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**‘Yours in Struggle’:
Bad Feelings and Revolutionary Politics in *Spare Rib***

MELANIE WATERS

Abstract

When *Spare Rib* first launched in July 1972, its glossy pages promised to ‘put women’s liberation on the newsstands’ by spreading ‘new politics through familiar forms’ (Fell 1979: 2). From editorials exploring how it ‘feels’ to work collectively to letters from readers expressing the emotional toll of discrimination, *Spare Rib* makes a consistent effort to provide spaces in which the feelings associated with women’s liberation can be articulated and explored. This article examines the extent to which affect theory might help to illuminate the virulent discourse of feeling in *Spare Rib*. Foregrounding the high premium placed on personal testimony, both within the women’s liberation movement and in *Spare Rib* specifically, it explores a mixed selection of published correspondence and reflective editorials in order to assess how ‘bad feelings’ (Ahmed 2010a: 50), in particular, might serve as an ‘affective magnet’ around which the politics of feminism can be negotiated and critiqued (Berlant 2008: 7).

Keywords

Feminist periodicals, women’s liberation movement, *Spare Rib*, affect theory.

Biographical Note

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‘Yours in Struggle’:

Bad Feelings and Revolutionary Politics in *Spare Rib*

When *Spare Rib* first launched in July 1972, its glossy pages promised to ‘put women’s liberation on the newsstands’ by spreading ‘new politics through familiar forms’ (Fell 1979: 2). Featuring articles on abortion and prostitution alongside cartoons, do-it-yourself guides and a satirical ‘Men’s Page’, the magazine – cofounded by Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott – was hailed as offering a ‘revolutionary’ alternative to the traditional diet of fashion, beauty and homemaking found in its commercial competitors (Winship 1987: 143). As per its manifesto, *Spare Rib* sought to rehabilitate the stricken ‘concept of Women’s Liberation’ – at the time ‘widely misunderstood, feared and ridiculed’ – in order to establish feminism’s ‘vital importance to women now and, intrinsically, to the future of society’. In doing so, it would ‘reach out to all women, cutting across material, economic, and class barriers, to approach them as individuals in their own right’ (*Spare Rib* Manifesto 1972: 1).

This ambitious aim to ‘reach out to all women’ is a mainstay of *Spare Rib*’s editorial discourse throughout its 21-year run. It is invoked repeatedly as part of the rationale for changes in the magazine’s structure and organization, scope and contents, and political position: when *Spare Rib* makes a positive effort to provide lesbian readers with ‘material relevant to their lives’, it does so on the basis that it will help to reveal how ‘all women’s efforts to be liberated are connected’ (Spare Rib Collective, March 1982: 3-4); when it is excoriated for publishing ‘illogical reactionary rubbish’ from an ‘Oxbridge tory’ in its correspondence pages, it recapitulates its policy to ‘allow all women, who define themselves as feminists, an opportunity to express their points of view’ (Cathy T 1987: 6); when it drops the

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‘women’s liberation magazine’ byline from its cover in 1989, it explains that the label ‘alienates a large number of women, especially Black women and women in the Third World’ (Spare Rib Collective, August 1990: 4).

Throughout its various and controversial transitions, *Spare Rib* acknowledges the discomfiting effects of change on readers, editors and contributors alike; it does so on the basis that some changes – particularly those which are designed to expand the reach of the magazine to ‘all women’ – contribute positively to the collective good, even if, for certain individuals, they feel bad. From editorials exploring how it ‘feels’ to work collectively (as did the editors of *Spare Rib* from 1973) to letters from readers expressing the emotional toll of discrimination, *Spare Rib* makes a consistent effort to provide spaces in which the feelings associated with women’s liberation can be articulated and explored. In this article, I examine the extent to which affect theory might help to illuminate the virulent discourse of feeling in *Spare Rib*. Foregrounding the high premium placed on personal testimony, both within the women’s liberation movement and in *Spare Rib* specifically, I explore a mixed selection of published correspondence and reflective editorials in order to assess how ‘bad feelings’ (Ahmed 2010a: 50), in particular, might serve as an ‘affective magnet’ around which the politics of feminism can be negotiated and critiqued (Berlant 2008: 7). Making links to Barbara Green’s article, in which she uses affect theory to explore the ‘emotional valences’ of suffrage periodicals, I analyze how feelings circulate in *Spare Rib*, why they are important, and what their role is in shaping the direction of the magazine and fulfilling its commitment to ‘all women’.

Feeling Feminism

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As Green reflects in this special issue, affect theory has a potentially rich contribution to make to the field of periodical studies, offering ‘a language for unpacking the feelings that stitch readers to a community’, as well as ‘a frame through which we can explore the connections that link various parts of the paper to one another and to the larger networks of feminism’. In considering affect, Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg evoke ‘the visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing [...] that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension [and] can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability’ (Seigworth and Gregg 2009: 1). As Seigworth and Gregg’s account implies, we have no control over affect: its surges, eruptions and blockages are as involuntary as they are unpredictable. Furthermore, because affects are pre-subjective, embodied sensations – what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari might term *sensate* ‘intensities’ – they escape linguistic systematization (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 283); in this sense, affect theory and periodical studies would seem to be an unusual coupling: if affects elide linguistic representation, then what can they reveal about texts which take language as their primary mode? At the same time, however, the discourse of affect – with its attentiveness to flows of emotion, feeling and mood that are not always readily articulable – might provide a suggestive vocabulary for evaluating some of the more elusive dimensions of periodical culture in general, and feminist periodicals in particular. In *Spare Rib* the forces of affect play a vital role in magnetizing the connections between the movement and the magazine, its creators and consumers, the personal and the political, and – most challengingly – the theories and experiences associated with emancipation. Affect, then, is the current that animates and electrifies the complex web of personal, social and political

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identifications that spark between women in, through and beyond the pages of the magazine.

There is already a substantial and dynamic body of scholarship dedicated to tracing the intimate convergences of feminism and affect, to which Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, Clare Hemmings, Elspeth Probyn, Ann Cvetkovich, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, have each made exemplary contributions.¹ Approaching these intersections from a variety of angles, this scholarship seeks to explore the currency of affect, both in feminism and in the ‘public sphere’, while also investigating the potential dangers of over-identifying the personal with the political. To place feminism and feeling in close proximity, after all, risks reinvigorating what Megan Boler characterizes as persistent and ‘powerful biases against feminism’ and the ‘invocation of “feeling”’: biases which threaten to undermine its political imperatives (Boler 1999: 112). Berlant, meanwhile, cautions that attempts to retrieve affect for the purposes of critical enquiry – however valuable – do little to countervail the ‘difficulty of inducing structural transformation out of shifts in collective feeling’ (Berlant 2008: xii). As a revolutionary political movement, however, feminism owes its vitality to the currents of affect by which it is energized: ‘Feminism appeals because it means something – it touches deeply felt needs, feelings and emotions. It makes a direct, emotional and personal appeal, or it means little except as an intellectual exercise’ (Wise and Stanley 2002: 66).

The ‘deeply felt’ need for feminism is registered everywhere in *Spare Rib*, from Eileen Fairweather’s agenda-shifting article on abortion and women’s liberation

¹ See Pedwell and Whitehead (2012).

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(Fairweather 1979: 26-30)² to the magazine's support for women campaigning against workplace discrimination (Parker 1981: 13), rape in marriage ('A Wife's Right to Refuse' 1982: 12), and proposed amendments to the 1967 Abortion Act by the MPs James White (1975) and John Corrie (1979).³ As a periodical, moreover, *Spare Rib* – like 'grassroots' publications *Shrew* (1969-78) and the *Women's Newspaper* (1971) before it – is itself a tangible outgrowth of the 'deeply felt' need for a media that would reflect the principles of women's liberation not only between its covers, but also in its financing, production and editorial organization. In this respect, *Spare Rib* requires analysis along the lines proposed by Maria DiCenzo, Lucy Delap and Leila Ryan in their work on suffrage periodicals, as a publication that is at once 'embedded in a dynamic and widespread movement and part of a complex web of media'

² Fairweather's article prompted an impassioned public meeting in 1979, organized by *Spare Rib* and the National Abortion Campaign, which is evoked to powerful effect by Margaretta Jolly in 'The Feelings Behind the Slogans: Abortion Campaigning and Feminist Mood-Work Circa 1979'. Referring to the remembrances of Jan McKenley, who was present at the meeting, Jolly describes women "testifying" to sadness, guilt and loss as well as relief", sharing 'abortion experiences in a way that campaigns to date had not allowed' and which point 'to complexities not captured by straplines such as "Abortion on Demand – A Woman's Right to Choose"; "Our Bodies, Our Lives, Our Right to Decide"' (Jolly 2014: 105).

³ For *Spare Rib*'s coverage of changes to abortion legislation see the following: Warren, February 1975: 23; Warren, April 1975: 17-18; Warren, May 1975: 19; Nicholls, June 1975: 22; Warren, June 1975: 23; *Spare Rib* Collective, July 1975: 26; Warren, August 1975: 18-19; *Spare Rib* Collective: July 1979: 11; *Spare Rib* Collective, Sept, 1979: 11; *Spare Rib* Collective, December 1979: 20-25.

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(DiCenzo, Delap and Ryan 2010: 200). In other words, it is a magazine that cannot be judged solely in terms of its relationship to the women's liberation movement. Rather, its distinctiveness must also be assessed through reference to its lively placement within a rich panoply of mass-marketed and countercultural media forms, from the soft-focus sewing and sentimentalism of *Woman's Own* to the dizzying experimentalism of *OZ* (1967-73).

The media world in which *Spare Rib* emerged in 1972 was in a state of flux: the underground press was in a state of slow collapse and, while commercial women's magazines continued to enjoy popularity, a new species of glossy monthly was starting to appear. *Cosmopolitan* had bounced onto British newsstands in March 1972, in a scarlet burst of stitch-popping cleavage, only three months prior to the first issue of *Spare Rib*. The editors of *Spare Rib*, however, were quick to distance their 'women's liberation magazine' from *Cosmopolitan's* sexy brand of no-strings-attached individualism. They published a scathing review of the magazine in their first issue, which took aim at *Cosmopolitan's* veiled conservatism and 'methodically trite' coverage of women's issues (Neville 1972: 33). *Spare Rib's* complex entanglements with this media milieu are the topic of thoughtful consideration in Laurel Forster's *Magazine Movements* (2015) and in Janice Winship's influential study *Inside Women's Magazines* (1987). Positioning *Spare Rib* within the shifting media landscape of the 1970s and 80s, Winship observes that its distinctiveness as a magazine is, first and foremost, a matter of feeling: '*Woman's Own's* complacency, the overwhelming heartiness radiating from *Cosmo*, are simply not there', she concludes. *Spare Rib*, by contrast, 'resonates with strong feelings, sometimes of exuberant energy, warmth and humour, often of pain, sadness and anger' (Winship 1987: 124). Characterized by the intensity and range of the feelings that emanate from

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its pages, as distinct from the more consistent ‘moods’ – of ‘complacency’ and ‘heartiness’ – ascribed to its competitors, *Spare Rib* exudes an energy that betrays its debt to another section of print media: the underground press.

Rowe and Boycott had each been working in the underground press – Rowe for *OZ* and *INK* (1971-72), and Boycott for *Friends/Frendz* (1969-72) – when they first met, and in Rowe’s estimation *Spare Rib* is both a product of this anarchic milieu and a ‘reaction against it’ (Rowe 1982: 13). Since the mid-1960s, the underground press had been at the vanguard of a new era of innovation in the world of print media, one that took its cues from the revolutionary politics and psychotropic iconography of the countercultural movement. The ‘revolutionary’ commitments of publications such as *IT* (1966-73), *OZ*, *Black Dwarf* (1968-72), and *Friends/Frendz*, were, however, limited. As Elizabeth Nelson reflects, the underground press ‘grasped too late and inadequately’ the ‘question of women’s liberation’ (Nelson 1989: 138); sexism was rife both in the content of the periodicals and in the offices from which they were run, where women were expected to serve ‘the men and [do] the office and production work’, while male colleagues held fast to the reins of editorial control (Rowe 1982: 15). When, in December 1971, a meeting was called for women who were ‘dissatisfied with their marginalized role in the underground press’, both Rowe and Boycott were in attendance, and it was in this context of shared anger and frustration that the idea for *Spare Rib* was first conceived (Spare Rib Collective, April 1989: 5). Rowe’s recollections of the meeting are striking, prioritizing the febrile mood of the gathering over any ‘discussion of work’:

The main impression that has stayed in my mind is of women voicing the other side of sexual permissiveness, talking of pain and anxiety about

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abortions, the problems of obtaining an abortion earlier in the sixties, and in one case of a woman having gone through pregnancy as a teenager only to see the child adopted. [...] So much of our lives had been concealed from each other, it was as if we had been strangers. Other impressions were the way the room seemed to swirl with emotion so long suppressed and that I was frightened. (Rowe 1982: 16).

Just as *Spare Rib* would go on to exhibit the ‘deeply felt’ need for feminism and a feminist periodical culture, Rowe’s memories of the meeting register less as coherent political formations than as feelings. While these feelings are identified by Rowe, however, they are not experienced by her alone. Rather, they seem to pattern Kathleen Stewart’s description of affects as ‘public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation’ (Stewart 2007: 2). The dizzying ‘swirl’ of emotion ‘begin[s] and end[s]’ within the walls of the room in which the women gather, but in Rowe’s dramatic rendering, some of that emotion ‘gets into’ her (Brennan 2004: 1). Trading on the ‘contagious’ nature of emotion (a compelling strand of discussion within feminist theories of affect), Rowe recognizes the importance of emotion not just in terms of its potential to generate a sense of collective intimacy within the bounds of a particular place and time, but also implies that there is something in the unrestricted, excessive and unpredictable movements of emotion that might be usefully instrumentalized in service to feminism’s political ends.

No hard feelings?

In *Metamorphoses* (2001), Rosi Braidotti casts a nostalgic glance back to the ‘early militant days of the women’s movement when laughter and joy were profound

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political weapons and statements'. 'In feminism', she argues, 'it is crucial [...] to move beyond the deadly-serious priests of revolutionary zeal and revalorize the merry-making aspect of the processes of social change' (Braidotti 2001: 61). While Braidotti agitates for a politics of renewed 'positivity', Ngai, Ahmed and Hemmings petition just as convincingly for the productive political currency of so-called 'bad feelings'. For Ngai, 'the affective dimension of feminism, including all its ugly feelings, needs to be taken far more seriously than it has so far' (Ngai 2007: 127), while Ahmed, in particular, cautions against the disavowal of 'bad feelings' in 'the hope that we can "just get along"'. It is, she argues, 'the very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear' (Ahmed 2010a: 50). The feminist 'merry-making' that Braidotti hitches to a now-past cultural moment rings from the pages of British women's liberation periodicals. It is often, however, so-called 'bad' feelings that seem to have the most powerful currency, both in the periodicals and the movement they reflect and create. As *Spare Rib* makes clear again and again, bad feelings are catalysts for action; without the acknowledgement and negotiation of 'bad' or 'ugly' feelings, the affective process of liberation would grind to a halt.

Appearing at a time when the nuclear family was hailed as a prospective casualty of women's liberation, early issues of *Spare Rib* are necessarily preoccupied with the 'bad feelings' that circulate within heterosexual relationships, but they are also concerned with the emotional struggle of liberation. This struggle is addressed in a regular feature, 'Ellen's Diary', which runs for four issues between July and October 1973. According to the editors at the time, 'Ellen's Diary' 'shows a woman's confusion when she begins to live her life through a man' and 'will continue as she rediscovers her own identity and changes her relationship' (Spare Rib Collective, July

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1973: 5). In an entry dated 'February 1967', Ellen, despite being married to a man she loves 'passionately', describes being 'sunk in a black depression, filled with suicidal thoughts' ('Ellen's Diary', July 1973: 46). Through two pregnancies and ongoing marital difficulties, Ellen continues to record her feelings of frustration, confusion, resentment, and outrage, as her husband's involvement with 'radical politics' intensifies, making it necessary for Ellen 'to spend [her] whole time looking after his children' ('Ellen's Diary', September 1973: 4, 36). Liberation is difficult, too. The women's liberation meetings she attends are as unsettling as they are rewarding, propelling her into states of 'terrific nervous excitement' that prevent her from sleeping, but which ultimately facilitate her attempt 'to develop a revolutionary life style in the home and outside it' ('Ellen's Diary', October 1973: 33).

The challenge women's liberation poses to heterosexual relationships is explored from a male perspective in a poignant article by John Miles, which appears in the September 1973 issue of *Spare Rib* (with the third installment of 'Ellen's Diary'). In 'Jealousy', Miles traces his experiences in an open relationship with his wife, along with all the bad feelings it entails: 'I never expected this unceasing ache and emptiness, these explosions into almost delirious anguish. I never expected I would feel so crushed, so left out, so insecure, so inadequate, so lonely, so *paranoid*' (Miles 1973: 8; emphasis in original). These feelings, though troubling, are rationalized in terms of their political necessity: 'If we can create relationships that are relatively free of dependence, possessiveness and the adman's fantasies – then maybe we have helped in a small way in a fight for humanized relationships in every aspect of ours and other people's lives' (10). Like 'Ellen's Diary', Miles's article presents an ambivalent, equivocating account of how liberation can feel, valorizing the endurance of bad feelings as a significant phase in the 'fight for humanized

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relationships'. As Winship discusses, bad feelings are a staple of women's magazines (Winship 1987: 70-80); while *Spare Rib* does not have a monopoly on the sharing of 'bad feelings' that arise in marriage, it is distinctive in its attempt to analyze these feelings within the political frameworks of women's liberation, and as part of a much larger narrative of progress. This narrative of progress, integral to the coverage of 'liberated' relationships within the home, is just as central to the way in which *Spare Rib* – as a magazine that seeks to 'reach out to all women' – rationalizes the balancing act between individual discomfort and collective galvanization that shapes its own working practices.

In *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), Cvetkovich examines cultural texts as 'repositories of feelings and emotion, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception' (Cvetkovich 2003: 7). With its insistence on attending to the role of feeling in its practices, production and reception, *Spare Rib* would seem to invite consideration in such terms. From its early days with Rowe and Boycott as co-editors, to its reconfiguration as a collective in 1973, to the racial and ethnic diversification of its editorial team a decade later, *Spare Rib* is consistent in its endeavour to develop models of work that put into practice the principles of women's liberation, without neglecting the difficult feelings to which this perpetual transitioning gives rise. Through its irregular editorials, *Spare Rib* provides candid insights into its working practices, revealing the frequency and force with which the personal, the professional and the political converge. Rowe, in one such editorial, organizes her thoughts around two key questions that, when taken together, imply the dynamic, reciprocal connectedness of politics, work and subjectivity: 'Why do we work collectively?' and 'How does it *feel*?' (*Spare Rib* Collective, February 1975: 3; emphasis added). She

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surmises that '[t]o put women's liberation ideas into practice has been to command our own work and alter the conditions for our work. These changes in turn affect the way you think and feel. Sometimes the changes feel good, and sometimes bad – or at least unflattering' (Rowe 1975: 4). Working collectively, in an arrangement 'without any authority figure', where all work is shared and decisions are made unanimously – based on 'understanding the circumstances', rather than by majority vote – *Spare Rib*'s members create an environment in which the professional and the political are unfailingly personal (4-5). This does not change with the passing of time: just as Rowe reflects in 1975 that feelings at meetings are 'desperate' and 'worries pop out like a jack-in-the-box' (5), Sue O'Sullivan, in her contribution to a group editorial from 1983, describes how the 'demanding cycle of "getting the mag out", of meeting the demands of change, and of arguing [her] politics', can leave her ideals 'gasping at the wayside' (Spare Rib Collective, June 1983: 6).

Both editorials, in mapping the proximal relationship between the personal, the professional and the political, represent the 'demands' of the magazine in terms of affect and embodiment. In this way, these editorials evoke longstanding conceptualizations of the periodical as a 'feminine form', consequent, as Margaret Beetham notes, upon the 'periodicity which gives the genre its name and distinguishes it from other kinds of print' (Beetham 1996: 8). The 1983 editorial has a special section describing its 'monthly cycle' (30), while Rowe explains that the magazine's production timetable accommodates 'period pains' as well as 'quarrels and worries' (Rowe 1975: 4). If the cycles of the magazine's production pattern those of the women who work on it, then the magazine is likewise calibrated to the restive mood of its overworked staff: 'Spare Rib twitches with alarms of copy dates, production, print and distribution schedules', states Rowe, 'and the floor's been swept clean

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countless times of discarded illusions' (4). *Spare Rib* – this twitching body of liberation – is fuelled by the inchoate energies of affect, which – in Rowe's editorial at least – mediate enigmatically between feminist epistemology and ontology: 'when our backs ache, we look at our work and know we exist, when our mouths smile and grumble, we know we are expressing ourselves, when our eyes blink with tiredness we find our stares have had somewhere to focus' (4). Here, feeling and being and knowing are part of the same affective circuitry: we know we are liberated because we feel it. Every ache, every smile, every exhausted blink is a felt confirmation of one's liberation, and an uncomfortable reminder that liberation might not always feel good. At the same time, as in 'Ellen's Diary' and Miles's 'Jealousy', a special political premium is placed on personal discomfort, leading O'Sullivan to reflect that collective working 'isn't a cure-all', but 'it feels like we're on the right, if difficult, path' (Spare Rib Collective, June 1983: 6).

While the editorials tackle the challenges of liberation from the perspective of the Collective, they also acknowledge the 'bad feelings' that circulate within its readership. When, in December 1983, the Collective announces via an editorial that '*Spare Rib* is no longer a white women's magazine', it makes sure to recognize 'the difficulty of all this for many [...] white readers'. The Collective also observes, however, that feminism must not ignore the 'overdue challenge' of racism, nor the pains it inflicts on the magazine's non-white readers: 'we need our readers in order to survive but we need to meet the urgent realities of racism (and other injustices) in order to survive and grow as feminists' (3). Articulating, analyzing and debating bad feelings, whether they arise as a result of liberation or discrimination, is an important function of *Spare Rib*, and one which is documented with special poignancy within

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the correspondence pages of the magazine, where these feelings have the potential, at least, to gain public acknowledgement and political traction.

Intimate Things

In the introduction to *In Love and Struggle* (2008), her compelling analysis of feminist correspondence from the 1970s and 80s, Margaretta Jolly – tracing the ‘striking number’ of feminist ‘novels, poems [and] essays’ that make use of the letter form – finds in letters ‘a significant literature of the second-wave women’s movement’. Jolly identifies in this rich epistolary archive an affective energy that reveals ‘more poignantly than autobiography [...] the struggle to realize ideals of sisterhood from within and the puzzle of how to create genuine coalition and community across political gulfs of race or class or sheer differences of temperament’ (Jolly 2008: 4). With its emphasis on the capacity of the letter to communicate across chasms of difference, Jolly’s work provides a suggestive context for examining how *Spare Rib*’s commitment to ‘all women’, irrespective of ‘material, economic, and class barriers’, plays out in the magazine’s correspondence pages.

Letters, whether revelatory, supportive or critical, play an essential role in the life and development of *Spare Rib*: the magazine had a correspondence page before it had any readers with whom to correspond, publishing in its first number, as ‘letters’, responses to a questionnaire about women’s liberation that the editors had distributed ‘to lots of women around the country’ (‘In Our Own Write’ 1972: 5).⁴ Along with the reviews section, the letters page was the only regular column to survive from the first

⁴ These appeared under the heading ‘In Our Own Write’ (#1), a title that *Spare Rib* would retain for its regular letters page, before rebranding itself as ‘Letters’ from March 1974 [with the exception of November 1972, when it was ‘P.S.’]).

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issue of *Spare Rib* to the last. While consistent in its presence and placement within the magazine (it is usually the first item to follow the table of contents), the correspondence column is otherwise a fairly versatile space, expanding – sometimes to four pages – and contracting in accordance with the volume of letters received in a particular month. As well as letters, responses from editors and contributors, adverts, and subscription notices, the correspondence column was also a showcase for illustrations, cartoons and poems, some of which were submitted by readers and others by regular contributors. *Spare Rib* thus demonstrates an ongoing editorial commitment to providing women with opportunities for self-expression, appearing to valorize letter writing, along the lines suggested by Jolly, as a ‘creative process’ and ‘form of women’s art’ (Jolly 2008: 3).

Like the U.S. women’s liberation periodicals researched by Kathryn Thoms Flannery, *Spare Rib* ‘invited readers to involve themselves actively’ in the magazine’s production, ‘to join in the work, not simply as consumers [...] but as creators’ (Thoms Flannery 2005: 51). Certainly, the editors are consistently solicitous of feedback, in some issues making their appeal to readers on the basis of feeling: ‘Is this the first time you’ve seen *Spare Rib*? Did it make you laugh/depressed/angry or bored? Write and tell us what you think’ (*Spare Rib* Collective, October 1978: 5). If *Spare Rib* was consistently solicitous of readerly opinion, then its readers were just as consistently responsive to the magazine’s invitations. Between threats of withdrawn subscriptions and robust avowals of sisterly loyalty and support, the correspondence pages are a volatile brew of conflicting sentiments about the magazine and its politics. Feelings – of contributors, editors and readers alike – run high. These responses regularly reveal the strength of readers’ attachments to *Spare Rib*, even in spite of its enumerated flaws: Fizz from South Croydon, for example, writes in to commend the editorial

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team on their production of such ‘a stimulating mixture of inspiration and disgust provoking garbage’ (Fizz 1978: 4), while Fiona Hartnett condemns *Spare Rib*’s decline into ‘a kind of Marxist *Woman’s Own*’ and ‘confidently await[s] the day when knitting patterns of the Red Flag appear’ (Hartnett 1975: 4). Nestling beside the letters of complaint are missives of support. Lynn Carney in *Darlington* describes *Spare Rib* as a ‘sort of friend to a lonely feminist’ (Carney 1980: 4) and it is ‘as much a sister’ to Sue Regan ‘as the women [she] know[s] and love[s]’ (Regan 1983: 5). This heightened emotional register is similarly discernible in more personal letters from readers. From the kitchen-sink mundanity of the housewife’s complaint to the nightmarish narratives of rape survivors, the letters page operates along the lines of an open confessional, a space in which correspondents can share and reflect on their experiences – however intimate or ‘shameful’ – within a community of (largely) sympathetic readers.

As Green notes in her insightful analysis of the correspondence columns in the *Woman Worker* (1907-10), *Women Folk*, and the *Freewoman* (1911-12), Lauren Berlant’s account of the ‘intimate public sphere’ has a significant contribution to make to the study of periodicals, providing a lens through which the ‘emotional valence of the negotiation between publics and subjects, periodicals and their readers’ might be better understood (Green 2012: 465; emphasis added). As it is evoked in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997) and *The Female Complaint* (2008), Berlant’s ‘intimate public’ is a site of ‘affective identification’ at which ‘strangers’ who are ‘perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history’ are able to make ‘emotional contact’. The correspondence pages of feminist periodicals exemplify, as Green asserts, the affective characteristics of Berlant’s ‘intimate public sphere’. In particular, these pages play host to ‘narratives and things’ which are

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expressive of a ‘worldview and emotional knowledge that have derived from a broadly common historical experience’. In the context of the women’s liberation movement, this fantasized shared history turns on such ‘common’ experiences as domination and discrimination, which provide ‘anchors for realistic, critical assessment of the way things are’, while *Spare Rib* itself offers a space for ‘recognition and reflection’ through which a ‘better experience of social belonging’ might be envisioned (Berlant 2008: viii).

A harrowing letter from ‘Jane’ in the July 1975 issue of *Spare Rib* is a case in point. Written in the immediate aftermath of a domestic attack, Jane’s letter demonstrates the affective power of readers’ correspondence and shows how this power sparks connections not only between individual readers, but also between the abstract concepts of the personal and the political:

This is what happened to me on Sunday – my husband beat me up on the kitchen floor in front of my two children (both under two). I saw flashes of white in my head and he twisted my arm backwards against the joint – after a long time I crept upstairs and slept in the spare room. He wasn’t sorry at all and did not apologise and has not spoken to me since. (Jane 1975: 4)

Jane’s letter begins, as do many such letters, with the visceral account of a ‘private’ experience, before broadening out to address the various practical, economic and legal obstacles that prevent her from getting herself and her children to safety. These range from the difficulty of travelling ‘across London – tubes etc. – with a twin pram’ to the unsympathetic attitude of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and, ultimately, the failure of the law to safeguard survivors of domestic abuse. Jane’s solicitor notes that

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she does not 'look bashed up enough [and is] probably "borderline" as regards getting an injunction' against her husband:

I might be able to obtain a divorce but my first duty is to *try for a reconciliation* – yes – I, the person who was beaten, should contact a social worker and try to *effect a reconciliation*. And as "marriage is a contract" I am supposedly wrong to move into the spare room because my husband has "a right to access" (to me). (4; emphases in original)

With its hesitations, repetitions, clarifications, and emphases, Jane's letter shudders with rage and distress, but its affective tremors only intensify its political insights. Quoting the language of the law and the advice of her (male) solicitor, Jane foregrounds the extent to which violence against women is perpetuated and facilitated by individuals and public institutions alike. As she reflects at the close of her letter, she knows she 'can't win', but is writing because she is 'angry that the CAB should purport to help battered women and speak to me in such a rude, supercilious manner' and because she would 'like to suggest' that a 'list of women's centres [...] be standard in every issue' (4). As a site of 'affective identification', the letter prompts another reader to write in and advise Jane to obtain a doctor's note, as it is 'the only evidence [a solicitor] can act on': 'It worked in my case', she reveals, 'I hope it works for Jane, as being beaten is not very nice' (Joyce 1976: 4).

This matrix of responsive, 'affective identification' is similarly enlivened by another letter that touches on the problem of violence against women. Signing off as 'A. Cooper', the 27-year-old correspondent is inspired to write to *Spare Rib* after seeing a letter from another reader (printed on the same page as Joyce's response to

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Jane's letter) calling for a return to 'grass roots' activism (Thompson 1976: 4). Cooper goes on to enumerate the difficulties of working part-time, running a home and raising three children, while her 'bone idle' husband 'is out at the pub'. When he comes home, she explains, he 'demands to have sex [...] otherwise he starts smashing the flat up'. Recognizing her situation as common to her friends and 'all the women you talk to, be they on a bus, or in the launderette', she concludes that '[i]t is about time we stopped going behind closed doors and started getting a few home truths *out*' (Cooper 1976: 4-5). Because her letter touches on a broader debate taking place between readers about the class tensions within the women's liberation movement and its failure to connect with working-class women, it is later taken up by Janet Smith as striking 'at the heart of sexual discrimination': 'The women's movement', Smith assures Cooper, 'exists for you, it exists in order that women may recognize themselves as worthwhile people and it exists to give help and support in order to break out of restrictive relationships where you are used and abused' (Smith 1976: 4).

Like many of the letters printed in *Spare Rib*, Cooper's letter discharges in Smith an 'emotional response' of the kind Berlant associates with the intimate public sphere. In Berlant's account, however, intimate publics are oriented *primarily* towards 'the expression of emotional response'; they operate in '*proximity* to the political', only 'occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics' (Berlant 2008: x; emphasis in original). In the context of *Spare Rib*, conversely, 'the expression of emotional response' is often part of a broader enticement to political alliance and action. At the close of her letter, then, Smith invites 'any woman who feels herself to be in the same position as A. Cooper' to contact her 'with a view to setting up communications channels throughout the country' (Smith 1976: 4). Here, and elsewhere in *Spare Rib*, emotional responses are

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part of ‘doing’ politics, but just as they can facilitate the development of feminist networks, campaigns and actions, they might just as readily short circuit lines of identification.

Yours in Sisterhood?

While the physiological dimensions of affect may render it unavailable to language, the *logic* of affect – in particular, the unpredictable ways in which it flows between subjects, circulating, spreading and transforming, firing connections and blowing fuses – would seem to shed important light on what takes place within and beyond the covers of *Spare Rib*. Brian Massumi’s characterization of affect as the ability ‘to affect and be affected’, for instance, seems to capture the open, reactive dynamism of a correspondence page which registers how letters shape and are shaped by the magazine, its readers and their experiences of the world (Massumi 2015: ix).

The circulation of feelings in the correspondence pages of *Spare Rib* exemplifies the mobile status of affects as they are conjured by Stewart in *Ordinary Affects* (2007). Stewart argues that affects can ‘be “seen” obtusely, in circuits and failed relays, in jumpy moves and the layered textures of a scene’. These affects, she continues, ‘point to the jump of something coming together for a minute and to the spreading lines of resonance and connection that become possible and might snap into sense in some sharp or vague way’ (Stewart 2007: 4). Stewart’s seductively slippery rendering of affect, with its jumps and snaps and ‘spreading lines’ of influence, would seem to have suggestive implications for an analysis of the flurries of controversy that break out within the correspondence pages of *Spare Rib*. While many such

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controversies arise in response to the publication of particular polemical articles⁵, it is two letters, printed together in the February 1990 issue, that become lightning rods for what is arguably the most sustained and vociferous debate in the magazine's history.

The first of these letters, from 'Manchester Feminist', condemns the *Spare Rib* for its 'PSEUDOFEMINISM' (Manchester Feminist 1990: 5), and the second, from Nikki McCarthy, 'object[s] strongly to the softening up of our erstwhile radical space' with 'glossy' covers and 'celebrity' interviews (McCarthy 1990: 5). These letters prompt a response from the Spare Rib Collective that runs to two-and-a-half pages, in which it clarifies its editorial commitment to 'unity', 'diversity' and the 'politics of self-determination', while articulating the magazine's rejection of McCarthy's 'narrow and rigid' definition of the political, which it views as 'alienat[ing] a huge majority of women from [...] the women's movement' (Spare Rib Collective, February 1990: 6). This formative exchange 'spark[s] off quite a dialogue'; it gives rise to a debate that unfolds in the correspondence pages over the course of the next two years⁶, and which is also – according to the Collective – 'taken up elsewhere' (Spare Rib Collective, August 1990: 5). The debate in question is wide-ranging, but takes as its focus the increasingly contested concept of 'women's liberation' and *Spare Rib*'s vexed attempts to adapt the magazine in ways that better reflect 'all of the

⁵ Amongst the most controversial articles published in *Spare Rib* are Morrell, 'Schizophrenia', pp. 34-5; Greer, 'Killing No Murder', pp. 28, 33 and 'Editorial', p. 9; Kelly and O'Hara, 'The Making of Pornography', pp. 16-19.

⁶ Beginning in February 1990, the fierce dialogue about the future direction of *Spare Rib* rages on within the magazine's correspondence pages until May 1991.

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oppressions which affect women worldwide' (Spare Rib Collective, October 1989: 48).

Unsurprisingly, the feelings that arise within this dialogue are intense and conflicting. One reader reports in the March 1990 edition of *Spare Rib* that the letters from Manchester Feminist and Nikki McCarthy printed in the magazine's previous number 'provoked feelings both of hurt and anger'. In the same issue, another reader notes that 'a great many women are very angry', finding evidence of this in the criticisms leveled at *Spare Rib* by the original correspondents, as well as in the magazine's equally vociferous response to them (Walker 1990: 4). In the months that follow, readers and editors alike continue to air their feelings of 'excitement', 'rage', 'anger', 'pain' (McCormack 1990: 4), shock (Gill and Shinebourne 1990: 5), and frustration (Littleson 1990: 6) at the intensifying exchange. While the editors receive only 'a few "frightfully nasty" letters' (which they publish), a number of readers threaten to discontinue subscriptions if the magazine refuses to adjust its 'international bias' and continues to ignore 'the experiences of ordinary British women' (Spare Rib Collective, October 1990: 4; Gollings 1990: 5).

By forcing *Spare Rib* to review its editorial policy and articulate its position in relation to shifts within the women's liberation movement, the letters from Manchester Feminist and McCarthy 'snap into sense' issues 'that have been, and are presently being discussed by women worldwide' (Spare Rib Collective, August 1990: 5). McCarthy's letter, then, inadvertently reveals the peculiar and unpredictable potential of certain letters in the magazine to 'catch' readers and editors alike, illuminating the complex web of lateral and longitudinal identifications that stretch across the past, present and future of the magazine, drawing certain parties closer in 'the jump of something coming together', whether in agreement or dissent.

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What is interesting, however, is how the pitch of the initial dialogue and the discourses of racism with which it engages seem to spread to the exchanges that follow. Following the publication of her initial letter, McCarthy writes a second time to complain about the way her comments were (mis)interpreted by the editors: 'I feel that I have been virtually accused of racism by *Spare Rib*', she claims (McCarthy 1990: 4). After Terri Syira expresses her 'deepest disgust' at the 'racist shit' in one particular letter (Syira 1990: 5-6), two other readers profess themselves to be 'fed up, angry, tired' with the 'elitist crap' promulgated by middle-class white women (Cross and Prodromov 1990: 5).

Just as Anna Gibbs observes that affect is contagious - bodies 'can catch feelings as easily as catch fire' (Gibbs 2001: para. 1) – the feelings aired within the correspondence pages of *Spare Rib* as part of this 'dialogue', and the rhetoric of racism with which they are bound up, are not containable within the terms of the debate alone and thus pass into other, adjacent strains of discussion. Nickie Roberts, in a letter responding to an article about the sex industry, makes a point of dismissing '[w]hite globe-trotting feminists', who 'pay lip service to the devastating poverty of grass-roots women' in other countries, as the purveyors of 'crap' (Roberts 1990: 4). Charges of racism likewise abound when Maud Sulter, the writer of a controversial review of a book of erotica, accuses correspondents who are critical of her position, such as Mandy McCartin, of deploying the 'patriarchal tactics' that 'are often used to silence Black women' (McCartin 1991: 4; Sulter 1991: 5).

These sequences of (mis)communication are suggestive of the 'failed relays' and 'jumpy moves' to which Stewart refers. Statements, clarifications, accusations, and denials, alive with feeling, fly between contributors to the correspondence page, but the feelings catch and spread in unpredictable ways. If affects are indeed

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contagious, then it is clear from these awkward exchanges that ‘we might be affected differently by what gets passed around’ (Ahmed 2010b: 39-40).

While the contingency of affects, the unpredictable ways that they intensify, mutate or abate according to the ‘bodies’ they pass between, is demonstrated in the exchanges that take place in the correspondence pages, this is no less of a concern elsewhere in the magazine, where the feelings that attach to discrimination and liberation – however difficult and conflicted – are repeatedly opened to scrutiny. Within the discourses of *Spare Rib*, feelings are a part of politics. In the transient world of periodicals, where longevity is an exception rather than a rule, *Spare Rib*’s 21-year run is a triumph of the powerful feelings that editors and readers attached to the magazine. By creating a space in which ‘bad feelings’ were not dismissed, but aired, acknowledged and responded to, *Spare Rib* shows how the struggle for liberation was not only one against the status quo, but also one that brought women into conflict with their peers, their families and themselves. Through their contributions to *Spare Rib*, readers and editors engaged in a form of activism in which the political effectiveness of the women’s liberation movement could be assessed and negotiated *through* its affectiveness, and not in spite of it.

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