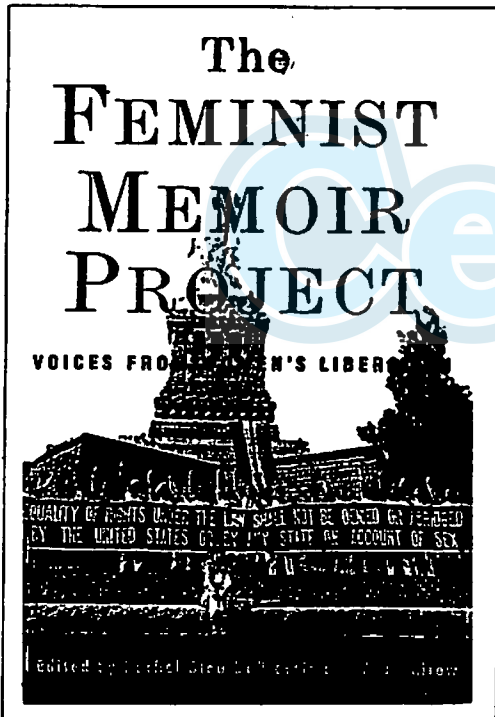




# THE FEMINIST MEMOIR PROJECT : VOICES FROM WOMEN'S LIBERATION<sup>1</sup>.



Edited by  
**RACHEL BLAU  
DUPLEISIS and ANN  
SNITOW**

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Women's movement is often relegated to the footnotes and the margins of any literary works. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow see this fact as alarming and decide to contact a number of active contem-

<sup>1</sup> The reviewer especially thanked Ann Snitow who donated the book while giving a lecture to Fulbright Summer Institute grantees at New School University of New York, USA in July 2001.

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porary United States feminists to voice their feminist's accounts of the diverse historical participation and agency in the form of a memoir. These active feminists as contributors to the memoir are asked to make an entry of what initially burst their excitement and motivation into a political movement and how feminism has affected their lives. The editor's intention is so that other women, after reading the memoirs, can begin to reflect and redefine or re-highlight the meaning of being a woman.

This book is a non-fiction writing, which captures the second wave of feminism that begins in 1965 and explores how it felt to live through and contribute to a massive social change. In the context of a general expansion of political energy, feminism has created a movement of breath and staying power, hope, and influence. As feminism kept moving the lives of many women in America, changing its meanings, the book creates a record and tries to understand that record. The memoirs written by key protagonists of the movement represent a whole spectrum of ethnicity in America, therefore, conveying a sense of time when old conditions became visible and new analysis and desires became thinkable.

How did feminism start? According to the memoir entrees of some thirty-two contributors, women started to form a movement because of their concern over those who told them to leave jobs when married, forced into unacknowledged doubled work days, often fired when pregnant, aggressively ignored or ignorantly aggressed upon, assumed as helpers but when unhelpful are called bitches or witches. As far back as the 1960s, Barbara Seaman and Alice Wolfson see the start of feminism movement with the finding that the contraceptive pill, which is thought to bring new possibilities are actually threatening women's health. In the same perspective, the discovery of sterilization for women of color or poor women as the price exacted by official boards for allowing a legal termination of pregnancy has made women see it as an act to only "free men first" and leave women to suffer.

In general, the book shows that women who became feminist activist often share a social, spiritual and emotional yearning for a better world for all. They hope thrillingly, wildly, and even absurdly and worked for social change with the rare urgency that comes from believing in the immediate possibility of a fundamentally different world. Their questions are scandalous and compelling, examining the traditions of their culture and society to home and intimacy. Why do people call us "girls"? Why is housework "women's

work"? Why are women paid "less" than men? How does "this advertisement exploit women"? These are burning questions that needed answers.

The book records that "sisterhood" as the proposition of sheer solidarity among women became the first model for feminists who have a shared intellectual and social idea. The Civil Rights Movement has taught women the power of struggling on their own behalf. The first March for Women's Equality on August 26<sup>th</sup> 1970 down Fifth Avenue in New York is announced to be the full force of the movement.

Even though at one stage the organization unselfconsciously left women's movement to only involve the white race, the black women, however, did not stand still. Barbara Smith and Beverly Guy-Sheftall point out that African-American women participate in the movement by establishing among others, the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973 and the Combahee River Collective in 1974. In contemporary literature, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*<sup>3</sup>, also the magazine *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman* and *Ms* to mention a few is considered to be influential in shaping women's outlook on feminism. Jane O'Reilly's article regarding the little word *Ms* reveals the implication that the insights of women's secondary status are already deeply known and only needed that "click" - a key opening word, a button to be pushed - to activate women's awareness about their self worth.

In the 1970s, feminists demand control of their bodies in all kinds of different situations - in sex, in reproduction, on the street, and at work. They criticize the image of passive girls in children's books; recover the biographies, issues and works of under-appreciated women who are active in history and culture; demand the participation of women in sports, expansion opportunity in the workforce such as the equal chance for family leave for birth and adoption; and reinterpret lesbian's past and future. In California, for example a lesbian law group is advocating for lesbian rights in childbearing, custody and adoption. Women in the 1970s are suddenly speaking in public; acting in flamboyant, polemical skits; gathering and analyzing statistics; criticizing everyday institutions; drawing up women

<sup>3</sup> A further analysis of other feminist literatures, which specifically deal with sex can be read in Camille Pagila's *Sexual Personae*, New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

studies programs; sketching political cartoons; organizing speak-outs; composing analytical and personal essays; and publishing and distributing documents. Writing punchy and engaging leaflets is also a way of making feminism heard. For example, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" by Anne Koedt inaugurated the whole debate about sexuality. Another is Naomi Weisstein's "Woman and Her Mind: The Story of Everyday Life" which sells to 150,000 copies because women dislike the notion of psychologists who are conventionally constructing women as being inferior to men<sup>4</sup>.

The 1980s, however, brings the word "feminism" into a place beyond disrepute. This is because there is a lack of symbolization of political action that activists seem to evaporate. Thus, the 1990s feminists try to revive that sisterhood feeling by reawakening women to become organized intellectuals. In this memoir, Barbara Winslow, for example, helps women remember the claim that women were once the true experts on unwanted pregnancies. For this same purpose, Gloria Steinem reports that she has written the anthology, *In the Company of Women* in 1996 as a way out to focus on the interviewing memoirs of this basic issue.

*The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation* is a historical document. It is partial, a lens, a work not just mediated in language but constructed by language, which enables the rise of questions of completeness, of veracity and the fictive, of issues of privacy, of mediation. It describes events with their affects attached, examines a complex of actions and feelings in social and personal space, and makes an honest and ethical attempt to restore a sense of women history's<sup>5</sup> specifics.

Although there may be falsifying memoirs due to amnesia about political movements, this can be categorized as an innocent forgetfulness. Rather than having women's movement go towards a silent direction<sup>6</sup> - where all are willing to disappear to blend into the background of other events, this book of memoir can make an invitation to further dialogue and

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion see Michael R. Stevenson (ed.), *Gender Roles Through the Life Span: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*. USA: Ball State University, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Read Hymowitz, Carol and Michaela Weissman. *A History of Women in America*. USA: Bantam Books, 1978, for a more detailed account of US women's history.

<sup>6</sup> See also a book review by Fadmi S. in *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2001 of "Membisu demi Harmoni" written by Mohammad Hakimi, Elli Nurhayati, V. Utari Marlinawati, Anna Winkvist, Mary C. Ellsberg

documentation. Every woman has her story, her still changing stories, and her encounter with modern feminism. Just like Shirley Geok-lin Lim, her writing group enables her to interact with dramatists, poets, scholars, senior professors and recent PhDs, Jews, Irish and Anglo-Americans, South Asians, and Asian Americans, divorced, single, long-married and newly married women, mothers and women without children, women over sixty and women in their twenties.

In short, reading *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation* encourages women the need to write and have a substantially liberated voice. Are we also - the readers of this book review forum - encouraged to make a move on modern feminism by writing our own individual accounts of what it means by pursuing the hopes of improving the women's future? In closing, the readers are also asked whether we are in unison with the following 1930s popular prose poem:

*I am all women, I am every woman. Wherever women are suffering; I am there. Wherever women are struggling, I am there. Wherever women are fighting for their liberation, I am there.*

*I am at the bedside of the woman giving birth, screaming in labor; I am with the woman selling her body in Vietnam so that her children may eat. I am with the woman selling her body in the streets of American cities to feed the habit she acquired from her boyfriend.*

*I am with the woman who never sees the light outside her kitchen; I am with the woman who never sees the light outside her factory; I am with the woman whose fingers are stiff from endless typing and whose legs ache from the high heels she must wear to please her boss; I am with the groupies following the rock bands, bands whose every song is a triumphant celebration of women's degradation. I am with the women who wanted to be scientists and architects and engineers and poets and who ended up being scientists' wives and architects' wives and engineers' wives and poets' wives.*

*I am with the woman bleeding to death on the kitchen table of a quack abortionists; I am with the woman answering endless questions of the inquisitive caseworkers. And I am with the caseworkers, whose dreams of making a new social order have long been smothered in the endless bureaucracy, the endless forms, the racism of their institutions.*

*I am with the beauty queen painting her face and spraying her hair with poison; I am with the black prostitute straightening her hair and lightening her skin; I am with the young child for whom an apron is the only thing she has been taught to dream of; I am at the hospital where a beaten child is being treated for wounds caused by a mother driven beyond desperation, past sanity, past compassion; I am with the forty-five-year-old file clerk, raped and strangled in her one-room walk-up.*

*I am with all women; I am all women and our struggle grows.*

*I am with the Vietnamese guerillas, fighting for the right to control their country; I am with the women in Ireland, living on the streets of Derry with their children because their houses have been burned or they have been evicted.*

*I am with the underground in the Latin American cities, arranging supplies for the guerillas, hearing the secret police in every footstep. I am with the welfare mothers in New York and Hartford and Wisconsin who will not be turned away by the indifferent legislators.*

*I am with the women who have loved other women as sisters, as lovers; I am with the airline stewardess fighting to retain their job after they reach thirty and their market value has decreased; I am with the witches hexing Wall Street and the bridal fairs and the beauty contests; I am women struggling everywhere.*

*And where there are women too beaten down to fight, I will be there; and will take strength together. Everywhere; for we will have a new world, a just world, a world without oppression and degradation.*