Patricia Carbine, and public relations executive Elizabeth Forsling Harris, *Ms.* felt more able to debate itself as an exercise in ‘humanizing business’ as well as politics, and as Waters puts it, ‘monetise the affective labour of feminism’. This allowed it to survive its crisis in the 1980s, including impressively refusing advertising altogether as it moved entirely to a subscription model. *Ms.* has never made a profit, but Waters asks us to consider whether we should broaden our criteria of a ‘successful business’ in feminist contexts, for example as ‘... a catalyst for political mobilisation; an inspiration for—and supporter of—feminist enterprise; a voice of resistance; and an agent of change, both within and beyond the publishing industry’.

By these criteria, of course many movement productions could be considered successful—even if they never saw themselves as such. *Red Rag*, the subject of Victoria Bazin’s article ‘*Red Rag* Magazine, Feminist Economics and the Domestic Labour Pains of Liberation’, was an example of a women’s liberation magazine more akin to a political pamphlet and vehemently anti-capitalist. It produced only 15 issues and 2 pamphlets between 1972 and 1980, launching at 7 pence (significantly cheaper than *Spare Rib* or *Shrew*, the London WLM newsletter).<sup>4</sup> But it punched above its weight as a vehicle for public intellectual debate about the very ideas of what employment could and should be, produced by ‘Marxist feminist’ (no hyphen) women infused by Communist theory but highly critical of Party structures and diktats. As Beatrix Campbell, a founder member puts it: ‘For my part *Red Rag* was the arena in which working out [...] what a feminist economic strategy might be’.<sup>5</sup> Bazin illuminates how feminist thinking on the impact of hidden, unpaid, domestic labour became folded into the process of its own production, with children playing in the office and providing drawings for the magazine itself. Work management processes inclusive of domestic and emotional work raises another criterion for defining feminist business.

We might ask whether breaking away from the Communist Party of Great Britain deprived *Red Rag* of funds: the CPGB supported its own feminist magazine, *Link* (1973–84). There was no question it would turn to (or arguably attract) advertising revenue. Without investment however, it struggled to satisfy its initial ‘Declaration of Intent’ to be a magazine ‘for all women who work—in factories, shops, offices, schools and in their homes’ (1972a: 2). The cover price could never compensate. But it is typical of the purism so characteristic of these enterprises, where socialism infused all flavours of feminism. It was arguably easier to scale up while maintaining ethical principles in book publishing, given that magazines depend upon advertising to survive. But where 10 per cent or so of books make the real profits in the trade market (Thompson 2012: 212), feminists had to be careful to promote less popular but perhaps more

<sup>4</sup> *Red Rag* has been digitised. See [http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/redrag/index\\_frame.htm](http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/redrag/index_frame.htm) (accessed 28 August 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Beatrix Campbell, *Sisterhood and After* oral history, transcript p. 87/track 5.

challenging reads, while not exploiting their star writers. Naturally it was exciting and a financial relief to break into the best-seller lists but this could have very paradoxical effects, particularly where Black, lesbian or other minority writers were tokenistically hyped by a mainstream, white-dominated press, which felt in one Black-British writer Joan Riley's words, 'momentarily gratifying but actually damaging' (quoted in Gerrard 1989: 47).

My own piece looks at a tricky balancing act by Virago Press, the WLM's most conventionally successful feminist publishing business. Established in 1972, incorporated as a limited company in 1973, and still going strong, Lennie Goodings puts it that

from the beginning, Virago has wanted to prove that the business of publishing books by women is a profitable enterprise and that the very existence of Virago shows the world that a feminist business run by women would work. (Goodings 2020: 38)

But as I show in 'The Making of *Mamatoto*: Virago, the Body Shop and Feminist Business Strategy', it suffered alongside others from the late 1980s because of increased competition in deregulated bookselling, conglomeration and merging of the book trade. Having regained its independence as a company in 1987, but facing renewed pressures to satisfy investors, Virago sought business partners with distribution opportunities as well as bulk purchase agreements and ideas for products with wider appeal. I investigate Virago's problematic deal with the Body Shop in publishing *Mamatoto* in 1991, a book of 'birthlore' to complement a range of toiletries of the same name. *Mamatoto* is Swahili for mother and baby, and 'mamatoto' products exoticized non-Western mothers for the projected white middle class 'mama market', the Body Shop's main customer base. Yet in going deeper into the ethical business practices of the Body Shop—recently revived in its registration as one of the few UK's B-Corps—alongside Virago's parallel deal with Oxfam, I also celebrate the strategy of alliances between progressive, women-led enterprises, where best practices can encourage each other.

Clever partnerships and striving to realize the promises of corporate social responsibility is one tool for doing feminist business. Another is to draw on community donations or more substantial philanthropic funding, though such efforts can be even more sensitive than profit-based enterprise. Bibia Pavard, in 'The business is political': *Des femmes* publishing house and the question of power in the French Women's Liberation Movement (1972–1979) explores an infamous case of philanthropic abuse, as well as legal appropriation of movement ideas when Des



Femmes trademarked ‘women’s liberation’. Yet Des Femmes was responsible for publishing many of the best beloved French feminists, including H el ene Cixous, globally influential writers like Brazilian Clarice Lispector and Egyptian Nawal el Saadawi, and innovative audiobooks with the idea of making books compatible with domestic labour for ‘double-burdened’ women. A less contentious but related example of feminist gift-giving is where Silver Moon Bookshop, a bustling feminist business established in 1984, lent a financial hand to an unprofitable but vital initiative Feminist Audiobooks, launched the same year for women with sight-impairments.<sup>6</sup>

Grant funding is another important part of the alternative business story. D-M Withers, in ‘Honno Press and Welsh cultural nationalism: cultural policy as insulation from the free market’, shows how subsidy from the Welsh Books Council enables Honno, established in 1986 as a community co-operative, to continue as the only remaining independent women-centred publisher originating from the networks of British women’s liberation. Withers brings to life what is possible in different policy contexts, comparing Honno with Sheba Feminist Press, a not-for-profit worker’s collective of a similar size, renowned for its commitments to working class and minority women’s writing and employment, but which closed in 1994 when local authority funds were withdrawn. As will be seen, many feminist enterprises crumbled in the late 1980s and early 1990s after the demise of the Greater London Council (GLC). Creating this Special Issue during the release of ‘emergency’ arts funding during the Covid-19 pandemic, we hope that new political will to support the arts through state funding will endure.

More often, it is an ironic case of finding oneself moved from market exclusion to market exploitation—as the US-academic network Race in the Marketplace eloquently puts it.<sup>7</sup> Sheer resilience here plays a part. Gail Chester, an independent scholar-activist and publisher, is perhaps a case in point, as is her wry commentary on the trajectory of her own book in ‘From self-publishing collective to multinational corporation: the publishing history of *In Other Words—Writing as a Feminist*’. *In Other Words*, an anthology edited by Chester with Sigrid Nielsen, writer and co-founder of Scotland’s first LGB bookshop Lavender Menace in 1982, was ‘for all women writers, professional, amateur or aspiring, in which forty women talk about writing and the part it plays in their lives’. It followed *Rolling Our Own: Women as Printers, Publishers and Distributors* (1981), cited above, and originating similarly in autonomous hubs of women’s self-education. But in its current pricey Routledge reissue, Chester argues, it has been ‘repackaged and commodified for the benefit of a multinational corporation’. *In Other Words* itself advised:

6 Kirsten Hearn, *Sisterhood and After* oral history, transcript pp. 69–70/track 3; Jane Cholmeley, personal communication to the author.

7 See <https://www.rimnetwork.net/aboutus/> (accessed 28 August 2020).



feminists need to find a balance between taking the opportunities commercial publishers can offer and maintaining the small feminist presses. For those of us who come from so-called ‘minority’ groups, it is a matter of our very survival. (Chester & Nielsen 1987: 15)

Francesca Sobande, in ‘By Us, For Us? The Narratives of Black Women in Past and Present British Feminist Publishing’ also proposes that publishing for Black women is part of a much wider existential struggle, not only to be heard but to define the terms of representation outside of racist perspectives, including from white feminists. Here too, endurance and autonomy have been vital. Sobande recounts a long history of creative activist enterprise, from Bogle L’Overture Black Power publishers to *Outwrite* internationalist newspaper, zine-making and contemporary digital forms of ‘do it yourself (DIY)’ and ‘do it together (DIT)’. Again, there are precipitously fine lines to walk. Sobande outlines tensions between gaining recognition online versus trolling of Black feminists and the fuelling of mainstream media activity which lacks a Black feminist position. Black women’s struggle is also painfully exploited by brands in ‘woke-washing’, flattening social justice symbols into mere fodder for (white) individualist consumption (Sobande 2019).

In this context, Kaitlynn Mendes’ ‘Fempreneurs and Digital Feminist Publishing’ offers some hope we can refocus so that, in her term, ‘fempreneurs’ sometimes can make ends meet against the odds in digital ventures. ‘Brand activism’, she shows, is not always devoid of political benefit. Talking with the founders of a range of popular feminist blogs and vlogs including *The F-Word*, *The Vagenda*, *Feminist Frequency*, *Feministing*, *The Establishment* and *Crunk Feminist Collective* she identifies their business models and methods in a world of free content. Venture capital and organized philanthropy play a minor part, but most operate through individual donations, advertisements, public speaking, or the sale of merchandise. A few are registered not-for-profit companies. Admittedly, most are subsidized by other jobs which may also stimulate them—contributors are often academics, journalists or non-profit sector administrators by day—and it is now unusual to be able to pay writers. Moreover, they face new challenges of online harassment and loss of records when ventures fold. But we also see a different side to the problem of commodification and alienation, for they are also the means of voicing, critiquing, developing a range of political counter-publics, accessible activism and skills-development for participants, as writers, speakers, campaigners and designers.

Hope also persists in the business itself. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf and Simidele Dosekun in sparkling conversation explore Bakare-Yusuf’s Cassava Republic Press, founded in 2006 to publish affordable editions of quality African

writing. Dosekun (formerly managing editor and chief operating officer at Kachifo Limited, publisher of Farafina Books in Lagos) and Bakare-Yusuf also discuss what it means to run and brand a feminist business today when feminism is said to be ‘popular’, shining a light on where the cultural and creative industries in particular can still be a politically satisfying employment and enterprise, for women, feminists and social justice activists more widely.

Telling this story highlights the continuities of feminist publishing as both activist and business activity, where the fragility of the digital record emphasizes the need to document and connect the archive. It is pleasing therefore to feature two ‘archival reviews’ in this issue. Gillian Murphy, Curator of Equality, Rights and Citizenship at LSE Library, opens the papers of Onlywomen Press, another small venture nonetheless legendary for its literary list, longevity (1974–2008) and single-minded politics. “‘Balancing on a razor’s edge’”: the running of the radical feminist lesbian Onlywomen Press’ reveals again the crucial role of grant-funding but also Onlywomen’s unusual printing and publishing combination, aiming to break down barriers between artist, tradesperson and consumer, while also upskilling. Polly Russell, Director of the Eccles Centre at the British Library, also offers a unique view in ‘Curating women’s business’. Russell reflects on how archival practices could be developed to further connect and communicate radical business histories including through linking with professional and social movement networks. Discussing the creative use of archival materials from Virago, *Spare Rib* and other feminist publishing in a digital map, podcasts, schools’ workshops, and a major public exhibition at the British Library, she considers the archive’s role as bulwark against market-forces.

The landscape of activist enterprise we uncover here is part of a wider ‘business turn’ in literary study, interestingly echoed in a ‘cultural turn’ within the business school. This reflects no doubt the pressing fingers of financialization on all aspects of society, alongside the more prosaic demand for novelty within academia. We do however see ourselves within an exciting community of thought. Eleanor Careless’s review essay maps some of the other excellent contributions upon whose work we build, from Miranda Garrett and Zoe Thomas’ *Suffrage and the Arts: Visual Culture, Politics and Enterprise* (2019) to Joshua Clark Davis’ comparison of Black activist bookshops, hippie headshops, feminist businesses and wholefood developers in North America (2017) and Angela Smith’s *Re-Reading Spare Rib* (2017). See *Red Women’s Workshop: Feminist Posters 1974–1990* (2016), by the artist collective Jess Baines, Anne Robinson, Susan Mackie and Prue Stevenson, shows how important visual as well as verbal enterprise has been for activists and, with Lennie Goodings’

*A Bite of the Apple: A Life with Books, Writers and Virago* (2020), give us first-hand accounts of the work of feminist business. As Careless says, the testimony of those who walked the line is vital.

### ***Where We Tell This Story: The Long History of Women: A Cultural Review***

The articles in this issue show a greater crossover of activist with commercial activity than is commonly appreciated in movement histories. They testify to hopeful enterprise within a complex ecology embracing the market, public funding, philanthropy as well as the feminist ‘gift economy’ of voluntary work and bartering. Where ventures failed, which was often, they nevertheless acted as socially responsible businesses, producing publications with a long tail of value which includes and exceeds the financial. This journal itself is a case in point. For those who are attached to *Women: A Cultural Review* (W:CR) as a scholarly feminist journal, or indeed, those who simply see it as a showcase for their wares, it may be thought-provoking to learn of its own origins as *Women’s Review* (WR), an arts magazine immersed in the UK women’s movements of the 1980s.

Brainchild of Helen Carr and Deborah Philips, part-time Extra-Mural lecturers and journalists, WR was inspired by the inaugural Feminist Book Fair at London’s Covent Garden in June 1984 and the following ‘Feminist Book Week’ involving some 40 venues around the country (Editor 1984).

Helen Carr and I were both doing our PhDs [...] both teaching women’s writing classes. And there was this real passion for women’s writing around at the time and [...] Helen said, ‘Why don’t we have something like the [American] *Women’s Review of Books*?’<sup>8</sup> and I said, ‘Yeah, why don’t we?’ And I said, ‘Helen, if you look at your address book, we know an awful lot of the most interesting women journalists and academics around, we could do it’. And it was also the beginnings of the eighties and Thatcherism and there was all this talk about enterprise and setting up your own small business. And we thought right, we can try.<sup>9</sup>

Joined by Nicci Gerrard, with a background in literature and journalism, they mined their bursting address books for a telephone tree fundraising drive, generating £20,524 sufficient to register as a Limited Company, within which the ‘Women’s Review Cooperative Limited’ held a ‘golden share’ (Hardisty 1992: 152–3).<sup>10</sup> They also applied to the Greater

8 *The Women’s Review of Books* piloted in 1983. It was published by the Wellesley (College) Center for Research on Women. See <https://www.wcwnline.org/Research-Action-Report-Fall/Winter-2002/qa-with-linda-gardiner-editor-of-the-womens-review-of-books> (accessed 28 August 2020).

9 Deborah Philips, ‘The Women’s Liberation Movement’ Witness Workshop.

10 A golden share enables veto power.

London Enterprise Board, an investment agency within the GLC. Ken Worpole, Head of GLEB's Cultural Industries Unit was impressed with their unembarrassed 'sense of the marketplace' (Hardisty 1992: 67)—for example choosing a jazzier 'magazine' format over the newspaper-style of the *London Review of Books* (launched in 1979).<sup>11</sup> It aimed at those who might read *The Guardian*, *The Observer* but also *Cosmopolitan* (at that point with a circulation of 400,000), and the two-thirds of women notionally 'missing' from the readership of male-centred politically left weeklies (Hardisty 1992: 157–67). Worpole supported a £39 K grant, though they'd only asked for a loan. *New Statesman* magazine marketing manager Andrew Ryan was also convinced, agreeing to distribute the magazine and advising them on business planning.<sup>12</sup> The seven-strong cooperative moved into pleasant offices in Hackney, East London, and (eventually) paid themselves equally between £7–8 K per year (£8 K was the minimum permitted by GLEB, worth approximately £22 K in 2017), also adopting union rates for writers.<sup>13</sup> Tracey Brett fundraised and Wendy Kasabian oversaw production.<sup>14</sup>

Their first issue, November 1985, sported a cover drawing of a muscular leaping woman (by Tamara Capellero) and headlined with an article by Judith Williamson, author of *Decoding Advertisements* of 1976, which 'decoded' the victim/aggressor 'look' of female models. Debates about cover imagery were long and hard, including the decision to put Madonna on one cover (Issue 5). Its total of 21 issues, each 50 pages of A4, offered a quality range of features, fiction, poetry, film, visual arts, music, architecture, interviews, autobiography, 'notebook', letters and classifieds, and photographs, cartoons and illustrations, its graphic design modelled initially on mainstream women's magazines, and later, on the *New Statesman*. Book reviewing was themed such as Holiday Extra, Feminist Book Fortnight, Creative Accountancy, Dossier Français, Romance and a 'Top Ten' picked by well-known feminist cultural figures. Highlights included an interview with Margaret Atwood by novelist Emma Tennant, a review of the Thin Black Line exhibition curated by Lubaina Himid at the ICA and the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in 1985, a French feminist issue and a tribute to the then largely forgotten Modernist poet Mina Loy (Figure 1).

What distinguished *WR* was not only its crossover design and content, but its wish to present an inviting face of feminism at a time when women's movements were associated with fierce ideological division. Its inaugural editorial stated it would be 'open and divergent', 'a positive response to women's creativity'. Carr reiterated this in her oral history (2020), comparing its 'celebratory' approach to *Spare Rib's*

11 Janice Winship praised *Women's Review's* understanding of the role of visual pleasure in contrast to other movement publications, p. 159. Janice Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines*, London: Pandora, 1987.

12 The £39 K was from Greater London Council's Industry and Employment Department. They also received £4 K from Greater London Arts for contributors' costs; a rent grant from Hackney Economic Development Unit and the Department of Trade and Industry's Business Expansion Scheme's tax relief for investors of over £500 (Claire Hardisty, 'Women's Review 1984–1987', *Masters*, Middlesex, London, 1992, pp. 152–3).

13 Conversion using <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>.

14 Other members were designers Judy Crammond, Jo Hughes and Caroline Grimshaw, also Jane Ferret and unpaid advisor Beverly Stern. Their accountant, typically, was a man: Paul Beber, whom Andrew Ryan put them in touch with.



Figure 1. *Women's Review* covers, including the first issue (collection of Helen Carr © Margareta Jolly).

campaigning one.<sup>15</sup> Isobel Armstrong has spoken about the value of 'enjoyment'.<sup>16</sup> But though women's culture was invoked as a unifying force, its editors were steeped in structuralism, psychoanalysis and political discussions which recognized the distinct interests and needful alliances between women of different classes, races, sexualities, ideologies, nations. Philips described 'the moment of *Women's Review*' as 'wanting to take the discussions that were happening in consciousness raising, that were happening in academic groups and to take it out there, to make it a magazine that was sold in WH Smith'.<sup>17</sup>

*WR* also promoted creative women through its function as a review-based magazine: some 283 books were reviewed (Hardisty 1992: 41). The Women in Publishing lobby group demonstrated the commercial value of this in their 1989 *Reviewing the Reviews* report which showed the terrible imbalance of publicity given to men and women writers (Gerrard 1989: 43–4). *WR* indeed received a WiP 'Pandora Award' for significant contribution to the publishing industry, for this work. But it also nurtured an intellectually critical approach to women's arts which arguably generates a longer form of cultural and aesthetic value. Philips commented on the difference from *City Limits*, where she'd previously worked:

15 This contrast was also made at the time. See Susan Ardill and Sue O'Sullivan, 'Dizzy Pace in Women's Publishing', *New Statesman*, 25 October 1985, p. 12.

16 Isobel Armstrong, personal communication to the author.

17 Deborah Philips, 'The Women's Liberation Movement' Witness Workshop.



because women's writing was still on the margins it was terribly hard to be critical, [...] you would read this terribly sentimental novel and think actually, I don't think this is great, but [...] you didn't want to say so because it was one of the few women's novels being reviewed that week.<sup>18</sup>

*WR* might have felt satisfied that David Lodge made his feminist lecturer a *WR* reader (admittedly she was also a naive specialist of the industrial novel) in his novel *Nice Work* (1988: 50–3).

Yet, as with so many other feminist enterprises, business expertise was stretched and the magazine only lasted 21 months. The collective soon discovered the limits of a feminist advertising market. (Sarah Baxter, who came from Virago to work with them in 1987, explained that Virago had no need to pay for advertising when *WR* reviewed its books anyway; the GLC, a principal advertiser and source of support, was abolished in 1986.) The low pay (equal across staff, as per the terms of their grant) did not attract an experienced marketing manager and they did not undertake planned market research (Hardisty 1992: 159). They were both seriously under-capitalised and over-extended, despite reaching a circulation figure of 10,000 and a subscription base of 2,070 in 1986 (Hardisty 1992: 176).<sup>19</sup>

But Carr, for whom *WR* remained a passion, pounded doors for new backers, striking lucky with Kim Scott Walwyn, a rising star honoured today with an annual prize celebrating exceptional women in publishing. Scott Walwyn had just been appointed OUP editorial director for academic humanities and social sciences publishing and was a feminist with an innovative commissioning style. She proposed reincarnation as an academic journal, renamed *Women: A Cultural Review*, published three times a year rather than monthly.<sup>20</sup> She also asked Carr to work with Isobel Armstrong as lead editor, since Armstrong, a former *WR* contributor, could bring the (then rare for women) experience and contacts of a long-standing professorship. Carr and Armstrong did the administration initially, eventually contributing some of their modest fee to hiring Barbara Rosenbaum as (part-time) editorial administrator in 1998; Laura Marcus (modernism and life writing) and Alison Mark (psychoanalysis) joined as reviews editor and editorial assistant in 1990 and 1993 respectively, later moving to full editors.<sup>21</sup> Poet and academic Deryn Rees-Jones took over from Armstrong on her retirement in 2017. Carr had struggled to escape an upbringing in a patriarchal Plymouth Brethren community and terror of a housewife destiny, but in the 1990s finally finished her doctorate, enjoyed her children (who both helped out with *WR*), got her first full time academic post aged 54 at Goldsmiths (where she eventually became

18 Deborah Philips, 'The Women's Liberation Movement' Witness Workshop. Philips made this point at the time, in the well-attended Feminist Book Fair meeting 'Who Reviews Feminist Books—and Why?', a meeting described with some frustration by Susan Ardill in *Spare Rib*. Susan Ardill, 'Reports on the Bookfair: Reviewing the Reviewers', *Spare Rib, Undefined* 146, 1984, p. 28.

19 One American reviewer concluded that 'for most libraries this lively monthly will not be an essential purchase, but it deserves careful consideration by all women's studies collections and libraries supporting research on British mores and culture' American Library Association, 'Choice Review', *Publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries* 24, 1986, November, p. 445.

20 It now publishes four issues per year.

21 Many others of course have supported the journal including a stellar advisory board, Trudi Tate as Reviews Editor from 1997 and Clara Jones since 2019.

head of English and Pro-Vice Chancellor).<sup>22</sup> The journal's success in securing a place within the academy seems to parallel her own.<sup>23</sup> Simultaneously, the transformation of *WR* into *W:CR* measures a more general shift in the relationship between feminist purpose and profit. The idea for *WR* took shape in 1984, a marvellous, even mystical year for feminist enterprise, supported by a left wing public cultural industry apparatus on the one hand and the Conservative government's Enterprise Allowance Scheme and other small business-friendly measures on the other.<sup>24</sup> *W:CR* by contrast appeared in 1990, the first of three years of economic recession, as simultaneously, John Major's Conservative government shifted support from start-ups to proven winners. Many of the essays in this issue note the challenges of global neoliberalism, privatization and financialization, focalized in the London Stock Exchange's Big Bang and the deregulation of the financial markets in 1986. New 'big box' chain stores, along with the collapse of the 'Net Book Agreement' squeezed out the alternative independent bookshops, crucial to the sale of feminist publications.

Here, the university sector, long a lifeforce for social movements, proved an important and sometimes critical economic haven. Some activists feared that an adult education-based, public Women's Studies, was 'disciplined' into exclusive circles and languages, accompanied too by worries of a depoliticizing move into Gender Studies (Messer-Davidow 2002). Yet the sector was expanding: former polytechnics became universities in 1992; New Labour in 1999 set a target of 50 per cent of young people going to university, reached in 2017–18, 57 per cent of which were female—though with significant differences in completion and success rate for minorities, and the challenges of tuition-fee debt.<sup>25</sup> *W:CR* is a case in point, retaining its feminist vision (and its name) within the shelter of an academic community. Carr mused in 2020:

we're very lucky because we did realise even by 2000 things had changed and you could publish something with an emphasis on gender almost anywhere. You know, it was accepted that that was one of the categories you had to look at, so it didn't actually need to be in a journal with women on the title. But we seemed to still be offering something.

Perhaps what they offer—along with the deconstruction of 'woman' as an essential category in 1990s feminism, including in *W:CR* itself—is an enduring interest in 'women' as a political constituency, within a broadly socialist, intersectional, anti-racist, above all, cultural framework. Put differently, its scholarly market has protected and even enhanced the cultural value which *WR* had begun to generate.

22 Helen Carr, *The Business of Women's Words* oral history, transcript p. 75/track 2.

23 Deborah Philips is now Professor of English Literature at the University of Brighton and a member of the *W:CR* Consultative Group, and Nicci Gerrard writes bestselling novels with her husband Sean French as Nicci French, and won the Orwell Prize in 2016 for her campaigning journalism on the treatment of dementia.

24 *Women's Review* benefitted from the Business Expansion Scheme's tax relief for investors of over £500 (Hardisty, *Women's Review 1984–1987*, pp. 152–3). The Enterprise Allowance Scheme (1982–91), enabled participants to draw unemployment benefits whilst working to establish a business, if they could demonstrate £1,000 of capital. See <https://www.gov.uk/hmrc-internal-manuals/venture-capital-schemes-manual/vcm2020> (accessed 28 August 2020).

25 See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-49841620> (accessed 28 August 2020).



The symbolic commitment to continuity can be seen in the first issue (1990) which opened with writer and *Red Rag* Marxist feminist collective member Beatrix Campbell conversing with Bridget Smith, who had joined the *WR* collective for its last months, then a teacher at Thames Polytechnic. Reading these ‘two generations in dialogue’ today is striking for its similarity to contemporary arguments over ‘pure’ versus ‘fluid’ versions of feminism, identity and sexuality: Campbell admires the ‘bottle’ of the younger generation, Smith the legacy of the pioneers. But we might also view this as a continuity of brand and market. The interview format, alongside ongoing inclusion of activist voices, creative features, archival discussions, review space and perhaps especially, listings, pushed against the conventional academic journal. In addition to rigorous academic articles, *W:CR* has featured opinion pieces by such movement stalwarts as Lola Young, Selma James, Pragna Patel, alongside formative intelligentsia including Juliet Mitchell, Donna Haraway, Gayatri Spivak, Rosi Bradotti. Its Editorial Board included former *WR* contributors like Gillian Beer, Marilyn Butler, Juliet Stevenson, Lynne Segal and Helen Taylor, and interviewees like Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood.

Also enduring has been the mix of popular culture with literary classics and philosophy, including an interest in the role of the magazine itself, from Claire Rayner (‘Writing for Women’s Magazines’) to Melanie Waters and Victoria Bazin’s special issue ‘Feminist Periodical Culture: From Suffrage to Second Wave’ (2016) (Bazin & Waters 2016; Rayner 1991). Costs might have restricted the use of images, but traces of the original graphic design can be seen in the logo and layout. (The ‘handwritten’ W playfully crossed out the straight font of ‘Review’, in the original masthead) (Hardisty 1992: 131). The twenty-first anniversary issue, in 2010, featured contributors writing autobiographically about their ‘Desert Island Texts’.<sup>26</sup> Its editorial explained the continuities with its predecessor in terms which also reaffirmed commitment to the Women’s Liberation Movement:

*Women’s Review* had been set up to celebrate and explore women’s cultural and artistic contributions, particularly to the contemporary scene. *Women*, which came into being, as we noted in the first issue, on the twentieth anniversary of the first Women’s Liberation Conference in Oxford, continued and broadened this exploration of the role and representation of gender and sexuality in arts and culture. *Women* has gone on, as we promised then, to analyse and lead debates on many aspects of the theory and politics of sexual difference, in such areas as literature, history, the visual arts, psychoanalysis, law, film and education. (Armstrong, Carr, Marcus, & Mark 2010)

<sup>26</sup> They dedicated the issue to Scott Walwyn (who died young in 2002).

One way to appreciate progress against their aims is to compare *W:CR* with *Feminist Review* (*FR*), one of the UK's first Women's Studies academic journals (with *Women's Studies International Quarterly* and *m/f*). *FR* was established by a collective of scholar-activists in 1978 with a mission to 'to develop the theory of Women's Liberation and debate the political perspectives and strategy of the movement' and 'to be a forum for work in progress and current research and debates in Women's Studies' (Feminist Review Collective 1979). *FR* wrote to *W:CR* in 1990 to say 'we were a bit taken aback to find ourselves acknowledged in your first editorial for our "sociological perspective"', claiming its own sense of contributing to 'an understanding of culture in the broadest sense' and engaging in 'the whole problematic notion of a feminist cultural politics'. 'Where we differ, perhaps, is over the idea of a "women's culture". As our own title suggests we believe that the experience of being women is not in itself enough to unify us and may indeed divide us' (Feminist Review Collective 1990). Looking back on content today, *W:CR* in fact has consistently covered diverse texts, perspectives and the politics of culture, locally and transnationally, in ways arguably not so different from *FR*. However *FR* was right to suggest a difference from their own ongoing attention to theories and sociologies of identity, coalition, political struggles within and across feminisms. Gail Lewis and Avtar Brah have written about that journal's development, including its principled (and challenging) diversification of its editorial collective in the late 1980s to more consistently include the perspectives of women of colour and global feminisms (Brah & Clini 2017; Lewis 2005).<sup>27</sup> Its current 'Aims and Scope' declares 'Challenges of race, class and sexuality have been central to the development of the journal'.<sup>28</sup>

*W:CR*'s editorial group has changed much less. Some might say that cultural homogeneity of class, race, sexuality has underpinned its 'celebratory' approach, albeit its diverse board and consultative group. My view, however, is that to properly assess the offer of *W:CR*, as with all the periodicals and publishers discussed in this Special Issue, we need to consider the business model which has sustained it. *WR* was attempting to appeal to a middlebrow market of art-loving women. *FR*'s likely readers reflected instead activist-intellectuals already interested in movement debates, perhaps more akin to *Spare Rib*'s core customers. Both publications were initially centred on white middle-class constituents and both have changed over time with dedicated effort. Ideals of a wide cross-class, cross-racial readership are always very difficult to materialize but will be affected by whether the strategy is commercial, educational, general or niche. As scholarly journals, both *FR* and *W:CR* reflect readerships determined largely by the slowly diversifying academic market and the state of

27 See also Gail Chester in this issue and Catherine Hall, *Sisterhood and After oral history*, transcript pp. 71–5/track 2. These struggles to fulfil ideals and diversify in all respects continue, in 2020 notably linked to the challenges of academic labour and publishing.

28 Statement published at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/description/FR> (accessed 28 August 2020).

29 Rates taken from *W:CR*, Volume 2, Issue 1. Launch prices were at £30/£15 for the volume only.

30 Helen Carr, *The Business of Women's Words* oral history, transcript p. 71/track 2.

31 Rates taken from *W:CR*, Volume 10, Issue 1, 1999.

32 The journal is Abstracted/Indexed in: Alternative Press Index; British Humanities Index; Educational Management Abstracts; Educational Research Abstracts Online; Feminist Periodicals; Film Literature Index; Humanities International Index; International Bibliography of the Social Sciences; OCLC; Periodicals Index Online; Religion Index One: Periodicals and Studies on Women and Gender Abstracts. <https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rwcr20> (accessed 28 August 2020).

33 Note T&F's disclaimer on the accuracy of its metrics. <https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/article-citations-disclaimer> (accessed 28 August 2020).

34 See <https://www.animemangastudies.com/2015/05/31/anime-and-manga-in-the-oa-comic-book-graphic-novel-collection/#more-1244> (accessed 28 August 2020).

academic publishing in general, which, since Scott Walwyn's contract, has become an industrial, globalized affair.

OUP's early model for *W:CR* involved a hard copy subscription for institutional subscribers at £14 per issue (£36 per year for three), and individuals at £6/16, with an EU and US as well as UK market.<sup>29</sup> (*WR* had cost £1 per issue.) This succeeded well enough, but when OUP, along with other commercially minded university presses, sought bigger markets in the 1990s, it sold *W:CR* to Routledge in 1998: Carr recalls they were 'quite keen to take us on'.<sup>30</sup> Carr felt the terms and conditions were little changed, and again, it was a case of needs must. Routledge was a leading humanities publisher which had supported many feminist ventures, notably Pandora Press under Philippa Brewster (Pandora, it might be noted, *did* advertise in *Women's Review*). Routledge repriced the journal at £110 per year for institutions; £25 for individuals, published quarterly,<sup>31</sup> presumably aiming to feed and profit from the expanding university sector, alongside a growing field of cultural and feminist study. Routledge was itself bought by Taylor & Francis in 1998, and the latter by Informa in 2004, which has enabled distribution on a much larger scale via library packages, indexed in databases including Feminist Periodicals and Studies on Women and Gender Abstracts.<sup>32</sup> I have not been able to discover *W:CR*'s total sales but as most academics know (wanly), anyone can see 'attention' metrics for articles. As of August 2020, these put Fiona Tolan on the *Handmaid's Tale* (as critique of second wave feminism) garnering the highest number of views (8,287), and Kukhee Choo's study of femininity in Japanese anime second (6,356) (Choo 2008; Tolan 2005).<sup>33</sup>

Choo's article was chosen for promotion in a specially curated selection of Routledge journal articles on comic books and graphic novels, which was also 'Open Access' for a period. While this may have helped her work get (deservedly) noticed, it highlights another increasingly important aspect of the business model. 'Open Access' is more than a marketing tool, but a source of publisher income, even as it is also demanded by readers accustomed to free digital content and funders expecting greater sharing of research. At present, costs are covered by an 'Article Publishing Charge', paid for typically by university, grant or other funder.<sup>34</sup> The seeming circularity of this economy, where the content producer rather than reader pays, reflects a well-known complex of interests. Universities as much as individual scholars depend upon journal platforms, databases and information processing, here Taylor & Francis Online, symbolically, for academic capital. They provide auditing, quality control, prestige and 'impact factor' in ways with which the alternatives (self-publishing, free open access, revived university presses) cannot yet compete.<sup>35</sup> From the

publisher's perspective, the skilled work of copy-editing, formatting, marketing, distribution, accountancy, platform, management and technology—the business elements which proved so much more onerous than *WR*, like so many other feminist productions anticipated—add value and require paying for. Today we can add new tasks, from rights management in Beijing to tech support in Bangalore to e-book aggregator sales in Philadelphia. T&F, according to its promotional video, is thus 'Where academia and business meet'.<sup>36</sup>

For many feminists, this is deeply troubling, reflecting 'academic capitalism' within the education sector, gendered, classed and raced global divisions of labour, the crushing ubiquity of the English language and the appropriation of creative work via fixed markets and copyright control by publishers. But it is tough to create sustainable alternatives as we have seen, particularly for the humanities, which lacks the sciences' clout. Creative commons ventures remain important here, including Unpaywall, a free, open-source non-profit project which searches the web for open access articles.<sup>37</sup> However, in addition to monopolies in communications platforms, such projects still have to compete with the instant and full access which commercial publishers offer at their price. Similarly we see that alternative experiments in academic publishing, such as Goldsmiths Press (which adopts a hybrid digital/print, open access and ethically priced model), and REFRAME at Sussex (multimedia, digital and open access) require university funding, itself typically supported by government funds to support business incubation or 'knowledge exchange', while the larger-scale Open Humanities Press works on voluntary labour. Gail Chester, in this issue, points to the model of independent start-ups, funded by a trade market, perhaps in the mode of *Women's Review* itself. All these will have to engage in market research, including tracking media metrics of their own, if they are to survive—and indeed, if they are to nurture inclusive readerships. But a better deal between universities and publishers over price, access and editorial remuneration is more likely to serve the 'cultural economy of research' (Thompson 2005: 83).<sup>38</sup>

Here *Feminist Review* perhaps offers an enduring example in retaining ownership as a collective from its start in 1979, its independence formalized through registration as a limited company (without shares) in 1982. First distributed by the Publications Distribution Cooperative, it stayed with 'radical' distributors (including Pluto, Kitchen Table Press and Central and Scottish & Northern Book Distribution Cooperative) until moving to Methuen in 1988, then Routledge/Taylor & Francis, then Palgrave Macmillan in 2001–2. At this point, instigated by Dorothy Griffiths, a professor at Imperial College London's Business School and member of *FR* since its inception, it negotiated a transparent profit share. This enabled

35 <https://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/publishing-open-access/> (accessed 28 August 2020).

36 <https://taylorandfrancis.com/careers/> (accessed 28 August 2020).

37 <https://unpaywall.org/> (accessed 28 August 2020).

38 Project Muse as a non-profit journal publisher provides an interesting model.

funds for an awayday to develop ideas, a part-time administrator and, significantly, the founding of the Feminist Review Trust in 2001, which supports activist, training and creative projects outside academia.<sup>39</sup> While Griffiths emphasizes the shared nature of *FR*'s management, undoubtedly her business skills and experience, including consultancy for blue chip companies, were rare in the women's movement. She says: 'I had spent years trying to work out publishers' costs and with this contract we had them presented to us and subject to our agreement. We were a Collective and the business side was my contribution.'<sup>40</sup>

*FR* moved to SAGE in 2019, a leading social sciences publisher with a portfolio of feminist and social justice journals, with a similar financial arrangement with SAGE to the one negotiated with Palgrave, allowing them to continue to finance the Trust.<sup>41</sup> While metrics-integrated and marketed via impact factor, *FR*'s home page defiantly declares that '*Feminist Review* resists the increasing instrumentalisation of scholarship within British and international higher education and thus supports the generation of creative and innovative approaches to knowledge production'.<sup>42</sup>

Finding a 'feminist economics' to be effected at scale within academic publishing requires multi-party solutions, in which the strength of universities as independent not-for-profit economic and political hubs will be vital. It will also need to continue connecting academic and activist initiatives and policy makers who can help get care work valued as it sustains professional life/business and feeds 'patient, socially responsible capital' (Murray 2018: 432). Meanwhile, we must live with the paradox that platforms like the one on which you are reading now continue to support articles, arguments and jobs which protest the terms of their production. We may interpret this as evidence of a long leash within which creatives are loosely managed but badly paid, if at all, in an economy of precarious work. It could also signal an academy captured by digital monopolies. We may also be delighted to showcase our work, enjoy each other's and hopefully bring newcomers into the debate. And we may continue to explore the dialectic of cultural and economic value, where 'in generating symbolic meaning, cultural industries provide a context and a resource for evaluating the prevailing order of life' (Banks 2018: 40). In this way, the price of this journal and its underpinning business model cannot fully capture its value as feminist critique, community maker, educator, nor the non-financial commitments to those who make it. Helen Carr tells me in 2020,

it's been very nice [...] feeling that *Women's Review* hasn't been completely forgotten because [...] I was very committed to the enterprise and I felt the fact that we did it even for that length of time shifted things just that little bit.<sup>43</sup>

39 See <https://www.feminist-review-trust.com/about-the-feminist-review-trust/> (accessed 28 August 2020).

40 Dorothy Griffiths, personal communication to the author.

41 SAGE describes itself as 'independent', and still majority-owned by founder Sara Miller-McCune. See 'About' in <https://group.sagepub.com/> (accessed 28 August 2020).

42 <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/description/FER> (accessed 28 August 2020).

43 Helen Carr, The Business of Women's Words oral history, transcript p. 77/track 2.

The journal you are reading now is a palimpsest. Within its pixel-pages are material, emotional, intellectual and economic traces of one more feminist publishing business project adapting to survive. In its contradictions and enduring idealism, we're back to the love of words and women at the heart of all the ventures described in this special issue. To you, reader, writer, maker, customer and investor, I give thanks for deciphering, for creating, protesting, persevering.

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