

**'IMAGES' OF PROVOCATION:
CREATIVE REVOLTS OF THE SECOND WAVE FEMINIST MOVEMENT OF THE 1960S AND 70S**

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One of the common denominators of the feminist movement in the general context of the counterculture of the 1960s and 70s is its emergence as an act of dissent from other protest movements, notably the New Left. Indeed, even if historical analysis of the modern feminist movement situates its birth with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* in 1963 and its denunciation of women's post-war life in suburban "concentration camps," followed by the creation of N.O.W. in 1966 with Friedan as its first president, the most spectacular revolt and scathing language of Women's Liberation originated in the rage against sexism within New Left groups such as SDS (Students for Democratic Society) and in which women had taken an active part in the early 1960s. Consider, for example, this statement in 1964 by Stanley Carmichael, leader of the SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, part of the black freedom movement): "What is the position of women within the SNCC? The position of women in the SNCC is **prone**" (Isserman and Kazin 56). A famous denunciation of the rampant male chauvinism in the New Left was Marge Piercy's article "The Grand Coolie Damn" written in 1969 in which she explains that

The male supremacist tends to exploit women new to the Movement or on its fringes. His concept of women is conventionally patriarchal: they are for bed, board, babies and, also, for doing his typing and running his office machines and doing his tedious research. By definition women are bourgeois: they are housewives and domesticators. A woman who begins to act independently is a threat and loses her protected status. He can no longer use her.¹

Feminist writer Robin Morgan, author of *Sisterhood is Powerful*, perhaps summed it up best when she said "Goodbye, goodbye forever, counterfeit Left, counter-left, male-dominated cracked-glass mirror reflection of the Amerikan [sic] nightmare. Women are the real Left" (Gitlin 362). As women began coming into the political sphere in their own right, then, they deserted the ranks of left-wing organizations to join the emerging feminist movement, some later splitting off into various dissenting groups when "mainstream" feminism did not respond to what some women saw as a specifically 'female' revolution. Although some of these feminist groups may be perceived today as extravagant or lacking in credibility as we look backward at their actions, the purpose of my demonstration is in no way to criticize or to deny feminism's impact on American society in the 1960s and 1970s; on the contrary, I hope to show how women's creative dissent contributed actively to the overall feminist agenda of achieving equality for women in a male-centered culture.

This brief paper will thus seek to demonstrate how the most radical fringes of what is now called "second wave" feminism used creative forms of political activity to promote its demands

¹ <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/modern/The-Grand-Coolie-Damn.html> accessed 10/18/11. Other examples of texts which denounce these problems are "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" (1968) and "The Politics of Housework" (1970).

and visions of a better world. What I will term the most radical groups—S.C.U.M. (Society for Cutting Up Men), W.I.T.C.H. (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), BITCH (not an acronym), the Redstockings and the Radicalesbians to name but a few—were in fact dissenting groups who, after having first rejected male-dominated left-wing protest, then rejected the “mainstreaming” of feminist ideology that came with the creation and the development of the National Organization for Women. As with various other countercultural movements of the period, we will see that many protests took the form of “staging,” that is the creation of an event in a public space to attract media attention. I am first going to examine two of these events: the “No More Miss America” demonstration of 1968, the first such creative protest by feminists, and the actions orchestrated by W.I.T.C.H. “covens” in various cities across the United States (called “zap actions”), also in 1968. Less spectacular but as creative, radical feminists would invent and spread the practice of “consciousness-raising” which I will discuss as well. Last but not least I will discuss what I consider another form of creative protest as illustrated in the playful and satirical yet scathing rhetoric of feminist manifestos in the early 1970s like those of S.C.U.M. and BITCH.

Invading the public scene

On September 7th 1968 a group of several hundred feminists, led by an offshoot movement called the New York Radical Women, protested in front of the Convention Center in Atlantic City, New Jersey against the Miss America contest. According to Robin Morgan, one of the instigators of this action, the beauty pageant was targeted because it represented “a perfect combination of American values—racism (there had never been a black finalist), militarism (the winner toured Vietnam), capitalism (the contest was a gimmick to sell sponsors’ products)—all packed into one ‘ideal’ symbol, a woman” (Burns 120). The demonstrators picketed, performed “guerilla theater” (a form of creative protest first used by the Digger movement in California), auctioned off a dummy Miss America, crowned a live sheep as the winner of their wildcat pageant and tossed various items into a “Freedom Trash Can”: not only ladies’ magazines and instruments of household drudgery such as dishcloths, but also “instruments of torture to women” such as girdles, high heels and bras.



Figure 1: Protesters on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey

Although it was their intention to set the trash can on fire, the women did not do it because they had not obtained a fire permit; this would not prevent the press from calling radical feminists “bra-burners,” an expression which stuck in the popular culture. Meanwhile, another group of women (called the “inside squad”) infiltrated the pageant itself, disrupting the contest as they unrolled a banner claiming Women’s Liberation while chanting “Freedom for women!”

The tract, which was written and distributed during the protest, illustrates radical feminism's use of sarcasm and shock value vocabulary to get its message across:

On September 7th in Atlantic City, the Annual Miss America Pageant will again crown "your ideal." But this year, reality will liberate the contest auction-block in the guise of "genyooine" de-plasticized, breathing women. Women's Liberation Groups, black women, high-school and college women, women's peace groups, women's welfare and social-work groups, women's job-equality groups, pro-birth control and pro-abortion groups-- women of every political persuasion-- all are invited to join us in a day-long boardwalk-theater event, starting at 1:00 p.m. on the Boardwalk in front of Atlantic City's Convention Hall. We will protest the image of Miss America, an image that oppresses women in every area in which it purports to represent us.

The tract then gave a list of "ten points" that were being protested against, such as "the Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol," "Miss America as Military Death Mascot," and "the Unbeatable Madonna-Whore Combination."

The No More Miss America protest was the first militant demonstration of this kind, and has remained an emblematic moment of the radical feminist movement for one major reason: the choice of the beauty pageant specifically to attract media attention, since in the late 1960s the annual telecast of the Miss America contest was one of the highest-rated programs, watched by about two-thirds of the prime-time evening TV audience, not to mention that it was also covered by the major national newspapers.² In this it joins other protest movements of the counterculture, the members of whom understood the importance of the media in the potential impact of their actions on the general public and on policy-makers. Feminist historian Flora Davis notes that while the Miss America protest allowed feminism to "suddenly burst into the headlines," the resulting media attention was a "mixed blessing: feminists were derided as 'bra burners' from that time on, but on the other hand, newspapers around the country *did* cover the protest and many women began to think about what it meant to be a sex object" (Davis 107). Considering the number of demonstrations taking place in this period, the media had become "blase" and only took interest if there was violence (not a component of feminist protest) or "an approach that seemed both fresh and funny" (Davis 108).

The group called W.I.T.C.H. deployed such an approach to attract media attention. W.I.T.C.H. was more of an idea-in-action than an organization; founded in 1968 by a New York Radical Women (the same feminists responsible for the No More Miss America protest), "covens" rose around the country as opportunities to do "zap actions" presented themselves. The idea of such zap actions was not an original creation of W.I.T.C.H. but rather the reappropriation of a technique elaborated by the Digger "guerilla theater" movement in San Francisco, beginning as early as 1966, where plays were performed spontaneously in the street. W.I.T.C.H.'s first action was a hex of Wall Street on Halloween 1968, the stated purpose of which was to "pit [witches'] ancient magic against the evil powers of the Financial District--the center of Imperialist Phallic Society."

² Source: http://www.pbs.org/wab/amex/missamerica/peoplevents/e_feminists.html accessed 10/18/11.



Figure 2: WITCH members on “hexing” mission at Chicago Transit Authority

The protesters stuck W.I.T.C.H. stickers on a statue of George Washington, chanted curses, then invaded the Stock Exchange where they formed a “sacred circle” to hex the traders; they handed out leaflets with the text of their manifesto:

WITCH is an all-women Everything. It's theater, revolution, magic, terror, joy, garlic flowers, spells. It's an awareness that witches and gypsies were the original guerillas and resistance fighters against oppression--particularly the oppression of women--down through the ages. Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, nonconformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary.

[...] They bowed to no man, being the living remnants of the oldest culture of all--one in which men and women were equal sharers in a truly cooperative society, before the death-dealing sexual, economic, and spiritual repression of the Imperialist Phallic Society took over and began to destroy nature and human society.

Again on February 15, 1969, W.I.T.C.H. covens disrupted Bridal Fairs held simultaneously in New York City and San Francisco. Exhorting prospective brides and their mothers to “confront the whoremakers,” the protesters distributed leaflets explaining that

[...] marriage is a dehumanizing institution--legal whoredom for women... A woman is taught from infancy that her only real goal in life is to fulfill the role of wife and mother of male heirs. She is allowed an identity only as an appendage to a man... The wedding ceremony is the symbolic ritual of our legal transference from father's property to husband's property.

At the shows WITCHes chanted “Here come the slaves. Off to their graves,” and created the W.I.T.C.H. unwedding ceremony text as a replacement for standard wedding vows.³ Other such zap actions included Boston women who hexed bars and Chicago women who zapped multiple targets: for example on January 16, 1969, eight undergraduate women at the University of Chicago hexed the chairman of the Sociology Department, who had fired a woman professor; another coven hexed the Chicago Transit Authority to protest an increase in bus fares; and in

³ “We are gathered here in the spirit of our passion to affirm love, cherish and groove on each other and all living things. We promise to smash the alienated family unit. We promise not to obey. We promise this through highs and bummers, in recognition that riches and objects are totally available through socialism and theft. We promise these things until choice do us part. In the names of our sisters and brothers everywhere, and in the name of the Revolution, we pronounce ourselves Free Human Beings.”

response to a Boston radio announcement that “chicks” were wanted as typists, W.I.T.C.H. members presented the manager with eight baby chicks and demanded airtime for a program on women’s liberation. As the feminist movement spread to other groups nation-wide, these spectacular media actions were replaced with more direct actions on the press in particular thanks to a coalition of feminist groups headed by Susan Brownmiller; these included a sex discrimination complaint against *Newsweek*, a sit-in at *The Ladies’ Home Journal* and the disruption of stockholder meetings at CBS and *The San Francisco Chronicle* (Davis, 110-114). By 1970, though, women had created their own media outlets, although the following evaluation by *Time* magazine illustrates the way in which such writing was perceived by the profession itself:

The movement’s diversity is pointed up by the variety of new women’s publications. Most are angry and barely afloat financially. A few, such as *Aphra*, a quarterly located in Springtown, Pa., and *Women: A Journal of Liberation of Baltimore*, are of high literary quality. Some, like *A Broom of One’s Own*, of Washington, are largely one-woman efforts. Two angry entries are *Off Our Backs* and *Up from Under*—a gymnastic juxtaposition.⁴

As previously noted by Davis, humor seemed to be one of the only ways women could make themselves heard by national media institutions; here again, *Time* magazine complains of the lack of humor in most feminist actions (described as shrill or extravagant or somehow not justified) with the exception of “the April issue of *Off Our Backs* [which] offered readers a *Playboy*-type centerfold showing a bearded *Mr. April* fetchingly posed nude on a shaggy fur rug.”⁵

Perhaps less spectacular in nature but nonetheless creative form of political activity, the “consciousness-raising” session was another radical feminist invention which aimed primarily at imagining a situation in which women could express themselves freely. This was because women had suffered in New Left groups where they had been excluded from political decision-making and largely ignored when they tried to participate in group “rap” sessions. Consciousness-raising was seen as crucial to liberation and the pursuit of self-awareness; it was used by feminists as a recruitment tool, a process for shaping politics and ideology, and as a microcosm of an egalitarian community which would prefigure a truly feminist society. The inspiration for this new group technique came from a combination of “the ‘speaking bitterness’ method of the Chinese Revolution, SNCC’s testimonials on experiences of racism, and the ‘guerilla’ organizing approach of SDS” (Burns 130). CR was to become an emblematic activity of radical feminism, an intentional break from the hierarchy and “star system” of N.O.W. which radical feminists had denounced from the beginning of the women’s liberation movement. Again, *Time* magazine’s description of this activity is particularly edifying:

For all the visibility of BITCHES and WITCHES, the heart of the movement is made up of hundreds of “rap groups,” usually formed on an ad hoc basis. “Consciousness raising” is their aim: the establishment of a common understanding of the problems that women face in a male-dominated society. The usual group meets one night a week, numbers eight to twelve women, and concentrates on topics such as attitudes toward work, marriage, families, feminist history and woman’s role in society.⁶

⁴ “Who’s Come a Long Way, Baby?” *Time*, August 31, 1970, 18.

⁵ “Who’s Come a Long Way, Baby?” *Time*, August 31, 1970, 18.

⁶ “Who’s Come a Long Way, Baby?” *Time*, August 31, 1970, 18-19.

This does not prevent the journalist from ending his description with the remark “[w]hile rap groups build common awareness of problems, national and state legal codes offer women a reasonably effective way of combating sex discrimination.”



Figure 3: Consciousness-raising session as depicted in the press

Other feminist practices were inspired by radical feminist CR, such as “female bonding” movements within the larger scope of the counterculture and typical of certain hippie communities like in Mateel, a southern Humboldt County (California); again, the idea of sharing women’s specific experiences among women remained the core objective of this activity, but unlike radical CR, this “feminist awakening” centered on female experiences of birthing, mothering and female bonding in the sharing of these experiences. As Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo states in her work *Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties Counterculture*, “[t]his difference-based feminist vision [...] encouraged hippie women to move outside their homes and communes and into New Age movements. But in the shorter term, it led many women to demand authority and respect in their personal relationships and extended communal families” (Lemke-Santangelo 163). In both cases, such acts of creative dissent allowed women to gain political awareness in informal, loosely-formed local groups, thus “liberating” them from the imposed (male) structures of other political movements.

The rhetoric of provocation

We are now going to turn to another salient dimension of radical feminist activity, the use of provocative discourse in the writing of feminist literature such as manifestos. Generally speaking the women activists in marginal groups, usually those more specially enraged by the treatment they had received in New Left organizations, did not hesitate to use violent, shocking and “unlady-like” discourse in their writings: the repetition of words like “fuck,” “shit” and “cunt,” or graphic reference to sexual intercourse (in which the woman was not the passive receiver but the aggressive instigator) appeared in underground newspapers and pulp fiction—for example, new (and totally inglorious) descriptions of the female experience in novels such as Marge Piercy’s *Dance the Eagle to Sleep* (1970) and Suzy McKee Charnas’s *Walk to the End of the World* (1974). These novels depict the plight of the housewife in the first case and the life of a young woman in the counterculture in the second, but both denounce in no uncertain terms sexual inequality and the shifting values of the 1960s. Even though Piercy’s novel is set in the future, the reader easily recognizes the author’s rage against American culture.

Political literature was also taken to such extremes: perhaps the most famous manifesto for its outrageous demands is the one written by Valerie Solanas who founded the Society for Cutting Up Men:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex. It is now technically feasible to reproduce without the aid of males (or, for that matter, females) and to produce only females. We must begin immediately to do so. Retaining the male [sic] has not even the dubious purpose of reproduction. The male is a biological accident: the Y (male) gene is an incomplete X (female) gene, that is, it has an incomplete set of chromosomes. In other words, the male is an incomplete female, a walking abortion, aborted at the gene stage. To be male is to be deficient, emotionally limited; maleness is a deficiency disease and males are emotional cripples.

Besides the fact that Solanas was mentally disturbed and actually tried to murder Andy Warhol, it is doubtful that the purpose of the document was to recruit members; the rambling diatribe against men was probably more cathartic in nature than anything else. But it presents in the crudest terms a combination of different countercultural philosophies and feminist positions: the belief that a post-scarcity society will make possible the elimination of work and of the capitalist system; Shulamith Firestone's proposal to eliminate the 'barbarism' of pregnancy through "cybernetics" (even if Solanas does not use this specific expression); the necessity for a revolution to eliminate the oppressors (in this case men) reminiscent of the most violent discourse of revolutionary black leaders who promoted the necessary killing off of white men in order for blacks to be liberated. Solanas also denounces, in the crudest form possible, the contradictions of countercultural communitarianism when it comes to relations between men and women: "[...] the most important activity of the commune, the one upon which it is based, is gang-banging. The 'hippy' is enticed to the commune mainly by the prospect for free pussy—the main commodity to be shared, to be had just for the asking, but, blinded by greed, he fails to anticipate all the other men he has to share with, or the jealousies and possessiveness for the pussies themselves." Such writing has been referred to historically as the "angry" period of second-wave feminism, where outrage against the system in general and the *machismo* of the New Left in particular led certain groups to produce these extreme manifestos.

The second example here will be another instance of radical discourse written by Jo Freeman, entitled the BITCH Manifesto (later to be called the Redstockings Manifesto). Jo Freeman was the editor of the *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement*, thought to be the first national women's liberation periodical. This text is in fact her reflections upon how strong women are perceived in a sexist society and first appeared in 1971; it begins with a quote from Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* "...man is defined as a human being and woman is defined as a female. Whenever she tries to behave as a human being she is accused of trying to emulate the male..." As stated in the first sentence of the manifesto, BITCH "[...] is not an acronym. It stands for exactly what it sounds like," while also distinguishing itself by the fact that it is "an organization which does not yet exist" (the reference is in fact to the W.I.T.C.H. acronym). Similar in style and purpose to the SCUM manifesto, Freeman uses the space in her magazine as a bully pulpit to denounce sexist language by proposing the transformation of the derogatory term "bitch" into a positive one:

A true Bitch is self-determined, but the term “bitch” is usually applied with less discrimination. It is a popular derogation to put down uppity women that was created by man and adopted by women. Like the term “nigger,” “bitch” serves the social function of isolating and discrediting a class of people who do not conform to the socially accepted patterns of behavior.

BITCH does not use this word in the negative sense. A woman should be proud to declare she is a Bitch, because Bitch is Beautiful. It should be an act of affirmation by self and not negation by others. Not everyone can qualify as a Bitch. One does not have to have all of the above three qualities, but should be well possessed of at least two of them to be considered a Bitch. If a woman qualifies in all three, at least partially, she is a Bitch's Bitch. Only Superbitches qualify totally in all three categories and there are very few of those. Most don't last long in this society.

This “revolution through language” will be another salient feature of creative revolt among the most engaged activists and will impact the popular culture for example in the creation of the term “Ms.,” the change of expressions ending in “-man” (chairman, spokesman etc.) into the ending “-person”—which we have come to accept and use without knowing or remembering militant feminists’ role in their origin. (it is to be noted that there was active resistance in the press of the time against these transformations that were “blown off” as ridiculous and impossible to accept.) These linguistic battles against sexism as an intellectual pursuit were also to be found, in the second half of the 1970s, in feminist utopian literature, such as Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, use of “per-“ to replace gender-specific personal pronouns. In any case, the BITCH manifesto illustrates feminists’ links to Marxist theory which placed social structure and the language evolved from it in the context of class struggle. Women understood that the battle was not only in the streets or on university campuses, but also in the media. Seeing language as a source of oppression, equating their battle with that of the African-American community, were the driving forces of the most creative revolts of the early second-wave feminist movement.

Thus it can be noted that women understood the power of the image and its circulation in the press as an efficient means to make their voices heard in a period where diverse minorities of all stripes and shapes were clamoring for change.

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