

The Politics of the Forum in Feminist Avant-Garde Magazines After 1980

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Dissatisfied with the exclusion of women from preceding avant-gardes, the overlapping communities that formed around the feminist avant-garde magazines Chain, Raddle Moon, HOW(ever), and HOW2 attempted to forge alternative modes of connection and avant-garde identities. Feminist avant-garde magazines instantiated a “politics of the forum,” an editorial and poetic pedagogy based on hospitality and non-hierarchical dialogue. Sometimes this implicit politics was made explicit in so-called magazine “forums,” in which poets could recast their feminist avant-garde identity, represent a diversity of voices, and overcome the usual distinction between identity and theory within avant-garde discourse. In their critique of previous models of avant-gardism by way of little magazines, feminist avant-garde writers after 1980 invite us to rethink the conventional canonization of avant-garde groups and of “modernist magazines,” and to ask what is at stake in a more hospitable model of avant-gardism for the present day.

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Over two issues in 1992 and 1994, the feminist avant-garde magazine *Raddle Moon* hosted a roundtable on “Women/Writing/Theory.” In its discussion of feminist politics, avant-garde poetics, and critical theory, this forum would become a litmus test for the cohesiveness of *Raddle Moon*’s feminist community. When filmmaker and poet Abigail Child asked her forum collaborators—“Are we trapped in a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonism and historical contradictions can take no other form than a binarism of theory versus politics or theory versus poetry?” (Child 20)—Child’s question identified a critical cul-de-sac in her feminist avant-garde literary community. How could feminist poets confront patriarchy in forms outside conventional binaries, in which identity politics and theory were believed to be opposites?

In this article, I chart the routes taken by that avant-garde community and others out of the theory-vs.-identity-politics cul-de-sac by focusing on little magazines and magazine forums as the venues in which the supposed oppositions between theory and identity, between politics and poetry, and between avant-gardism and feminism were debated and given a politics of form. In other words, magazines and forums came to be considered political forms rather than mere receptacles for politics. The artist Mira Schor, for example, asked in a 1994 forum on “Creativity and Community” published in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, a feminist journal dedicated to the visual arts and art criticism that she co-edited, how an avant-garde magazine could constitute an “enduring and trustworthy community” that would also be hospitable to newcomers and to diverse opinions (Schor, “Forum” 27). Feminists like Schor and Child used the magazine medium and the forum in print and online as experiments in collaboration and non-hierarchical dialogue that tested their community’s hospitality and allowed them to forge a feminist avant-garde identity that drew on theory and formal experimentation *and* gender and self-expression, bringing theory and identity politics into a productive relation.

The feminist avant-garde surveyed in this essay emerged in and around little magazines in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. I focus on four magazines whose overlapping contributors have often been described as trailblazers for American, Canadian, and British avant-garde writing and art by women: *HOW(ever)* (edited by Kathleen Fraser, with various associate editors, 1983–89), *HOW2* (edited by Kathleen Fraser, et. al., 1999–2009), *Raddle Moon* (edited by Susan Clark, later with co-editors, 1983–2003), and *Chain* (edited by Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr, 1994–2005).¹ Together, these magazines form an important avant-garde cluster, whose publishing history has not yet been given the level of critical attention it merits. This is partially because twentieth-century poetry anthologies and criticism habitually distinguished between identity- and theory-driven poetics, a scheme in which experimental feminist communities find no place, and the very problem Abigail Child articulated.²

Feminist avant-garde writers helped to soften the border between identity politics and theory even if they did not, in the end, manage to open it completely—that division remains pressing to avant-garde criticism today. However, several

anthologies and critical studies have rectified the earlier scholarly neglect of experimental writing by women, and feminist critics like Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Ann Vickery, Linda Kinnahan, and Elisabeth Frost, among others, have offered models for reading feminist poetry, theory, and avant-gardism in conjunction.³ But there has been little research on feminist avant-garde magazines of the last thirty years, with the notable exceptions of Kinnahan, Vickery, and Frost. Given the important contributions of *Periodical Studies* to reviving the work of female modernists in little magazines and to considering late-modernist magazines (Latter; Middleton), the time is ripe to offer an equivalent study for feminist avant-garde magazine networks.

I view the magazine medium and so-called forums within their pages as ideal formats through which to analyze the formation of a feminist avant-garde community after 1980. What I call a feminist *politics of the forum*, which aims for hospitality and non-hierarchical dialogue in avant-garde communities, sometimes materialized in the genre of the magazine forum. The forum, a written dialogue between multiple participants, realized formally the implicitly hospitable politics of experimental feminist magazines. My attention to the forum complements modernist research into manifestos (Caws; Lyon; Puchner), questionnaires (Cole), and letters to the editor (Golding, "Avant-Gardism Against Itself"), while extending it beyond the modernist *period* as it is usually understood.

I will emphasize two aspects: the forum as an editorial model and the forum as a pedagogical model for feminist hospitality beyond the magazine, addressed to readers, critics, and feminists more broadly.⁴ The latter aspect also has theoretical implications for how we read other, not explicitly feminist avant-gardes. Influenced by recent feminist theorizations of hospitality and pedagogy based on "identity, inclusiveness, reciprocity, forgiveness, and embodiment" (Hamington 24), I consider hospitality a useful metaphor for the complex negotiations around the inclusiveness and hierarchies of magazine communities. The feminist avant-garde described here turns the magazine and the forum into a scene of pedagogy that critiques previous, traditionally male-dominated avant-gardes by attending to what has been excluded and what must remain provisional. In this view, the allegedly anti-identity, theory-driven, hierarchical, and manifesto-heavy avant-garde is then only one among many other possible manifestations of "avant-gardeness," rather than the measure of all others.

But hospitable forms, such as the forum, because they are cast as hospitable, sometimes end up highlighting the failings of solidarity and producing unease. If feminist magazines seek to use hospitality as a utopian corrective to the perceived exclusivities of previous avant-gardes, then the limits of hospitality—what Derrida calls its "conditional" and "de-termining" function (4) that maintains the inequality between guest and host—problematizes the idea of utopian inclusivity. As we shall see, the feminist magazines' desire for greater inclusion is often accompanied by anxiety, even paranoia, about the seeming ineluctability of exclusion and privilege. In calling these feminist projects "paranoid," I am drawing on Sianne Ngai's argument about the connection between paranoia and

feminist theory, which she views as a useful lens through which to read feminist experimental poetry from the 1990s onwards. Similarly, Eve Sedgwick explored this connection in her distinction between paranoid and reparative reading (the former based on demystification and distance; the latter on surprise and reconciliation), to which I will return later in this essay. Though inspired by psychoanalysis (especially Melanie Klein in Sedgwick's case), neither Sedgwick nor Ngai understand this paranoia as pathological but rather as a pattern of feminist and queer thinking.⁵ It is my hope that my analysis of the politics of the forum contributes to a new understanding of avant-gardism based on the concepts of hospitality and provisionality, even though these magazines and forums remained imperfect.

Unlike other avant-gardes, the feminist avant-garde as a *literary* network has been defined inconsistently, in part because feminism is too broad and multifarious an ideological position to fit neatly into conventional models of literary avant-garde movements, and partly because it is not identifiable as a poetic style. Such broadness, however, must be incorporated into our notion of avant-gardism. Indeed, the provisional avant-garde network around *HOW(ever)*, *HOW2*, *Raddle Moon*, and *Chain* announces its own provisionality as a welcoming "broad church" through participatory formats particularly suited to their feminist politics, such as forums, chain letters, and other collaborative pieces. But in critical writing about experimental women writers there has sometimes been a danger of overemphasizing their commonalities. To read lyric or syntactic play as gendered forms or as particularly suited to feminist writers, for instance, risks etching more deeply the groove between avant-gardism and feminism.

While the feminist literary avant-garde that emerged in and after the 1980s indeed defined itself in relation to previous male avant-gardes or a genealogy of female modernists (as Elisabeth Frost proposes), it must also be seen as an avant-garde in its own right. I would add to Frost's definition that these poets are not avant-garde because they "play with words and syntax" to "alter conceptions of rigid gender and racial divisions" (Frost xi) but because they work within a community of practice in and around magazines, which debated and disagreed about what "avant-garde" meant to them. I agree with Frost that "the feminist avant-garde" "collectively [...] expose[d] the gendered nature of cultural inheritance" (Frost xiv), but want to press harder on what "collectively" means here. I want to examine how poets have worked "collectively" in magazines and magazine forums, and will now turn to their sophisticated attempts at carrying out the project of theorizing a feminist avant-garde identity themselves.

In an interview for the Bay Area newsletter *Poetry Flash*, *HOW(ever)*'s editor Kathleen Fraser described how in the 1960s and 1970s she "consciously chose not to align myself exclusively with any one clique or aesthetically defined group, though there were many opportunities to 'sign on'" (Tremblay-McGaw 6). Instead, *HOW(ever)*, founded in 1983, identified with what Fraser saw as a "developing feminist poetics," which might have followed formal strategies similar to those of earlier avant-gardes, but showed "an understandable wariness in simply following [their] diagrams" (Fraser, "Partial Local Coherence" 137).

This involved finding languages and formats somewhat different from previous avant-gardes, which were often “male-dominant in their theoretical documents” (Fraser, “Partial Local Coherence” 137). *HOW(ever)* thus allowed Fraser and her co-editors to bypass “male editorial approval” (Fraser, “The Jump” 45) and to produce a magazine that was “absolutely based in the dilemma of and attunement to gender. Our hearts did not belong to Daddy” (43).

Similarly, Marianne DeKoven, a *HOW(ever)* contributor and modernist scholar, argued in 1989 that “feminist critics, women experimental writers” needed “to establish ourselves as an ‘ambiguously nonhegemonic group’ *in relation to male avant-garde hegemony*, simultaneously within it and subversive of it” (DeKoven 79). Picking up DuPlessis’s phrase from her influential essay “For the Etruscans,” DeKoven conceded that “ambiguity” “did not materially alter patriarchy’s essential subordination of women” (DeKoven 80). Still, like DuPlessis and Fraser, DeKoven recognized the need to theorize a “group” and poetics based on their arguably shared feminisms but “ambiguously” and provisionally so; as an inserted “however” in the syntax of avant-garde hegemony. Rather than establishing a rigid separatism (many feminists continued to publish in other venues and many feminist magazines included men), the conversations in which feminist poets engaged and the heterogeneous materials their magazines published suggest an alternative mode of forming literary communities that was deliberately more provisional and hospitable than in traditionally defined avant-garde groups (defined usually by their key players, key characteristics, and clear group boundaries).

As such, the politics of the forum needs to be seen within the wider recuperative project of feminists who recovered forgotten female voices and developed hospitable venues for experimental women writers. To circumvent what experimental novelist and critic Christine Brooke-Rose aptly called a “[f]luttering around a canon” (65),⁶ beginning in the 1970s an increasing number of explicitly labeled feminist magazines, collectives, and anthologies dedicated to issues of gender, sexuality, and race instituted their own canons or attempted to do away with canonicity altogether. But there was little publishing overlap between prominent feminist publications, such as *Chrysalis*, *Heresies*, *Azalea*, *Calyx*, and *Conditions*, and the self-consciously “experimental” literary magazines examined in this article. When *HOW(ever)* associate editor Frances Jaffer stated in her introduction to the first issue in 1983—“We want to publish an exception, however” (Jaffer 1)—this “exception” meant the avant-garde paradigm of the “new,” but also the magazine’s historically specific critique of that paradigm. The magazine set out to be the exception to experimental publications that ignored women, and the exception to feminist magazines that ignored experimentalism.

For Fraser, *HOW(ever)* filled yet another “gap” by combining experimental poetry by women with feminist scholarship (Fraser, “Why *HOW(ever)*?” 1). *HOW(ever)*’s efforts to generate hospitality and provide publishing opportunities for innovative female writers were matched by small presses such as Kelsey Street Press, O Books, Tuumba, and (later) Belladonna in the US and Street Editions in the UK. But no matter how inclusive feminist avant-garde poets were

amongst themselves, non-feminist Anglo-American avant-garde scenes remained splintered powerhouses of lasting legacy, with only some inertial awareness of the divisions that remained rigid.⁷ Even in a 2007 *Chicago Review* article, Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young argued that “Numbers Trouble” still existed, especially in anthologies and small-press catalogs, where women made up only 27% of contributors, even lower than in periodicals, which hovered around 37% between 1990 and 2005 (Kotin and Baird 226). Feminist forums, like the magazines in which they appeared, tried to remedy such representational imbalances, especially from the 1980s onwards.

Although feminist avant-garde poets disagreed about the existence of a specifically female aesthetic, and often upheld an ideal of provisional identities, the magazine forum suited this emphasis on differing views under the umbrella of multiple feminisms. *Chain*, *HOW2*, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, and *Raddle Moon* offered so-called forums as “a gesture toward conversation” that mitigated editorial authority (Spahr and Osman, “Frameworks” 131). Historically, dialogue and collaboration are not unique to the forum but structured many avant-garde magazines more broadly; features that arguably constitute the medium’s radical political potential as Walter Benjamin famously argued, because magazines (unlike books) potentially turn readers into authors through reader contributions (Benjamin 688–89). As a generically collective form, a magazine’s intended periodicity, heterogeneous contents, and multiple authors trouble notions of single authorship and authority, which appealed to several social and literary movements in their desire for community formation. But precisely because some avant-gardes favored or fashioned an exclusive dialogue dominated by white male voices, feminist poets tried to activate the democratic potential inherent in the magazine medium through the forum.⁸ The forum posited a communicative situation different from, but related to, the community expressed in letters to the editor, reviews, or other dialogic magazine features, in that it suggested hospitable community-building and arguably counteracted the perceived fragmentation of feminists across a wide range of otherwise disparate communities.

One way to theorize how the forum functioned in a specific feminist avant-garde community is to consider it a variation of the questionnaire frequently found in modernist magazines, which Lori Cole considers as crucial a genre as the manifesto (115). Highly “self-reflexive” (Cole 112), modernist questionnaires, manifestos, and forums helped to define artistic identity and forge “collective formation[s]” (Cole 110). Unlike in questionnaires, however, the roles of questioner and respondent are often less clearly divided in forums. While sharing the pedagogical intent of the manifesto, feminist forums are more ambiguous about positing a movement and its attendant stylistic characteristics, as we have seen in Fraser’s and DeKoven’s commentaries above. Although not exclusive to feminist avant-garde magazines, the forum took on a special significance in them because it offered a *form* suitable to their politics of hospitality, attention, and diversity. In their non-programmatic experiment in provisional collectivity, feminist avant-garde forums diverge from Cole’s assessment of the questionnaire as enabling “art

movements to establish their own authority, challenging older or inherited literary norms" (115). Instead, they challenged inherited literary norms precisely while also questioning their own authority.

To challenge its authority in constructing a new community, the magazine *Chain* opened its first issue with a forum on "Gender and Editing." *Chain*'s forum participants reflected on practical as well as aesthetic and political editorial decisions, including issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Lee Ann Brown, for example, wrote about her own Tender Buttons Press; Susan Clark, Catriona Strang, and Lisa Robertson about *Raddle Moon*; Susan Bee and Mira Schor about *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*; and Avis Lang about *Heresies*. In her contribution to the forum, Fraser recalled being asked by readers about *HOW(ever)*'s "affiliations" and aesthetics, and that she resented "such insistent need for codification," "the casual assumption of a static absolute," because the queries "assum[ed] that literary decisions of consequence were [...] initiated, articulated and canonized by Male Editors, Critics, Anthologists" ("The Jump" 42). Fraser disapproved of unquestioned authority and instead hoped to present an "able female counterpart" that participated in "canon-forming" ("The Jump" 43) in a way that maintained provisionality (no "static absolute"). The reluctance of female poet-critics like Fraser to theorize a monolithic and codified feminist avant-garde for poetry is a direct reaction against a perceived male tradition of discursively constructing oneself as an avant-garde with rigid boundaries. Instead, feminists constructed an avant-garde identity and canon based on hospitality, for which the medium of the little magazine and the format of the forum were essential.

To abjure "the aesthetic separations of various schools and to deliberately create an aesthetic of joining" (Spahr, "Spiderwasp" 409) continued to be important to a younger generation of "emerging poets of the 1990s" who published in magazines like *Chain*. This "aesthetic of joining" contrasted with an avant-garde tradition that "assume[d] that literary movements are breaches" and "denie[d] relationship" (Spahr, "Spiderwasp" 411). Critics like Redell Olsen, Kaplan Harris, and Ann Vickery similarly identify a desire for a "connective poetics" (Vickery, "In/Complete" 194) in feminist and queer literary communities of the last three decades (Olsen 373; Harris 825). In her own critical work, Spahr has called for "connective reading," which views reading as "reciprocal, as shareable" and is related to a political practice of "consciousness-raising" (Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy* 6). *Chain* promoted such connective, participatory reading in its editorial model. Spahr and Osman "started *Chain* because we wanted to talk to more people," especially "to women" (Spahr and Osman, *Chain* 12; 3). In their first issue, they "create[d] a forum that takes that invitation [toward conversation] seriously, that is not just going through the motions of what it means to instigate response; it *require[d]* continuation" (Spahr and Osman, "Frameworks" 131).

The forum, with its participatory politics, became a model for feminist editorial accountability. In order to avoid being the "editor as autocrat" (Spahr and Osman, "Chains" 136), Spahr and Osman sent invitations to a number of women to build a collaborative poetic "chain" with other female poets. Unlike

conventional chain letters, which are often manipulative and deceptive, the promised reward of *Chain's* poetic chain-links was inclusive dialogue. Chain poems presented a different model of textual circulation: instead of books going from producer to reader, poems passed between readers as co-producers; ideal for a project which championed "non-hierarchical development" (Spahr and Osman, "Frameworks" 133).

The magazine's chain letters and forum thus extended to poets beyond the editors' immediate community, but one "interjection" in Osman and Spahr's editorial disputed the success of their outreach, which was, after all, limited to writers and friends of friends. Nevertheless, because these "chains" depended on the contributors' willingness to collaborate, and—to recall the editors' premise again—"require[d] continuation," *Chain's* first issue was immediately legible as a political statement. By inviting their feminist community to participate in a dialogue in print, the editors publicized their belief that not only a select few should have the cultural capital to discuss gender and editing, but that feminist concerns needed to be addressed in collective solidarity (however idealized that collectivity transpired to be). The forum and chain letter thus became the signature of their feminist avant-garde hospitality as editors.

Drawing attention to its politics of form is in fact one of the feminist forum's characteristics. Like questionnaires and manifestos, feminist forums not only foster communities but frequently incorporate self-conscious and self-critical reflection on such formations. Osman and Spahr acknowledged that "[i]t is impossible to make a frameless frame" in editing their magazine *Chain*, but by asking their forum contributors "how and why journals are created and in what ways questions of gender have informed those decisions," and how "current feminist theory influenced [their] editorial practice," they illuminated those frames, as "a way of creating a body that shows its own skeleton" (Spahr and Osman, "Frameworks" 129). In their attempt to create "an editorial equivalent of the [Brechtian] half-curtain," *Chain* revealed its editorial processes so readers could "see the scene being changed," a desire for editorial transparency also evident in the alphabetical arrangement of every issue's contributions.

The reference to Brecht is apt. Brecht linked theater to pedagogy when he distributed questionnaires after performances of his teaching plays, inviting audiences to confront their own complicities and a play's political shortcomings. *Chain's* editorial "half-curtain" was also commonly used in feminist publishing more broadly. Considering "the amount of print space devoted to the challenges of organization and process in feminist periodicals," Kathryn Flannery states, editorial collectives attempted "to replace what appeared to be either the hierarchical organization of the mainstream press or the haphazard workings of the underground press" (54–55). The experimental feminist poetry magazines I analyze here often shared the editorial structure with 1970s American mainstream or politically-oriented feminist journals, 65% of which were collectively run (Flannery 54). In short, feminist magazines across the board, irrespective of their emphasis on poetry, theory, or consciousness-raising, espoused a more

egalitarian and responsible publishing practice than previous, not explicitly feminist publications.

Moreover, the politics of the forum—sometimes materialized in actual forums—tied into an understanding of the little magazine as a pedagogical medium through which an alternative history of the present could be written. This pedagogical theory of the forum came with the hope of changing editorial and poetic praxis towards non-authoritarian and inclusive models that accounted for different identities. In her response to *Chain*'s "Editorial Forum," Mira Schor, who edited *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* with Susan Bee, "recommend[ed] small publications as a feminist arena and strategy" (Schor, "Untitled Contribution" 101), because they "made for a kind of intimacy within the project, and with our readers and contributors," and allowed them "to trust in the political efficacy of small cells" (Bee and Schor, "A Community"). Evoking the guerrilla tactics of militant groups, the editors fashioned themselves as a similarly revolutionary publishing nucleus. To make various exclusions visible, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* published eight forums, one of which asked its contributors: "Do you feel that contemporary art discourse has neglected or repressed any art issues, aesthetic, political issues, ways of working, or specific bodies of work of particular concern to you?" (Bee and Schor, "Forum 1989" 3). In response, the magazine forums addressed those neglected issues, from sexuality, motherhood, recent political art, the state of art criticism, to the invisibility of female and non-white artists. One of many "participatory media" that have shaped feminist history (Piepmeier 29), the little magazine enabled such attention as essential to its hospitable politics.

HOW(ever)'s "working notes," which accompanied new writing in the journal as "formal problems" and "stimuli" (Fraser, "The Jump" 44) were another way to enact this politics of the forum that connected readers and contributors via the format of the little magazine. As pedagogical devices, the notes proposed reading routes for the magazine audience, sometimes by referencing a poem's source texts, as in Rosmarie Waldrop's use of Wittgenstein, or by noting a poem's place within a larger project. For Fraser, the working notes, provided by the author featured, were meant to open difficult texts to mainstream feminists and feminist literary scholars, "afraid of *uncommon* language," in order to join forces (Hogue 18). This attempt at accessibility notwithstanding, the notes do not explain the poem, nor do they follow what Fraser identified as "a male style of logic and argument with its confident and enlightened pressures" ("The Jump" 45). Rather, the working notes offered brief and provisional thoughts—given as an invitation for dialogue. In this way, the hospitable and provisional pedagogy of feminist magazines appealed to those who felt unable to contribute to more exclusive and potentially intimidating magazines that required fully developed essays. For others, however, such a fragmentary and improvisatory style was a concession to feminine stereotypes, as we will shortly see in my analysis of the *Raddle Moon* roundtable.

HOW2—HOW(ever)'s digital successor—indicated its educational purpose in its title—a how-to manual for editing an experimental feminist magazine. *HOW2* not only extended its predecessor's promotion of contemporary and past

modernist texts, but also continued to explore the magazine format as part of its hospitable feminist pedagogy. The collectively edited *HOW2* imaginatively built on *HOW(ever)*'s sections of working notes, conference alerts, and postcards. To blend theory and poetic praxis, it added "POST(ed)," which annotated recommended publications, "In'Print," which listed recently published books of interest, and "reading/s," a section dedicated to extensive commentary on a modernist or contemporary woman writer. *HOW2* also introduced a regular forum, "an on-going discussion site" in which guest editors selected topics, correspondents, and reader responses "with an eye for introducing varying points-of-view" ("Forum"). The topical range of *HOW2*'s digital forums—which covered gender-specificity, cyberspace, public intellectual debate, taking risks in critical writing and its relation to university tenure, transnational communities of experimental women writers, and *HOW2*'s potential complicity in Anglo-American publishing dominance—counteracted the unifying programmatic intent we have come to expect of avant-garde magazine communities.

The turn to the digital format in *HOW2* facilitated this range of and access to forgotten and contemporary women poets even more than its predecessor, but it was, of course, selective nonetheless—for some readers usefully so. In *HOW2*'s first forum in 1999, Meredith Stricker described the need for *HOW2* as a "navigator" because "[t]here is no way I can count on Microsoft or AOL to open to the sites of new writing I need to encounter. *HOW2*, then, can be envisioned as a site that confronts the chaos of free-market hyperbole—where being gender-specific is a device that enables us to select, direct, pay attention—toward inclusion" (Stricker). For Stricker, *HOW2*, with its capacity for "attention" and "inclusion," also became the necessarily selective filter for the confusing inundation of internet data. In another forum on small-press publishing, *HOW2* guest editor Jane Sprague explains that its purpose was

a true public Forum in the spirit of Juliana Spahr and Jena Osman's Call for Work for their forthcoming pamphlet series *Chain Links*:

Think of these books as a conference panel for the page, a panel that is being held at an unusually interdisciplinary conference of leftists, environmentalists, inventors, freethinkers.

Think of this Forum as a kind of virtual panel, one which might be added to over time. Think of this Forum as a variation on the idea of aperture, a Forum which might continually expand, open and allow more in. (n.p.)

The metaphor of the "aperture" epitomizes the hospitable setting of feminist avant-garde magazines. Potentially less "open," however, is the conception of the forum as a site of academic activity requiring access to the codes and practices of conference panels. That aside, *HOW2*'s revolving editorship and the forum's numerous respondents demonstrated an inclusivity greater than that of coeval non-feminist avant-garde magazines, aided by the digital format's hypothetically unlimited space.

But even innovative formats like the forum were often presented in a conventionally linear, hierarchical layout. In its low-fi, early-Internet aesthetic, *HOW2*'s first issue was fundamentally a print magazine put online. Finding the first issue difficult to browse, Linda Russo suggested in the forum that the "official" entry to sections to which the table of contents is a 'master plan,'" reminded her "that we live in a 'man-made' world, that the 'journal' itself is a 'man-made' form. Does it need to be re-imagined?" (Russo). Russo's question encapsulates the feminist avant-garde's self-conscious concerns about its chosen medium and an anxiety about the extent to which *HOW2* really challenged literary patriarchy. *HOW2*'s focus on widening access and the geographical range of contributors initially came at the expense of rethinking the magazine's very layout, with its hierarchy of reading orders, as itself potentially patriarchal. *HOW2* certainly welcomed such doubts as crucial to its inclusive editorial policy. If the forum presented experimental collaborations that offered inclusivity, then hospitality in feminist avant-garde magazines was especially tested when it broached the old divide between academia and poetry, an animosity or congruence particularly pressing since the emergence of post-structuralism on the public and academic stage. In reviewing the magazine, Sheila Murphy praised *HOW2*'s capacity for "integrating difficult, conceptual works with a human dimension—i.e., personal experience" (6). There is a presumption here that feminist avant-garde work had to be both difficult or theoretical *and* "personal," a position which many contributors debated passionately in precisely such magazine features as the forum, as we will see in the *Raddle Moon* debate, to which I will now turn.

The poet and critic Johanna Drucker had organized the *Raddle Moon* roundtable on "Women/Writing/Theory" between 1990 and 1994 with a group of women—Susan Clark (*Raddle Moon*'s editor), Abigail Child, Laura Moriarty, Jessica Grim, Chris Tysh, Kathryn MacLeod, Jean Day, and Julia Steele—who circulated their work amongst themselves prior to publication, with work by Norma Cole and Juliana Spahr sent in response to the first published issue in 1992. Drucker began the exchange by asking her correspondents about their relationship to theory, whether they regarded it as "inherently masculinist," and how the nexus of gender, writing, and theory played out in their own praxis (Clark 16). The unpublished correspondence preceding the roundtable proper showed much concern for inclusivity and equality among participants. In her first letter addressed to everyone, Drucker emphasized that "this project should be as nonexclusive as possible"; the originally invited respondents were "merely the result of conversations and contacts rather than any selective criteria" (Drucker, Letter 3 Nov. 1990). While her wish for inclusivity elides the fact that magazines often need a socially connected editor with significant cultural capital in order to launch successful projects and that "conversations and contacts" are highly selective, Drucker's reassuring address to her friends practices the politics of the forum and the hospitable pedagogy that we have seen feminist magazines rehearse in this article.

In the published *Raddle Moon* exchange, the worry over inclusivity was attached to theory itself. One major disagreement arose between those who rejected theory outright and those who saw it as an important part of their practice. Jean Day, for instance, expressed a “disinclination to think of [theory] as more than a tool” (Day 56). Citing her collaborators in parentheses, Chris Tysh responded by pointing out the danger in wrongly identifying all theory with masculinity: “The conventional beef about theory’s HAR(D)NESS, ‘overly systematic’ (Day), ‘mastery’ (Steele) regrettably [...] can only profit the patriarchal status quo” (Tysh 45). In fact, Tysh countered, the participants (herself included) were complicit in a system that already involved theory:

Far from a self-marginalized topos inside which we survey theory as DE BIG BAD WOLF hungry to swallow our differences, we remain absorbed within. [...] we are, as Spivak argues, part of the structure, living *inside* the space from which we de facto speak, work and write. (Tysh 44)

Abigail Child, in turn, wanted to “enact” theory, rather than for her writing to “be *about*” theory, because “WOMEN ARE ALWAYS TALKING THEORY ONLY THEY DON’T NAME IT AS SUCH” (12–14). A way to “talk theory” in practice was through the forum, which implemented feminist theories of hospitable collectivity.

What sounded like an opportunity for an inspiring exchange in *Raddle Moon*’s forum was also ridden with strife, “fraught with problems,” as Drucker remembered in *Chain*’s “Gender and Editing” forum in 1994: “The project started with great optimism and enthusiasm on my part,” but after a while, “instead of sisterhoodly exchange, there was only paranoia, jealousy, and weirdness” (Drucker, “Editorial Forum” 37). For Drucker, the fact that they were all women set up the (second-wave feminist) expectation that they could all “identif[y]” with one another, implying “less capacity for distance/difference” (37). Consequently, the project ended prematurely: “we never got to the ‘editing’ stage. Communications broke down and Susan Clark took the project to completion so that I didn’t, ultimately, participate in giving it a final shape in any editorial sense” (37).

What had, in fact, happened behind the scenes was a disagreement over Drucker’s second-round contribution, which offended several participants. Drucker prefaced that contribution by acknowledging in her letter that “there is some degree of sharpness, but not meant as negative confrontation, rather, as a means of clarifying my own position” and while “[t]his will no doubt pique a number of you, [...] it was probably impossible to imagine we could invite each other to respond [*sic*] without risk of accentuating differences” (Drucker, Letter 12 April 1991). In her response, Drucker carefully critiqued the other contributions, but also pointed out that some women, herself included, have a stake in theory, because it “is essential to our survival” in the academy (Drucker, Letter 12 April 1991). Since the difficulties were “very real” and not “comfortable,” Drucker did not “feel tolerant of the condemnation of theory when that rejection proceeds from defensiveness and ignorance, or claims that somehow theory is

'other' than writing. For me the two are intimately bound up in my intellectual life, professional life, daily life" (Drucker, "Response" 49).

While the title "roundtable" evokes a chain letter ("round robin"), a round in a musical canon or boxing match, or the equality of the Knights of the Round Table, it also suggests the authority of academic roundtables. Drucker's "Response" is an example of a potential roundtable paper that engages critically with the other contributions and identifies what would be considered incoherent thinking in an academic context. Of course, this resemblance also reveals the exclusivity of the institutions of theory and academia, and the kinds of conversations they produce—and *cui bono*? An academic receives institutional credit from a theoretical engagement with the avant-garde through such a magazine roundtable; non-academic participants would not. Moreover, the alleged exclusivity of theory was often identified with a particular argumentative style and tone, and contrasted to fragmentary, non-linear forms with which some *Raddle Moon* responses experimented. Expressing doubts about a supposedly "feminine" style, Drucker wrote in her letter that she did "not want to condemn women writers to a theory position which necessarily requires that they be diffuse, plural, and polysemous just because the idea of clear articulation and assertive, reductive statements has a tradition of coming from male writers" (Drucker, Letter 12 April 1991). Drucker deemed this notion limiting and anxious.

Not having heard back from anyone in three months, Drucker sent another letter, worried that the "dynamics of exchange" were now skewed:

I have a feeling (and, without wanting to sound paranoid, have heard rumors) that in fact you have responded and that you simply have not responded to me. I was intentionally polemical, hoping that we would all push each other toward greater clarity, definition, and exchange. (Drucker, Letter 1 July 1991)

These rumors insinuated that Drucker's co-editor Susan Clark had asked the other participants about their willingness to continue the project. The silence and subsequent offended responses evidence that the project inadvertently ended up perpetuating the exclusionary politics it sought to overcome. Drucker, for her part, felt that "you are all projecting your own issues about authority onto me and working them out emotionally," and that she was suddenly "the object of hostility which is orchestrated as a group dynamic" (Drucker, Letter 16 July 1991).

Hospitality turned into hostility, with Drucker, one of the two academics among them (then an assistant professor in the Columbia art history department), being viewed as an authority figure. Owing to this rift, two participants withdrew their pieces, and Drucker resigned as the forum organizer. Feeling "under attack," Drucker pinpointed the problem they encountered in their attempt at group conversation: "it seems that you all have problems with the 'tone' of my response. Well, my tone is one which assumes authority. I want it to be. [...] yet, I do not vaunt it as the only position" (Drucker, Letter 16 July 1991). Often feminist magazine forums, like *Raddle Moon*'s, operated on the premise of kindness and accord, in opposition to what was understood to be masculine agonistic rhetoric.

Not only theory but disagreement itself was identified with masculinity, the challenge being how to tolerate discord *within* feminist collectives.

As the fronts between the participants softened and two further responses were circulated, Clark published the first round and a delayed second round with an edited version of Drucker's letter that toned down her criticisms. For Jean Day, their "problem of finishing this project [was] one of vocabulary"; "it was never clear *what* theory we were talking about" (56). Another problem was "how we address each other": "Then came Johanna's response, invoking much I find troubling in traditional intellectual debate. I felt unwilling to take up its terms" (57). For Day, who preferred more "speculative" modes, Drucker's "rhetoric" was not "productive" (57), a position she would now revise.⁹ For Drucker, conversely, "programmatic assertion" was the only viable feminist "real politik" (Drucker, "Response" 52–53). As if Drucker anticipated critique from outside their circle—"I don't want to see my theory turn all deferential, lady-like, and polite" (Drucker, "Response" 52)—Marjorie Perloff (a critic who's long advocated mostly male avant-gardes, such as Language Writing) dismissed *Raddle Moon's* roundtable, the "Poetics and Exposition" section of Margaret Sloan's feminist anthology *Moving Borders*, as well as other "postlanguage" tendencies "especially true of women poets" as examples of the "good bit of 'soft' theorizing" that followed the "foundational" (and by implication harder) theory of the male Language poets (Perloff 31–32). Perloff's dismissal shows what is at stake in a feminist engagement with theory: question a particular mode of theory and you are considered "soft"; engage with it and you can "found" avant-gardes. Feminist avant-garde magazines like *Raddle Moon* negotiated this conundrum: how to "talk theory" without mimicking potentially anti-feminist models, and how to be inclusive without disallowing disagreement.

More helpfully, Sianne Ngai reads the *Raddle Moon* roundtable as operating under a paranoid logic. Some participants saw theory as patriarchal and wanted to resist being complicit in it, others considered gendering style a form of complicity. If modernist questionnaires, as Cole argues, signaled "anxiety" about their own self-definition, the feminist avant-garde's call for a new magazine hospitality resulted from a feeling of complicity and paranoia—negative affects Ngai identifies as crucial for feminist poetics. This paranoia about complicity exemplifies the feminist avant-garde's dilemma: "[i]n these works, fear of unintended collusion with a system in which one is already inscribed [...] becomes the primary focus of investigations" (Ngai 8). Little magazine forums, I would add, offered a form to this necessary self-criticism in the service of feminist solidarity. Paranoid about continuing the exclusionary history of the avant-garde, the feminist avant-garde realizes its complicity with and inability to be entirely outside of patriarchal structures and compensates by dispersing editorial authority into the hands of the contributors.

The feminist avant-garde's imperative was and continues to be to expose the sexism and racism in avant-garde publishing. In this way, it matches the scholarly practice of critique, or what Sedgwick called "paranoid reading," which "places its faith in *exposure*" (130). At the same time, the politics of the forum in

avant-garde feminist magazines has both paranoid and reparative motives and effects: it highlights systemic oppression, but also promises what Sedgwick groups under reparative modes of knowing, namely pleasure and amelioration (144). Feminist avant-garde magazines, then, can teach us “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture [...] whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (Sedgwick 151). And it is a *reparative* reading that their paranoid project invites from us as contemporary critics. If these communities offer new pedagogical models of “hospitable reading” (Attridge 305), we, too, can ask ourselves: how can we become more hospitable in our attention and writing and address our own complicities productively?

In *HOW(ever)*, Drucker posited that the task of a contemporary avant-garde “has got to be the undoing of that mythic autonomy in recognition of the complicity of (still male-dominated) power relations as they structure the ongoing production of literature as its own critical history” (Drucker, “Exclusion/Inclusion” 13). Quoting Spivak in her last *Raddle Moon* response, Tysh accurately summed up the roundtable and a wider problem encountered in feminist experimental poetry communities: “in order to intervene one must negotiate [...] you must intervene even as you inhabit those structures” (Tysh 44). Forming an “ambiguously nonhegemonic group,” as DuPlessis envisioned, comes with strings attached. The *Raddle Moon* exchange reveals what is perhaps the forum’s characteristic undercurrent: the aspiration of female editors to “do it right” and increase inclusivity, and the paranoia that can be the underside of poetic hospitality. Worried about falling into patriarchal patterns with which they are entangled, feminist poets are anxious to interrogate their own positions and choices in order to instantiate ethical editorship.¹⁰ The weight of centuries of patriarchal editing failures rests heavily on the shoulders of feminist magazine editors and contributors. There is a desire to explain, motivated by the need not to alienate possible allies. Always offering the possibility of another response is the paranoid, but necessary, rejoinder to the shutting down of dialogue many of these poets experienced in non-feminist publishing ventures. It is a cautionary act fundamental to their hospitable politics and pedagogy.

While often idealized and unrealized, feminist magazines experimented with a model of hospitality that was not conditional—in other words, not a one-way invitation, guest-host hierarchy—but one that promoted reciprocity and mutual learning. The feminist avant-garde magazines discussed in this article involved more writers from different social, gendered, generational, and racial backgrounds, and bridged a greater number of topics than previous, non-feminist little magazines, and thus presented a concerted effort of inclusivity. That said, the realms of academia and even feminist theory, within which many of these avant-garde magazines moved, often reprised class and racial privilege. Feminist writers attempted to instantiate a theory and practice of hospitality within the medium of the magazine, for which the forum feature, and a politics of the forum more broadly, served as tools. But in some cases, magazines failed to instantiate a hospitable community, as we have seen in the *Raddle Moon* exchange.

This notwithstanding, the forum materialized a pragmatic feminist position that gave magazines the opportunity to avoid being “autocratic” and to increase the multi-vocality of their inclusions. Set up as a space for learning and discussion, the forum mimicked a pedagogical situation, with the difference that conventional teacher-student roles ideally did not persist. As an exercise in community-building, collective articulation, and attentive listening, the magazine forum admitted to saying, “we don’t have the answer to this, we want to hear from you.”

The contribution made by experimental feminist poets to the concept of magazine hospitality, which always depends on an editor granting that hospitality, is to redefine editorial hospitality with an understanding of the concept’s inherent contradiction, and view “this necessary impossibility as [a] condition of possibility” (Derrida 15). It is therefore understandable that the very aim of their pedagogy and poetics—hospitality—can become the object of paranoia about complicity, and even generate that paranoia. Offering hospitality is also, as Derrida highlights, an act of language (4–5). Jean Day’s insistent query about “how we address each other” manifests in the complex negotiations between *Raddle Moon*’s forum participants, but is also directed at us. In which language do “we address each other” as editors, writers, critics, and readers? The provisionality of any possible answer may be the condition under which hospitality must be invited. Feminist avant-garde magazines posit precisely those possible-impossible hospitable spaces, where criticism of the avant-garde does not mean there should not or cannot be one, but where a pedagogy and politics based on hospitality must be re-learned repeatedly.

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Notes

1. Related feminist magazines not included here are *Big Allis*, *Black Bread*, *(f.)lip*, *Re*Map*, *Tessera*, and *6ix*.
2. To name only two examples: Jed Rasula, himself a contributor to 1980s poetics magazines, divides the American poetry world of the 1990s into four “zones”: MFA programs, New Formalism, Language Poetry (by implication the only avant-garde), and “subcommunities, linked by identity politics,” which “tend to be antitheoretical” (Rasula 442–443). Mark Wallace offers a similar categorisation of post-1990 poetry (Wallace 193).
3. See Friedman and Fuchs; DuPlessis, *Pink Guitar* and *Blue Studios*; Keller and Miller; O’Sullivan; Sloan; Vickery, *Leaving Lines*; Rankine and Spahr; Hinton and Hogue; Frost, *Feminist Avant-Garde*; Kinnahan; Frost and Hogue, *Innovative*; Keller, *Thinking Poetry*. But, as Lisa Sewell pointed out in a 2016 essay, the category of “poetry by women” remains necessary today, not to describe “new, coherent movements” but “eruptions’ in the topography” (378).

4. DuPlessis and Golding have highlighted the avant-garde's "didactic element"—as a project of "cultural transformation" for DuPlessis's feminist peers (DuPlessis, *Pink Guitar* 17) and for poets from the 1980s onwards who increasingly appeared in the institutional "setting" of the classroom (Golding, "Isn't the Avant-Garde Always Pedagogical?" 14–16). Retallack and Spahr, in turn, suggest that teaching experimental work "help[s] us respond both empathically and critically [...] to our ongoing histories" (3).

5. Sedgwick criticizes a hermeneutics of suspicion that we have inherited from a philosophical tradition via Marx, Freud, and others, and that not only attempts to expose oppressive structures but also produces affective states and ways of knowing and being in the world that are grounded in suspicion, paranoia, and doubt at the expense of more reparative emotional and epistemological possibilities like pleasure and care. In Ngai's examples, paranoia is directed at the subject herself and takes the form of a worry over complicity, which she sees as particularly prevalent in a "minority oppositional subject" (7), such as the feminist avant-garde writer.

6. By "canon," I mean the processes of aesthetic judgments that lead to a sanctioned body of "great" literature and art, as well as the alternative, putatively anti-canonical, but equally sanctioned, avant-garde canon, erected by practitioners and critics wishing to define avant-gardism as separate from the so-called mainstream. For more on the "institutional" versus the "poet-based" model, see Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic* 41.

7. Despite increased diversity in the 1990s, Harryette Mullen stressed that "[t]he assumption remains, however unexamined, that 'avant-garde' poetry is not 'black' and that 'black' poetry, however singular its 'voice,' is not 'formally innovative'" (30).

8. Davidson's *Guys Like Us*, for example, details the "compulsory homosociality" in post-WWII poetry communities, focusing on the circles around Charles Olson and Jack Spicer (Davidson 28).

9. Jean Day, e-mail to Sophie Seita, 12 March 2015: "If you want to know whether feminist writers gendered 'theory' male, I think there certainly were some who thought so, and I was probably among them, though that seems far too simplistic now." Jean Day, E-mail to Sophie Seita, 4 March 2015: "What's surprising to me now is what appears to have been my own defensive response, accusing Johanna's piece of 'overtones of mastery and unrevisability'—which I really don't see now. I actually think her response, in retrospect[,] is exactly right."

10. A similar feminist paranoia is present in Spahr's and Osman's editorial to their fifth issue: "We have at various times in working on this issue felt nervous. Nervous because we often couldn't read all the languages. Or nervous that too much work remains in English" (Spahr and Osman, *Chain* 5; 4).

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