

Bless Her Heart: Southern Media Perceptions of the Women's Liberation Movement, 1970-2000

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## **Abstract**

In 1970, a concerned Georgia man wrote to the *Atlanta Daily World*, "When extreme Women's Liberationists assert that women are oppressed by men, their claim has no foundation, for women live longer than men." This comment exemplifies the ignorance and obliviousness that southern feminists sought to dismantle. Southern women are most often depicted as brainwashed victims of the patriarchy who are complacent in their place in the kitchen. For many southern women, this portrayal is incomplete and inaccurate. Up against an established patriarchy which oppressed women under the guise of religion and tradition, strong southern women fought for equality in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Working within and simultaneously deconstructing constraints of respectability and etiquette, southern feminists in the late 1960s and '70s empowered women to take on traditions that kept them oppressed. This paper seeks to correct the erasure of southern women from feminist scholarship during the second-wave era. Examining southern newspapers coverage of the women's liberation movement provides a comprehensive perspective of the challenges that activists faced, prevailing mindsets of women on the fence about embracing the movement, and how committed feminists and journalists used their voices to enact change.

## **Introduction to Southern Feminism During the Second Wave, 1970-2000**

Southern womanhood is often equated with domesticity and submission, but amidst social change toward equality in a place where patriarchy runs thicker than molasses, women learned to resist their oppressors wearing a smile as sweet as a peach. The prevalent historical narrative of feminism in the United States prioritizes the work of Northern activists, neglecting to mention southern women's contributions. Yet, southern feminists learned the art of peaceful protest from the Civil Rights activists who pioneered civil disobedience displays and challenged the monolithic southern cultural institutions of religion and gender, racial, and class hierarchies. When Yankee feminists came to the South to preach, as if there were not enough Southern evangelism already, their sermons fell flat because they failed to understand the implications of deviating from established norms.<sup>1</sup> Pushing boundaries meant tarnishing traditions that were the defining characteristics of southern culture and integrated with southern identity. At the dawn of the 1970s, national attention shifted from the Civil Rights movement to the Equal Rights Amendment, opening the conversation for women to share experiences of oppression across racial and class boundaries, although there was tension about the movement's priorities. Mainstream southern media reveals negative and neutral reactions to the movement, so this paper provides a comprehensive source that encapsulates various reactions from men and women who rejected women's liberation.

### **Significance of Study**

Feminist literature in the post-Civil Rights era fixated on San Francisco and New York, where debates about abortion, the pill, and pornography were taking place. The vast majority of

<sup>1</sup> Janet Allured, "Louisiana, the American South, and the Birth of Second-Wave Feminism," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 54 no. 4. (2013): 389-423.

feminist scholarship is produced in New York or San Francisco, as Katarina Keane observed that "historiography is marked by an overwhelming emphasis on the activists, participants, organizations, and publications of urban centers in the North and on the West Coast."<sup>2</sup> This work will supplement that work by filling the void in southern and feminist history with particular attention to the critical voices that southern feminists were up against. Tracing the contributions of southern feminists during the second wave is crucial to rescripting stereotypes of southern women as naïve, uneducated and complicit in our own subjugation. Women who defied the status quo deserve recognition for their involvement that often forced them to sacrifice financial stability and social acceptance. This study will benefit future feminist scholars seeking to understand the priorities and methods utilized by southern feminists. For future feminist organizers, this research will provide insight about how to effectively organize southern women with an appreciation for the culture that shapes southern womanhood.

## **Literature Review**

Preliminary research on southern feminism during the second-wave era might leave scholars questioning if such a movement existed at all. Given the absence of feminist discourse in southern history, it's hard to search a database for the presence of a movement that rejected labels. Keane reiterated this gap, affirming, "Many Southern activists did not identify themselves as feminists at all. For any number of working-class women and women of color, second-wave feminism had been too strongly identified by the media as a movement of middle-class, white women to be considered a useful rubric." By avoiding such terminology, southern women

<sup>2</sup> Katarina Keane, "Second-Wave Feminism in the American South, 1965–1980," *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*, (2009). On p. 5, footnote 10, Keane lists the 10 most important books about second wave feminism, none of which mention the contributions of southern women.

strengthened their power by uniting behind an ideology rather than in support of a group. As evidenced by existing available criticism which dubbed feminist activists "libbers," such an organization would inevitably be given a patronizing nickname to generalize and then swiftly dismiss the whole movement. In an article from early 1970, *Atlanta Constitution* journalist Carolyn Marvin interviewed the leaders of emerging women's rights group in Atlanta. She noted the lack of standardized terminology used by southern organizations to describe their concerns, stating that the "phenomenon is discrimination to NOW and oppression to [Women's Liberation]," in reference to what each group perceived as the challenging force to their goal.<sup>3</sup> In feminist scholarship, these loose and fleeting ties are termed "coalitions," defined as "fluid sites of collective behavior where the blending of multiple personalities with political activism interacts with structural conditions to influence the development of commitments, strategies, and specific actions."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the elusive nature of a group that forgoes formal titles, regional identity precluded Southern women from identifying with national feminist societies. Southern women did not want to compromise their regional identities and lived experiences to fit within an organization that was not attuned to their culture and heritage. Much of the literature on southern feminism begins with an assessment of the factors that distinguish southern feminism from other regional iterations, illuminating cultural elements which influenced the priorities and practices of southern women's liberation. Geography is one feature frequently attributed to the uniqueness of southern feminism. Stephanie Gilmore notes, "location directly affected the ways in which

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Marvin, "Women Oppressed, Exploited in Man's World?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 5, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Bystydzienski and Stephen Schacht, *Forging Radical Alliances Across Difference: Coalition Politics for a New Millennium*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001): 2.

women organized and expressed themselves as feminists."<sup>5</sup> Women in rural areas were often not afforded access to feminist spaces because of their distance, making their advocacy efforts even more subtle and unremarkable to the national feminist discourse. Parting the "magnolia curtain" that conceals the internal machinations of southern regionalism allows researchers to comprehend cultural factors that separate southern feminism from other regions.<sup>6</sup> In her book, *Remapping Second Wave Feminism*, Janet Allured decried the lack of understanding that northern feminists had about southern culture and the regional identity. She expressed the disdain of radical southern feminists for radical northern feminists because they preached a condescending ideology of aggressive activism that would isolate women from anyone willing to listen, discrediting their voices as hysterical. Southern women's liberation activists would quickly be written off as man-haters and face social isolation if they adopted these brash techniques. For the most part, southern women were not trying to upend the existing social structure outside of oppressive gender norms. Allured says they "asked little more than that the state and the nation uphold its promise of equality of opportunity of all races and ethnicities."<sup>7</sup>

Religion is another significant factor when analyzing southern feminism. In Caroline Dillman's foundational research, *Southern Women*, she compares northern religious affiliation to southern religious institutions. She explains:

Not only regional ties, not only extreme religiosity compared with other regions, not only strong family ties, but adherence to the opinions, beliefs, and values of elders, extremely

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Gilmore, "The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, 1971-1982: Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide." *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 15, no. 1 (2003): 94-117.

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Gilmore, where she quotes Daneel Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis: Building Communities Behind the Magnolia Curtain*. (New York: Garland Pub, 1997): 96.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Allured, *Remapping Second Wave Feminism: The Long Women's Rights Movement in Louisiana, 1950-1997*. (The University of Georgia Press, 2016), 6.

deep regard for kinship networks, and open conservatism on issues of social change create a formidable impediment to becoming part of the mainstream.<sup>8</sup>

She acknowledges that religion in the South is a social network that often dominates other community affiliations, and acceptance in this network means complying with the status quo. Questioning the established social norms and gender roles, as women's liberation did, meant social exile.

Past encounters with feminism had left black women hesitant to take up the cause. During the suffrage movement, white feminists feared their right to vote was put at risk by allowing black women to vote, as the Nineteenth Amendment had to be ratified by Southern states who would like vote against a policy including black women. National American Women's Suffrage Association, NAWSA, advocated for white-only enfranchisement. As a result, black women formed their own groups, like the Colored Women's League, that prioritized dismantling racism with suffrage as a secondary goal. Given the proximity of the second wave of women's liberation to the Civil Rights movement, black women in the south were still fighting racism that had not been abolished by legislature, as indicated by the South's reluctance to segregate schools and adopt other equal rights policies without force from the federal government. In her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks discusses that white feminists were condescending to black women. hooks' observed that white feminists, "act as if black women did not know sexist oppression until they voiced feminist sentiment. They believe they are providing black women with "the" analysis and "the" program for liberation." Her lived experiences as a black woman in the South had made patriarchal oppression evident from a young age, but white feminists made black women feel as though they were required to enlist in the movement in

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Dillman, *Southern Women*, (New York: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1988), 7-8.

order to be valid feminists. Tokenization of black women's stories of oppression were used to maintain a façade of inclusivity, but hooks recalls, "Though they expected us to provide first-hand accounts of the black experience, they felt it was their role to decide if it was authentic." However, she confirms that much of this patronization came from classmates in her women's studies courses at Stanford and recognized that "southern white women often have a more realistic perspective on race and class than white women in other areas of the United States."<sup>9</sup>

Although the tensions cited by hooks that certainly caused friction between black and white women's liberationists, media coverage of the movement in southern papers exacerbated and conflated these differences. There was plenty of coverage about disagreements between black and white feminist groups, but little discussion of their collaboration and mutual advocacy. In her work about interracial bonds between black and white feminists, Rebecca Sheehan documents the relationship between white, mainstream feminist Germaine Greer and southern black feminist Florynce Kennedy.<sup>10</sup> Benita Roth's study of the various approaches that different racial groups of women took surmises that divides between women of color and white women's feminist goals emerged because innocuously because of different priorities, not because white feminists were too racist to deal with.<sup>11</sup> However, patriarchal-dominated southern media preferred the hostile, divided narrative of women's liberation because it was more effective at undermining the feminist cause.

<sup>9</sup> hooks, bell, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984) 10-12.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Sheehan, "Intersectional Feminist Friendship: Restoring Colour to the Second-Wave through the Letters of Florynce Kennedy and Germaine Greer." *Lilith*, no. 25 (January 2019): 76-92.

<sup>11</sup> Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge University Press, 2004): 6.



Even when time separates southern women from more severe applications of these cultural forces, their impact on the southern identity is nevertheless apparent. This year, in 2019, Alabama's legislature passed a bill abolishing judge-signed marriage licenses because some conservative judges still refused to sanction same sex marriage. These Alabamian judges refused to comply with Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* because their religion conflicted with the law, despite the separation of church and state clause that is the supposed cornerstone of American government. Another bill from this 2019 legislative season undercutting women's rights passed in the majority Republican, white, male, Protestant Alabama legislature to effectively ban abortions in the state. While this legislation is unconstitutional under current federal court precedent, the religious establishment in the Deep South has enough of a stronghold on the dominant party that such unenforceable legislation passed without a hitch. The state legislature, steeped in evangelism and conservative interpretations of religion, still undermines women's rights in the state today despite progress in attitudes towards women in the national conversation.

Media coverage of women's liberation in the South tells the story that historians have ignored. In her book, *The Lesbian South*, Jamie Harker emphasized the role of media in organizing women's liberation efforts. She remarked that "women's liberation was obsessed with print. Feminists believed that an independent press was essential to a political and cultural revolution and so produced a diverse array of publications."<sup>12</sup> Studying local southern media coverage of women's liberation reveals various perspectives of women's liberation. Common negative stances toward the Women's Liberation Movement included those who derogatively

<sup>12</sup> Jamie Harker, *The Lesbian South: Southern Feminists, the Women in Print Movement and the Queer Literary Canon*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 18.

called activists "libbers" and attempted to undermine their efforts. There were also men's rights activists who failed to realize that the feminist movement fought for equality, not women's superiority. There were the religious zealots who disregarded the fact that Jesus' closest companion who found him when he rose from the dead was a woman, and a prostitute at that. Some women were apathetic to the movement, thinking it was unnecessary or a threat to their dreams of becoming a housewife and mother. Conversely, women's rights activists in the media dismantled stereotypes about women's liberation through their genuine accounts of the movement's benefits. These advocates risked social pariah status and ridicule from men in order to secure equality for fellow women.

### **"Libbers"**

This section will establish the negative attitudes towards the women's liberation movement in the South. The opinions, mostly held by men, minimized the causes which women's liberation advocated for and disparaged the loss of family values that the movement allegedly ushered in. One article titled, "Is Marriage an Unmentionable Now?" written by the editor of *The Atlanta Constitution*, Reg Murphy<sup>13</sup> embodies the assumption that just because women sought autonomy, they had no interest in marriage. Murphy received a note from a doctor in Australia who said there was a disproportionate number of single men who he wished to introduce to single women of America. Murphy complained that, "everyone has tried so hard to keep from offending the women crying out for their rights" that he did not know whether or not women would be offended by the doctor's invitation. Murphy wrote, "Should one write the doctor to tell him that American women have warned us not to make them sex objects?"

<sup>13</sup> Reg Murphy, "Is Marriage an Unmentionable Now?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 19, 1973. Two years later, Murphy was kidnapped by a militia member who sought to destroy all "lying leftist newspapers."

Murphy's approach to women's liberation shows that men viewed the whole movement as a group of angry man-haters who wanted nothing to do with marriage.<sup>14</sup> They could not fathom why women would rather build a life independently than just settle down with a random Australian bachelor. The premise of the original communication should also be brought into question. Who said there was a surplus of lonely, single American women? This assumption illuminates another shared notion about women's liberation. Those who sought to minimize the causes of women's liberation disseminated the belief that the sexual liberation aspect of the movement caused men to reject committed relationships because they were "get[ing] the milk for free."<sup>15</sup> This colloquialism, often invoked in criticisms of women's liberation, presumes that men only want relationships with women in exchange for sexual gratification. These clichés are used to uphold the social value placed on the construct of virginity, promoting a harmful narrative that sex makes a woman unclean or undesirable. Such notions represent the draconian conventions that the women's liberation movement had to dismantle in the South.

Another article by Murphy used some sketchy data to suggest that women did not need or "aren't buying women's liberation movement." He reiterated that women reported that they "don't want to be liberated, [they] just believe in equal rights." This commentary takes issue with a nominal difference between the labels of the movement and its goals, weakening the power of the movement by undermining unity against the patriarchy. He also made sure to note that "women's liberation does have the support of a majority of single women and divorcees," but not

<sup>14</sup> "Feminists Adopt Cause Devoted to Man-Hating," *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 1, 1972: This article from the AP, selected for *The Atlanta Constitution*, featured northern feminists voicing their reasons for hating men. It also said "The only way to win liberation is to make men miserable so they will have no peace until women are free." Sensationalized media portrayals of feminists as man haters dissuaded southern women from associating with the movement.

<sup>15</sup> Betsy Hart, "Men Refuse to Commit to Marriage Because Situations Are Just Fine," *Mobile Register*, October 1, 1995.

married or widowed women.<sup>16</sup> This commentary perpetuates the fear-mongering tactics to undermine the women's movement by scaring young women into thinking that associating with feminism will prevent them from getting a husband.<sup>17</sup> He said the poll concluded that men and women agreed that "to be really active in politics, women have to neglect their husbands and children." Normative gender roles prescribed that men did not have to be as attentive to children because their primary role was to provide financial stability. If a woman wanted to undertake some part of this role, though, it was seen as neglecting her family. His disdain for men in the household reflects his opinion towards childcare, that this work was demeaning and of lesser value than employment, which reflects his opinion that women are inferior.

The idea that women's liberation would obliterate the nuclear family structure was a trend in southern media. This article establishes the double standard that women were held to and reflects the narratives that women were fed to prevent them from participating in an organized form of women's liberation. This critique is reiterated in David Wilson's article, "Fatherhood-- Few Kids Will Know It." Although the title reads as a hyperbole, the article that follows reveals this author wholeheartedly believes this melodramatic statement. He begins by identifying women's liberation as the culprit of "the abolition of fatherhood." He gives a soliloquy about his own father who was somewhat of a "tyrant" but taught him to "catch a ball...hammer nails, screw screws...care for our fingernails, shoot firecrackers without hurting ourselves...clean spark plugs...and hundreds of other simple, necessary and useful things." Even if fatherhood as he knew it were dead, there was no reason a woman could not teach her children to do these

<sup>16</sup> Reg Murphy, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 30, 1972.

<sup>17</sup> Another example of their fear-mongering attempts were articles with headlines like "FBI Kept Files on Women's Libbers." These made women afraid to associate with women's lib organizations, because who would want the FBI investigating them? See Norman Kempster, "FBI Kept Files on Women's Libbers," *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 6, 1977.

things, which reveals his worship of the gender binaries that women's liberation stood to dismantle. Wilson stated that his father "was able to do these things because his ultimate authority was understood to be irresistible," insinuating that the idea of a powerful woman in the household would undermine the totalitarian authority of a father figure. <sup>18</sup> It raises the question that if a leader is truly powerful, then the presence of an empowered woman should be no threat to their irresistible power.

Such assumptions about women's liberation embody the ideas of a threatened patriarchal establishment using fear and exaggeration to prevent the movement from succeeding. Wilson shows no understanding of the substance of the women's liberation movement. He only returns to blame the movement at the end of the article when he claims that his father was the antithesis of feminist depictions of men that classified all men as "drunken, lecherous, irresponsible, sadistic and tyrannical." The notion that women's liberation would threaten fatherhood is contradictory to the various goals of the movement which effectively pushed for a more equal share of childcare responsibilities between parents so that women could pursue a career if they desired. Baseless attacks by men often resorted to pedantic retorts and could not provide any genuine reason why women's liberation was bad. After facing insults in an article published by the National Organization for Women (NOW), State Representative "Sloppy" Floyd told women's liberationists "to take their organization and go jump in a lake and go straight to hell." <sup>19</sup> He also said that he opposed the Equal Rights Amendment because, "I'd just like to keep ladies as ladies." This comment was another trivial criticism of women's liberation, claiming that women's

<sup>18</sup> David Wilson, "Fatherhood--Few Kids Will Know It," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 14, 1976. See also, Art Harris, "The Look of Love and Marriage in the Year 2000," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 14, 1975.

<sup>19</sup> David Morrison, "Sloppy Battles the Libbers, Suggests 'Jump in Lake,'" *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 18, 1974.

liberation would turn women into men. Such attitudes showcase a slice of oppressive gender norms that southern women were up against.

### **Men-imizing the Issues**

With the second wave of women's rights activism came a lesser known phenomenon; men's rights. Despite the movement's mission of equal rights for both sexes, "meninists" perceived the movement as a way to give special privileges to women.<sup>20</sup> Participants in the women's liberation front were often chastised for being shrill and whiny. One article called liberationists "nutty" and "inane" for complaining about the objectification of women in a campaign to raise money for a Christmas charity.<sup>21</sup> Another southern journalist described articles from a northern feminist publication, *Ms.*, as having a "note of petulance, of bitchiness, of nervous fingernails screeching across a blackboard." According to him, feminists, "do not cry: they merely mewl. They whine. They carp. They exude a flatulent self-pity." They equate the meaning of high tragedy with the picking of a husband's socks.<sup>22</sup> However, the same could be said about proponents of men's rights. One letter to Ann Landers published in *The Atlanta Constitution* complains, "If a woman gets sick during work and wants to lie down, there are lounging chairs and couches in the women's restroom. If a man gets sick, he can lean against a sink or stretch out on the floor."<sup>23</sup> Such trivial criticisms chipped away at the perceived validity of the issues that southern women were fighting for. Men in the media missed the memo that women's liberation sought liberation from restrictive gender roles that relegated women to

<sup>20</sup> Maxine Turner, "ERA: Both Sides Now," *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 18, 1977: Turner explains exactly how the ERA and women's liberation fought for the liberation of both men and women. Despite this, "meninists" still thought they had a different cause and detracted support from women's liberation, harming the potential efficacy of the movement.

<sup>21</sup> Gene Tharpe, "Nutty Feminists and Santa," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 26, 1974.

<sup>22</sup> James J. Kilpatrick, "The Pitiful Women," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 21, 1971.

<sup>23</sup> "It's About Time to Talk About Men's Liberation," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 17, 1975.

domestic spheres and expected men to be stoic workhorses. Their existence drew men away from women's liberation, where they could have provided beneficial support and publicity, and further divided the sexes in this fight by posing their goals in opposition to each other. Their voices also gave legitimacy to resist the renegotiation of gender norms that are so stringently defined in the South.

An interview with Frank Bertels, who founded the Male Liberation Foundation in 1981, reveals the motives of the movement. He states, "Two generations of young men have been brainwashed. They've been told nothing except that they are sex-crazed and insensitive and they can't cry. Now some of them are crying like girls." This quote, which equates any semblance of male emotion to femininity and suggests that a man expressing feminine character traits is negative and abnormal, exemplifies the toxic and narrow conceptions of masculinity that women's liberation in the south sought to dismantle. Bertels' organization evidently opposes the women's rights movement because "All you read in newspapers is stuff bashing men and glorifying women."<sup>24</sup> If men's rights activists seek to represent the accomplishments of men, they need to look no further than the annals of history which chronicle the accomplishments of almost exclusively men since the beginning of human civilization. Bertels also claims that "the law and courts are stacked against men," a statement which would be laughable to any feminist living in 2019, when the Honorable Clarence Thomas and Brett Kavanaugh, two men accused of sexual assault, sit on the highest court of the land,. How can these institutions be stacked against men, when the law was written by men and the most influential positions in courts are predominately occupied by men, especially in the South?

<sup>24</sup> Robert Kerr, "Rugged Individualists Lead the Men's Lib Movement," *The Commercial Appeal*, September 2, 1990. See also, Bill Easterling, "Just Another Sign of our Emergence." *The Huntsville Times*, July 7, 1992.

Other objectives of men's liberation were honorable, but would also have been accomplished if women's liberation in the South was given the space to achieve its goal of eliminating the constraints of male and female gender roles that are particularly prevalent in this region. Dick Woods of the National Congress for Men said, "Men are entitled to make choices, too. Men might choose to be stay-at-home fathers or they might choose a more traditional role."<sup>25</sup> Freedom of choice is a rally cry of women's liberation. If southern men had allowed women equal opportunity to prioritize their careers, norms would have naturally shifted to accept men who choose to stay at home. Clearly, the goal of the Equal Rights Amendment was completely ignored by these men's rights groups. This section prompts a reminder of the pronouns used in the Bill of Rights. The fundamental rights of this country were nominally given to *men*, assuring *his* liberties. Meninists failed to recognize that their interests and rights were guaranteed in the founding documents of this country, rendering this 'men's rights' crusade irrelevant.

Other men's rights articles published in southern newspapers detracted from the goals of women's rights movements by purporting seemingly trivial facts. One article featured in *The Atlanta Constitution* from the Miami AP declares, "Don't be surprised if the 1979 hurricanes have names like Tom, Pierre, Thor and Mario along with the female names like Christine and Lorraine that have long been a bane to the women's liberation movement."<sup>26</sup> Nowhere in prominent women's rights literature is this mentioned among the many issues that they fought against. Feminists were more interested in securing their reproductive rights and curtailing workplace discrimination. These demeaning articles proliferated a false narrative and trivialized

<sup>25</sup> "'79 May See Few 'Himmicane' Winds," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 16, 1977. To make this article more ironic, one of the groups included is called "The National Congress for Men." With men making up 77.4% of the U.S. Congress, even in 2019, are the two not synonymous?

<sup>26</sup> "'79 May See Few 'Himmicane' Winds."



the legitimate concerns of women seeking equal rights in a region that deployed tradition and religion to keep women in submissive roles.

### **Mary Magdalene was a Liberated Woman**

The weight that southern culture places on Christianity is evident in religious critiques of the aims and methods of women's liberation. Churches pushed back against the movement's progress and claimed that Satan was "using scientific arguments and nefarious propaganda to lure women away from their primary responsibilities as wives, mothers, and homemakers."<sup>27</sup> In an article by Reverend Robert Williams, he said that the work of feminists is to "destroy the role of the man in the home and the family [through] same-sex marriage, welfare, [and] career mentality." He claimed that the female is degraded through "pornography, lesbianism and women's liberation" and situated feminists as agents of the devil who strive to eviscerate the family as "the nucleus of society."<sup>28</sup> Another religious criticism that posed women's liberation as contradictory to Christianity is found in a letter to the editor by Mobile, AL resident Joseph Mass. He responded to an editorial criticizing the pro-life movement, claiming that abortion advocates "generalize all pro-lifers to be basically evil and out-of-touch with God."<sup>29</sup> Southern women, many of whom were raised in the church, were subjected to this propaganda that situated women's liberation in direct conflict with their religious beliefs. These religious critiques had the potential to isolate southern women of faith despite their support of the movement's goals, simply because media depicted women's liberation as an enemy of the church.

<sup>27</sup> Louis Cassels, "Women's Gains Slim in Field of Religion," *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 21, 1973.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Williams, "Godlessness - Destroying our Nation," *The Augusta Chronicle*, July 13, 1996. See also, Billy Graham, famed televangelist's commentary on women's lib; Billy Graham "Women's Libbers Unrealistic," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 31, 1972.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Mass, "Pro-lifer portrayal was not on target," *Mobile Register*, March 14, 1995.

Yet another editorial that condemns women's liberation on the basis that its goals "would place precious womanhood and blessed motherhood in the same category with those abominations you read about in the 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Leviticus, 22<sup>nd</sup> verse" sought to turn religious women against organized women's liberation efforts.<sup>30</sup> Instead, the contributor suggested the movement should be forgotten and replaced by a measure "to allow women their rights to hold positions where they are qualified on the merits of abilities and background as well as capacities where they relate to the certain position."<sup>31</sup> Although this call to action summarizes the Equal Rights Amendment provision to prevent gender discrimination in the workplace, denunciation of the existing movement chips away at the strength that can be found in a unified front. Instead, the author divides women who seek equality by portraying the goals of the movement as a betrayal of faith. Given the prevalence of religion in the South, a deviation from the tenets of faith as widely interpreted in the region could mean social isolation for women. These misrepresented frames of women's liberation played a role in the hesitancy of southern women to label themselves as feminists, despite general agreement with its teachings.

There were also traditionalists who blamed women's liberation for the disintegration of southern traditions like etiquette and customs like a woman taking their husbands' last names. An article headlined "Minding our Manners" exemplifies the attitude of traditional southern women towards women's liberation. This title suggests they perceived women's liberation advocates as transgressing the boundaries that contained proper southern womanhood. Betsy Camp, an etiquette teacher from Huntsville is quoted blaming women's liberation for "an etiquette upheaval."<sup>32</sup> Such assumptions portray feminists as rude, uncouth, and disrespectful of southern

<sup>30</sup> Leviticus 18:22- "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; it is detestable."

<sup>31</sup> R. E. Quinn, "Letter to The Editor: Another View On Women's Lib," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 30, 1974

<sup>32</sup> Mindy Keyes, "Minding our Manners," *The Huntsville Times*, April 26, 1992.

politeness and hospitality. Associations like this might deter reluctant southern women from formally affiliating with the movement because they believe it contradicts their regional identity.

In 1992, when the heyday of second wave feminism had subsided, Karen DeWitt wrote about an increase in women taking their husbands' last name again.<sup>33</sup> Reemergence of traditional southern customs is attributed to a generational gap between women of the 1970s who saw major advances in women's rights to their children who were distanced from the collective effort of feminists to secure the rights they enjoyed. These trends toward tradition are quantified in a report stating that marriage announcements in *The New York Times* show a decrease in women preferring to keep their surnames. A decade earlier, approximately half kept their own names. In 1995, when the article was written, there was an equal distribution of those who keeping their names, those taking their husbands surnames, and those who did not state a preference. The author attributed the return of this custom to the fact that the upcoming generation "inherited the benefits of the women's liberation movement" and took for granted the vocational strides that second wave feminists fought for.<sup>34</sup> However, women whose privilege rendered their perceptions of the fight for women's rights unnecessary were common in the South.

### **Debutantes and Belles**

Southern women were hesitant to embrace women's liberation. Several "Dear Abby" letters in *The Atlanta Constitution* started off with a variation of "I'm no women's libber, but..." which represents the tentative approach they had towards the label, but their general acceptance

<sup>33</sup> Colleen Teasley, "Mrs. By Custom, Not by Law," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 4, 1971. She encouraged this, so women could participate in the movement without worrying about their husbands' social status being affected.

<sup>34</sup> Karen DeWitt, "Wives Take Fancy Again to Husbands' Surname." *The Commercial Appeal*, June 5, 1995.

of women's lib causes.<sup>35</sup> Many factors influenced attitudes towards the women's liberation movement, and in the South there were myriad considerations that could orient their reactions negatively to the causes of feminism. Race, class, sexual identity, regional identity, and religion could deter a woman from associating with women's liberation. Stigma was also a significant barrier. In the South, white, upper-class women tended to view the movement as a threat to their dreams of domesticity rather than an opportunity for liberation.

An article titled "Debs Speak Mind on Women's Rights," details the factors that southern debutantes, who were mostly white, upper class women, said shaped their perception of the movement.<sup>36</sup> Sallie Brock Jones reported that "all the girls agreed that women should not be discriminated against on the wage scale," but only to an extent. Ginger Applegarth of Phoenix adopted the ideals of women's lib, saying, "Women are looked up to for beauty and chastised for brains." Anna Bruce disagreed with women's liberation because she believed that "a women's place is in the home and with her children." Jones mentions that "many of the girls also agreed that the fanaticism of the leaders alienated them." This suggests either that southern media minimized women's rights issues, or these girls rejected liberal iterations of Yankee feminism that did not account for southern culture or recognize additional obstacles that southern women encountered in the quest for liberation.<sup>37</sup> Jones also interviewed the girls about their stances on issues like "child daycare centers, abolition of male chauvinism and a draft for women."

Selecting these three topics indicates something about popular depictions stated as the goals of

<sup>35</sup> Abigail van Buren, "Women on Money?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 6, 1975; Abigail van Buren, "Conspiracy of Silence?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 3, 1975; "'People's Libber' Cites Case of Male Chauvinism," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 30, 1975.

<sup>36</sup> Sallie Brock Jones. "Debs Speak Mind on Women's Rights," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 18, 1971.

<sup>37</sup> Southern media used several AP articles about women's lib to portray issues as immature or crude to southern women. See "Libbers Put Halt to Ogling," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 29, 1973. See also, "Libbers Get Into Dogfight," *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 29, 1975.

women's liberation. Interestingly, these specific talking points represent controversial women's issues often classified as extreme or petty. The debs agreed that the abolishment of male chauvinism was unnecessary and at the bottom of their priorities but thought daycares were beneficial to mothers who wanted a career and children. Most of them said that they wouldn't want to be drafted, except Alice Edwards who thought that seemed perfectly fair if we are fighting for equality.<sup>38</sup> This cross-section is valuable to understanding what caused some southern women to have a negative perception of women's liberation. These distinctions help historians understand how southern media conveyed the portrayal of women's liberation and how the primary southern cultural influences affected the way women received second wave feminism.<sup>39</sup>

The role of media in shaping opinions about women's liberation is reiterated by *Redbook* magazine editor Sey Chassler who criticized southern publications for "ridiculing the women involved" in women's liberation.<sup>40</sup> He claimed this demeaning coverage had gotten the attention of women on the fringe and pushed them to join the movement. Conversely, media narratives about feminists as shrill and single may have led female readers to believe these negative descriptions and dismiss the movement altogether. Cathy Yarborough of *The Atlanta Constitution* interviewed "future homemakers" attending the Georgia Association of Future Homemakers convention about their beliefs on women's liberation.<sup>41</sup> Most presumed it would be short lived and have little effect on their lives. One woman expressed that she thought women's liberation would "make girls work harder to hold up the American concept of neat, feminine

<sup>38</sup> Jones, "Debs Speak Mind on Women's Rights."

<sup>39</sup> Since this article only featured white women who were wealthy enough to afford the expenses of country club membership and a debutante ball, their opinions should not be generalized to all southern women.

<sup>40</sup> Tish Young, "Women's Lib Coverage Rapped," *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 18, 1974.

<sup>41</sup> Cathy Yarborough, "Women Lib 'Waste of Time' To Future Homemakers," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 10, 1971.

girls...I think women want to be waited on." Southern media furthered discredited the movement by running articles with titles like "Prince Charles says Women's Libbers Idiotic," associating the royal family with rejection of women's liberation.<sup>42</sup> These depictions of highly regarded public figures speaking out against the movement served as a deterrent for women who might otherwise be inclined to participate.

A cooking column in a newspaper's domestic section mocked the movement, saying, "Contrary to what the Women's Liberation Movement would have you believe, most women still enjoy preparing meals for their family."<sup>43</sup> In a later article from 1994 in the *Birmingham Times*, Suzanne Fields criticized feminists who denounced the Miss America pageant for being elitists and "sneering at young women who sought success, money and social mobility with beauty and talent."<sup>44</sup> They perceived the movement as a series of mutually exclusive choices; career or family, beauty or empowerment. Although the idea that women could have it all was an outright goal of women's liberation, southern culture's adherence to gender roles of women as the primary caretakers of the family prevented these ideas from persuading women who valued conformity. Thus, media portrayals of the movement's goals as contradictory to southern tradition and culture pushed southern women away from formally associating with women's lib.

### **Steel Magnolias**

<sup>42</sup> "Prince Charles says Women's Libbers Idiotic," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 17, 1976. See also, "No Woman's Libber," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 7, 1974; Robert Lurati, "No Libber Says Hard Hat Girl," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 22, 1973; Charlie Roberts, "Braves Seeking Singles Sales," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 11, 1975; Several articles started with some variation of, "I/they/she is no women's libber, but..." followed by a tenet of women's liberation that they supported. This shows that women were hesitant to formally affiliate because of stereotypes about feminists. Media perpetuated the negative connotation of "libbers."

<sup>43</sup> Sylvan Lumiere, "Bright Ideas: Kitchen Lib," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 18, 1971.

<sup>44</sup> Suzanne Fields, "Heather Whitestone Shows Those Anti-Miss America Feminists," *Birmingham News*, September 22, 1994.

Many bold southern women pioneered women's liberation in the region, and other brave female journalists documented their progress. At the onset of the movement, around 1970, Linda Hewitt wrote, "Young people today are no longer content with a system that rests on exploitation...we must view one another as individuals with specific capabilities and limitations, not as members of a race or sex."<sup>45</sup> On the heels of Civil Rights progress, feminists sought to secure constitutional protection against discrimination on the basis of sex. In the South, different groups formed based on their priorities but they all shared the belief that "women are economically exploited as a reserve and cheap labor supply, that they are sexually exploited and thrust into confining roles from birth and that a woman's decision to bear or not to bear children is a constitutional right."<sup>46</sup>

Carolyn Marvin profiled three major women's liberation groups, NOW, the Atlanta Women's Liberation Group and a collegiate branch, EWLG reporting that the three groups have a combined membership of 130 Atlanta women. Marvin notes that the members of NOW were mostly over 30 and married but had the only black and male members. AWLG members tended to be under 30 and of the "privileged middle class." EWLG was founded by mostly married graduate students. The groups shared common goals but were immediately concerned with different issues. The Emory group fought against the school's misogynistic policies that required women to have better grades than male candidates to be accepted, while Atlanta's NOW chapter sought to remove discriminatory gendered labeling from public spaces. One abortion activist said that women's liberation groups in the South had to be "spontaneous and not too large," likely because larger groups that presented a threat to the patriarchal status quo risked ridicule, evident

<sup>45</sup> Linda Hewitt, "Painful Transition," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 23, 1970.

<sup>46</sup> Marvin, "Women Oppressed, Exploited in Man's World?"

in the previous discussion of "libbers." Activists discussed how their advocacy benefits men by dismantling gender binaries which force men to be "aggressive, rational, competitive and dominant." Marvin ended the article, pondering, "perhaps because Atlanta is a Southern city or the cause is not yet in full swing inviting all extremes, there are no practicing feminist groups who see men as the enemy." Even pandering to men did not stop them from disparaging their efforts. However, southern women like Louise Whatley, Eliza Paschall, and Linda Jenness, who were willing to risk their jobs and reputations to spread the gospel of women's liberation, were determined to achieve their goals of equality. Sally Gabb asserted, "We are asking why women are oppressed and we will not settle for intermediate solutions."<sup>47</sup>

Women journalists mocked stereotypical characterizations of the women's liberation movement with headlines like "Had It in The Kitchen?"<sup>48</sup> These women exaggerated caricatures of women's liberation to convey that there was meaning beyond the superficial issues portrayed as the goal of women's lib in media, especially in the South. Journalists who used this technique juxtaposed sarcastic titles with articles that dismantled stereotypical depictions, like Cathy Yarborough does in "Libbers Can Be Happy Ever After."<sup>49</sup> She interviewed married Atlanta feminists about balancing liberation and family. Many women said their husbands' refusal to help around the house illuminated unfair double standards for women. Selma Felkner said that she and her husband had equally time consuming careers, "but I, not he, would spend another eight hours with housework." This article is significant because it debunks the common critique of feminists as man-haters, making men look petty for not doing chores just because it was not "masculine" to do so.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Celestine Sibley, "Had It in The Kitchen?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 25, 1971.

<sup>49</sup> Cathy Yarborough, "Libbers Can Be Happy Ever After," *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 30, 1972.



Authentic features of feminists in southern media were beneficial to the image of the movement because women could see that they did not have to choose between equality or marriage, and that women's liberation actually made for better marriages. Other articles that showed southern women's rights activists in their true form juxtaposed their physical descriptions and their philosophies. One journalist wrote, "Anne, a fragile beauty with long blonde hair said: 'I'm not thinking about marriage and children. I want to choose my role.'"<sup>50</sup> These profiles make it harder for naysayers in the media to clump feminists together as bra-burners. Journalist Sherri Springer identified media as the culprit of spreading false narratives about feminism. Springer wrote, "The media is a large contributor to the male supremacy attitude...to convince a man to buy, an ad must appeal to his desire for autonomy. To convince a woman, it must appeal to her need to please the male."<sup>51</sup> By using media to counteract negative portrayals of the movement, these journalists recast the narrative of women's liberation in the South.

Another article by Yarborough about Gloria Steinem's influence in the South asserts the regional identity of women's liberation in Atlanta. Yarborough asked Atlantans what they thought about Steinem's nomination for *McCall* magazine's Woman of the Year title. Many of the women interviewed in this piece barely knew of Steinem.<sup>52</sup> Some appreciated that she spoke for other women and supported her nomination for Woman of the Year, but even active feminists like State Representative Grace Hamilton said, "Gloria Steinem is not a household word in my house."<sup>53</sup> This reiterates the notion that southern women's liberation acted independently of

<sup>50</sup> Sylvie Reice, "Women's Liberation Hits the Campus," *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 6, 1970.

<sup>51</sup> Sherri Springer, "Don't Snicker, Men, It's Here to Stay," *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 7, 1971.

<sup>52</sup> Men interviewed suggested more "appropriate" figures like Mrs. Nixon or Billy Graham's wife should receive the nomination, even though they were only known for their work in relation to their husbands.

<sup>53</sup> Cathy Yarborough, "Gloria Who? Some Question Her Power On Capitol Hill, at Home." *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 1, 1972.

northern and western iterations. Instead, southern women championed liberation in their own way. Rep. Hamilton, the first black woman to serve the Georgia General Assembly, broke glass ceilings with her election and used her platform to fight for abortion reform. Other Atlanta feminists suggested women of color like Shirley Chisholm and Aileen Hernandez for Woman of the Year title. While both of these women called New York home, they looked more like most Atlanta residents than white, privileged Steinem.

In fact, southern women who looked most like Steinem tended to reject the movement more vocally. In an article about liberation groups at Emory University and Georgia State University, the dean of students gathered a group of women who were supposed to represent the opinions of students, pulled entirely from sorority rosters. These "Scarlett Belles" objected to feminism because they "never had been blocked from getting what [they] wanted."<sup>54</sup> One woman teaching an adult education class called "The Life of a Wife," featuring a panel of wives of doctors and lawyers, criticized women's liberation because, "None of us mind being the second person in the family...we are delighted with the role of helping our husbands."<sup>55</sup> White sorority women who likely marry successful men were not inclined to sacrifice their privilege for the sake of women who had not been born with such advantages. In these instances, layers of race and privilege shaped the trajectory of women's lib.

### **Black Liberation, Women's Liberation**

Second wave women's liberation in the South adopted methods of peaceful resistance and understanding of oppressive power structures from the Civil Rights movement. Betty Maskewitz,

<sup>54</sup> Cindy Luke and Cathy Yarbrough, "Scarlett Belles May Go with Wind," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 6, 1971.

<sup>55</sup> Jean Tyson, "A Liberation Gap," *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 20, 1970. Ironically, Margaret Mitchell of *Gone With the Wind*, would have supported women's liberation. See also, Jill Franco, "GWTW Author Was a Libber, Brother Says," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 25, 1975.

a Jewish women's liberationist, conjectured "The black movement had done more for the white woman almost than for the black people."<sup>56</sup> And what did black women get in return? Critics of the movement said mainstream feminism in the South excluded black women. The platform focused heavily on increasing career opportunities for women. This goal was irrelevant to black women because, at the time in 1970, almost 70 percent of black women with children between 6 and 18 were employed. To black women, the oppression targeted by the white women's liberation movement paled in comparison to the racial oppression they faced. They worked and took care of their families, to pay their bills, not because they wanted to escape the monotony of domestic tasks.

Relationships between black men and women were also different than white gender dynamics. Black women were often heads of the household, which threatened black men. Anna Grant of Morehouse college said, "Some black men feel resentful of young black women who are achieving. They look at her as a potential enemy economically."<sup>57</sup> And while black women were making progress in the job market, they were still earning less than black men and white men and women.<sup>58</sup> These differences created friction between white feminists and black women who were hesitant to participate. Black women felt the movement needed to focus more on racial discrimination in order to achieve liberation for all women.<sup>59</sup> Founder of the League of Black Women, Arnita Boswell expressed this tension, exclaiming "They may say we're liberated. I say we're liberated to work in someone else's kitchen."<sup>60</sup> Almerna Lomax reiterated, "It is a frivolous bid for attention by most privileged and coddled women in the world. So they want out of their

<sup>56</sup> Kimberley Coy, "Women's Lib Sure Helped," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 12, 1971.

<sup>57</sup> Colleen Teasley, "Human Lib an Urgent Concern," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 23, 1972.

<sup>58</sup> And they still are paid less, as evidenced by the fact that this article is from 2001. Dr. Yvonne Scruggs-Leftwich, "Black Women Are Touching the Sky," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 4, 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Carolyn Marvin, "First Priority- Lib vs. Racism," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 28, 1971.

<sup>60</sup> Patricia Moore, "Black Women Have Lib Problems, Too," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1973.

kitchens. We want to get out of their kitchens, too!"<sup>61</sup> Intersections of racial and gender oppression gave black women more complex considerations when it came to women's rights. They formed separate groups with their specific goals in mind, like the Black Women Coalition, the League of Black Women, and the Third World Women's Alliance and argued that black women were too busy trying to survive to concern themselves with women's liberation.<sup>62</sup> Black feminists believed "the struggle against racism and imperialism must be waged simultaneously with the struggle for women's liberation."<sup>63</sup>

The inequities faced by black women were real and valid concerns. There was undeniably a lack of black representation in the movement, and black women did have larger forces of racism compounding their struggle for freedom. However, southern women's rights groups did attempt to solicit the voices of black women. In 1971, NOW held a forum about black women's liberation, hoping to discuss their concerns. In 1972, Emory hosted Shirley Chisholm, a black presidential candidate, and Dr. Delores Aldridge of the school's black studies program, to give black women's perspective on liberation.<sup>64</sup> And the voices of black women were heard, whether it was through collaboration or forging their own coalitions. But these divides might also be attributed to mainstream media attempts to deteriorate the strength that comes with sisterhood. Frankie Freeman, leader of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights attributed the perceived divide between black and white women to the media, calling these classifications of the movement a myth. She called on black women who felt that feminism did not represent them to join the

<sup>61</sup> Carl Rowan, "Women's Liberation," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 17, 1973.

<sup>62</sup> "White Women's Liberation?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 30, 1972.

<sup>63</sup> Charlayne Hunter, "Black Members Are Few in Women's Lib Groups," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 21, 1970.

<sup>64</sup> "Group Discusses Black Movement," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 6, 1971; Colleen Teasley, "Is Southern Belle Still Clinging?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 16, 1972.

movement and shape the goals with their leadership.<sup>65</sup> Regardless of perceived racial divides, southern feminists knew one thing to be true; "No woman can be free until all women are free."<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

Southern women feminists in the second wave faced significant barriers to liberation that are underrepresented in feminist literature. Their stakes were the highest, especially for southern black women.<sup>67</sup> Image was important to the movement's success, and men in the media used their power to undermine the efforts of southern women who dismantled systemic forces of oppression and fought for equality for all. In the 1990s, feminism became a "dirty word" that evoked the very stereotypes women of the second wave set out to prove wrong.<sup>68</sup> The next generation grew up entitled to the strides made by the women who came before them and became complacent. Rachel Smart of Anniston, Alabama, said, "I've never had to overcome anything. That's kind of boring, isn't it?"<sup>69</sup> Older feminists reminisce fondly about marching on Washington for their rights, but journalist Elizabeth Bluemink observed that nowadays "you might have to wave your sign alone."<sup>70</sup> But today's southern women should not put down their signs so fast. Future feminists should take notes on the methods and missteps of the steel magnolias who came before them on how to engage southern women in defense of their rights defeat the ongoing oppressive white patriarchy that aims to "Make America Great Again," harkening back to a time that was not great for most women.

<sup>65</sup> Kathy Tilley, "Blacks Urged to Join Feminists," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 18, 1973.

<sup>66</sup> Lorraine Bennett, "How Far Yet to Go, Baby?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 5, 1970.

<sup>67</sup> Carolyn Marvin, "Coddled Southern Women Behind in Liberation Quest?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 23, 1971.

<sup>68</sup> Geneva Overholser, "Remembering Days of Feminism," *Mobile Press-Register*, September 18, 1999.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Bluemink, "Yesterday's Success Defines Today's Woman," *The Anniston Star*, March 19, 2000.

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Bluemink, "Taking it to the Streets," *The Anniston Star*, April 23, 2000.

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