# Listening Across Difference: Feminist Conversation, Sisterhood, and the '70s

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"The magazine is not meant to provide the conversation, it's the conversation," writes Mary Peacock (pictured), co-founder of Women's Film Quarterly (1971-1974), in her contribution to the 1972 issue of the journal, which was the first feminist magazine in the US. Released as a 64-page, 6x9 unbelabored in-kind, full-magazine, the first issue of WFQ was a "conversation" between 20 women, including Peacock, who had gathered in Los Angeles for a weekend of magazine-literature-and-culture-making. Peacock, who was the magazine's first editor, in her first editorial course-lecture for the "Sisterhood," letter and "Sisterhood" poem, she wrote, "Women are the ones who have to make the world a place where we can live." Conversations ranging from sexual liberation, self-discovery, and relationships to "women's work" and "women's culture" ensued, and the magazine was a place for the conversation to continue. Peacock, who was the magazine's first editor, in her first editorial course-lecture for the "Sisterhood," letter and "Sisterhood" poem, she wrote, "Women are the ones who have to make the world a place where we can live." Conversations ranging from sexual liberation, self-discovery, and relationships to "women's work" and "women's culture" ensued, and the magazine was a place for the conversation to continue. "It's the conversation,"

and open, to not let Deena's "in Sisterhood" letter closing be the (literal) last word; and – ultimately – to stay alert to unsettled questions of who gets to be a sister.

**Endnotes**

1. Sally Quinn, "Instant Sisterhood from ," Los Angeles Times (1923-1995), 19 December 1971. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. ↩
2. Clay Felker, "Editor's Letter: What Is *Ms*. and What Is It Doing in *New York*?" New York Magazine, 20 December 1971. ↩
3. Steinem, Gloria. "Sisterhood." *Ms*., spring 1972, 46-49; Rpt. in Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions. By Gloria Steinem. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983. 112-118. ↩
4. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980: A Finding Aid, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, October 1981. ↩
5. Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political," February 1969. ↩
6. Each month between 1972 and 1980, *Ms*. was only able to publish around 15-20 letters total, and while this published letters section ran longer than those in other peer magazines, there was only room to publish a fraction of the many letters that arrived in the mail. Published letters tended to focus on specific responses to articles in the magazine, which excluded many compelling but off-topic personal stories readers sent in. It is an unusual practice for a magazine to make unpublished letters to the editor available to researchers in the way that *Ms*. did, but *Ms*. editors recognised early on that the huge number of letters sent to the magazine collectively constituted an important social history of feminist conversation. In 1981, *Ms*. made an initial large donation of letters to the Schlesinger followed by a second even larger donation processed in 2001 (Letters to *Ms*., 1970-1998, MC 568) which I did not fully research for my project. In addition to the library donations, *Ms*. editor Mary Thom also created a collected published volume of letters to the editor (including many previously unpublished letters) in 1987. ↩
7. *Yours in Sisterhood*, directed by Irene Lusztig (2018; United States: Women Make Movies), DCP. ↩
8. *The Motherhood Archives*, directed by Irene Lusztig (2013; United States: Women Make Movies), HD Video. ↩
9. *The Woman's Film;* The Woman's Film, directed by Judy Smith, Louise Alaimo, Ellen Sorin (1971; United States: California Newsreel), 16 mm film. ↩
10. *Growing Up Female,* directed by Julia Reichert and James Klein (1971; United States: Reichert Klein Productions), 16 mm film. ↩
11. *Janie's Janie,* directed by Geri Ashur and Peter Barton (1971; United States: Odeon), 16 mm film. ↩
12. *Joyce at 34*, directed by Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill (1972; United States: New Day Films), 16 mm film. ↩
13. Julia Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film," originally published in Quarterly Review of Film Studies 3 (Fall 1978): pp. 507-523. Reprinted in *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, Jonathan Kahana, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 668-679. ↩
14. *Joyce at 34*. ↩
15. I have collected experiential and affective narratives from many different mothers over the course of eight years of work created between 2006 and 2014 that explicitly deals with maternity, maternal feelings, and maternal language – work that also deploys some earlier iterations of these consciousness-raising/'70s-film-inspired ideas, including the 2013 feature-length film *The Motherhood Archives*, the 2011 web-based *Worry Box Project* and a 2014 short film called *Maternity Test*. Based on this extensive interviewing/collecting of women's maternal stories, I feel comfortable making the claim that many women indeed feel maternal ambivalence as well as strong social pressure not to speak openly about less-than-positive feelings about motherhood. ↩
16. *Womanhouse*, directed by Johanna Demetrakas (1974; United States: Women Make Movies), DVD. ↩
17. Both of these student responses were written as part of a weekly blog post assignment in Film 176 (Special Topic: Feminist Filmmaking) at UC Santa Cruz in fall 2017. ↩
18. Steinem, "Sisterhood," 112-118. ↩
19. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., 1974, MC 331, folder #12, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
20. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., 1974, MC 331, folder #5, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
21. Originally coined by Jane O'Reilly in her article in the inaugural issue of *Ms*., "The Housewife's Moment of Truth," "click" quickly became a popular '70s shorthand to invoke a moment of revelation in which sexist and oppressive patriarchal structures became suddenly visible. ↩
22. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., undated, MC 331, folder #2, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
23. Amy Erdman Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 168. ↩
24. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., 1979, MC 331, folder #196, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
25. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., 1976, MC 331, folder #72, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
26. Overall, I did not find many letters from readers who self-identified as transgendered in the archive, but there was a small flurry of responses (three letters sorted into one archival folder) to the February 1977 issue of *Ms*., which featured a story on transgendered tennis player Renée Richards as well as Gloria Steinem's notorious "If the Shoe Doesn't Fit Change the Foot" editorial (much criticised in trans communities). *Ms*. did publish one of these transperson-authored letters on this occasion (as well as several additional responses from cisgendered readers) in the June 1977 issue. Aside from this cluster of topical letters, I found four additional letters readers who identified as transwomen or cross-dressing men, all unpublished. ↩
27. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., 1977, MC 331, folder #126, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
28. While I only found one letter in the archive from a writer who identified herself as a former sex worker – Jenny Wrenn, who reads her own letter to *Ms*. in my film – a second letter from a former sex worker was published in the magazine in January 1977, in response to a series of *Ms*. articles on prostitution including an article on COYOTE and a profile of an ex-madam called "On September 30 1975, I turned my Last Trick," both in the September 1976 issue. I should note that many of the published letters that I read in the magazine were not included in the 1972-80 archival collection. Some may have been included in the later 2001 donation of letters, also housed at the Schlesinger (that I did not work with for *Yours in Sisterhood*), and others might have been thrown away: The online finding aid for the 1972-1980 collection states that "because the files of letters were voluminous and repetitious, they have been weeded to approximately half their original volume. No attempt has been made to preserve a representative sample of letters…" Because of the somewhat haphazard organization across these two collections, it is difficult to make any conclusive statistical claims about letter writer demographics; but I think it is safe to say that sex workers were not writing letters to *Ms*. in large numbers. ↩
29. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., 1978, MC 331, folder #160, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
30. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, a Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2002), p. xiii. ↩
31. Ibid. ↩
32. Hemmings, "Telling Feminist Stories," p. 121. ↩
33. *Ms*. made a significant effort to publish writing by Black women throughout the '70s: Alice Walker was a regular contributor, and *Ms*. also published work by Ntozake Shange, Angela Davis, Michelle Wallace, and Jamaica Kincaid, among others. Technically, *Ms*. overrepresented women of colour in their published letters section – I found only 20 letters from self-identified Black women out of several thousand in the 1972-1980 archive, so the 2% published rate in the magazine is definitely higher than the percentage received in total. That said, it seems clear from the archive that, despite efforts made by the magazine to be inclusive, the magazine's readers were largely white. ↩
34. Kayli Botiz, email correspondence, 2015. ↩
35. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., 1978, MC 331, folder #169, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
36. Lauren Jacobs outtake from *Yours in Sisterhood*, Birmingham, AL. ↩
37. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., 1977, MC 331, folder #126, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
38. Letters to *Ms*., 1972-1980, unpublished letter to *Ms*., 1977, MC 331, folder #147, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. ↩
39. Hemmings, "Telling Feminist Stories," p. 130. ↩

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Irene Lusztig is a filmmaker, archival researcher, and amateur seamstress. Her film and video work mines old images and technologies for new meanings in order to reframe, recuperate, and reanimate forgotten and neglected histories. She teaches filmmaking at UC Santa Cruz where she is Professor of Film and Digital Media.

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