

**A Room of Her Own:
The Spatial Impulse of Feminism at Smith College**



"Invaluable Information," Student Clubs and Organizations records, Box 3004.5, College Archives, CA-MS-00022, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA

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Feminists of the 1960s and 70s, emboldened by concurrent liberation movements and critical texts such as Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, moved outside of the domestic sphere into self-designed spaces created solely to empower women. Their encompassing movement, known as second-wave feminism, expanded upon the previous fight for suffrage by advocating for social equities often with a more radical tone. The foundation of the movement was women shaping themselves "around the limitations and possibilities of local geographies" as they transformed local buildings into centers for radical organizing.¹ The women's liberation movement mainly spread through its physical dimension, which manifested in the creation of separatist spaces that embodied the values of the women who built them. These included women's centers on college campuses which had goals of advocating "for women on campus and making both the institution and individual women aware of the[ir] changing status."² While feminists had a variety of strategies to enact their beliefs, producing physical spaces for consciousness raising and coalition building defined this era of women's organizing.

When women entered the public realm en masse during the twentieth century, women's centers served as a private gathering point for empowerment on the basis of gender in contrast to the misogyny experienced both at home and at work. Many recognized that "these places built the feminist movement" by fostering communities built upon a shared resistance to misogynistic oppression.³ The creation of these spaces fall under the term "spatial feminist organizing" as they signified "a sense of solidarity among women" who occupied them.⁴ Despite being a historically women's college, the physical environment of Smith College did not cultivate consciousness raising discussions. Most classes focused on reinforcing a patriarchal worldview and often erased women's roles in their respective fields

¹ Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Duke University Press, 2007), 6.

² Beth Willinger, "Women's Centers, Their Missions, and the Process of Change," in *University and College Women's Centers: The Changing Landscape*, ed. Sharon L. Davie (Greenwood Press, 2002), 47.

³ Daphne Spain, *Constructive Feminism: Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City* (Cornell University Press, 2016), 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

to emulate the education received at prestigious universities.⁵ These male-centered curricula limited conversations on feminism across campus since it restricted education on women's history and political power.

The women's movement had found advocates on college campuses, with the University of Minnesota creating one of the first Women's Centers in 1948, although most colleges did not create their own center until the 1970s.⁶ Sophia Smith bequeathed her fortune in 1871 to fund Smith College due to the lack of higher education institutions for women. Elite colleges excluded women on the basis of their gender until 1969 at Yale, the first Ivy League to become co-ed, and 1975 at nearby Amherst College.⁷ At Smith College's inception, women were not viewed as students; it was a title they fought to have as President Seelye, the inaugural President of Smith, had to assure potential donors that women could still be domestic with a college education.⁸ Even when women enter the university, whether as a student or faculty member, sexism remains present through male-focused curriculum, lack of respect for women in academia, and a pay gap between female and male professors.⁹ From its founding, Smith existed to educate women, but never wanted to challenge the patriarchal world in which it lived.¹⁰ At the inception of spatial feminist organizing at Smith, the college had never had a woman president and continuously diminished the contributions of women faculty, as shown through gender discrimination lawsuits and the lauding of male faculty.¹¹ The administration had built the school to patronize students, as every detail from the housing system to the heights of the steps to the proximity to downtown had been carefully chosen to reinforce traditional femininity within students.¹² Despite being an all-women's college, Smith was not a feminist institution.

⁵ Jill Ker Conway, *A Woman's Education* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 41.

⁶ Candance Rosovsky, "Libraries at the Center," in *University and College Women's Centers: The Changing Landscape*, ed. Sharon L. Davie (Greenwood Press, 2002), 405.

⁷ Marc Sollinger, "When Women Entered the Ivies," *GBH*, March 23, 2017, <https://www.wgbh.org/news/2017-03-23/when-women-entered-the-ivies>.

⁸ Helen Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 73.

⁹ Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (Ballantine Books, 2002), 160.

¹⁰ Conway, *A Woman's Education*, 43.

¹¹ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 180.

¹² *Ibid.*, 71.

Smith College's Women's Resource Center (WRC) began in 1974 as a central space for feminists to tangibly enact their politics on campus. Upon its inception, the primary focus of the center was to "coordinate the services available to women at the college" while also having a library and "plans to invite more women speakers."¹³ The center was a home base for building community. The organizers intended for it to be available for any student to engage in discussion or learn more about themselves. It was not necessarily a third space, or a space meant to differentiate itself from home or work, but an alternative to the housing system that forced Smith students into separate cliques as the dining system and social lives revolved around their insular residence. The center aimed to cultivate solidarity through personal connections based on a common oppression rather than a shared living space. A women's center had a particular role on a historically women's college campus, as organizers presumed that all students would be interested by most, if not all, the services offered. They hoped to raise awareness for women's issues and activist causes on a campus full of the people affected by them. From the start the WRC recognized ways in which Smith's infrastructure contributed to the oppression of women and intended to counter it through their supplemental programming.

In February of 1973, an unnamed women's consciousness raising group associated with Smith Political Action (SPA) convened to celebrate Susan B. Anthony's birthday. SPA was a group focused on supporting progressive causes, such as the United Fruit Workers' boycotts on produce. Students revived the group in 1972 after the reelection of President Nixon as the continued popularity of a President whose actions they opposed agitated students.¹⁴ Much like the wider movement for women's liberation, feminist activism on Smith's campus "grew out of both the civil rights and student movements of the 1960s" as demonstrated through their association with SPA.¹⁵ At the party, the women decided to

¹³ Deirdre Greenwood, "Women's Center Organized; Plans Info Coordination," *Sophian*, November 15, 1973, Volume 22, Number 8, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

¹⁴ Barbara Bassner, "SPA Reconvenes," *Sophian*, vol. 22, no. 2, September 27, 1973, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

¹⁵ Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back* (Ballantine Books, 2002), 86.

honor International Women's Day in March with a weekend dedicated to discussing feminist issues, which they named the Women's Weekend.¹⁶ The event occurred from April 6–8 with workshops ranging from a movie about mining unions to a panel about academia with a professor from Hunter College.¹⁷ The workshop with the largest impact was the discussion on lesbianism in which about forty women participated. Most of them came out as gay before the end of their meeting and spent the remainder of the time discussing the difficulties of being queer at Smith.¹⁸ After this initial meeting, these women began to meet as an underground student group known as The Sophiasisters. They created space on campus for themselves in the vein of “the utopian world that lesbian-feminists envisioned” as they solely addressed lesbian issues and made their needs visible as a unique group of students.¹⁹ Unlike some of their contemporaries, the Sophiasisters seemed more amenable to educating heterosexual women about their sexuality. However, for safety, they created barriers to join the organization and many women in the group had to hide their affiliation.

The second Women's Weekend occurred on November 2–4 led by the same unnamed group, with contributions from the Sophiasisters.²⁰ The final panel about future actions resulted in planning for a Women's Resource Center. Centers emerging at other colleges, such as the Everywoman's Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the Valley Women's Center in downtown Northampton, inspired these women.²¹ The founders wished to join the women's movement that had been “establishing places that reinforced women's

¹⁶ Elisa Spungen, “Women's Group Develops Project,” *Sophian*, vol. 21, no. 13, February 22, 1973, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

¹⁷ Beth Taylor, “Weekend Symposium Focuses on Women,” *Sophian*, vol. 21, no. 16, April 5, 1973, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

¹⁸ Amy Hill, “Weekend Workshop Helps Lesbians Examine Dilemma,” *Sophian*, vol. 21, no. 17, April 12, 1973, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

¹⁹ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (Columbia University Press, 1991), 218.

²⁰ Jill Abeshouse, “Weekend Stimulates Sense of Community,” *Sophian*, vol. 22, no. 6, November 1, 1973, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

²¹ Mary Beth Kenney, “Valley Centers for Women Expand to College Campuses,” *Sophian*, vol. 22, no. 6, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

autonomy” since the beginning of the decade.²² While Smith’s mission was to educate women, the very foundations of the school upheld a perseverance of a rigid femininity that enforces the inferiority of women and permeated the culture on campus. During this time, two women English professors filed a complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, alleging their teaching contracts were not renewed due to their sex.²³ Even as the campus readied itself for the first female president, some older, male professors felt threatened by the growing tide of women in power.²⁴ The university classroom was “yet another stage in the process of her education,” as the lessons reinforced ideas regarding gender roles and femininity onto the students that media and previous teachers introduced in earlier years.²⁵ The outcome of the Women’s Weekends had proved to those interested in women’s liberation that they still had to fight to educate themselves and their peers on women’s issues at a historically women’s college.

By February 1974, the center was operating on the third floor of the Davis Student Center. Founding members worked to uphold the mission of building community at the Center by bridging gaps created by the housing system. They designed support groups meant to act as a refuge for a small group of students to meet and discuss issues personal to them. These were likely modeled after the consciousness raising (C-R) groups other women’s centers hosted that brought awareness to how personal problems have a political cause. C-R was a center of political life at Smith, as discussions prompted women to recognize the oppressions created by misogyny and created trust between those involved.²⁶ Due to the lack of women’s studies classes and certain students’ fervor for a women’s political spaces, it can be implied that women on campus did not understand how societal misogyny could have originated their difficulties. The implementation of support groups then created solidarity amongst Smith students, as they shared intimate details about their lives, while also building

²² Spain, *Constructive Feminism*, 12.

²³ *Smith College et al. v. Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination*, 380 N.E.2d 121 (Mass. 1978).

²⁴ Conway, *A Woman’s Education*, 43.

²⁵ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1979), 134.

²⁶ Spain, *Constructive Feminism*, 52.

a foundation for future activism by encouraging participants to recognize the systemic injustices they all face.

Another early focus of the WRC was their publication “Invaluable Information: How to Get to Smith Before Smith Gets to You.” This resource guide sought to educate Smith students on services and programs they likely did not know were available to them through the school. It detailed how to move off-campus, design a major, start a club, and highlighted clubs and classes that focused on women. The center then established itself as a resource with its crucial publication aiming to “educat[e] those in close contact” or those in the Smith community.²⁷ Interestingly, the publications focused entirely on teaching their readers about Smith and did not connect their readers to the wider women’s liberation movement. It also empowered Smith students to take advantage of all the school has to offer. For example, the publication explained how to live off-campus or in a co-op despite these being less popular to encourage students to take control of their college experience and break from the possibly patronizing traditional housing system.

By focusing on spreading knowledge regarding systems within Smith College rather than greater society, “Invaluable Information” demonstrates both the WRC’s adherence and divergence from the prevailing thought within the feminist academy. In her notable 1974 essay, “On a Women-Center University,” poet and feminist thinker Adrienne Rich illustrates how universities, even those which are co-educational, reinforce the patriarchy due to its hierarchical nature and erasure of women’s contributions. A feminist university, however, would then allow female students “to discover and explore her root connection with *all women*.”²⁸ “Invaluable Information” built the foundations for these connections to occur as it highlighted ways in which students on campus had been building radical communities, such as through their non-traditional housing units or in their extra-curricular clubs. It also emphasized courses that focused on women’s histories and sociologies to encourage students

²⁷ Rebecca Hyman, “Speaking in the Circle: Women’s Center Publications and the Politics of Experience” in *University and College Women’s Centers: The Changing Landscape*, ed. Sharon L. Davie (Greenwood Press, 2002), 420.

²⁸ Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 145.

to engage with their sex and view womanhood as a valid site of inquiry. The publication does not contribute to this cannon as it solely educates readers on knowledge relating to Smith. Their limited scope demonstrated a lack of connection to the actions and politics of the broader women's liberation movement. While other early efforts from the WRC centered around the dissemination of feminist knowledge, such as the building of a library of women's texts, the most public-facing effort, their publication, did not engage with politics, theory, or actions of those outside of the college. While it can still be praxis of their cause, as it empowered women to capitalize on their enrollment at Smith, it did not encourage radical action aligned with Rich's view of building a "consciously woman-centered universit[y]."²⁹

In 1975, the group restructured to have a central committee and working groups that included peer counseling gynecology, comprehensive exams, a gay group, booklets, radio station, and support groups. A subset of women involved with the center in the peer gynecology group received approval from President Conway to provide support to fellow students dealing with sexual health issues.³⁰ They worked with the Family Planning Council of Western Massachusetts to receive the foundational knowledge on how to guide their peers. The college saw this as one positive option for students who did not wish to discuss their personal lives with doctors at the Schacht Center for Health and Wellness. The working group could only provide counsel and referrals as the administration and school physicians discouraged students from dispensing pregnancy tests and medical advice to avoid liability. To boost participation, nurses had encouraged their patients to visit the peer counselors, but "students refused to go and discuss these matters with their 'peers.'"³¹ The service was not popular amongst Smith students, leading Health Services to decide to terminate the project. This is a microcosm of the center's initial lack of popularity as

²⁹ Ibid., 155.

³⁰ Correspondence between President Conway and WRC, Office of the President Jill Ker Conway Files, Box 233, College Archives, CA-MS-00071, Smith College Special Collections.

³¹ Correspondence between President Conway and WRC.

evidenced in op-eds by WRC members that implore their fellow students to interact with their programming, which they viewed as integral to a Smith women's education.³²

The largest reorganization occurred in 1976, when, in an attempt to secure more members, the WRC divorced itself from discussing lesbianism. This resulted in the formation of the Lesbian Alliance. An op-ed article published in the November 18, 1976 edition of *The Sophian* by an anonymous author, who is seemingly close to both groups, explained why the separation was “necessary:”

As a gesture of practicality, and in an attempt to define their own collective purpose, many lesbians on campus have formed the Lesbian Alliance, which was chartered this week at a meeting of house presidents. By forming such an alliance, gay women have officially dissociated themselves as a group, though fortunately not as individuals, from the WRC. Though it is benevolent of the gay students to sacrifice their own collective input into the WRC in order to encourage greater participation in it by other segments of the student population, it is a sad reflection on the tolerance and open-mindedness of the College community that such an action is deemed necessary.³³

The article illustrates how heterosexual members of the college did not want to work with the center due to preconceived notions that the group was solely for lesbians. While the Sophiasisters associated with the group since the first Women's Weekend, the center hoped to expand its reach outside of the gay community as it viewed itself as a resource for every woman on campus. In the larger women's liberation movement, “the initial response of many heterosexual feminists was to view lesbianism as a threat.”³⁴ Much like the national movement, many Smith women did not want to associate with lesbians due to their homophobia leading to the Lesbian Alliance becoming a separated group, despite the large overlap in membership.

The resource center continued its push for revitalization the following year by hiring a part-time staff member to work at the Center. The organization ultimately chose Anne

³² Loretta Smith, “Solidarity Needed,” *The Sophian*, vol. 21, no. 19, April 26, 1973, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

³³ *The Sophian*, “Women's Resource Center Redefining Purpose,” vol. 25, no. 8, November 18, 1976, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

³⁴ Beth Firestein, “Out of the Closet and into the Center: Women's Centers Serve Lesbian and Bisexual Women” in *University and College Women's Centers: The Changing Landscape*, ed. Sharon L. Davie (Greenwood Press, 2002), 230.

Dellenbaugh, a Smith alumnae who graduated the year before and would go on to co-found *Trivia*, a local feminist journal. She described her job as “overseeing things to make sure that nobody is duplicating anything” with her main role as “being a central leadership figure.”³⁵ Not only did having a worker solely dedicated to running the Center reduce redundancy but it provided support and structure for ideas that college students likely did not have the time to implement themselves. These ideas included the reorganization of the central committee into a collective and the offering of non-credit classes to teach life skills, such as auto mechanics. While Dellenbaugh’s work is throughout the archive of the Center, from her correspondence with administrators to the collaborations between the WRC and *Trivia*, it is unclear where her paycheck came from and when she stopped working at Smith, though it was within the decade. Based on WRC budgets from 1977–1979, it is clear that the WRC did not pay Dellenbaugh using their discretionary funds from the Student Government Association. It is likely that Dellenbaugh was the only person to ever take on this role at the Women’s Resource Center at Smith as there is no evidence of any other staff members.

That same year, the Smith’s Women’s Resource Center began participating in local Take Back the Night marches, which historian Estelle Freedman has suggested were “a collective method of reclaiming public life.”³⁶ They collaborated with feminists from Northampton to publicize and host these events that involved women marching through the town at dark to declare the streets as safe for all. By 1978, the center began to focus more on combatting domestic violence and sexual assault. Not only did they continue planning Take Back the Night rallies, but they also instituted workshops, a hotline, and student counseling service, which they mainly outsourced to UMass. Their focus on safety illustrates that colleges with women’s centers on campus often relied on them to handle most matters surrounding sexual assault including preventional education and supporting survivors.³⁷

³⁵ Amy Schancupp, “New Head Discusses Aspects of Women’s Resource Center,” *Sophian*, vol. 25, no. 21, April 28, 1977, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

³⁶ Freedman, *No Turning Back*, 286.

³⁷ Claire Kaplan et al., “Violence Against Women: Women’s Centers’ Responses to Sexual Assault” in *University and College Women’s Centers: The Changing Landscape*, ed. Sharon L. Davie (Greenwood Press, 2002), 149.

The center hosted various self-defense courses throughout their years and partnered with the Valley Women's Martial Arts group to underscore the need for greater security for women in the area. While campus security and other departments addressed students' fears of violence through flyers and pamphlets, it was the Women's Resource Center that encouraged Smith students to learn how to protect themselves and how to heal from traumatic experiences.³⁸ The WRC provided a sense of safety through the dissemination of knowledge related to self-protection, perhaps more successfully than the staff-led initiatives that stoked fear by solely focusing on the violence itself.

Towards the end of the decade, the group focused heavily on maintaining an up-to-date library full of women's and queer studies texts for any Smith student to borrow. The library was integral to the mission of the center because it "transmitted to women a powerful legacy."³⁹ Acquiring these books required cultivating a relationship with some of the feminist bookshops downtown and in their hometowns. As a result of the popular lesbian separatist movement, Northampton has a rich history of women-centered businesses, with several lesbian bookstores and a woman-identified press running out of the town. Lesbian Gardens, a lesbian bookstore on Main Street, ran from 1974–1977.⁴⁰ However, the WRC seemed to have a closer relationship to Womonyre Books, which was in business from 1978–1982. Students involved in the Resource Center sold tickets to their concerts at the store and advertised the store's events in their WRC newsletter. The symbiotic relationship demonstrates not only the importance of feminist literature to the Center but also the importance of building relationships with local feminists. Working with and being a patron at nearby lesbian businesses showed that the commitment WRC had to enriching their members through the knowledge and literature that older women had acquired in town. This is how the WRC built their "diverse array of publications that spoke

³⁸ Sue Cobb, "Women's Center Raps on Rape," *Sophian*, vol. 23, no. 5, October 10, 1974, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

³⁹ Rosovsky, "Libraries at the Center," 393.

⁴⁰ Kaymarion Raymond, "Lost Womyn's Spaces of Northampton, Massachusetts," *Lost Womyn's Spaces*, April 16, 2019, <https://lostwomynspace.blogspot.com/2019/04/lost-womyns-spaces-of-northampton.html>.

to multiple and overlapping groups.”⁴¹ The group collected dozens of books focusing on topics as varied as healing from childhood sexual abuse, biographies of influential women, feminist theory, and lesbian fiction from notable presses, such as Naiad or Firebrand Books. It is through these relationships to feminist booksellers and the books they purchased that women were able to receive a woman-centered education that they clearly craved.

By 1980, a working group from the Women’s Resource Center began to push for a women’s studies program. In February 1979, the organization had submitted a statement to the Committee on Educational Policy about instituting a Women’s Studies program of any form.⁴² Their first task was to collect papers students had written with a primary focus on women and compile a list of syllabi from classes that would fall under the women’s studies category. Both faculty and student activists did not see the creation of a Women’s Studies major at Smith to be feasible. Despite the popularity of classes centering on women and their perspectives, the curriculum committee seemed unlikely to create a department solely focused on gender. The newness of the field also likely played a part. As Robin Morgan has argued, “the difficulty of learning about the history of women in America is that, for the most part, it is an unwritten history.”⁴³ Smith did not view women centered inquiry as a valuable part of their education even as the school community continuously fought to learn their own gendered history.

Though they had the same goals, students and faculty did not seem to be on the same team. An internal letter between members of the Women’s Studies Taskforce revealed that “We [students and faculty] are not really going to work together. They will be consultants etc, etc, but although we’re working on the same issues, we won’t plan and plot together.”⁴⁴ The tension between the faculty and students is evidence that students viewed their professors as role models and trail blazers. In the letter, the unknown writer noted that she

⁴¹ Spain, *Constructive Feminism*, 86.

⁴² Statement to Committee on Educational Policy, Women’s Studies Task Force records, Box 3021.1, College Archives, CA-MS-00117, Smith College Special Collections.

⁴³ Robin Morgan, “Introduction: The Women’s Revolution,” in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, ed. Robin Morgan (Vintage Books, 1970), 3.

⁴⁴ Internal Student Correspondence, Women’s Studies Task Force records.

“immediately lost her ability to speak coherently,” presumably due to her nervousness to approach these respected faculty members.⁴⁵ These faculty members decided to fight for the recognition of a separate women’s studies program on their own terms. In their book, *A Woman’s Place in the Academy*, Smith professors Marilyn Schuster and Susan Van Dyne recognized that they saw the need for a Women’s Studies program “partly through student prompting to build a more formal community.”⁴⁶ Their writing continued to diminish the students’ activism to advocate for the creation of this academic program. They wrote, “to accomplish these goals we developed a model that combines mechanisms for faculty development... with a curricular experiment.”⁴⁷ While the department would not have developed without faculty’s advocacy, dedication, and determination, the students in the WRC devoted themselves to fight for an education that represents their histories and futures. The WRC created a workshop designed to be during interterm in 1980 which demonstrated their commitment to instituting a Women’s Studies program as they put effort into creating a curriculum and recruiting students to their extra no-credit class. In their advertisements for the course, the WRC asked for faculty guidance and received some positive responses. At this time, the Women’s Studies Task Force had been continuing to compile student papers and syllabi for classes focused on women. The goal through these collections and the class was to illustrate interest in having a dedicated department for Women’s Studies by underscoring the work that students and faculty have already been doing. The WRC wanted to be a resource for students interested in studying women and gender more than the faculty wanted to be a resource for them as shown by their distance from student activism, although the professors did not seem reluctant to help when asked.

During the 1980s, the Women’s Resource Center hosted a variety of entertainment, specifically performances from lesbian musicians popular in the women’s music scene. In 1981, the WRC helped to host a Sweet Honey in the Rock concert along with women’s

⁴⁵ Internal Student Correspondence.

⁴⁶ Marilyn Schuster and Susan Van Dyne, eds., *A Woman’s Place in the Academy* (Rowman and Allanheld Publishers, 1985), 98.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

centers and Black student alliances at the other five colleges. The WRC also planned and hosted a June Millington concert and a Holly Near performance that next year. Women's music was evidently an important unifying force that worked to bring people into women's spaces who may not have understood the movement otherwise. Scholar Ann Cvetkovich wrote about the importance of music in the lesbian feminist movement in her book *An Archive of Feelings*, arguing that "the combined power of song, visuals, and live performance lends itself to the formation of a public culture that doesn't involve medical diagnoses or victims."⁴⁸ These events proved that the foundations of building community could be from pleasure and the arts, not just shared oppression. It would be integral to the movement to create moments of joy, not victimhood, in order to empower women and recognize their potential as cultural creators, not just consumers.

In 1983, the WRC worked with President Jill Ker Conway and the Career Development Office to host the Alternative Careers Conference.⁴⁹ One of the student conference organizers, Peri Hall, told *The Sophian* that the purpose of the event was learning about "integrating what's personally important to you with what you do for a living."⁵⁰ They hosted speakers from every field, from law to arts to business co-operatives. Some speakers required a fee, specifically Smith alums who traveled to campus to speak. Others, such as the owners of Womonfyre Books, agreed to participate for free. Overall, the conference meant to show feminist alternatives to typical post-graduation jobs. The WRC helped to plan this conference while publicizing outside political events such as those put on by the Democratic Socialists of America and socialist politicians. These events demonstrated how the students in the WRC had radical leftist politics that viewed class oppression as intertwined with sexism. Smith's feminists imagined a world outside of capitalism in order to envision a future without the patriarchy. While the WRC sponsored and publicized events that were

⁴⁸ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴⁹ Alternative Careers Conference Flyer, Women's Resource Center Records, Box 3021, College Archives, CA-MS-00108, Smith College Special Collections.

⁵⁰ Kathryn Calley, "Conference Explores Career Paths," *Sophian*, vol. 31, no. 37, April 14, 1983, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

inherently leftist, their work on the Alternative Careers Conferences makes evident that they were willing to work with Smith, with capitalism, and with other oppressive institutions in order to advocate for change on any level, even a reformist one.

It is unknown how radical the students' involved politics were, as it depended on the members' personal ideologies. As shown in the organization's archive, there were debates over different political and economic systems found in notes highlighting the pros and cons of different types of economic systems. A 1983 *Sophian* article about Women's Week highlighted these diverse opinions by quoting a student who saw "the interdependence of patriarchy and capitalism as the root of wimmin's oppression."⁵¹ Overall, the Women's Resource Center held space for a wealth of ideas that explored how sexism became so pervasive, including economic ones, and discussed possible solutions on campus and beyond.

While planning their own events, the Women's Resource Center stood in solidarity with the Lesbian Alliance (LA). Not only did they advocate for the organization to receive funding during their time of tensions with Student Government, but they greatly overlapped in membership and hosted events together. The groups co-sponsored dances, lectures from speakers including Adrienne Rich, and educational workshops.⁵² An interview with an alumnae, Julia Dryfoos, who was active in both groups, revealed that the WRC was more politically focused. The Lesbian Alliance, on the other hand, viewed building community through entertainment as integral to their goals. LA dances were especially popular, seemingly marketed as an alternative to the party scenes within houses, with the Radical Debutante Ball being an example. While the WRC had their own parties, the group focused more on activist motivated actions and educating their peers on women's issues. Still, coalition building was integral to achieving their shared mission of creating a campus culture where everyone could feel empowered and safe. The organizations had to work

⁵¹ *The Sophian*, "Neither a Feminist Nor a Socialist Be," vol. 31, no. 28, February 24, 1983.

⁵² Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Alliance Records, Box 3016, College Archives, CA-MS-00112, Smith College Special Collections.

together, as their “ability to advance social justice and women’s equality within an institution of higher learning” depended on their cooperation with each other.⁵³ Therefore, it would make sense that the WRC would adamantly support the Lesbian Alliance, because of their own queerness, but also because of their shared belief in community.

In 1979, the Women’s Resource Center began publishing a feminist journal titled *Praxis*. The goal of the journal was to “articulate a feminist perspective at Smith College and to offer a forum for ideas and opinions not represented in existing campus publications.”⁵⁴ It was an example of feminist cultural creation as students involved with the Women’s Center wrote their own opinion pieces, poetry, and stories in alignment with their politics. By the mid-1980s, the journal began to solely focus on publishing poetry in a chapbook format. It is evident they viewed the structures of poetry to be radical as in the 1986 spring edition, editor Monica Pearl described how “in poetry then lies the opportunity to question the ideologies that perpetuate the inherent biases in our language.”⁵⁵ The fact that students wrote and designed this publication on top of their demanding schoolwork demonstrates that they viewed feminist culture production as important to the functions of the WRC and to their expression of self. They viewed their poetry as able to challenge the established patriarchal institutions of the written word and language. Their dedication to undermining their oppression through the arts shows their idealism but also their tenacity to push for change in every capacity.

In 1987, Audre Lorde, esteemed Black lesbian writer and thinker, came to Smith’s campus to speak at Women’s Week. Jennifer Dryfoos, a WRC coordinator, invited Lorde, who resided in her hometown in the American Virgin Islands. Lorde spoke at Wright Hall on the final day of the weekend, a venue much too small for the crowd she drew. Though a variety of organizations sponsored the event, including the Lesbian Alliance and the Black Students Alliance, Drooyfus recalled being the sole leader, which likely contributed to the

⁵³ Firestein, “Out of the Closet and into the Center,” 247.

⁵⁴ “Praxis” feminist publication, 1979–1983, Student publications and student publications records, College Archives, CA-MS-01049, Smith College Special Collections.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

unsuccessful nature of the event as she did not anticipate needing to change venues due to the number of attendees. Lorde's talk on campus illustrated how the Women's Resource Center tried to address issues of racism within their organization and on-campus since their inception but often failed to do more than just co-sponsoring events with the Black Students Alliance. While there are no records of any racism occurring within the center, scholars Elena DiLapi and Gloria Gay suggest that "it is likely the power arrangements within these women's centers mirror those of the broader society."⁵⁶ Pictures in the Women's Resource Center archives demonstrate this as the majority of the women involved were white, especially those in leadership positions. However, many events solely run by the resource center, such as Women's Week, focused on the dual oppression of women of color. During the spring of 1988, the Women's Week centered around events that heavily discussed race such as "Workshop for Latinas" and "Working Toward Change in a Racist Institution."⁵⁷ These BIPOC-centered events demonstrate that on some level the center recognized the need to ensure their events not only included everyone, but fought for the empowerment of all women.

By the end of the eighties, the WRC tackled debates and issues that feminist worldwide had been discussing. They held a talk by Andrea Dworkin, a known anti-pornography scholar, as students published several op-eds in *The Sophian* regarding their views on pornography and women's portrayals in media. It was then that the WRC became more than just a student-run organization, but a resource to bring influential and contemporary thinkers to the forefront of campus consciousness. The sheer number of events demonstrated the Student Government's willingness to fund talks from notable speakers that touched on issues that did not necessarily have a physical manifestation on Smith's campus. One demonstration of this was their focus on international women's issues. They invited various speakers from around the world to introduce Smith students to issues

⁵⁶ Elena DiLapi and Gloria Gay, "Women's Centers Responding to Racism" in *University and College Women's Centers: The Changing Landscape*, ed. Sharon L. Davie (Greenwood Press, 2002), 203.

⁵⁷ "Women's Weekend" 1988 Flyer, Women's Resource Center Records.

affecting women outside of the USA and to suggest ways in which Smith students can advocate for people outside of their communities.

By the mid-1990s, the WRC became a coalition that grouped every feminist-like group on campus instead of being a separate entity. Organizations under their umbrella included Student Labor Action Coalition, Feminists of Smith Unite, Smith People for Choice, Students Together Against Abusive Relationships, Rape Awareness, Survivors and Allies For Education on Childhood Sexual Incest, Queer Action Coalition, Peer Sexuality Educators, Associations of Smith Pagans, Hillel, and the Pro-Life Alliance. The inclusion of clubs that were antithetical to their mission, such as the Pro-Life Alliance, or only tangentially related, like Hillel, show how the space was beginning to wane in popularity. Most of these groups can and did function without the center. In the early 2000s, the space became even more inaccessible when the spatiality of campus shifted with the addition of the new Campus Center. Student life began to shift to the new building, meaning Davis Student Center became less central to students' lives on campus. Since the organizations within the center could easily exist without the physical presence of a Women's Resource Center, nor did they rely on many of the resources of the space, it seemed that interest in maintaining the WRC declined as people began to use the Campus Center more.

During this time, the importance of advocating for transgender rights within the feminist movement became more critical to the Smith community. The ideologies of second-wave feminism "constructed a culturally specific version of 'woman' as the subject of feminism" that often erased trans people and their relationship with the patriarchy.⁵⁸ Activism that relied on using women, or any spelling of the term, as a catch-all for those affected by gender oppression then became taboo since the 1970s women's liberation movement became associated with Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs). Separatist spaces and events, such as the Michigan's Womyn's Festival became synonymous with transphobia, as their exclusionary rules denied trans women entry to the music event.

⁵⁸ Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 10.

Activists that held genuine views of inclusion, such as queercore band Le Tigre, then had to distance themselves from the movement that served as the foundation for their work. The WRC co-hosted trans-centered events with the Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Alliance, their reliance on 1970s feminist symbols and language likely portrayed them as discriminatory and exclusionary.

The association between the second-wave feminist movement and TERFs likely led to the decline of gender-based organizing on Smith's campus. The Resource Center for Sexuality and Gender, which opened in March 2006, refused to engage with the legacy left by the Women's Resource Center. The debate over naming the center demonstrated the organizers' unwillingness to engage with history, as they decided to not name the center after alumna Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, a pioneer in the field of Women's and Queer Studies who co-wrote a foundational text in lesbian history with Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993).⁵⁹ Instead of recognizing the foundational work done by previous Smith students since the inception of the college, the staff who created the center used an ahistorical name that also distanced itself from other, more popular buildings and centers on campus that are all named after influential alumni, faculty, or donors. Rather than recognize that the WRC and other minority-centered centers on campus had been successful because they began as a student-led initiative, faculty and staff from Residential Life and the Office of Student Engagement created the center with some input from LGBTQ student groups. This meant the center came from above not from the people that would be engaging with the services. Additionally, these staff did not follow the advice of their peers and had Residence Life staff the center, rather than hire separate staff members who might be more equipped to support queer students and host events at the center. Not only does this diverge from some of the successes of the WRC, but it differentiates Smith from the other Five College with active women's and LGBTQ centers who have workers dedicated to maintaining those spaces. Additionally, the lack of a staff member limited connections with

⁵⁹ Student Clubs and Organizations records, Box 3004.5, College Archives, CA-MS-00022, Smith College Special Collections.

community members and activism occurring in town, which helped to sustain and support the work of the WRC. Today, Hampshire College's Women's Center and Queer Action Center have a staff member solely dedicated to working at these spaces, preservation of their history through the work of student archivists, and frequently engage with organizations around the valley. Their success mirrors what went well with the WRC and highlights possible reasons for why the Smith Resource Center for Sexuality and Gender is under-utilized today.

Women's centers, both on and off college campuses, were an integral manifestation of second wave feminists' desires to raise consciousness through connecting their personal experiences to systemic misogyny and educating themselves on women's contributions to history. While they had been inspired by neighboring centers, the WRC was uniquely positioned to serve Smith students, from their publications' focus on navigating the bureaucracy of the school to their events catering towards college students already interested in women's studies. The ideas came directly from students, not staff, which meant they understood the needs of the student body and would have ensured the programming would be of interest to people on campus. Additionally, it allowed them to host fun events for students, such as dances and concerts, through partnerships with other organizations. Their willingness to work within, but not necessarily with, Smith is likely what allowed them to prosper for almost thirty years.

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