

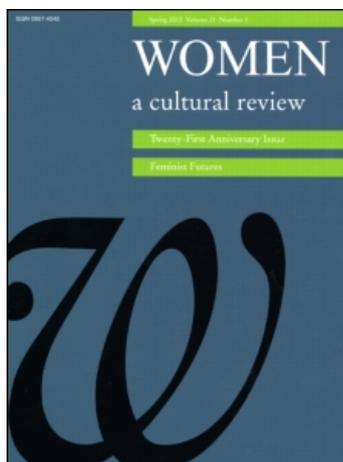
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Complicated Inheritance: *Sistershow* (1973–1974) and the Queering of Feminism

T

HE idea of generational conflict is a recurring motif in feminist historiography: ‘rebellious daughters’ distance themselves from their feminist ‘(fore)mothers’ and claim to rewrite feminism with new agendas, tactics and attitude (Henry 2004). Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970), for example, announced the birth of feminism’s ‘second wave’ by distancing it from the push for equality characterised as the ‘first wave’ of women’s struggles at the turn of the century (2006: 13–15). Today, debates within feminist activism and theory pivot around a supposed ‘third wave’ movement led by feminists who came of age in the 1980s and 90s. This new wave, it is claimed, has emerged in reaction both to changes within the socio-political landscape and to the assumed failings of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) (Heywood 2006).

Such wave-based understandings of feminist history, however, necessarily curtail feminism’s past. As Clare Hemmings (2005) demonstrates, academic depictions of recent feminisms often rely on a linear narrative that tells the story of key shifts in the development of Western feminist theory. This story moves smoothly from the supposed naive essentialism of the 1970s, to the perspectives of difference that women of colour and lesbians contributed in the 1980s, to the ‘sophisticated’ post-structuralist deconstruction of the 1990s. The presence of such a narrative, Hemmings argues, means that only certain types of stories can be legitimately told within the history of feminism. Accordingly, accounts of the ‘third wave’ (see Henry 2004) often draw sharp distinctions between the anti-essentialist, playful,

We would like to thank Alison Rook, Jill Robin, Angela Rodaway and Helen Taylor for sharing their *Sistershow* archives and memories with us during this research.

- 1 Eve Setch has also criticised dominant historiographies of the British Women's Liberation Movement for privileging an 'intellectual legacy' over the documentation and analysis of WLM grassroots actions (Setch 2002). A spate of WLM memoirs are seeking to reverse this trend (Rowbotham 2002; Segal 2007; Roberts 2008). Additionally, a number of feminist public history initiatives have been launched, including a UK-wide research network (<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/theomenslibrary/aboutthecollections/research/wlmnetwork.cfm>) and oral history projects (<http://heartoftherace.blogspot.com>), Feminist Webs (<http://www.feministwebs.com>), Bolton Women's Liberation History Project (<http://www.bolton-womens-liberation.org>), Remembering Olive Collective (<http://rememberolivemorris.wordpress.com>) and *Unfinished Histories* theatre project (<http://www.unfinishedhistories.com>).
- 2 Whilst *Sistershow* was comprised of women with various and fluid sexualities, the show itself created a space for participants to

queer feminisms currently in ascendance, and the supposedly dogmatic, anti-sex, queer-phobic politics of the second wave.

This article aims to disrupt such teleological narratives of 'second' and 'third wave' feminist activism by introducing and analysing some aspects of the British Women's Liberation Movement, such as 'queer tendencies', that we may more readily recognise as 'third wave'. In particular, we aim to move away from assumptions that ascribe specific tactics or ideologies to certain time periods or generations. In its place we wish to present the idea that feminists have used activist strategies that recur throughout the history of feminist struggle. Such an understanding, we believe, can help us move away from a rigid, generational-based knowledge of feminism, both past and present.

Like Sasha Roseneil, in her study of 'queer tendencies' in the 20-year protest camp held at Greenham Common, we note, 'Writers on feminist politics have tended to smooth over the rough edges of activism, to close their eyes to its sexual and erotic dynamics, to focus their gaze on more respectable, "straight" feminisms as they have engaged with government, the law, organizations and academia' (2000: 4).¹ Roseneil stresses the historical importance of taking seriously the 'queer tendencies' within feminist activism that are 'less concerned with achieving rights for women, more concerned with the cultural politics of opening up and reconfiguring what it means to be a woman' (2000: 4). Understanding 'queer tendencies' allows for a reappraisal of feminisms that operate outside state formations: groups and individuals that use disruptive cultural politics to open up conceptions of sexuality, gender and feminist identification. Such strategies have not been assimilated easily into dominant narratives of feminism's history.

Of course, taking up a queer analysis as a point of historiography creates its own set of tensions. As Roseneil notes of her work, 'Speaking of the queer feminisms of Greenham carries [the current day use of] queer back in time, to before queer theory and queer studies' (2000: 6). However, as her study highlights, only through such an anachronism can the dominant narrative that sees the second wave as 'maternal, anachronistic and putatively puritanical'—and thus ripe for a queer succession—be disrupted (2000: 6). To help us bend preconceptions of distinct second and third wave feminisms, therefore, we introduce the queer feminist cultural activism of an agit-prop theatre group based in Bristol called *Sistershow* (1973–1974).²

In our presentation of *Sistershow* life history materials (oral interviews and letters) and historical artefacts (photographs, programmes, flyers), we reclaim a lively episode of WLM cultural activism. We analyse how this collective work, with its strategically queer inflections, interferes with

explore their desires outside heteronormative frames. Our use of 'queer tendencies' here draws on the disruptive power of erotics (Lorde 2007), rather than referring to sexual or gender orientations per se—be they heterosexual, queer or other.

dominant narratives of Western feminist theory and historiographies.³ In doing so, we re-locate so-called third wave tendencies such as camp (Conrad 2001) in *Sistershow* performances. This allows us to question the widespread but problematic presentation of these tendencies as triggering a shift from puritan, 'anti-sex' second wave practices to a more pleasure-orientated present. In summary, we aim to contribute a playful troubling of both one-dimensional understandings of 'seventies feminism' (Graham et al. 2003) and the 'unique' legacies of so-called contemporary feminist activist strategies.

Feminist Inheritance: The Imagined Parameters of the Second and Third Wave

Third wave feminism is full of claims of 'inclusivity' and 'diversity' and positions itself as a force against conservative, post-feminist backlashes as well as imagined characteristics of the second wave (Gillis, Howie and Munford 2004; Heywood 2006).⁴ Adopting a linear narrative of third wave feminism as moving on from and incorporating WLM theory and tactics, Lettie Conrad has identified seven aspects of third wave strategies. These are 1) reaction to, or adoption of, second wave feminist theory; 2) multiculturalism; 3) alternative and diverse sexualities; 4) anti-essentialism; 5) individualism; 6) contradiction or contrast; and 7) pastiche and camp (2001: 123).

The move towards a so-called 'third wave' in Western feminist theory and activism has, however, run a contentious trajectory. Within such debates, as already indicated, critics often denounce the 'third wave' as based on a shallow understanding of feminism's past (Siegel 1997; Gillis et al. 2004; Reger 2005). In particular, such a chronology marginalises the influential and important work of women of colour, as their input becomes fixed to the 80s and so-called discussions of 'difference' (Springer 2002; Smith 2006). In creating skewered historiographies, young feminists have therefore been accused of historical amnesia. This includes oversimplifying debates and activism of the second wave, and being 'enmeshed in a sororal anxiety relating to inheritance' (Gillis et al. 2004: 3). According to Hemmings, such a situation leads young women to rebel against their WLM 'sisters':

Discourses of a post-feminist era do not simply position feminism in the past, they further pit the young against old in familiar stereotyping fashion. To inherit the feminist present, the youthful and those who wish to appear so are compelled to position themselves in opposition to a rather restricted range of second-wave subjects as well as epistemologies: the radical lesbian, the castrating activist mother, the

3 The term 'queer' has been used historically to denote something strange, as a term of abuse for homosexuality, and as a reclaimed name for sexualities and genders outside heteronormative frameworks (Sullivan 2003). This article looks at 'queer tendencies' and 'queer' as a set of actions, to *queer* the historical record.

4 In January 1992, Rebecca Walker—daughter of novelist Alice Walker and goddaughter of *Ms. Magazine* stalwart Gloria Steinem—penned an article for *Ms. Magazine* entitled 'Becoming the Third Wave', which distanced Rebecca Walker's feminism from both perceived second wave and postfeminist trajectories, and coined a neologism for a new movement based on contradiction and pleasure, and women's social, political and cultural equality.

histrionic queer, to name three familiar types. To fail to do so is of course to be stuck in the past, or, indeed, just plain old, and that would never do (Hemmings 2009: 34–35).

In a move akin to Iris van der Tuin's 'generational jumping' (van der Tuin 2009; see also Hemmings 2009), we now turn to a consideration of *Sistershow*. We argue that a queer sororal anxiety played out in the *Sistershow* happenings that took place within the British WLM in the early 70s in ways that critiqued the movement's internal dynamics, in much the same way as third wavers are assumed to do today.

Troubling generational assumptions help us to rewrite feminist historiography. As Rosalind Delmar argues, what is needed now 'is an historical examination of the dynamics of persistence and change' within the feminist inheritance of different generations: 'This inheritance is not simply a part of the past but lives in the present, both as a part of the conditions of existence of contemporary feminism, and as a part of that very feminism' (Delmar 1986: 24). As such, our analysis of the queer tendencies of *Sistershow* aims to expand the 'conditions of existence of contemporary feminism' and to jam dominant trajectories. We seek to bring in an unruly, undisciplined historical narrative, and to make connections between the much-mythologised feminist seventies and our, equally and differently maligned, feminist present.

Sistershow Beginnings: Culture Making and Guerrilla Warfare

On both performance nights, we lined the hall with a bookstall of feminist literature, an abortion and contraception display (plus pregnancy testing kit), and a bizarre exhibition of Victorian art nouveau pictures, books and posters concerning woman's role. The walls were adorned with collages of advertisements and magazine cuttings aimed at, and degrading to, women as well as a washing-line laden with nappies. It was clearly more than a show; we were bombarding our audience with our lot ... it began with a sketch parodying women's role in marriage (Holy Padlock), using a show-dummy as the bride ... lots of poetry ... blues singers ... and ten of us closed the show singing a Liberation song dressed in a huge ten-headed T-shirt ... We did manage to convey, fairly forcibly, a sense of the joy and excitement of women being together, which is something most people outside the Women's Movement have seen little of (Taylor 1973a).

Sistershow was a situationist-feminist cabaret whose 'anything goes' attitude included a wide breadth of creative expressions such as song, film, dance, events, sketches and parodies. These expressions were

“‘happenings’ . . . a kind of feminist “guerrilla warfare”’ on a cultural and artistic front (Honeybourne 2003: 48). Based in Bristol in 1973–74, and travelling to London and Bath, this agitprop group was co-founded by Pat V. T. West, Jackie Thrupp and a number of other women involved in the WLM in Bristol. The group was all white apart from a black transvestite called Sapphire, who contributed a flamboyant performance to the first show. Sapphire was not, however, an ‘official’ member of the collective, which was comprised of cisgender (biological born) women only (Rodaway 2009).⁵

The *Sistershow* collective used theatre to explore empowerment, gender and sexual politics. It was also a creative forum for consciousness raising. During the time the group worked together, six different versions of the show were performed, each carrying different monikers, strategies and a fluid cast roll (see Figure 1). For its inaugural show, *Sistershow* billed itself as ‘entertainment with a difference. It’s the first show ever to appear in Bristol produced, presented and acted by women—even if we did have a little help from our men friends’ (*Sistershow* 1973a). While *Sistershow* was an event comprised largely of women ‘doing it themselves’, men helped in the sphere of technical support with sound and lighting; a fact lamented in the evaluation of the show by Helen Taylor (then a lecturer at the polytechnic and main fundraiser for the event) in *Enough*, the Bristol WLM journal (Taylor 1973b).

The first *Sistershow*, performed at the Bristol Polytechnic Faculty of Art and Design on 13–14 March 1973, was an enormous success. Over 1,000 people attended the performances with at least another 500 being turned away. Proceeds were donated to the newly opened Women’s Centre, housed at the time in the basement of Ellen Mallos’ house (Taylor 1973a). Accounts of this show highlight its decentralised, sprawling, spontaneous and improvised aspects. They are suggestive of an exhilarating, as well as exhausting, experience for those involved: ‘Almost anyone who wanted to be in *Sistershow*—and others I approached through contacts—was in it! Certain elements of the show simply appeared on the first night—no-one seemed to care’ (V. T. West, cited in Honeybourne 2003: 31). Helen Taylor had the role of coordinating its more unruly elements. She suggested that the spontaneous aspects of the show’s organisation were as much its downfall as a sign of its unique character: ‘We never fused completely into a whole, and our lack of harmony as a group showed in the fragmentation of the show’ (Taylor 1973b: 31).

WLM historiography has highlighted the fragmentary organisational processes of second wave organisations. Martin Pugh, for example, has commented that ‘women’s liberation operated as a loose, decentralised affair relying on local initiatives and focused on the development of

5 In our personal correspondence, Alison Rook commented, ‘There were no women of colour in *Sistershow* and I think our awareness of the issue was very slight’ (Rook 2009b). Helen Taylor also commented that ‘Race wasn’t much on our agenda’ (Taylor 2009).

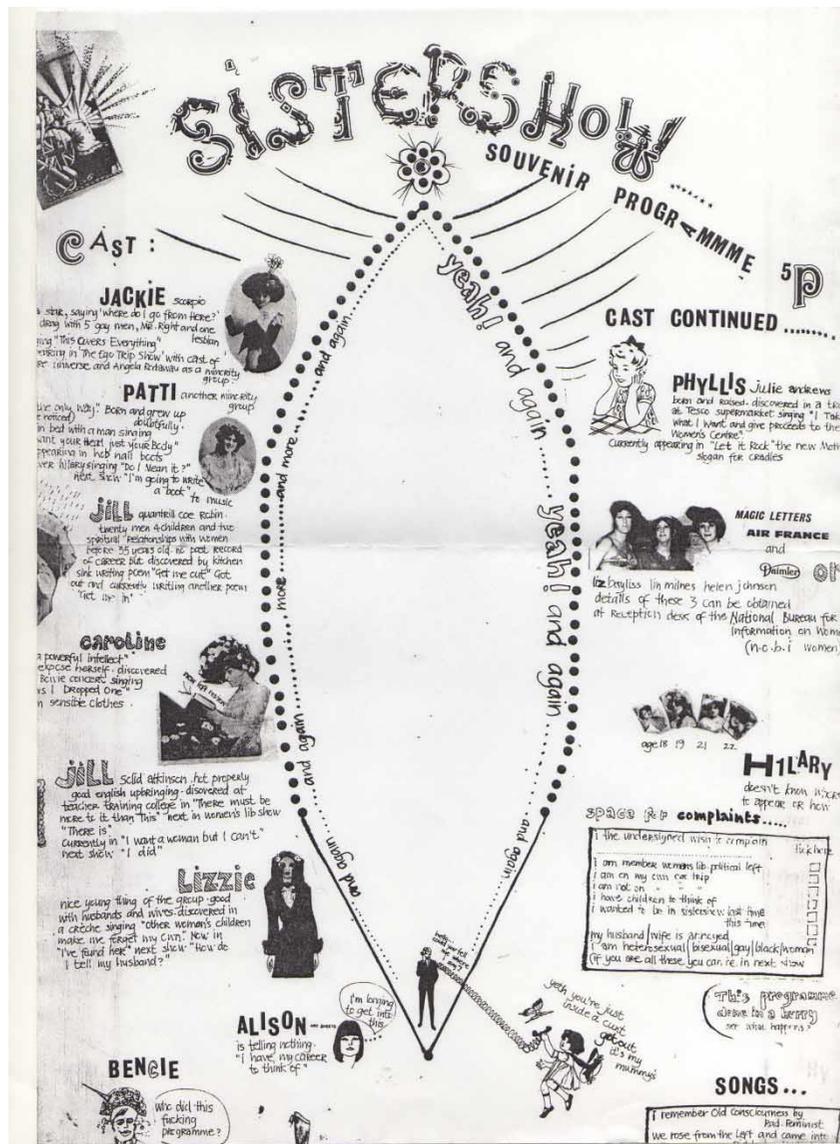


Figure 1. Souvenir programme for *Sistershow*, Bath (1973) by Jackie Thrupp. Reprinted with permission from Alison Rook.

alternative societies as much as on direct attempts to reform the male-dominated system' (Pugh 2000: 319). Yet the academic focus has remained firmly on 'straighter feminisms', thus marginalising the creative, cultural activism of the 'alternative societies' within the British second wave, which Pugh describes. Furthermore, this omission has given weight to the

assumption that the so-called third wave movement differs from its predecessor through being primarily ‘committed to cultural production as activism’ (Heywood and Drake 1997: 20).

We argue that *Sistershow* was part of the many autonomous culture-making practices of the WLM. These also included music, film, publishing, visual art, performance art, street theatre, as well as women learning manual trades.⁶ These diverse practices were embedded in local political actions and constituted a field of cultural production that was not solely interested in bartering for legal visibility and rights in a male-defined public-political sphere. *Sistershow* in particular presented a feminism whose desire lay in unravelling authority, presenting what Jackie Thrupp described as ‘interruptions’ (Rook 2009a), which posited a restless inventiveness in attempts to rework the social.

In its experimental nature, *Sistershow* marked a strategic change within the local politics of the Bristol WLM at the time. In the words of V. T. West, who along with Jackie Thrupp (see Figure 2) were seen by many as the main creative energies behind the show, *Sistershow* was part of ‘those days when we moved out from dull meetings and decided to live more colourfully and use “art” to show what we meant’ (V. T. West 1991). By adopting a creative approach to spreading the word of women’s liberation through the medium of theatre, *Sistershow* was also an attempt to diversify the middle-class-dominated politics of the local network. Jill Robin, an original member of the collective, described the motivations of the group thus:

6 See Julianna Bethlen, *Building the Future: Twenty-five Years of Women and Manual Trades*, Organisational Pamphlet, 2001; the work of the See Red Poster Collective (housed at The Women’s Library, London); Eileen Cadman, Gail Chester and Agnes Pivot (eds), *Rolling Our Own: Women as Printers, Publishers and Distributors*, London: Minority Press Group, 1981; Cinenova film archive, including films made by women in the WLM, <http://www.cinenova.org.uk>; for theatre and performance art, see www.unfinishedhistories.com; for music made by women in the UK, see the Women’s Revolution Per Minute archive, Birmingham City Library.



Figure 2. Collage image. Poster for the first *Sistershow* (left), *Sistershow* cast members in t-shirt (right), badge for *Sistershow Too* (above).

There was a political feeling, and there were a number of ‘worthy women’ who said we have to take the message to working class women on the estates around Bristol and I thought ‘oh yeah, fine’, completely naive as to what working class women were, my background was middle class, thoroughly spoilt . . . I think that’s how *Sistershow* happened, because I think we thought let’s not give them a boring talk, let’s be more creative, and give them a show, you know the way we are, and bring it with a bit of music and lightness and dialogue (Robin 2008).

The apex of these efforts was a street performance that took place in a caravan on a rainy day in Bedminster, a white working-class area of Bristol. Robin further explained: ‘going into working class estates failed miserably . . . they were thinking “who the fuck are these women”, you know, “how dare they”’ (Robin 2008). Robin’s comments point to how the collective devised creative and diverse strategies to attract women to the movement. Ultimately, however, these playful street performances failed to engage with working-class women, who were angry and dismissive of the ‘recruitment’ strategies of middle-class women ‘coming into’ their communities.

Women’s Liberation Can be Laughed at: Strategies of Humour in Sistershow

Come prepared to be entertained, amused, startled—and see what Women’s Liberation means to us.

—Pamphlet for the inaugural *Sistershow* event (1973a)

Sistershow began as a means of propagating WLM messages outside ‘dull’ meetings; it represented both a counter-experience and counter-representation to dominant forms of WLM activism. As the collective wrote at the time, ‘What *Sistershow* showed was that women’s liberation is not a collection of serious frumps, but a movement within which women can learn to laugh at themselves, as well as challenge the attitude of others towards them’ (*Bristol Women’s Liberation Newsletter* 1973). Addressing audiences outside the WLM, the collective also enthused to the *Evening Post*, ‘We are aware that Women’s Liberation can be laughed at’ (Richards 1973). Whilst the image of the Women’s Libber as dowdy and humourless is of course a recurring backlash motif (Faludi 1991; Redfern and Aune 2010), these critiques were nonetheless circulating at the time *within* the movement. The cast members of *Sistershow* not only saw themselves in opposition to mainstream patriarchal culture, but also to the trends of seriousness that

dominated the WLM. Humour was a fundamental strategy of the group, used with varying success to raise consciousness as well as personal and collective strength.

Sensibilities of camp were also significant to *Sistershow* performances. Considered a primarily third wave technique, ‘Camp is a term established by queer studies to identify those cultural expressions that are exaggerated, affected, and ostentatious, playfully calling the [gendered and sexual] status quo into question’ (Conrad 2001: 144). The first *Sistershow* included conventional Women’s Liberation themed pieces such as ‘Holy Padlock’, ‘Bored Housewife’ and ‘The Fantasies of a Conservative Lady’—titles evocative of the domesticity critiques of the ‘Feminine Mystique’ (Friedan 1992). What is today more surprising, given the dominant representations of the second wave in contemporary literature, are pieces that refer to drag and camp practices: a WLM newsletter, for example, reported that the ‘[h]ighlights of the evening included Miss Women’s Liberation won by a bloke in drag’ (*Bristol Women’s Liberation March Newsletter* 1973). The *Sistershow* programme similarly declared, ‘Another incredible, outrageous year: Pat van Twest (sic) & Jackie Thrupp camping it up’ (1973b).

These irreverent depictions of gender were central activist strategies of V. T. West and Thrupp in particular. Their performances used explicit and controversial gender-play to question women’s role in society, often within a stronghold of women-only spaces:

[Jackie and Pat] turned up to the Action Women’s Conference both dressed ‘in drag.’ Initially they were turned away ... they were very disruptive, often appearing at meetings and throwing in leaflets, continuing this ‘feminist guerrilla warfare’, always questioning gender and gender stereotypes and redefining themselves (Honeybourne 2003: 48).

The exploration and celebration of sexualities also formed an important part of *Sistershow*’s political remit. *Sistershow: The Woman Machine* (see Figure 3) was performed at the fifth national Women’s Liberation Movement Conference at Bristol in 1973. This show presented a dynamic exploration of sexuality at its centre:

The woman machine was created out of workshops in which various improvisation methods were used, including encounter-type situations, release of feelings in spontaneous energy-flow based on group dynamics and the individual. It is as a consequence consciousness-raising with theatre the framework and medium for women relating and exploring aspects of their sexuality (*Sistershow* 1973c).

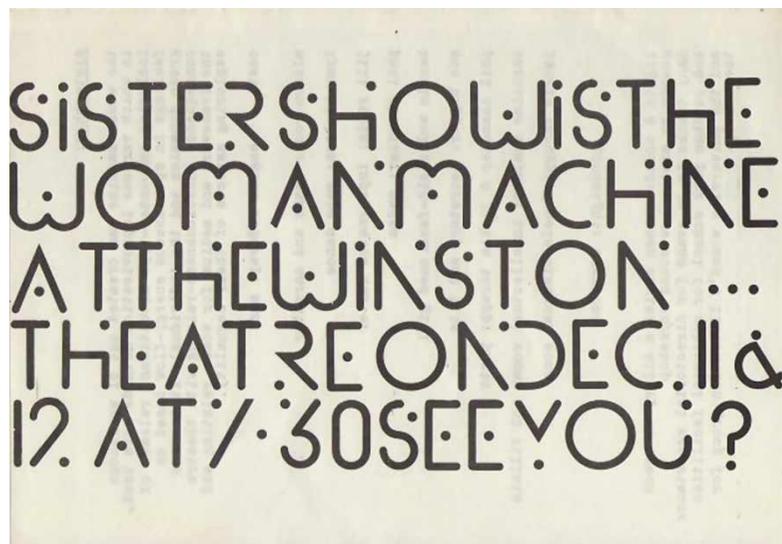


Figure 3. Programme for *Sistershow: The Woman Machine* (1973). Reprinted with permission from Alison Rook.

Sistershow used improvisation as a means through which to create theatre pieces. This suggests the necessity of inventing new scripts based on the urgency of the moment: not to be curtailed by pre-existing storylines that placed woman, and her desire, in staid positions. According to V. T. West, these performances had a powerful impact on the audience. *Sistershow: The Woman Machine* was “mind-blowing” ... women were making love on the dancefloor” ... after the seriousness of the [national Women’s Liberation] conference came “an orgy laid at the feet of *Sistershow*” (West, cited in Honeybourne 2003: 48).

The scope of performances in *Sistershow: The Woman Machine* also indicated the group’s desire to push boundaries and depart from the coy critiques of middle-class domesticity that characterised earlier versions of the show. Here, a definition of the third wave is insightful: being ‘a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures’ (Heywood and Drake 1997: 3). In this vein, *Sistershow* fused second-wave concerns with so-called third-wave tendencies of exploring the power of sex acts. Pieces entitled ‘Rape Dance’, ‘Impregnated Duster’, ‘Secretary and Tits’ and ‘Female Bisexual Song’ suggest a desire to shock the audience into new sexualised knowledges, both violent and pleasurable.

In reflecting on these performances, Angela Rodaway, now in her nineties and the oldest member of the *Sistershow* cast, describes her role in performing the ‘Rape Dance’:

[The dance] was not quite a rape scene but I danced with another woman, I danced as a man, doing this [moves her knees up and down] between her legs all the time and chewing gum all the time while I was dancing. It doesn't sound very funny, but it was then. You know I heard somebody in the front laugh and say, 'he's still chewing' and left her then almost flat on stage, pretty well devastated (Rodaway 2009).

Rodaway offers insight into the collective's attempts to use humour to challenge taboos and communicate their political ideas. 'Rape Dance' 'was presenting something that I think is serious but in a way that was humorous so it was acceptable to get the idea across . . . it showed what is sometimes contempt for women, *but people liked it* (Rodaway 2009, our emphasis).

Concluding Remarks

Something startling happened in Bristol at that time and we were all part of it. *We were ahead of our time in a way* and things started to change because of it. Yet it also seems trivial in light of today and could so easily become obscured.

—V. T. West, letter to Alison Rook, 1991 (our emphasis).

V. T. West wrote this letter on 21 February 1991 to her fellow *Sistershow* member Alison Rook. The letter documents V. T. West's ambition to gather ephemera, written accounts, and contacts of women involved in *Sistershow* to deposit in the Bristol-based Feminist Archive South. This initiative followed Jackie Thrupp's death from cancer in December 1990 and was a bid to ensure that the group's actions would not be omitted from the historical record.⁷ In her letter to Rook, V. T. West's sentiment that the collective was 'ahead of our time in a way' demonstrates an

⁷ Pat V. T. West died from cancer in June 2008. The first ever anthology of her poetry, *It Was Not & Never Would Be Enough & . . .*, was published posthumously by Rive Gauche, the publishing imprint she established in 2010. Her life and work is documented at <http://www.patvtwest.co.uk>.



Figure 4. Photos from the inaugural *Sistersshow* performance, March 1973, Bristol. Reprinted with permission from Helen Taylor.

understanding that the activities of *Sistershow* were somehow ‘out of step’ with the dominant strategies of the WLM itself at that conjunction.

Indeed, V. T. West’s comment lends itself to our suggestion that the strategies within *Sistershow* seem to synchronise with conceptions of third wave activism as it has been defined within Anglo-American contexts over the past ten years (tendencies that have also been referred to as trivial). By situating *Sistershow*’s queer feminist legacy within the WLM, we can appraise how these tendencies undo the logic of linear, generational-based conceptions of feminist inheritance. That is, through reclaiming *Sistershow* within the contemporary moment, it is possible to imagine a more flexible feminist past, present and future; a legacy that is mobile and able to accommodate multiple narratives of feminist histories and strategies. Through these legacies we can explore ‘the possibility of feminist spaces of friendship, desire, affiliation and productivity that produce variegated historical accounts whose subjects (of any age) move back and forth between their own and others’ memories, representations and fantasies of past, present and future’ (Hemmings 2009: 35).

As we have shown, *Sistershow* offers an unruly glimpse into a feminist past that utilised humour, fun, spontaneity, creativity and collective nuisance to make its point, sometimes connecting bodies in erotic political acts. *Sistershow* happenings not only complicate persistent narratives and the ‘straighter’ generational memories of the WLM, but also show that the WLM was sexy, fun, exploratory, artful, boundary pushing, energetic and not afraid to shake established norms up to achieve social change. *Sistershow*, as an example of queer feminism, sought ‘not to enter the corridors of power but to relocate [power]’ (Roseneil 2000: 3) within the hands of creative, grassroots women. These women then proceeded to further deconstruct (gendered and sexual) power logics whilst also re-enforcing others, such as the failings of the collective to engage successfully with working-class women. By recovering *Sistershow*, we would like to hold it up as a concrete example of disruptive, generational transference that can help us rework the temporality of collective feminist memory. Histories such as these offer ways of understanding the continuity of feminist strategies across generations. They enable a more nuanced look at feminism’s recent past and open up productive lines of inheritance within the current historical moment.

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