"A Dynamic Force in Our Community"

Women's Clubs and Second-Wave Feminism at the Grassroots

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An historian today looking for second-wave feminist action in Durham, North Carolina during the 1960s and 1970s would, at first glance, find very little. Several efforts were made to found a National Organization for Women (NOW) chapter in the city, but none were successful. Consciousness-raising groups and other radical feminist organizations often left little paper trail; one such group appears in neighboring Chapel Hill, but there is no documentary evidence of these groups in Durham. But when one looks beyond these second-wave groups, feminist activism in Durham comes into focus. The public face of feminism in Durham was not pickets or rallies, but rather workshops and a women's center run by the city's Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and efforts by the local League of Women Voters (LWV) to secure ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. This is not to say that there were no consciousness-raising groups in Durham. But no public actions by radical feminist groups were reported in the city's newspapers, either the African American weekly the Carolina Times or the daily Durham Sun. The feminist work of established women's groups was the work with which community members would have been most familiar. The leadership of these established women's groups in Durham's feminist community was not anomalous to this Southern town. Existing women's organizations were key channels for feminism in cities throughout the country. This essay sheds light on how the second wave looked in cities far from the movement's intellectual heart in a handful of large cities, examining the opportunities and limitations created when grassroots women undertook feminist action from within women's clubs that had been founded well before the second wave. It also argues that conducting feminist action through existing groups determined who would and would not participate in public feminist action in one Southern town.

This essay has two main goals. By documenting the role of established women's clubs in spreading second-wave feminism beyond the metropole,
it expands our understanding of how the women's movement functioned as a grassroots movement that received little explicit direction from the movement's theorists or media-identified leaders. While grassroots activists took cues from national leaders about which issues were appropriate for feminist action, they developed their own methods of addressing those issues, crafting programs to be successful in their cities. In examining the feminist community in one Southern town, this essay also shows how the race and class relations in that town shaped the city's feminist community. Durham's women's clubs had worked hard to integrate over the course of the 1960s. Channeling feminist action through those clubs created a feminist community that was racially integrated. But these were middle-class clubs, and working-class women of neither race participated in feminist activities in large numbers.

In the early 1970s the ideas and analyses of the women's liberation movement moved through the country primarily by means of mass media coverage.4 Most leading intellectuals of second-wave feminism did not develop mechanisms for widely disseminating their ideas.5 This omission has been replicated in the scholarship on the second wave, which has largely failed to examine how the movement proceeded outside of major metropolitan centers.6 Established women's organizations—clubs like the YWCA and the League of Women Voters—were vital channels for feminist activism in cities and towns throughout the United States. For women around the country, women's clubs provided communication networks through which ideas could flow. These networks were strikingly similar to those that existed among young women who participated in the civil rights movement and the New Left, and scholars have long recognized the importance of these networks to the leaders of the women's movement, and to the movement's success.7 But the comparable role played by women's clubs in the lives of women without leftist backgrounds, and the potential of women's clubs as conduits for feminism, has not been explored. Women's clubs also provided activist histories to their members—knowledge about the most effective ways to conduct local activism and what kinds of programs were most likely to find success in a particular city. While sociologist Benita Roth and others have shown the impact of these previous activist identities and priorities on women who encountered the movement in cities like New York and San Francisco, historians have neglected to consider the weight of similar prior experiences on activists in smaller cities and towns throughout the country.8

Studying Durham or other cities away from the women's movement's intellectual heart illuminates alternative visions of feminist communities in the 1970s. Local feminists came from a wide range of backgrounds and undertook feminist action for many different reasons. Examining the role of women's

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clubs in spreading feminist ideas and implementing feminist change enables us to see just how widespread support for feminism was by the middle years of the 1970s and how that support translated into action.

**WOMEN’S CLUBS AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM**

Women’s clubs had been centers of middle-class women’s lives since the last decades of the nineteenth century. They provided women with safe spaces to come together to discuss their lives and the problems they encountered as women. They also served, since their founding, as organizations that directed women’s public action and political involvement. Although these groups continued to flourish after World War II, little scholarly attention has been devoted to their work in those years. Examining the activism of women’s clubs in these years reveals that they continued to allow women space to talk about their lives. More importantly, they enabled those conversations to take place within organizations committed to action. When the women’s movement began sweeping the nation, therefore, these organizations were primed to be receptive to its ideas and calls for action.

Since its founding in the 1850s, the YWCA has been committed to addressing the needs of women. After World War II, the organization added a strong emphasis on racial justice to its programs. A large amount of the group’s time, particularly among the national leadership, became dedicated to fighting racism and racial discrimination. At the grassroots, struggles over integrating local chapters and combating discrimination were major parts of the YW’s agenda. But chapters also continued to address women’s other needs as well, and they focused these efforts on the iconic woman of the postwar era: a young, married woman, living in the suburbs with several small children and often far away from her natal family. To serve these women, local YWs greatly expanded the YW-Wives program in the 1940s and 1950s. YW-Wives clubs met regularly, normally in church basements or community centers in the suburbs, rather than at the central YWCA building. Volunteers provided baby-sitting services while mothers did everything from arts and crafts projects to hearing panel discussions about school integration or the latest foreign policy crisis. YW members reaffirmed the club’s commitment to addressing the needs of women in 1961, when they adopted a national convention resolution stating that:

The YWCA has a new awareness of the significance of its own responsibilities as a women’s movement. It is faced with a new urgency to help
women and girls find meaning in their own lives, develop to the full their capacity for leadership, [and] play an effective and constructive part in the life of today.15

Serving suburban housewives through YW-Wives programs was a key component of that effort.

In the mid-1950s, the Durham YW’s “young adult” program, of which YW-Wives was a part, served over four hundred women a year, making it one of the largest such programs in North Carolina.16 Working with this group of women in the late 1950s was a particular focus of the Harriet Tubman Branch, the African American YWCA in Durham that retained a substantial level of autonomy until the mid-1960s. The Tubman Branch ran an active YW-Wives group and encouraged all members of the chapter to think about their position as women and to use the Tubman Branch as a space in which to discuss the issues of their lives. In 1957, the Tubman branch distributed a questionnaire to their members entitled “Are You Satisfied Being a Woman in Today’s World?” The form asked questions such as “What preparations do you wish you had had for your present status?” The questionnaire asked women if they were happy in their current situation or would prefer to be single or, if married, whether they would prefer to work or stay home, be childless or have children.17 The Tubman Branch’s use of the questionnaire shows that middle-class African American women were equally aware of—and perhaps felt equally affected by—the “malaise” that many national magazines began to discover among American housewives in the late 1950s.18 Television news programs, and especially magazines, repeatedly ran stories in the late 1950s and early 1960s claiming that middle-class women who had married young and borne several children close together early in their marriages appeared to be growing dissatisfied with the choices they had made in their lives.19 The Tubman Branch’s board was attentive to these concerns even though the majority of Branch members were employed. In fact, all ten of the women described in the “Who’s Who” to which the questionnaire was attached worked outside the home.20 Most were teachers, accountants, and other professionals, members of Durham’s large African American middleclass.21 The Tubman Branch’s use of the survey is also somewhat unusual because the magazine stories that addressed the stifling nature of being a housewife were virtually all in white-oriented periodicals such as Ladies’ Home Journal.22 But the leadership of the Tubman Branch felt that the malaise of the home was an issue that their organization, as a women’s organization, should be open to discussing.

Just as the Durham YWCA provided its members with numerous opportunities to use the club as a space to discuss the problems and challenges they confronted as women, so did the local League of Women Voters. League of-

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Officers and newsletter contributors often highlighted the role their organization could play in combating the supposed malaise in middle-class women's lives, by keeping them engaged in current affairs and providing intellectually stimulating programs and meetings. The Durham League offered frequent opportunities for activism to members who wanted to maintain a role in the larger community in conjunction with their home and family commitments. For example, in 1964 President Johnson declared a week in June "Women Voters Week." The Durham LWV sprang to action, making their members available to journalists who were doing television and newspaper pieces about the event. The League members made available to the journalists show the diversity of the club's membership. Peggy Mann, who hosted a television news program in the city, wanted to speak to "just housewives" about President Johnson's declaration. A newspaper reporter, Barbara Short, was interested in speaking with "professional women who also do League work." The Durham LWV was able to provide both. Later that year, the League continued to introduce its members to the changing possibilities for women, encouraging members to attend a speech by Dr. Anne Firor Scott, a pioneering historian of women who was then the head of the North Carolina Commission on the Status of Women. The League undertook little public action to advance women's position in society—it did not organize or host Dr. Scott's talk, for example; members were merely encouraged to go. But the club's work offers a glimpse of the nucleus of woman-centered activism with which feminist ideas interacted in organizations like the League.

In one instance, the League did undertake a protracted effort that subtly pushed the boundaries of "respectable" women's roles. In the spring of 1966, League leaders began a discussion with the editors of the Durham Morning News that lasted, off and on, for over a decade. The women wanted stories about their organization, from announcements of candidate meetings to the club's position on the most recent foreign aid bill, taken off of the women's page of the newspaper and placed in the main news section. That May, they had a meeting with the editor of the Morning News to discuss "what qualifies as news." They came away from the meeting having learned that the opinions of local women on political and economic issues did not qualify. League women were still trying to get their positions into the paper's main news section in 1975. In dealing with the intractable editors of the Morning News, women in the Durham LWV were beginning to grapple with the discrimination they faced as a women's organization and to consider the broader implications of that discrimination.

Women's clubs had long served not only as organizations that directed women's voluntary work, but also as safe female-only spaces in which women...
could gather. In the 1960s, such clubs offered women space to talk about their personal lives and the impact societal expectations had on the choices they had made about the trajectory of their lives. When second-wave feminism emerged in the last years of the 1960s, local women's clubs were primed to become sites of feminist discussion. Moreover, women's clubs preserved and advanced a tradition of action that had a tremendous impact on the shape of the second wave in a city far from the metropole.

The Public Face of Feminism in Durham

In 1972 and 1973, the YWCA of Durham hosted a series of public workshops for women. The sessions focused on a wide range of feminist issues. There were panels on the Equal Rights Amendment, on changing male-female relationships, on Black women and feminism, on women and their bodies. The workshops were widely publicized, including an article in Durham's black newspaper, the Carolina Times; over 285 women attended the 1972 session.28 By the time the first workshop occurred in the fall of 1972, the Durham Women's Center, which the YWCA had founded the previous year, had become a hub of feminist activism in the city. Much of the public feminist work in Durham flowed through the YWCA or other women's clubs that predated the emergence of second-wave feminism. Working through existing organizations rather than abandoning them for new, explicitly feminist ones, was both a pragmatic and personal choice for Durham women. They knew how to create successful community projects through their existing organizations, and those organizations had the respect of community leaders. Also, many women did not see the necessity of creating alternative organizations in order to accomplish their goals. The local YWCA in particular had a long history of successfully developing controversial projects that benefited women and girls. For example, in the late 1960s the group organized an integrated school for pregnant teenagers, which operated for several years.29 Working through their existing organizations, women at the YWCA and the League of Women Voters created a diverse and active feminist community in the South.

Women in the YWCA and elsewhere did not believe they needed to create new groups to craft an effective feminist agenda, and so they used the resources—both the material resources and the community authority—of their existing groups to pursue feminist goals. Although not all members of the organization identified themselves as feminists, the YWCA used its existing female-only space to undertake a wide array of feminist actions.30 Meanwhile the explicitly feminist organization that tried to develop in the city struggled. Scholar Jean Anderson has argued that a NOW chapter, first founded

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in 1973, never got off the ground in Durham because many activist women
in the city were put off by what they saw as NOW's confrontational tactics. The
group never met for more than eighteen months consecutively, despite
three attempts to create a viable chapter. There were consciousness-raising
(c-r) groups in the area; historian and activist Sara Evans formed a c-r group
while in graduate school at neighboring UNC-Chapel Hill in the early 1970s.
Members of her group often spoke to women's groups and other civic
organizations about issues such as sex stereotyping in education. But conducting
public feminist programs—from lobbying for the Equal Rights Amendment
(ERA) to operating a rape crisis hotline or a women's health collective—fell
almost exclusively to the city's existing women's organizations, specifically the
YWCA and the League of Women Voters.

Pursuing feminist action from within existing organizations gave that ac-
tion an appearance of respectability. Since the YW and the League had begun
addressing women's issues before the emergence of the women's liberation
movement, conducting feminist action through those organizations helped
conceal the true scope of the changes being sought from community mem-
bers who may have disapproved. Middle-class women, black and white, cre-
ated a feminist community in Durham despite the fact that the city never
had a strong chapter of any new, second-wave feminist organizations. They
heard the new ideas being promoted by national feminist leaders, and trans-
lated those ideas into feminist programs they believed served the needs of the
Durham community. Using their existing community groups, with which
Durham residents were already familiar, women's clubs mediated between na-
tional ideas and local conditions.

Working through existing organizations was not a method without limi-
tations. The lack of organizations that were explicitly and exclusively femi-
nist likely made it difficult for women not previously affiliated with any club
to participate in feminist action without first identifying and joining a club
conducting feminist work. And presenting feminism as a list of activities—
working at a health collective, attending a women's workshop session, or sim-
ply writing a letter in favor of ERA—without making explicit the connections
between those activities or discussing the theory behind them enabled some
women to work on achieving the structural and legal changes feminists sought
without fully engaging with the intellectual heart of the movement.

Using existing organizations also created a movement that, while racially
integrated, was almost completely middle class. Women in community orga-
nizations, especially those with a strong history of woman-centered activism,
developed an integrated feminist community in a Sunbelt city. The biracial
nature of the feminism in Durham separates it from much of the feminist
work currently described in the scholarship, and is one of Durham women’s greatest accomplishments. This biracialism, however, created barriers to working-class white women’s participation in feminist action. As will be discussed below, the white working-class community in Durham was a place where virulent racism found open expression. White women who tried to work with their black peers on workplace issues found themselves ostracized, and it is likely that women attempting to participate in interracial feminist projects would have encountered similar hostility.34

One vital space for Durham’s feminist community was the Durham Women’s Center at the YWCA. The opening of the Women’s Center was seen by the leaders of the YW as a way for the group to affirm its commitment to addressing women’s needs. A 1971 review of the club by the national organization argued that interrogating its position as a women’s club was an important step the Durham YW needed to take:

More fortunate perhaps than some associations, the Durham YWCA has not been faced with a struggle to maintain itself as an autonomous, women’s Christian organization. In a sense, however, we viewed the lack of threat as somewhat regrettable because organizations that are forced to examine and redefine or reaffirm their goals find themselves in [a] stronger position. We agreed that we [the Durham YW] could welcome creative activists who might wake us up.35

After this report, the YW began developing the Women’s Center, a project headed by program committee chair Muriel Smith.36 Smith’s original vision was not for a Women’s Center but rather for a Women’s Library, which would gather books, bibliographies, and other items “concerned with the history and rights of women,” as well as pamphlets and other materials prepared by volunteer groups in the Durham area. In her proposal for the library, Smith wrote to Dr. Rose Butler Browne, the YW president at the time, that as the size of the collection of the library increased, she hoped the library would become a “dynamic force in our community.”37 By the summer of 1971, Smith and the program committee had broadened the scope of their plans to include not only the library, but also a Women’s Center that would provide meeting space to the city’s women’s groups.38 Over the next several years, Smith’s plans for the Women’s Center were enacted and expanded upon. The library grew rapidly, holding subscriptions to feminist, peace, and environmentalist newspapers from around the South. Periodical titles at the library included New Carolina Woman; the Women’s Rights Law Reporter, published by Rutgers University; the Southern Feminist Connection; and Distaff, a feminist paper published in New Orleans which reported heavily on African American women

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and feminism. The association also conducted public workshops in 1972 and 1973 on a range of feminist issues. The 1972 series addressed such topics as the Equal Rights Amendment, sexuality, work, and “changing patterns in male-female relationships.” The 1973 “Women’s Town Meeting” featured sessions on Black women, “women and their bodies,” women’s economic and legal problems, child care in Durham, and “restructuring personal relationships.” There was also a keynote speech by National Women’s Political Caucus leader Martha McKay.

In 1972 the Center also began offering abortion counseling and referrals, and the entire YW worked to bring about changes to the state’s abortion laws. Over the next three years the Women’s Center added a women’s health collective, a day care, and a rape crisis hotline. A lesbian feminist group held their meetings there as well. By 1975 the center had evolved, providing not only a library and workshops to introduce women to feminist ideas, but also developing programs and centers that provided the community with key feminist services.

The YW—and to a lesser extent the League—served as the public face of feminism in the city. It is impossible to know how many consciousness-raising groups existed in Durham, since c-r groups were so informal, seldom took notes of their proceedings, and did not appear in local media reports about feminist action in the city. Durham’s feminist community was, in the public eye, a community focused on services and action. Even though the YW was not creating small discussion groups, raising women’s consciousness was exactly what the library, the workshops, and the feminist projects at the Women’s Center were doing. Remaining within the YW gave feminist programs legitimacy within the community. It made coming to the women’s workshops or stopping by the library a “safe” thing for women to do in the eyes of a Southern town. But it did not decrease the potential of the message that women received at the workshops or the library. A wide range of feminist programs were undertaken in Durham in the first half of the 1970s, including some, such as providing abortion referrals, that a large percentage of the community likely disapproved.

Though the national headquarters called on YWs around the country to “revolutionize” society’s ideas about women, the Durham YW’s embrace of feminism was its own decision. It was not simply a case of a local chapter following the orders of the national board. Each YW chapter implemented the various national platform issues in its own way, and was free to prioritize those platform planks however the chapter saw fit. This freedom meant that the Durham YW undertook feminist work because its members believed in the projects and not simply because they were following directives from
the national leadership. In other cities—Indianapolis, for example—the local YW received the same national platform and did markedly less feminist work. Also, unlike most other women’s civic groups, the YWCA had to be financially self-supporting through memberships and class fees in order to operate its facilities and offset attendance at various classes by low-income women and children, whose fees the group routinely discounted or waived. Had an appreciable number of people not participated in the group’s feminist work, therefore, it is unlike that the club would have been able to sustain it. The members of the Durham YW were responsive to feminism and enabled it to flourish in Durham by providing the space for women to meet and discuss feminist issues, as well as holding workshops and running key feminist programs.

Despite a similar history of addressing women’s issues, the Durham League of Women Voters did not embrace a wide-ranging feminist agenda as the city’s YW did. The leadership of the League of Women Voters struggled in 1970 over whether the organization should take more action and work to recruit “young activist women.” The group decided against this course, fearing that undertaking projects “simply to involve members who want to ‘do’ something” would damage the club’s reputation in the community for thoughtful and even-handed support of issues. The League did provide significant womanpower, however, on the feminist issue that fit most easily within their existing organizational structure and purpose—the Equal Rights Amendment.

For the first several decades of its existence, the League of Women Voters had staunchly opposed the ERA. After 1950, however, opposition to the amendment by the League’s national leadership, and especially among local chapters, faded. The Durham LWV was an enthusiastic supporter of the ERA in the 1970s, as were League chapters around the country. Durham League women wrote letters, participated in marches, and lobbied legislators in their battleground ERA state throughout the 1970s. As Jane Sherron De Hart and Donald Mathews have argued in their book on the ERA in North Carolina, tension existed between the women sent by the NOW national office and many local activists. Many local women felt that NOW was insensitive to the need to moderate certain parts of its rhetoric in order to appeal to North Carolina state legislators.

The minutes from Durham LWV meetings on the ERA are filled with notes emphasizing the need for rational, polite letters that highlighted the ways the amendment would benefit North Carolina women. An article in the March 1975 LWV newsletter for example, urged members to write their legislators in support of the ERA. The article emphasized that letters should be “extremely polite, very low-key and pleasant.” A letter from Gail Bradley, a longtime
League member who had held local, state, and national offices in that organization, and who was one of the Durham League's representatives to the statewide ERA coalition, ERA United, stated that a new flyer would be used in the fundraising materials for 1974 as "the [previously used] NOW flyer was a little too militant for other organizations." ERA United's public relations committee also declared in 1974 that the year's public relations objectives should be "Positive Approach—get the real set. [sentiment] out and Identify with N.C." LWV women saw their letters and lobbying efforts as countering both the outside agitator image of NOW and what they perceived as the irrational and emotional appeals of organized anti-ERA women. Given the proximity of Durham to the state capitol in Raleigh, it was essential to the success of statewide League efforts to have substantial participation by their Durham members. And the women of Durham did not let them down. The Durham LWV worked tirelessly for ERA ratification in North Carolina. Their ERA work, however, was the only feminist action the club undertook.

The embrace by Durham League women of the ideas of the women's movement was partial. As an organization, the League of Women Voters encountered feminism through the same lens of legislative action as they did environmentalism, civil rights, and other issues of the day. They studied all sides, usually adopted a fairly progressive stance on the issue, and then put all the womanpower of their organization behind achieving their goal. Instead of turning their organization fully toward a diverse set of feminist issues, and throwing themselves wholeheartedly into an effort to change their community's gender norms, League women selected from the national feminist agenda the issue which best fit with their organization's purpose and structure. Members of the LWV who wanted to pursue more explicitly feminist activism were free to do so in other organizations. Some did: Gail Bradley, for example, became the treasurer of the local NOW chapter in 1973. The LWV was a vital ally in the fight for the ERA in North Carolina, but it was not a participant in the full range of feminist activism occurring in Durham in the 1970s.

**RACE AND CLASS BOUNDARIES OF DURHAM'S FEMINIST COMMUNITY**

The leadership of the YWCA in Durham's feminist community eased some women's entrance into the city's feminist community but, because of the race and class dynamics at work in Durham, it posed barriers to other women. The YW's leadership shaped the methods through which feminist action was undertaken and influenced the types of women who participated in feminist action in the city. In Durham and other cities, and especially in places where the YW was a primary location for feminist work, the women's movement was
integrated. Black and white middle-class women worked together to bring about feminist change.

Historian Anne Enke has recently explored the impact of space in shaping the feminist communities in several upper Midwestern cities. She found, for example, that when an integrated Chicago feminist group moved its meetings from the racially mixed Hyde Park neighborhood to a largely white neighborhood farther north, many minority women no longer felt comfortable at the meetings and stopped attending. Similar dynamics were at work in Durham. The racism of the white working-class community, combined with the integrated nature of the city’s feminist community, created obstacles to working-class white women’s participation in feminist programs. The key organizations of working-class life in Durham, the locals of the Tobacco Workers International Union (TWIU), were led throughout this period by openly racist white men. The climate of racial hostility that permeated the work lives of working-class Durham residents created layers of obstacles to white working-class women’s participation in the integrated feminist action in the city. White working-class women who worked with their black counterparts on job-related issues encountered hostility from other working-class whites; it is likely that they would have faced similar if not greater obstacles had they ventured outside the community to participate in racially integrated, middle-class feminist work.

The middle-class nature of the organizations that provided feminism’s public face in Durham also checked the participation of poor and working-class African American women in the city’s feminist projects. As Christina Greene has documented in her study of civil rights in Durham, poor black women became the central force in the city’s racial justice movement in the middle years of the 1960s. When poor black women tried to work with middle-class African American leaders—mostly men—during an eight-month boycott in 1968, the experience was frustrating for them, and fraught with class-based tension. Poor and working-class black women largely stayed away from a racially integrated women’s group that was formed in the wake of the boycott to deal with racial issues. Given the decidedly middle-class nature of the leadership of the Durham YW and this background of frustration in utilizing cross-class alliances, it is unsurprising that working-class African American women did not play a major role in Durham’s public feminist community, funneled as it was through existing middle-class organizations.

Despite these tensions, a large percentage of Durham’s black community appears to have been open to feminist ideas. The Durham YW had integrated slowly, but in 1970 the club elected its officers from a single slate that, for the first time, made no mention of race. Dr. Rose Butler Browne, an African American activist and scholar, contributed to the YW’s efforts to become more integrated and to address the needs of Durham’s black community.

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American woman and retired dean of the local black college, was elected president of the organization that year. By 1972, demographic changes in Durham, specifically white flight from the city’s center, meant that the majority of community members using both of the YW’s facilities—the Central, formerly all-white, building and the Tubman branch building—were African American. Thus, when the YW was undertaking its feminist work, it would have been counterproductive, and all but impossible, for that work to involve only white women. African American women were vital members of the Durham YW, both in leadership positions and as community members participating in the club’s various programs and workshops.

Several recent studies have focused either on black women’s creation of their own feminist organizations, or occasions when integrated feminist action occurred. Sociologist Winifred Breines, for example, has argued that white socialist feminists wanted to create an integrated feminism in the early 1970s, but were unable to do so because their desire for a biracial movement was not “rooted in actual experiences with black women.” For the women of the Durham YW, that was simply not the case. They already had many daily experiences with integrated woman-centered activism. To create a white-only or black-only women’s movement would have required intentional separation, which the women of the Durham YW did not pursue in the early 1970s. Their existing, racially integrated organization provided an effective home for a feminist community.

Not only were African American women active members of the Durham YW, an examination of the city’s African American newspaper shows feminist ideas finding acceptance throughout the community. During the early 1970s a sexual health advice column entitled “Pregnancy Planning and Health” appeared weekly in the Carolina Times. In the winter of 1971, a woman wrote in asking about the importance of female orgasms, and columnist Gloria Rigsbee responded with a frank discussion of the issue, assuring the questioner that “while a woman should not worry if she does not have at least one orgasm every time she has sex, she still has a right to expect a climax some of the time.” In 1974, the Times ran a four-part series of articles outlining the reasons why black women should join the women’s liberation movement. The author highlighted the fact that black women “respond to issues affecting her as they affect all women,” such as child care and equal pay, and encouraged African American women to work for feminist change. None of these articles generated disapproving letters to the editor or other negative responses.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the support among Durham’s African American community for feminist ideas was a discussion of sex stereotyping and sex discrimination in public schools that occurred in 1971. A fed-

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eral judge had ordered Durham’s school to begin meaningfully integrating their student bodies at the opening of the 1971–72 school year. Over the summer, state AFL-CIO leaders organized race, gender, and income-integrated groups of Durham citizens to meet in ten days of intensive meetings aimed at hammering out a plan to comply with the judge’s order. Among the recommendations from the curriculum committee were resolutions stating that pictures in elementary-level books should be changed to “picture the roles of both men and women away from their stereotypes,” and that a student’s sex should play no role in teachers’ or counselors’ assessments of a student’s aptitude for a particular subject or potential career. The members of this committee, who were black and white parents and students, had an understanding of feminist ideas such as the importance of early childhood socialization, and believed treatment of students on the basis of gender stereotypes was inappropriate. Not only at the YW, but throughout Durham, feminist ideas were circulating and people, regardless of their race, were beginning to implement them in the city.

The racism of the working-class white community contributed to many working-class white women’s refusal to participate in racially integrated feminist programs at the YW. While Durham never saw the kinds of violent confrontations that marred the civil rights era in other Southern cities, the major organizations of white working-class life in the city, the TWIU locals, were well known to be led by racists. The national TWIU declared in 1946 that it would no longer establish segregated locals. By 1964, every TWIU local in the country had integrated, except those in Durham. In October 1963, Floyd McKissick, a Durham attorney and leader of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), sent a letter to the field director of the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity on behalf of the African American members of the TWIU in Durham. McKissick listed the names and places of employment of all known members of the Durham White Citizens’ Council. He sent a copy of the letter to R. J. Petree, the national secretary-treasurer of the TWIU. The letter demonstrated what the entire city knew: TWIU members made up a large percentage of the Durham White Citizens’ Council’s membership. An article in the Durham Morning News on August 2, 1963 announced that the newly-formed Council would be “screening applicants” that week, and identified the president-elect of the organization as John Roberson, who was also a member of TWIU Local 183. Local 183 provided particularly fertile ground for recruiting White Citizens’ Council members; a photo in the Durham Sun in September 1963 shows that three members of the local, including its president Jack Overman, were officers of the Council.

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This climate of racism had serious implications for African American workers of both sexes, as well as for the city's union women, black and white. Historian Dorothy Sue Cobble has argued that women workers' union involvement enmeshed them in the "social reform agenda" of the labor movement in the 1950s and 1960s, which had a particularly strong focus on civil rights. After the merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955, the key vehicle for this social reform work within the unions was the Committee on Political Education (COPE), a group created by union leaders to generate political work by AFL-CIO members. Beginning in 1959, COPE organized female union members, members of women's union auxiliaries, and the wives, sisters, and mothers of union men into a Women's Activity Department (WAD) in every city. The WAD's primary focus was on voter registration and other get-out-the-vote projects.

In Durham, white union members active in either COPE or WAD were shunned by their fellow white workers. Mary Martin, a white employee of Liggett & Meyers and a member of Local 176 who was active in COPE, was accused in 1967 of being a Communist and a paid NAACP agitator after she worked with African American women to improve working conditions for women at the factory. Martin wrote a letter to Edward Sylvester of the TWIU's contract compliance division stating that she and Vivian Reese, the African American woman with whom she worked most closely, were being harassed by "individuals who [wish] to use the 'racial issue' to keep workers at Liggett & Meyers in a confused and divided state of mind." Martin's experience was not the only occasion when the Durham unions worked in opposition to the AFL-CIO's politics of civil rights and racial tolerance. In 1968 a group of Durham tobacco workers took out a series of newspapers ads entitled "Labor Stands Up," in support of George Wallace's presidential campaign. Wilbur Hobby, the president of the state ALF-CIO, was forced to write a letter to the editor of the Durham Morning Herald explaining that the ads were not official union endorsements and laying out the ways in which the positions taken in the ads were the opposite of the AFL-CIO's stand on the 1968 election. The returns of the 1968 presidential election offer a clear indication of how polarized Durham had become, and how numerous supporters of the racist union leaders were. While Richard Nixon won North Carolina, Hubert Humphrey carried Durham County with 38.7 percent of the votes. Wallace finished second, with 31.6 percent, followed by Nixon with 29.7 percent.

The limited amount of AFL-CIO-affiliated political activism by union women did not hamper their efforts to improve conditions on the shop floor, especially where wages were concerned. But it did cut union women off
from the kind of social feminist coalition that other union women around the country experienced. There is no evidence to suggest that large numbers of working class women sought such coalition work on their own. The white working-class community did not provide women with organized spaces that were both politically oriented and exclusively female. More importantly, the virulent racism that white working-class women encountered among their coworkers and union leaders would have made it extremely difficult for them to participate in the integrated middle-class women's groups that organized most of the feminist activism in Durham without incurring a high degree of community censure and disapproval. The racism of the white working-class community created obstacles for working-class white women's participation in the racially integrated feminist community in Durham.

A study of feminist groups in Durham created by the second wave would suggest that little feminist action occurred in the city in the 1970s. But a racially integrated community committed to a range of feminist goals did emerge in the city in the early 1970s. It is only visible, however, by examining women's clubs that existed before the rise of the women's liberation movement. Recognizing the importance of these types of groups shows that second-wave feminism at the grassroots did not spring up in isolation from the history of women's previous activism. It grew out of, and was sustained within, groups with previous commitments to providing space to women to discuss their lives and to designing projects and programs benefiting women. Organizations like the Durham YW and LWV were not merely woman-centered social and political clubs in the 1970s. They were, ideologically and practically, the grassroots of the second wave. They translated second wave feminism for local audiences, and mediated between theory and local needs. They discarded or ignored parts of the feminist program that they found impractical or incompatible with the foundations their organizations established far earlier, but this does not mean that their programs were not greatly influenced by those ideas. Women's clubs took the innovations of feminist thinkers and crafted them into wide-ranging programs of activism.

At the grassroots, the second wave was a broad and energetic movement. It was nurtured not only by young women in their twenties and thirties but also by women who had been engaged in progressive community activism for decades. Feminist work was undertaken by black women and white women, often working side by side. Women's clubs gave grassroots feminism its diversity, much of its vitality, and the ability to sustain programs in the face of community adversity.

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NOTES


2. This is not to suggest that there were not such groups in Durham. It is impossible to know how few or how many c-r groups there were in any town, as they were, by design, extremely informal meetings that seldom took minutes, attendance, or created any other documentation for historians to trace. Historian Sara Evans was a member of the Chapel Hill group mentioned. Her fame—and the fact that the group began a children's book press—likely contributed to the survival of its records. See Evans to "Gilman Sisters," 5 January 1974, folder 8, box 1, Boyte family papers, Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

3. While this essay examines only Durham, my larger project looked at Durham, Denver, and Indianapolis, and found that these organizations were vital conduits for feminist action and ideas in all three cities. Melissa Anna Estes Blair, “Women’s Organizations and Grassroots Politics: Denver, Durham, and Indianapolis 1960–1975,” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2008).


6. There are three exceptions to this statement: Judith Ezekiel's study of Dayton, Ohio; Stephanie Gilmore's article examining Memphis, Tennessee; and Anne Enke's work on Minneapolis, Detroit, and Chicago. However, Ezekiel and Gilmore both chose to study only newly-formed, explicitly feminist organizations, and Enke's work looks at public feminist spaces and their impact on the movement, rather than feminist organizations per se. Enke's concept of feminist space is an important touchstone for this work, as will be discussed below. Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002); Stephanie Gilmore, “The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, 1971–1982: Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide,” *NWSA Journal* 15 (Spring 2003): 1.

7. Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process* (New York: David McKay Co., 1975), 63–67. Freeman argues that such communication networks among women “had not previously existed” until they were created through the civil rights movement or the network of national committees established in the wake of Kennedy's President's Commission on the Status of Women, which met from 1961 to 1963. Ibid, 63.


10. On the importance of space in shaping feminist communities see Enke, Finding the Movement.


18. Unfortunately the results of the questionnaire do not survive, making it impossible to know how satisfied Tubman members were with their positions in life.


21. Ibid. Earlier in the twentieth century, Durham had been known as the capital of the black middle class, and the city retained a large middle-class African American community throughout the postwar period. See Anderson, Durham County, 221–222, 307–308.

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22. Joanne Meyerowitz has discussed African American magazines such as *Ebony* featuring articles instructing women on how to be sexually appealing to their husbands, articles that could also be found in magazines geared to white audiences. She does not address whether *Ebony* and other black periodicals discussed the stifling nature of the housewifery in the same way that magazines such as *Redbook* and *Ladies Home Journal* did. Since many more African American women worked outside the home, it is doubtful they would have done so, which makes the Tubman Branch’s use of the survey even more intriguing. On *Ebony*’s exploration of “heterosexual appeal,” see Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique,” 244.


24. Board of Directors meeting minutes, 9 June 1964, p. 6, folder 23, box 1, Durham LWV papers.

25. Board of Directors meeting minutes, 10 September 1964, p. 5, folder 23, box 1, Durham LWV papers.

26. Board of Directors minutes, 10 May 1966, p. 3, folder 26, box 1, Durham LWV Papers.

27. Board of Directors meeting minutes, 11 November 1975 p. 1, folder 3, box 2, Durham LWV papers.


29. City school policy barred pregnant teens from attending school. The cooperative school was the only opportunity the girls had to continue their education. YWCA Board of Directors meeting minutes, 26 October 1967, p. 1, folder 9 box 34; “Annual Report of Participation Statistics in the Community YWCA,” 1969–1970, p. 19, folder 3, box 21, both Durham YWCA papers.

30. On the importance of female spaces to many feminists, particularly lesbian feminists, see Enke, *Finding the Movement*.


32. “Organization for Women Holds Meeting,” *Carolina Times*, 24 March 1973, 5A; NOW meeting minutes, 9 September 1975, folder 1, box 1, Durham NOW papers, Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

33. Evans has stated that women from her consciousness-raising group, Cell 22, undertook nonsexist education and child-rearing projects because many of them had small children at the time. See Evans, *Tidal Wave*, 11. Cell 22, also referred to in the archival materials as the Charlotte Perkins Gilman Sisters, is the only consciousness-raising group in the Durham area to have left a historical paper trail, probably because of Evans’ fame as an historian and the prominence in the area of her ex-husband Harry
Boyte’s family. See Evans to “Gilman Sisters,” 5 January 1974, folder 8, box 1, Boyte family papers, Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

34. One racially integrated project did emerge within Durham’s working class in the 1970s. Christina Greene has documented the emergence of a successful neighborhood health clinic in the racially mixed working-class neighborhood of Edgemont in the early 1970s. However, even this relatively successful venture was marked by attacks by racist white neighbors, and before the decade ended it had relocated to a predominantly black neighborhood and was serving an almost entirely black clientele. Christina Green, Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 155–158.


36. Muriel Smith, Program Director, to Dr. Rose Browne, n.d. (c. spring 1971), folder 18, box 11, Durham YWCA papers.

37. Ibid. This letter is not dated, but in a report dated 1 July 1971, Smith mentions the library having been proposed at an earlier meeting. Her letter to Browne, who became president in the fall of 1970, was therefore likely written in the winter or spring of 1971. Program Committee Report, 1 July 1971, p. 2, folder 18, box 11, Durham YWCA papers.

38. Program Committee Report, 1 July 1971, p. 2, folder 18, box 11, Durham YWCA papers.

39. These newspapers are held as a second accession of the Durham YWCA papers at Duke University. New Carolina Woman, folder 9, box 2; Women’s Rights Law Reporter, folder 17, box 2; Southern Feminist Connection, folder 20, box 2; Distaff, folder 6, box 3, all Durham YWCA papers, accession 91–128.


41. “Women’s Town Meeting Slated,” Carolina Times, 3 November 1973, 4A.


43. YWCA Board of Directors meeting minutes, 25 September 1975 p. 2, folder 34, box 35, Durham YWCA papers; Anderson, Durham County, 459.


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46. Board of Directors minutes, 17 February 1970, p. 3, folder 1, box 2, Durham LWV papers.
48. Young, In the Public Interest, 158–159.
51. Letter to Nancy Brock and Jane Patterson, 14 June 1974, p. 2, folder 3, box 1, Gail Bradley papers.
52. PR Committee meeting minutes, 1 May 1974, folder 3, box 1, Gail Bradley papers. Underlining in original.
54. Greene, Our Separate Ways, 2–3.
55. The boycott began as a protest over the firing of thirty black workers of a local hospital when they attempted to unionize. The protest quickly turned into a nearly yearlong boycott of white-owned businesses in the city, an effort to which poor black women’s support was critical. However, they repeatedly felt their efforts and sacrifices went unappreciated by the middle-class black men that were the effort’s official spokesmen. Ibid, 165–167.
57. “1969 Official Ballot for Members of the YWCA Board of Directors” and “1970 Official Ballot for Members of the YWCA Board of Directors,” both folder 2, box 21, Durham YWCA papers.
58. Muriel Smith to Dr. Rose Browne, 1 July 1971, p. 2, folder 18, box 11, Durham YWCA papers.
59. “Annual Report of Participation Statistics in the Community YWCA, 1972–1973,” p. 21, folder 3, box 21, Durham YWCA papers. As noted earlier, there was still a sizeable white minority using the YW’s facilities in the early 1970s, so the space was truly integrated at that time.


68. Historian Christina Greene has argued that by 1964 the White Citizens’ Council and the KKK were “in control” of the unions in all of the city’s tobacco factories. Greene, Our Separate Ways, 140.

69. Untitled clipping, Durham Morning Herald 2 August 1963, folder 1, box 13, series III, TWIU papers.

70. Untitled clipping, Durham Sun, 23 September 1963, folder 2, box 13, series III, TWIU papers.


72. “What 36 Women Can Do,” folder 9, box 2283, NC AFL-CIO papers. Also see Cobble, Other Women’s Movement, 149.

73. Mary Martin to Howard Vogt, TWIU president, 26 May 1969, folder 16, box 7, series III, TWIU papers.

74. Mary Martin to Edward Sylvester, 4 September 1967, folder 15, box 7, series III, TWIU papers.

75. Wilbur Hobby to editor, Durham Morning Herald, 25 September 1968, folder 5, box 2285, NC AFL-CIO papers.


77. In Local 256, for example, women were able to negotiate pay raises throughout the 1950s, so that by 1961 the only men in the factory who made more than they did were the highly skilled “utility men.” “Supplement to Agreement, 15 August 1959,” p. 1, and “Supplement to Agreement, 1 September 1961,” p. 1, both folder 2, box 29, series III, TWIU papers.

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