The Passion of Conviction: Reclaiming Polemic for a Reading of Second-Wave Feminism

... we have not yet spoken of that indignation, that rage—perhaps the essence of militancy—which never finds its way into movement writing but which surely must be the impetus of our commitment. Tonight I am with the rage, an old friend now.

—Beverly Jones and Judith Brown, “A Personal Summary,” Toward a Female Liberation Movement (1968)

Conscientious avoiders of grand moral claims ... can be accused of restricting conviction to what propriety will tolerate.

—Anne Drury Hall, Ceremony and Civility (1991)

Beverly Jones and Judith Brown had been active in the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in Florida when they composed Toward a Female Liberation Movement.1 Dissatisfied with the “Women’s Manifesto,” a statement on women’s liberation issued by the female caucus of the national SDS convention in the summer of 1967, Jones and Brown analyzed the condition of activist women in particular, and women in the larger culture, and urged women to create a separate movement on behalf of female liberation. The resulting position paper, widely reprinted in pamphlet form, became one of the founding documents of second-wave feminism. Reading this pamphlet over 30 years later, I am struck by Jones and Brown’s remarks about rage that come on the final page of their 32-page pamphlet as a coda. There is in this brief moment of reflection the hint of an apology—“as I sit here in poorly controlled rage, I realize that there is one thing we have omitted”;—at the same time, there is also the recognition that rage is potentially constructive, the “maelstrom in which I come to recall again my own alienation,” an alienation that—oxymoronically—connects the writer to others. It is this double sense of rage—as something that “ought” to be controlled but is also at the same time a vital matrix from which empathetic understanding and action come—that interests

me as I reflect on the proliferation of writing produced by second-wave women. What sense can I make of that rage now? What good does it do us to recall it, to try to make sense of it?

I am interested in returning, through what Houston Baker, Jr., calls an act of "critical memory," to this chapter in our recent past in order to understand how "women maneuver[ed] within the specific constrictions they face[d]," and to make their strategies visible and available to us now, not as simple models but as a way to reflect critically on our work as academics engaged in the history of women’s rhetorical practices (Friedman 32). In particular, I am interested in how women deployed the rhetorical resources available to them to work out of (rather than to be swallowed by) the “maelstrom of rage.”

I have chosen to focus on writings produced by women who were educated into radicalism primarily through their experiences in New Left, civil rights, antiwar, and student rights organizations, rather than on the work of professional women who had been active in various commissions on the status of women or of “Betty Friedan’s housewives and mothers” (Tobias 72). This group of activist women became increasingly dissatisfied with their secondary status within various movements for social change, a status they understood to reflect their collective position within the larger culture. In a sense, activist women were following the lead not only of the Black Power movement but also the antiwar movement. Black activists questioned the motives of white liberals in the civil rights movement and urged black people to “escape dependency” on whites through “group solidarity based on black consciousness” (Chalmers 31). At the same time, as escalation in Vietnam increased pressure on draft-age men, more activists were drawn away from civil rights to antiwar activities. Similarly, increasing numbers of women stepped back from their involvement in what were perceived to be male-dominated political coalitions to attend to their own concerns understood increasingly in separatist terms. As Adrienne Rich recalls, in declaring themselves part of “an independent revolutionary movement of women,” an “autonomous women’s movement” … “women already active in movements for social justice were refusing to postpone issues of gender injustice, male chauvinism, and sexual politics till ‘after the revolution’” (Foreword viii).

Between 1968 and 1973, in the “first five years of sustained and politically inspired new thinking about women,” there was an explosion of feminist publication (Tobias 205). Jones and Brown had early on seen the need for “rapid communication, morale-building, and reporting of organizational activity” (3). Indeed, second-wave print production served multiple functions, including developing and spreading organizational and technical skills, educating women about themselves, helping to develop coalitions for the purpose of political action and serving as a “forum for community debate and development.”
(McDermott 26). Feminists appropriated publishing formats and rhetorical practices characteristic of the underground press, "stressing the importance of subjectivity, politically informed reporting, and the integrity of emotion rather than the mainstream claims to dispassionate, objective authority" (McDermott 26). Patrice McDermott describes the earliest publications as "written in the angry, confrontational style of earlier underground press newspapers," often taking the form of manifestos, "concise expressions of rage and politics" (32). This description, however, does not exhaust the remarkable range of writing second-wave women produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s—including poetry, plays, mini-novels, self-health manuals, satiric sketches, comics, parodic advertising, herstories, testimonials, and children’s literature—but it points to a persistent generalized perception of women’s textual performances in this period. The Jones and Brown coda suggests that women themselves were not unaware of the relationship between rage and politics, but the ways in which this relationship was manifested in and mediated through writing has not been adequately addressed. Part of the problem is that much of the academic work on 60s’ activism has relied on the establishment press and rarely on the fliers, posters, or underground newspapers produced by the activists themselves (Anderson 201). And because mainstream press coverage of the women’s movement was often inaccurate or “openly hostile” (Tobias 203), relying on such accounts is particularly problematic. Without reading a broader array of primary documents, we run the risk of perpetuating reductive versions of second-wave feminism. But to read in such a way that is neither nostalgic nor defensive also requires rethinking the analytical terms traditionally used to understand textual performance.

Because many movement women saw themselves as deliberately refusing traditional forms of argumentation (even as they borrowed from them) to the extent that such forms were seen to silence women, I have been concerned to find language that can better register their sense of rhetorical wariness and self-consciousness. While much useful work has been generated through recent interest in conceptualizing feminist rhetoric, I have not found familiar terminology, even as it has been realigned to better suit feminist ideas, adequate to make sense of much of the writing radical women were producing. Kenneth Graham has suggested that we participate in the late twentieth-century revalorization of rhetoric in part because it is consonant with anti-essentialism (223). We are in a sense, as academics, professionally suspicious of claims to certainty (no doubt for important and sound reasons). For feminists this has meant a renewed interest in ethos and the foregrounding of the positionality of the rhetor, in part as a way to interrogate, as Lorraine Code has put it, the “assumptions of unanimity and solidarity out of which second-wave feminism was born” (2).
In her essay, “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” Adrienne Rich criticizes an earlier feminism “so focused on male evil and female victimization that it [...] allows for no differences among women, men, places, times, cultures, conditions, classes, movements” (221). It has become commonplace in contemporary academic feminism to assume that second-wave feminism as a whole and across its historical arc was so focused, it mistook a white, middle-class face for the face of all women (see Probyn 177; McDowell 95–96; Bordo 141–42). Following Rich’s powerful lead, such feminist rhetoricians as Nedra Reynolds have sought a corrective to such a limited view, reconceptualizing rhetorical responsibility by redefining ethos as a relational location articulated in writing. Thus, according to Reynolds, “writers earn their rhetorical authority by being responsible—by stating explicitly their identities, positions or locations, and political goals” (330). Such identities, positions, or goals are not stable qualities possessed by the rhetor, but changing, contingent, provisional, socially and culturally located. The paradoxical aim of the responsible feminist rhetor, then, is to acknowledge the limitation of her range of vision to make clear that she cannot speak for everyone, for all time, and across all difference, and at the same time, to claim authority to speak out of a particular body, place, historical, and cultural moment.

I take seriously this project, and yet, as I work with the writings of radical women, I find that I have to shift gears if I am also to take seriously the passion of conviction registered in the writings of these women. In other words, even as I understand the ways in which any writer is located in time, space, and culture, and thus the writer’s statements are always, already contingent, I also have to try to come to terms with beliefs that are not offered as contingent or equivocal. I have thus looked to a term on the fringe of rhetoric, to the concept of “polemic” in order to get at the “antirhetorical directness” (to borrow Kenneth Graham’s useful phrase) of much second-wave writing.

“Antirhetorical directness” is not simply reducible to rant. While women used blunt language, and in some cases deployed “impolite” terms in scathingly satirical ways (as in the off our backs parodic double-page spread advertising “Butter Balls,” a male personal deodorant spray, or in such cultural analyses as Joreen’s “Bitch Manifesto”), the blunt language is rarely used simply to shock or to arouse. The social historian Alice Echols thus refers to the Jones and Brown pamphlet as polemical, not as a dismissive gesture but to signal something of the political dynamics operating around and through the pamphlet (62). While polemic is sometimes used as a term of approbation, signaling a reader’s sense that the partisan, even propagandistic, writer has exceeded the bounds of good sense and good taste, polemic has also signaled historically a passionate commitment to a cause that generates assertions of truth. Polemic in this latter sense is
antirhetorical in some of the same ways as dialectic: The polemicist writes out of a belief in a cause or a truth rather than in terms of the inevitable provisionality of a rhetorical gesture. And, importantly, for second-wave women such conviction was not simply in the service of a unanimity blind to difference. Indeed, reading at least some of the enormous outpouring of print in terms of a reclaimed concept of polemic has led me to think that we have been a bit too quick to assume that second-wave feminism was born out of unanimity and solidarity.

Rethinking Polemic

At first glance, polemic seems to be a near-synonym of argument. According to the OED, the word polemic derives from the Greek for war and refers to “controversial argument, especially religious controversy.” Polemics— with an s—is defined as the “art or practice of argumentation or controversy.” One might expect then that polemic would appear as a term of art within formal rhetoric, but in fact I have found no reference to the term in rhetorical manuals, handbooks, or histories of rhetoric in English from the English Renaissance forward. For all the concern about vituperare in epideictic, for example, and the concern about the place of pathos more generally in argumentation from Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian on forward—both terms of art one might associate with polemic—polemic itself does not appear to be used as an analytical category within formal rhetoric. Rather, polemic operates in English outside the manuals, as it apparently operated in Greek, that is, adjectivally to name discursive processes or movements that threaten the regularizing bounds of rhetoric. Indeed, the most consistent element that marks polemic is that it puts into question the notion of boundaries or limits.

Benjamin Arditi and Jeremy Valentine argue that if one were to try to formalize certain styles or codes as polemical, “such styles would quickly lose their purpose and their place in proportion to the extent that they become familiar and ideal”:

This was the fate of the classical manuals of rhetoric and argumentation that rapidly became merely procedures for performing allegiance to a doctrine or position rather than reflections on how it was possible for such positions to be open to dispute. In fact, they only ever really worked as displays or spectacles within quite specific institutional settings. (7–8)
In Arditi and Valentine’s terms, rhetoric systematized the “topoi of engagement” whereas polemic emerges precisely through the failure of the traditional grounds of argumentation (8). Polemic depends on both a recognition of traditional grounds of argumentation and at the same time comes into being to make evident the inadequacy of those grounds. This way of conceptualizing polemic strikes me as particularly useful for thinking about second-wave print production. The very uneasiness that Jones and Brown register about “poorly controlled rage” suggests their understanding of how argument is supposed to work: As any number of rhetorics could teach us, it isn’t that rhetoric makes no room for emotion, even the emotion of anger, but to be effective the appeal to emotion has to be deployed with care, harnessed if not fully subordinated to logos. In relatively moderate terms, Corbett states the problem: “in some cases, there is something undignified about a rational creature being precipitated into action through the stimulus of aroused passions” (86).

Because women know that they have been figured traditionally as inhabiting the domain of the irrational, the price of “poorly controlled rage” precipitating action can be especially high. And yet, to the extent that rage is understood as generative (as Jones and Brown suggest), the price of observing the decorums may be higher still. Feminists criticized psychotherapy for attempting to treat a woman’s feelings as illness that must be medicalized and controlled. In an early statement on consciousness-raising, Kathie Sarachild, for example, observes that radical women “assume that our feelings are telling us something from which we can learn … that our feelings mean something worth analyzing … that our feelings are saying something political” (78). While Sarachild argues that the larger culture assumes one must “master” one’s feelings—“control, stifle, stop” one’s feelings—she asserts that sometimes feelings may direct one to “a new and better idea of where we want to go and then to action which might help us get there” (78). Rather than turning inward, the analysis of feelings, as Sarachild argues, has to turn outward to consider what social forces are operating to “mess up” women and in what ways. Much of the enormous outpouring of second-wave print production focuses precisely on that political move outward, not resting on personal testimonial or assuming that the individual’s story is sufficient, but tracing the patterns and the variations of gender politics.

Such polemics as Sarachild’s can be said to emerge to make the traditional argumentative terrain of controlled emotion problematic. Polemic does not settle the problem or lead to the acceptance of rage for its own sake (as if emotion itself, or rage in particular, were the issue), but rather it begins to make visible the inadequacy of operant forms of argumentation and begins to consider when and how to deploy feeling, emotion, even rage as a source of ideas that will lead to knowledge and action. Indeed, such discourse is polemic as long as it does not
settle the matter, as long as it remains volatile and disruptive. Bell hooks has argued that as women “internalized the idea that describing their own woe was synonymous with developing a critical political consciousness”—that is, when women settled on the idea that describing their individual woes was enough—“the progress of feminist movement was stalled” (25). However, as long as women resisted the centripetal pull of introspection and worked to “create a space for contact” that would allow them to break out of “the isolation from women of other class and race groups,” the movement had a degree of productive volatility (hooks 6).

There is considerable evidence to support hooks’ sense that women were attempting, early on in the movement, to create a space for contact through pamphlets and feminist newspapers distributed across the country. One could read in the early Seattle-based newspaper Lillith “study papers” from a black women’s group in New Rochelle, New York, concerning the politics of taking birth control pills; the Denver-based Big Mama Rag ran articles by and about women in prison; Detroit’s Womankind included articles and essays exploring sexual orientation. Feminist newspapers included accounts from migrant workers, women in other countries, secretaries, childcare workers, teachers, welfare rights activists … and the list could go on. If one looks beyond the relatively few women at the national level who caught the national media’s attention to the network of loosely affiliated women’s liberation groups across the country, one finds a greater diversity of representation on editorial collectives, as well as attempts to explore something of the diversity of women’s experience, and efforts to respect the differing paths that women necessarily created toward radicalization (as a contributor to Lillith put it) (Hews 4). This is not to say that the newspapers do not also reflect tensions and stupidities in the movement (nor is to say that the newspapers necessarily reflect what rank-and-file women actually believed, or how they actually behaved in their groups or in their lives). Indeed, literacy itself functioned, as some writers acknowledged, as a way to divide women so that those who came to print had access to advantages not as readily available to women who could not participate in the movement through literacy (Bunch 15). But there was less effort at papering over such inequities and differences than is sometimes now assumed.

The prominence of polemical discourse evident in newspapers and pamphlets can be read as one gauge of how volatile were the attempts to create and maintain spaces of contact across difference. There can be no way independent of context to say what made or makes a text volatile and disruptive, and the context of the text’s production is itself available to us always mediated, reconstructed from a patchwork of possibilities that inevitably say as much about our own investments as about the context of the text’s production and immediate re-
ception. In this sense, polemic names not form or structure that is simply available—visible on the page—to the reader; nor is it *techné* or compositional guidelines (in contrast to rhetoric), but rather a way of naming what is perceived as orientation, attitude, intention, or stance in relation to situation. Such perception of orientation, attitude, and so on, signals much about the reader’s relationship to the text, hinging on how one is positioned or perceives oneself to be positioned in relation to the text. Thus, one can understand why from the vantage of 30 years’ remove, one might refer to the earliest publications of second-wave feminism as angry and confrontational in order to distance current practice from that point of “origin”—to both recognize (and derive political legitimacy from) that origin in the sociopolitical volatility of an earlier moment, and at the same time to distance current feminist practice in the academy from the “excess” of such volatility in order to ground it in (and derive intellectual legitimacy from) more conventional forms of knowledge production. In short, the aim would be to ensure that women’s academic work appear more rational. This is an understandable project in the midst of what has been characterized as a backlash against feminism and underscores the extent to which much of the material remains “polemical” in that it retains its potential to disrupt and unsettle.

Polemic forces an awareness of one’s relationship to a text, forces a recognition of how one is positioned by a text, and thus is openly partisan (but partisan in particular ways). Evelyn Tribble suggests that polemical discourse emerges especially at those historical moments when differential power relations are especially evident. But I find that the polemical context is more particular than that. Kenneth Cmiel, reflecting on the 1960s, observes that polemic seems to arise in the midst of a relatively unregulated civic forum (269). When the recognition of differential power relations combines with cracks in the well-regulated society (as when censorship or the means to enforce censorship weakens)—polemic can be seen to sprout like weeds in the sidewalk and to open up the cracks further. One could trace a cycle from relatively regulated argumentative discourse abiding by the rules of manuals and socially regulated decorum to eruptions of polemic that may appear to those included in or invested in the well-ordered society as mere rant but that are demanding to reorder the civil (or not so civil) space. When approached thus, some notions of civic space can be seen as intended to quiet difference and dissent. Polemic can be used, in fact, as a kind of cultural barometer, as a way of registering—both in terms of what is produced and how it is read—how tolerant the civic space is perceived to be.

Arditi and Valentine suggest that polemic “involves a tacit appeal to a space of commonality” even though the very fact of the exchange paradoxically suggests that the commonality does not exist (135). Or put differently, in polemic
“the mode of address […] represent[s] that which is held in common to be both present as a stake in the dispute and absent as that which is to be settled” (1).

**Toward a Female Liberation Movement**

In the case of Jones and Brown’s pamphlet, Alice Echols locates the polemical context in terms of a disagreement among women within the Movement, that loosely coordinated and loosely defined coalition of male and female activists associated with antiwar, civil rights, and student rights groups. As members of a local chapter of SDS, Jones and Brown are addressing other women in the national organization as fellow travelers. They share in common a belief in radical democracy (23); and yet, the double absence of such democracy is registered first through what they call the “soft-minded logic” of the “Women’s Manifesto” in having to ask for greater representation for women within SDS—and the perception on the part of Jones and Brown that the very mode of the request itself underscores the extent to which SDS is unable to actualize in its structures the radical democracy it proclaims (1). Jones and Brown note sarcastically that “lest the men get upset by all this wild talk”—the “talk,” meaning the “Women’s Manifesto”—“or even think of taking it seriously, the [SDS] women add a reassuring note[:] ‘Freedom now! We love you!’” The implication here is that the juxtaposition of demand and appeasement is a too-familiar accommodationist gesture: Women learn to smile to mute the threat, to suggest their willingness to forgive. They have not yet achieved the freedom to “unsmile” (Firestone 2). And, in these terms, the accommodationist gesture cancels out the demand. Jones and Brown then ask “what lessons are to be learned from this fantastic document, from the discrimination which preceded it, and the unchanging scene which followed?” (2). If the other women in SDS really believed in radical democracy, the pamphlet suggests, they would quit pandering to the men in the organization and help form a separate organization.

Although there is a degree of recognition of commonality with the audience, Jones and Brown do not write in terms of some communal “we” but something more complicated than that. Although the “we” is occasionally used literally to designate the two authors—Brown writes, for example, that “we have emphasized the plight of the married woman in her relationship with a power-oriented representative of the master caste” (19, emphasis added)—they almost never use the “we” to encompass either women in general or women in the movement. Their’s is not groupspeak, but neither is it the personal testimonials of two disconnected individuals. They write as a coalition of two, noting their historical connection to their audience at the same time that they distinguish themselves from their audience in terms of age and situation in life. The authors have be-
longed to an SDS chapter, but they are older than the majority of their audience and assume that most of the members of that audience are college students. Thus Part I begins with Jones locating herself very briefly in relation to the audience as "a middle-aged female accustomed to looking to militant youth for radical leadership," who is then shocked to read the Women’s Manifesto that these supposed radicals have produced (1). Later in Part II, Brown characterizes the relative privilege of white, female college students, a privilege that tends to insulate them from what Jones and Brown assert to be the realities of a patriarchal society. The pamphlet is thus constructed as a discourse in which differences matter not in idealized or essentialized terms but as manifested in real, material ways.

Jones and Brown express empathy for women in the movement, even as they step back from their affiliation to make visible the grounds of their differences and their stake in the dispute: “No one can say that women in the movement lack courage. As a matter of fact they have been used, aside from their clerical role, primarily as bodies on the line. Many have been thrown out of school, disowned by their families, clubbed by the cops, raped by the nuts, and gone to jail with everyone else” (2). But “any honest appraisal of their condition,” they assert, “would […] lead people out of logic, impulse, and desire for self preservation, to shoot at the guys who are shooting at them. Namely, first of all, to fight their own battles” (2). That the writers share some values in common with their immediate audience and yet also disagree in fundamental ways underscores the internecine quality of the polemical context. What readers may notice as the relative emotional intensity of polemic—or “polemical immediacy” (Shuger 3)—can be tied not simply to the degree of heat fueled by a commitment to a cause but also the relative proximity of opposition. It is one thing to complain about some distant enemy, and another when one shares much in common with the opponent, when the opponent perhaps has been (or may yet be) an ally. The heat seems to come, in other words, in part from the falling away of a friend—or the potential falling away of a friend—as much as the egregious behavior of an alien and unfamiliar Other. The heat of an internecine conflict may thus feel particularly acute.

But the polemical terrain is more complicated than a matter of in-fighting alone. The in-fighting plays out across a larger culturally contested terrain. In figuring the immediate, proximate opposition—in this case, the younger radical women—polemic also figures a more distant but very present opposition—patriarchy or, in the terms of the pamphlet, male chauvinism. In a sense, to the extent that the radical women ally themselves too closely with patriarchy, they make clear the extent of their political error. While men are not addressed directly in the pamphlet, patriarchy or male chauvinism has to be characterized in order to point out the limitations and dangers in the position of the “Women’s Mani-
festo.” Jones and Brown offer a critique of patriarchy in drawing a portrait of SDS leadership when they assert that even if an “individual male leader may be able to rise above [the] personal threat” posed by allowing women to participate in the group on the basis of full equality, “he cannot deviate from the rules of the game without jeopardizing his own leadership and the group itself” (7). And they broaden their critique to suggest the taken-for-granted quality of physical and symbolic violence against women in the larger society (11–12, 16–17).

Both the proximate and the distant opposition are constructed literally on the page. Polemic, in this sense, “peoples the page” (Tribble 109). While this means incorporating and redeploying the opposition’s words, it is more than simply attributing a set of ideas to an author (as I’ve just done in citing Tribble), and something more than ad hominem, more than personal attack or name-calling, to the extent that the opposition is figured as a collective. Jones and Brown quote from the very “Women’s Manifesto” they seek to discredit, and, significantly, they “quote” with an important substitution of words. Jones and Brown see the “‘radical women’ demanding respect and leadership […]” and coming on with soft-minded NAACP logic and an Urban League list of grievances and demands” (1). To emphasize what they take to be the “fruitless” rhetoric employed, Jones and Brown substitute terms: white and black for male and female respectively, while replacing references to SDS with “the city council” in order to show how the Manifesto is a “rather pathetic attempt on the part of the [women’s] caucus to prove its credentials by mimicking the dominant group’s rhetoric on power politics” (1). Their paraphrase thus functions in some sense as parody: “Therefore we demand that our brothers on the city council recognize that they must deal with their own problems of white chauvinism. […] It is obvious from this meeting of the city council that full advantage is not being taken of the abilities and potential contributions of blacks” (1).

When late in the pamphlet Jones and Brown invoke the phrase “male chauvinism,” they do so not as a direct address to a male audience but as a way of educating women by giving a name to the practices they have been describing (29–30). They focus primarily on demonstrating to the immediate audience of women the need for a separate women’s movement, a movement independent of such male-dominated organizations as SDS: “If the females in SDS ever really join the battle they will quickly realize that no sweet-talking list of grievances and demands, no appeal to male conscience, no behind-the-scenes or in-the-home maneuvering is going to get power for women. If they want freedom, equality, and respect, they are going to have to organize and fight for them realistically and radically” (3).

Drawing on their experience in CORE, Jones and Brown compare women’s situation in SDS with the situation of whites in the Civil Rights movement, a po-
tion that for all its good intentions could translate into a kind of *noblesse oblige*:

What happened to [women] throughout the movement is very much what happened to all whites in the early civil rights days. Whites acted out of moral principles, many acted courageously, and they became liberalized but never radicalized. Which is to say, they never quite came to grips with the reality of anybody’s situation.... At least one reason, it seems to me, is that people who set about to help other people generally manage to maintain important illusions about our society, how it operates, and what is required to change it. It isn’t just that they somehow manage to maintain these illusions, they are compelled to maintain them by their refusal to recognize the full measure of their own individual oppression, the means by which it is brought about, and what it would take to alter their condition. (2)

Shifting the lines of comparison, Jones and Brown next compare radical women to radical Blacks who had left the “white controlled civil rights movement, [and] started fighting for [themselves] instead of the American Dream.” The “best thing that may yet happen to potentially radical young women is that they [too] will be forced to stop fighting for the ‘movement’ and start fighting primarily for the liberation and independence of women” (3). Jones and Brown thus construct their proximate audience as too caught up in fighting other people’s battles to “get radicalized.” And perhaps more damning is the charge that the younger women in SDS operate as the female equivalent of “uncle toms” to the extent that their manifesto is an attempt to ingratiate themselves with the “male power structure of the movement” (2–3).

If the male members of SDS were understood to be persuadable, Jones and Brown would not have needed to compose their own manifesto. They could have simply signed on to the Women’s Manifesto already circulating and count on the reasonableness of the men to whom that manifesto was addressed. But they do not see the men as likely to be persuaded: “we cannot expect them to relinquish, by our gentle persuasion, the power their sex knows and takes for granted. They do not even know how” (19). Read thus, the men are not the primary concern of Jones and Brown, much less the primary audience, and in this sense, the document cannot be called “male bashing” in a simple or direct sense, as is sometimes the charge leveled against feminist writing. Further, the document is not directed toward arousing male opposition and thus needs to be distinguished from eristic—that is from fighting words or fighting as display of one’s verbal dexterity. Rather Jones and Brown, in figur-
ing within the text an immediate or proximate opposition of fellow radical women, construct their pamphlet primarily as woman-to-woman discourse, and that gives them discursive license to speak frankly. Their purpose is tactical, to redirect younger radical women's activism toward more effective strategies to combat gender inequity.

It should not be surprising to us now that Jones and Brown's account parallels the history of earlier suffragists who were expected to subordinate their concerns first to abolition and then to pacifism (cf. Riley). They note that male leadership in SDS had attempted to keep militant women within the fold "for the good of the movement." More "sophisticated" male leaders might say to the militant women that "there is a war; radical men are being cut down on all sides; we know there must be merit in what you say, but for the good of the movement, we ask you to [...] defer to the higher aim of draft resistance; besides, if you will fight along with us [...] you will receive equality when we return from the serious front" (21). Jones and Brown urge that women have to resist this "sophisticated" appeal by recognizing that there will always be yet another cause that will push women's liberation to the back of the line and that if women want equality, if they want liberation, they will have to act to get it.

But what action is called for? Jones and Brown say that they are wary of utopian solutions, arguing instead for multiple short- and long-term tactics (including "emergency tactics for non-separatists") (26). Women must develop physical self-confidence by learning self-defense; they should force the media to portray women in "their total spectrum"; women must learn their own history, develop and use "scientific competency," demand equal pay for equal work, work against job discrimination, share what they know about themselves, about survival strategies with one another, develop strategies for overcoming "legal discrimination," support newsletters and journals as writers and readers; and women have to claim the right to control their own bodies (16–18, 30). This is no doubt a familiar list. Perhaps more striking from the perspective of 30-years' distance is their approach to homosexuality.

As noted earlier, it is not uncommon now to assume that second-wave feminism in working for unity among women tended to negate difference, that it was a middle-class and white movement that tended to exclude working and poor women, women of color and lesbians. But as part of the volatility that bell hooks has noted, feminist newspapers and pamphlets in fact registered considerable interest in questions of sexual orientation—and not as an abstract interest in some "other," but as a matter of direct concern to women reimagining the range of human, sensual, and political possibilities open to them. Jones and Brown observe that "underlying much of the evasiveness, the apparent lack of self-confidence, and even the downright silliness among women when confronted with the possi-
bility of a female liberation movement, is [...] the charge of homosexuality” (27):

Indirect male sniping, insinuating homosexuality [...] is like the signals southern whites put out: ‘If you leave a white and a black alone for five minutes, there’s no telling what might happen.’ And it’s a lot like red-baiting. [...] The charge of homosexuality [...] stands for a fear of something greater, as did the charge of communism against southern blacks and whites getting together: that they might get together. An indigenous movement of any people determined to gain their liberation is a more serious threat than “communism” and “homosexuality,” and the charge is merely a delaying tactic to obstruct organization. (28)

While one might want to complicate the assumptions about what is the “more serious threat,” one can nonetheless see how Jones and Brown are attempting to work through a problem that they see as standing in the way of political action. Many of the “hassles” in the movement are attributable, as they see it, to women’s unwillingness to openly consider what it means for women to love women; and such love is not presented simply as an expression of political solidarity, nor as ever not political.

Jones and Brown reflect on the “curious paradoxes in the movement,” in particular how movement people maintain “some Puritan mores to excess.” While activists may be willing to “combat the social order [...] and] accept ostracism from [their] families [...] they] have learned a thousand tricks to forestall the ultimate bust—legal or psychological.” Homosexuality would seem to be “too much to add to an already strained relationship with the society in which we dwell” (27). Yet

fear of homosexuality may be the one last strand by which the male order can pull us back into tow. It has been our past error to repress the political attraction we have for our own kind. It would be equally wrong to turn female communes into anything less than a tentative experiment with a new domestic arrangement; political content will not suffice to fill the need every human has for that place where one “slackens the pace at the crossroads, and takes a chance to rest.” (27–28)

Is such a crossroads a place to rest for the long term or only before returning to heterosexual relationships? The sentence, as I read it, is ambiguous. But Jones
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and Brown assert that it is through acts of "female rediscovery that we may learn to design new living arrangements which will make our coexistence with men [whether domestic coexistence or simply coexistence as humans on this planet, or both, is not clear] in the future all the more equal and all the more humane." Indeed, they say with a hint of the utopian, "exploring the possibilities of non-elitist, non-colonial love may teach us forms of political strength far more valuable than guerrilla theater" (28).

I read this sentence as putting the weight on "exploration" and the ways in which women's fear prevents them from exploring a fuller range of possibilities. If polemic is marked by a passionate conviction—in this case the conviction that women have to create a separate movement for their own liberation—that conviction, as I read it, does not lead to a doctrinaire sense of method. Having established the need for a separate movement, Jones and Brown do not then determine a single path to follow toward radicalization. But neither do they minimize the risks involved. While polemic hinges on identifying areas of contestation, the polemic in this case does not work to smooth over those contested areas or to make them go away (as polite discourse might aim to create an civil space of commonality) but rather seeks to resist closure in order to activate agency among the proximate audience. Indeed the vehemence expressed in this pamphlet suggests an understanding of how much strength or courage it will take to change a system of inequities deeply embedded in or definitive of the culture.

Reading Toward a Female Liberation Movement this way, as polemic, challenges some of the preconceptions that shape our current understandings of second-wave feminism. Polemic also has the potential to put pressure on a too-limited view of feminist rhetoric. In their 1970 editorial that serves as preface to Notes from the Second Year, Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt explain that they wanted to present "the spectrum of current thinking on radical feminism" not because they agree with all that is said in the various articles they have assembled but because they think the very contradictions made evident through difference are themselves important:

[O]ne of the most exciting things to come out of the women’s movement so far is a new daring, a willingness—eagerness—to tear down old structures and assumptions … there is no right (stylish) opinion to have …, no longer a fear of being called "unfeminine" or worse, no more "style"—unless by that is meant courage to say what you mean however you choose as clearly as you can. (2)

To read this "spectrum of radical feminism" now requires not only that we rethink the commonly accepted view that second-wave feminism was born out of a
desire for unity that canceled out difference but that concomitantly we find better ways to read the range of discourses that registered difference. Rethinking polemic, in offering one way of rethinking this originary moment, also allows us to rethink our own practice now. If in our academically trained desire to avoid grand moral claims (as signaled in our collective embrace of rhetorical contingency) we run the risk, as Anne Drury Hall suggests, of restricting conviction to what propriety will tolerate, it would seem we also run the risk of losing the generative possibilities of volatility and contestation.

Note

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Works Cited


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