

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA

UMI[®]
800-521-0600

**Writing Themselves into the Text:
Letters to *Ms.*, 1993-1998**

Linnet Fawcett

**A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Communication Studies**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

August 1999

© Linnet Fawcett, 1999



**National Library
of Canada**

**Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services**

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

**Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada**

**Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques**

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-43613-6

Canada

ABSTRACT

Writing Themselves into the Text: Letters to *Ms.*, 1993-1998

Linnet Fawcett

This thesis examines the important and oft-neglected role of the Letter to the Editor in women's magazine culture. It does so through a textual analysis of letters and editorials in *Ms.*, an American feminist magazine which has, since its inception in 1972, set itself up as an alternative to "traditional" and "glossy" women's magazines. Informed by existing studies on historical and contemporary women's magazines, this thesis demonstrates how *Ms.*, with its unique way of addressing the reader and soliciting reader response, encourages its readers to become active participants in both the making and shaping of the text, and in the political process beyond the magazine. It shows how readers, through their letters, contribute to the on-going dialogue that is feminism, and forge connections to other readers. Paying close attention to how readers negotiate belonging to *Ms.* and build a sense of solidarity with others within this textually based medium, this thesis posits that it is through epistolarity, not the shared act of reading, that community is constituted. In drawing attention to the centrality of the Letter to the Editor in *Ms.*, this thesis raises our awareness of the non-participatory reality of most women's magazines.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been helped during the writing of this thesis, and I want to express my gratitude to several people. My supervisor, Dr. Kim Sawchuk, has been a continuing source of guidance, inspiration, encouragement and support throughout the entire life of this project. She has challenged and helped me enormously, and I thank her. I would also like to thank my committee member, Dr. Monika Kin Gagnon, who helped me conceptualize many of the ideas that have gone into this thesis, and my outside examiner, Dr. Mary Vipond, for showing interest in my research and for her highly constructive input both during my defense, and as regards the thesis itself. I would like to thank Dr. Charles Acland for agreeing to be part of my examining committee at such short notice, and for his thoughtful and illuminating comments and questions at my defense.

I would like to thank Pablo Cantero, who has listened to me talking about *Ms.* for hours on end, and who has not only proved his friendship in so doing, but has provided me with valuable feedback into the bargain.

I would like to thank my mother, Robin, who introduced me to *Ms.*, and who has, throughout the writing of this thesis, given me good ideas, good moral support, and good food.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<i>Situating the Self / Defining the Research Question</i>	
<i>Framing the Thesis</i>	
Chapter 1: Epistolary Beginnings, Ms., and Methodology	11
<i>Stirrings of Epistolarity: Her-Story Enters Magazine History</i>	
<i>The Ladies' Home Journal Sets a Precedent</i>	
<i>The "Implied Reader" in Modern Women's Magazines</i>	
<i>Letters and Ms.</i>	
<i>Ms. Letter-Writers: Who are They?</i>	
<i>Methodology for Analysis</i>	
Chapter 2: Epistolary Activism: Editor and Readers "Walk the Talk"	40
<i>A Brief Word about the Editor</i>	
<i>Editor as "Caretaker": Establishing a Voice</i>	
<i>Editor as Activist: Living Feminism</i>	
<i>Editor as Facilitator: Stirring the Pot and Stepping Back</i>	
<i>Readers as Newcomers: Discovering Ms.</i>	
<i>Readers as Readers: Why They Read Ms.</i>	
<i>Readers as Feminists: Debating the Issues</i>	
<i>Readers as Activists: Talk Becomes Action</i>	

Chapter 3: Negotiated Belongings, Building a Textual Community..... 71

“Becoming” Ms.

Reacting to Ms.

Reaching Out Through Ms.

Solidarity between Readers

In House Reader Activism: So . . . Breast-Feeding Sucks?

Including Exclusions

Conclusions 101

References 109

Introduction

Ms. magazine emerged as an American monthly in 1972. Described by Marjorie Ferguson (1983) as “a brave, bold and political act on the part of a few talented and committed feminists who undertook to raise the money, write the message and sell the advertisement space themselves” (84), *Ms.*’s goal from the outset was to practice journalism by utilizing feminism as a given. Eschewing the standard fare of most women’s magazines – food, fashion and family-related issues – and concentrating instead on in-depth investigative reporting and feminist political analysis, *Ms.* met with much resistance from advertisers and as a result, was plagued by financial instability from the start (Thom 232). However, *Ms.* has survived these financial hardships and gone on to become the longest running mass-circulation feminist magazine in American history.

In 1990, after a buy-out by Lang Communications, *Ms.* made the unprecedented move of going ad-free, with the result that the magazine has been, for the past nine years, fully reader-supported. In 1996, the magazine was bought by the MacDonald Communications Corp. In September 1998, after a sell-out by the former, *Ms.* was bought by Liberty Media for Women, a group of thirteen female investors led by original co-founder Gloria Steinem. This new, entirely female-controlled *Ms.* was re-launched in April 1999, under the continuing editorship (since 1993) of former *Essence* editor in chief, Marcia Ann Gillespie. At the time of the Liberty Media for Women purchase, *Ms.* had a circulation of 200,000 (Kuczynski C1+).

I would argue that *Ms.* distinguishes itself from most other women’s magazines in that it:

(a) survives without advertisements; (b) is free of articles on fashion, interior design, food/wine/diets, makeup and cosmetic surgery; (c) has a readership which is extraordinarily diverse because it manages to transgress the usual barriers of age, class, race, sexual-orientation and educational background – barriers which traditionally serve to delineate and then target a specific (and inevitably narrow) audience through the creation of clearly-defined inclusion/exclusion zones; and (d) encourages readers to actively participate in the making and shaping of the magazine.

Situating the Self / Defining the Research Question

For many years, I have been an avid reader of *Ms.* I became especially interested in the magazine in 1990 when *Ms.* went ad-free. The idea that a women's magazine could survive without advertising, relying solely on reader support, both excited me and aroused my curiosity. In a world where the standard advertising to editorial copy ratio in women's magazines runs at 60:40, rising to a ridiculously high 90:10 in the teen magazine *Seventeen* (Tebbel and Zuckerman 270), what this decision on the part of *Ms.* indicated to me was that *Ms.* had to have an extraordinary faith in its readership – a readership whose loyalty to their magazine was such, that readers could be relied upon to pay the extra price that going ad-free would obviously entail. That this faith proved well founded shows the extent to which *Ms.* knew its readership. What generated this faith, and lay behind *Ms.* readers' determination to keep their magazine alive at *any* cost, were questions that I began to ask myself, and seek answers to.

As I began the process of researching *Ms.* as an academic, whilst continuing to read and rejoice in *Ms.* as a committed feminist and regular subscriber, it became apparent to me

that one of the “features” that *Ms.* prided itself most upon was its Letters to the Editor section. Even before *Ms.* went non-advertising in 1990, this section was a dynamic forum: extensive, argumentative and imperative to the magazine’s credo of “consciously seeking to change the female world, not simply to reflect it” (Ferguson, M. 84). Ellen McCracken (1993) encapsulates the unusual *Ms.* letters section as follows:

Many lengthy letters from readers are published each month, showing intelligent, thoughtful responses to the articles. Here readers argue and disagree with one another and evaluate the magazine’s content. There is a sense of real communication between the women who write letters and those who read them, and an opportunity for serious thought about some feminist issues. (281)

If this “sense of real communication” was the distinguishing element that emerged from my own reading of *Ms.*, the reasons that lay behind it became the focus of my research. That *Ms.* devoted at least five pages per issue to its readers’ letters as opposed to “the page or two allotted by most national magazines” (Thom 207) was certainly a contributing factor. However, this offered but a partial explanation, and one that was more of an “after the fact” observation, than an answer as to *how*, and *why*. Determined to get to the bottom of what contributing *Ms.* editor Mary Thom described as “the intelligent, responsive *Ms.* audience” (Thom 212) whose letters, “Beyond their extensive appearance in the pages of *Ms.* . . . were the main vehicle through which [readers] helped shape the content of the magazine” (Thom 208), I turned to “the voice” that might explain such an epistolary outpouring – namely, “the voice” of the editor.

If, as Irene Dancyger (1978) states, “It is axiomatic in women’s magazine circles that ‘it is the editor who makes the magazine’” (164), then to what extent, I wondered, would the “the voice” of the reader be both a reflection of, and a reaction to, the editor’s voice.

Conversely (and being that a magazine is, first and foremost, a commercial venture), to what extent would the reader – if allowed to “speak” back – influence the kind of magazine that the editor would make. If *Ms.*’s stated policy of treating reader mail as “prime editorial material” (Thom 207) ensures that the section is, as current editor Marcia Ann Gillespie has pointed out, “A place where readers know they are respected” (Thom 207), then how would *Ms.*’s attitude towards the reader be articulated in the magazine’s editorials, and reflected back to the magazine in readers’ letters?

As I pondered this question, I stumbled upon the work of Kathryn Shevelow (1989), a feminist researcher who has investigated the relationship between editors and female readers in early British periodicals. Here, I discovered the “epistolary pact,” a concept used by Shevelow to describe the “deal” that is struck between editor and reader when readers, through the act of writing into a particular print medium and having their letters published, become part of the text. Although an element of this “deal” is clearly stated in the text itself – that the editor reserves the right to edit letters, for instance – a more important aspect of the epistolary pact concerns the establishment of a “dynamic relationship” between editor and reader which can only be achieved when readers become “textually manifest” and assume “an actual, constitutive existence upon the page” (Shevelow 78).

In becoming textually manifest, the reader allows her private experience to be put on public view. The editor, in turn, must accept that in allowing the reader to become writer, the private to be made public, the emerging reader-writer becomes a co-producer of the

text. The principal assumption underlying the epistolary pact in a magazine culture is that editors and readers create a dialogue, and in so doing become answerable to each other. As Shevelov states, “This sense of engagement is implicit in the epistolary form itself, which connotes relationship and reciprocity.” (78).

Although every magazine that invites reader input has an epistolary pact, my research indicates that the *type* of relationship established depends on how editors “speak” to their readership, and how readers in turn “speak” back. As I will demonstrate, the attitude of the editor vis-à-vis the reader affects how readers identify with the magazine, the kind of letters the magazine solicits, and the volume of letters the magazine receives. In the case of *Ms.*, readers write in *because* they are considered to be an important voice within the magazine. *Ms.* readers do not see themselves as passive receptors but rather, as part of the production process and essential to the existence of *Ms.*

Although much has been written about the women’s magazine as cultural signifier and marketing phenomenon (Barrell and Braithewaite 1979; Beetham 1996; Dancyger 1978; Ferguson, M. 1983; McCracken 1993; Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991; Tuchman, Daniels and Benet 1978), the role of the reader as *letter-writer* has been largely overlooked. In recent years, a body of research has emerged based on how readers read and interpret their magazines (Hermes 1995; Ballaster et al. 1991; McRobbie 1991; Winship 1987), but these reception studies do not take into account how readers actively interact with a magazine and write themselves, through their letters, into the text.

One significant exception is Mary Thom (1997) who, in her book on the history of *Ms.*, really does consider the reader as writer. But apart from Thom, only two researchers in this area – Kathryn Shevelow (1989) and Helen Damon-Moore (1994) – are interested in Letters to the Editor: Shevelow is the only investigator of women’s print culture to even speak of an “epistolary pact”; and Damon-Moore has examined how an editor’s perception of, hence style of addressing, the ‘dear reader’ will be reflected in the kind of “Dear Editor” letters he or she receives. It is interesting to note that both of these epistolary-sensitive researchers are dealing with pre-twentieth century texts. This could explain why, in the absence of any living audience with which to embark upon reception studies, they are obliged to glean what they can about readers from their letters – from the written evidence that both attests to, and describes their feelings about, their participation. However, if Shevelow and Damon-Moore have considered the “writerly-reader” (Barthes 1976), the Letter to the Editor in contemporary women’s magazines has not been fully investigated.

This puzzling omission seems to be indicative of just how little the reader as a writerly participant counts in the overall scheme of women’s magazine production and consumption. As Shevelow argues with respect to the pre-epistolary periodicals, though her observation applies equally to the women’s magazine of today, readers on the whole are “either ignored, merely implicit, or formalized (as in dedications and rhetorical addresses to the ‘dear reader’)” (Shevelow 78). In ignoring the *issues*, even, of participatory readership through epistolarity, we are left without a framework for thinking through what *could* be, and must limit ourselves to considering what *is*.

It is this omission that this thesis addresses. In suggesting that the letters to *Ms.* provide us with a framework through which to explore the notion of reader as active participant, I am also suggesting that assuming “an actual, constitutive existence upon the page” (Shevelov 78) does not, in itself, guarantee a reader-to-editor and reader-to-text relationship that is reciprocal, nor indeed dynamic. It is the *nature* of the dialogue that is all-important. Readers of *Ms.* do not only contribute to the making and shaping of the text. They become co-responsible for that text as well.

The findings of this thesis are based on a textual analysis of *Ms.* editorials and readers’ letters over a five-year period, beginning in September 1993 when current editor Marcia Ann Gillespie took over from out-going editor Robin Morgan, and ending in August 1998. This timeframe allowed me to follow Gillespie from the start of her editorship, when she established her relationship to the reader, and to see how this relationship developed over the ensuing five years. During a preliminary reading of both editorials and readers’ letters, I began “sorting out the structures of signification” (Geertz 9) contained within these texts. I also found myself reflecting upon what David Altheide (1996) refers to as those “overlapping concepts that aim to capture the emphasis and meaning” – that is: *frame*, *theme*, and *discourse* (Altheide 29). If the link between these three concepts is clearly defined by Altheide – “The actual words and direct messages of documents carry the discourse that reflects certain themes, which in turn are held together and given meaning by a broad frame” (Altheide 31) – what remained was to determine which aspects of the *Ms.* editorials and letters should be singled out for attention. My

method grew out of these considerations. The resulting textual analysis enabled me to discover the “hows” and “whys” behind *Ms.*’s unique Letters to the Editor section, and the potential for feminist community-building that a *Ms.*-style epistolary pact based on reciprocity and mutual respect allows.

Framing the Thesis

In summary, this thesis explores: (1) the important and oft-neglected role of the Letter to the Editor in women’s magazine culture; (2) the kind of epistolary pact that is established between editor and readers, and the nature of the textual community that emerges from this relationship; (3) how a magazine like *Ms.*, with its unique way of addressing the reader and soliciting reader input, encourages its readers to become active participants in the making and shaping of a text; (4) how through this act of shared production, the magazine becomes a site of feminist debate and activism; and (5) how readers, through epistolarity, experience “belonging” to a magazine and build community within a textually-based medium.

This thesis consists of three chapters. In Chapter 1, the historical origins of both epistolarity and the epistolary pact in women’s magazines are established. Informed by secondary sources (Shevelow 1989; Damon-Moore 1994), the attention these researchers pay to the epistolary component in specific examples of eighteenth and nineteenth century female-oriented print culture provides an important insight into how the female “writerly-reader” came into being, and how the tone employed by editors to address these early readers-cum-writers is reflected in both the content of the letters received, and the subject position that readers occupy both in relation to the editor and to the text. With the

introduction of the women's "service" magazine in the late nineteenth century, the overriding message to emerge from these early examples of print culture – women need help – became institutionalized. These magazines served to ghettoize female readers within the domesticated private sphere, and reinforce their role as passive receptors of the written text. A contradictory message was conveyed to female readers. On the one hand, they were encouraged to actively participate through their letters, and on the other, they were advised to passively consume the advice of authoritative, all-knowing editors. Most contemporary "glossy" and "traditional" women's magazines continue to perpetuate this contradiction. The tendency of modern editors of women's magazines to address an *implied* reader (Eco 1984; Ballaster et al. 1991) as opposed to a textually manifest *actual* reader, is briefly summarized. The second part of this chapter re-introduces *Ms.*, by highlighting how *Ms.* differs from its "glossier" sisters. Drawing primarily on Mary Thom's (1997) "insider" account of the magazine, examples of *Ms.*'s editorial approach and of *Ms.* reader participation in the magazine are presented in order to situate my own analysis within a broader understanding of the magazine and its readership. A demographic profile of *Ms.* readers is provided, based on details to emerge from my reading of their letters. In the last part of this chapter, I describe the methodology used to do the analysis.

In Chapter 2, the findings of my analysis provide the basis through which to examine the key elements of *Ms.*'s epistolary pact, and the dynamic nature of this feminist textual community. In highlighting how Gillespie "speaks" to her readers, how readers engage with the magazine, and how feminist issues are debated, I develop the notion of *Ms.* as a

site of feminist activism in which the personal, as articulated by editor and readers, is transformed into the political through the dialogic process. That for readers, establishing connections to both the magazine and to others within the community is as much about articulating one's perception of feminism, as it is about feeling connected through the shared act of reading, is one of the revelations to emerge from this analysis. The tendency of Gillespie to direct her editorials not so much to her readers, as to feminists in general, and to use her forum to incite activism, rather than discuss the magazine, are two others. If these three revelations suggest that the epistolary pact established between editor and readers is to a large extent cause-based, what they also suggest is that *reading*, per se, does not in itself create a community of readers. Rather, it is a mutual interest in feminism that helps to bring this community into being.

In chapter 3, I explore how readers negotiate belonging to *Ms.*, and through inscribing their lives into the text, establish a "place" for themselves within their magazine. Though an individual reader's sense of belonging is dependant, to a degree, upon finding herself on the pages of *Ms.*, the deep emotional attachment that readers have to their magazine is largely the result of feeling connected, through epistolarity, to a greater community of feminist readers. If the letter is a means to belonging, it is the dialogue that results of this on-going negotiation between self and text, editor and readers, readers and other readers, that is both *how*, and *where*, community "happens" in *Ms.*

In the conclusion of this thesis, I discuss what this reading of *Ms.* letters and editorials contributes to our understanding of community and *Ms.*-style feminism. The difference

between an epistolary pact based on reciprocity, such as *Ms.*'s, and one based on feedback, as we find in most women's magazines, is examined. I argue that a *dynamic* Letter to the Editor section can provide readers with a powerful voice within a magazine culture, and suggest that *Ms.* serves as a useful model through which to explore the notion of a participatory feminist readership actively involved in the co-production of the text.

Chapter 1

Epistolary Beginnings, *Ms.*, and Methodology

Stirrings of Epistolarity: Her-Story Enters Magazine History

Kathryn Shevelow's (1989) study of the construction of femininity in late seventeenth and eighteenth century popular periodicals in Britain documents two important shifts that occurred which changed the nature of print culture. The first was the shift from audience exclusion to audience complicity in the creation of text, a shift that characterized the "popular periodical," and distinguished it from its elitist predecessors. Linked, no doubt, to an increasingly literate population, this "innovative practice [of the first of the epistolary periodicals, the *Athenian Mercury*] of publishing readers' letters, thus establishing the appearance of dialogue between parties mutually concerned in the production of the periodical, concretized the association between the popular periodical and its varied audience by explicitly figuring that audience within the text" (Shevelow 37). Although, as Shevelow acknowledges, there can be no absolute guarantee that these letters were actually written by readers, the fact that these early periodicals were attempting "to collect and define a new audience" (38) is important in itself. For it is at this juncture that the concept of "reader as writer" first emerges, a concept central to those early periodicals devoted entirely to epistolary exchange, becoming less central, but still a constant, in subsequent periodicals, and continuing to exist, however tentatively, in the standard magazine formula of today.

If the first shift in print culture established the "reader as writer," the second shift involved the inclusion of the female voice in this new, participatory medium. The

exclusively male editors of the early epistolary periodicals appear to have been encouraging of women's input, going so far as to run advertisements on their pages to solicit women's letters:

We have received this week a very ingenious letter from a lady . . . who desires to know whether her Sex might not send us questions as well as men, to which we answer, Yes, they may. (Shevelow 60)

The content of this advertisement is relevant to this thesis for two reasons: one, the need to *ask* to be included highlights women's historical exclusion from non-female-specific public discourse¹; and two, it draws attention to the type of correspondence – questions – that characterized the early epistolary periodicals. These questions, which revolved around moral dilemmas and personal problems, placed the reader in a position of “need” and the editor in the position of omniscient advice-giver.

In retrospect, it is not surprising that women were encouraged to participate in these early periodicals. A glance at any modern-day “traditional” women's magazine or “glossy” reveals that “need” defines the genre, and that women – as the plethora of these magazines indicate – have been singled out as the segment of society most in need of advice. Whether women are inherently “needy,” or whether they simply became framed as such as a result of their propensity to send advice-seeking letters in to the early periodicals, is a matter for debate. What is clearer, if somewhat ironic, is that the expression of personal “need” that marked women's initial entry into the world of non-gender-specific public discourse, would later serve to ghettoize them within a highly

¹ When explaining this exclusion, this same editor somewhat problematically pointed out that this “cruel Tyranny (sic) that's exercised over their Sex . . . [is imposed] by their own Modesty . . . [and not] by *us* Men” (Shevelow 42, emphasis mine).

gendered, female-specific magazine culture. The tone used by editors of the early periodicals to address their female querists – an authoritative, father-knows-best kind of tone that invariably reinforced the reader’s obvious need for help and the editor’s all-knowing superiority – is also inscribed into the form, content and even the rhetoric, of most contemporary women’s magazines.

Although Shevelow concedes that an element of egalitarianism was brought to the early periodical through readers’ “complicity in the production of the text,” it remains that a “vertical, hierarchical relationship between questioner and answerer, suppliant and authority” was constructed, resulting in an epistolary pact which, whilst allowing “the writing subjects . . . a degree of authority to represent themselves,” still left the editor with the ultimate authority to “delimit the form and content of that representation” (Shevelow 79-80).

Editors exercised their authority in a number of ways. A female querist whose letter was grammatically incorrect, for instance, was severely criticized for both the moral dilemma that lay behind her letter, and for the way that her letter was constructed. Linking the “miserable-ness” of her character to the poor quality of her penmanship, the editorial board in question emphasized their disapproval by addressing her in the third person, thereby “implicitly refusing this letter-writer membership in the textual community predicated upon just such epistolary intimacy” (Shevelow 79). In other instances, editors asserted their authority by making themselves, and their periodical, indispensable to the life of the letter-writer. A letter which ended (as many did) with a plea for help that only

the editors could provide – “Gentlemen, pray, as soon as you can possible, advise me in this thing; for there’s not one Creature upon the Earth that knows it; nor can I confide in any person to ask their advice” (Shevelow 74) – elicited sympathy and paternalistic concern, confirming that the reader could treat the editor as confidante, and allow herself to be taken in under his wing.

The editor’s “right” to pass a judgement upon readers that either set them apart, or made them a part, was an important element of the epistolary pact established in the early periodicals. A community of co-producers it might have been, but the editor’s ability to set and enforce the *terms* of belonging is significant. The condescending tone assumed by editors when replying to even the most highly considered of readers reinforced the hierarchical order within these textual communities. The fact that readers continued to write in indicates that the “writerly-reader” accepted her place in the order – accepted, too, being *put* in her place by the “custodians” of this order – and was resigned to having little in the way of “rights,” beyond the “right” to write a letter.

The Ladies’ Home Journal Sets a Precedent

Helen Damon-Moore’s (1994) investigation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century editions of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* – an American women’s magazine that still exists today – provides some interesting insights into the editor-reader relationship of this time. The power of an editor to define and then shape both the content of a magazine, and the kind of epistolary pact that that magazine would have, became manifest in the actual changes that occurred in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* when the editorship passed from a woman, Louisa Knapp, to a man, Edward Bok, in 1890. Knapp’s “sisterly, down-to-earth

[editorial] tone” (Damon-Moore 62) which was characteristic of her “conscious effort to avoid being identified as an editorial personality” but rather, as “a peer” of her female readers (65), was sharply criticized by Bok, who, in his own words, found this “method of editorial expression . . . distinctly vague and prohibitively impersonal”(65). Determined to “project his personality through the printed page” by making “the editorial page very much his own, featuring signed editorials that were organized the same way each month” (66), Bok established an editorial style that continues to exist in most women’s magazines today.

It was a style that is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, the emergence of the editor as a distinct and easily identifiable personality who, in Bok’s words, “Ventured to use the first person singular and talk intimately to the reader” (66), gave the impression that the producers of the magazine, and its consumers, were being drawn closer together. On the other hand, the fact that readers were no longer being addressed by “a peer” but rather, “By a condescending man who often patronized them” in editorials that were “openly pedantic and prescriptive” (68), indicates that Bok’s cultivation of editor-reader complicity was dependant on the distancing of editor from reader. The epistolary pact that grew out of this paradox was in many ways similar to that established in the early eighteenth century British periodicals: an authoritative father-knows-best style of editorial voice which, if self-consciously gentler and more directly engaged with the reader – “Nine months ago you, my present readers, and I were strangers. To-day it seems as if I knew you all” (66) – still positioned the female reader as “needy,” and

encouraged letters from readers that expressed a need for information that only the magazine, and its editor, could provide.

However, if Bok's insistence that "a magazine's greatest value lies in its ability to enter directly into the lives of its readers" (66) is reminiscent of the kind of rhetoric used by editors of the earlier periodicals to induce readers to "go public," albeit anonymously, with their private life dilemmas, Bok's interest in his female readers' lives lay not so much in their emotional needs, as their more practical concerns. Out of this interest – an interest at once commercially driven, at once ideologically inspired – the women's "service" magazine was born.

According to Damon-Moore, Bok's wariness of middle-class women's growing emancipation in the late nineteenth century, combined with a strong desire to turn his magazine into a commercial success by attracting advertisers and fostering readership loyalty through his use of a deliberately intimate editorial tone, resulted in the transformation of the *Ladies' Home Journal* into a "helping" magazine (62). If Bok's "helping" magazine proved to be a financially lucrative formula, setting a standard that would be emulated by other women's magazines in the years that followed, it also helped "to institute the condescending message that 'women need help'" (79), a message that continues to characterize women's magazines today. The kind of "help" on offer revolved then, as now, around women's practical needs in the domestic sphere, ranging from tips on household maintenance to tips on personal maintenance. If the former

emphasized the need to create the ideal home, the latter guaranteed women's initial entitlement to such a home, and subsequent right to continue inhabiting it.

Bok's publicly articulated conception of his magazine as a "large family circle" which his female readers "helped him to create" (66) was, in effect, a macrocosm of the smaller family circle that every female reader was expected to create. Likewise, Bok's assumption that his female readers should be dependent both on him, and his magazine – as Bok proclaimed, "So intimate had become this relation, so efficient was the service rendered, that [*Journal*] readers could not be pried loose from it" (66) – was wholly consistent with Bok's concept of women's dependency within the home. As Bok went on to say of his devoted female readership, "Where women were willing and ready, when the domestic pinch came, to let go of other reading material, they explained to their husbands and fathers that the *Ladies' Home Journal* was a necessity – they did not feel that they could do without it" (66).

Here, then, a woman's need for help became compounded by her dependency both on the magazine that answered her needs, and on the males in the household who controlled her access to what she needed. Thus positioned, female readers of Bok's *Ladies' Home Journal* were rendered passive with regard to their magazine, a role that was hardly consistent with Bok's frequent appeals to his readership to participate in the making, and shaping, of the text.

If these appeals, however illusory, made good commercial sense to Bok – “Get the readers to interact with the magazine and they are subscribers for life” (68) – the inconsistency is perhaps best explained by the conflicting sentiments that existed within Bok himself. For if, on the one hand, Bok’s editorial credo was “give the people what they want,” Bok’s personal slogan, by his own admittance, was “give the people what they ought to have and don’t know they want” (64). In effect, Bok’s belief that he knew his readers better than they knew themselves provided him with the justification he needed to establish an epistolary pact which, whilst paying lip-service to the “dynamic relationship” between reader and editor, did not actually consider reader input to be an important element of a textual community.

In this light, it is not surprising that Bok’s editorship was marked by the gradual weakening of the reader’s voice in the magazine as letters “were increasingly controlled by the structures in the magazine,” as the editorial emphasis shifted from “sharing to instructing,” as the number of columns dedicated to “service” information and “advice-dispensing” expanded significantly, as reader *opinion* pieces were replaced by reader *help-seeking* pieces, and as readers’ query letters were condensed to the point that often, the question itself was not even printed and only the answer appeared as a brief one-liner that would only make sense to the letter-writer herself (68-69).

That this description of Bok’s late nineteenth century *Ladies’ Home Journal* sounds ominously similar to many of the women’s magazines gracing the newsstands today, indicates the influence that this male editor’s appropriation of a women’s magazine and

his subsequent designation of women readers as dependent entities in need of female-oriented “service” information, had on women’s magazine culture. This designation reinforced the female reader’s “belonging-ness” within an exclusively female world – the domesticated private sphere – and her exclusion from the wider realm of public life. It also set a precedent for future epistolary pacts between editors and readers: “pacts” in which the reader would be primarily a receiver of information deemed relevant to her life by an authoritative, all-knowing editor, and in which her ability to shape the magazine through any means other than her individual consumer power would be minimal.

That Edward Bok’s thirty-year editorship at the *Ladies’ Home Journal* earned him the title of “the father of American women’s magazines” (Woodward 63) illustrates his profound effect on women’s magazine culture. That a recent issue of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* (May, 1999) devotes not a single page to reader input would seem to indicate that Bok’s personal philosophy – “Give the people what they ought to have and don’t know they want” – has become institutionalized in his legacy.

The “Implied Reader” in Modern Women’s Magazines

In the introduction to their book, *Women’s Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Women’s Magazine* (Ballaster et al. 1991), the authors suggest that it is time that “the relation between the reader constructed in and by the [magazine] text (the *implied* reader) and the actual historical reader who paid her two pennies in 1788 and her one pound in 1988, was properly theorized” (4). To this I would add that given the relative absence of the reader’s voice *within* the text of most modern women’s magazines, any attempt to theorize upon the reader as anything other than *implied* results in an equally limited

construction: that of reader as passive receptor only, that of reader as reactive *to* the medium as opposed to actively engaged *with* the medium. In other words, these magazines are based on the traditional “transmission” model of communication in which, as John B. Thompson (1995) explains:

The flow of communication is overwhelmingly one-way . . . Hence the recipients of media messages are not so much partners in a reciprocal process of communicative exchange but rather participants in a structured process of symbolic transmission. (25)

Certainly, a perusal of a cross-section of women’s magazines available today indicates that the researcher interested in reader participation has very little material to actually work with if embarking on a study of the “writerly-reader” in the “glossies” and “traditionals.” However, *why* readers figure so little in the modern women’s magazine text is the question that begs asking, especially when one considers the kind of language modern editors use to create the *impression* that reader input really counts. From the “glossies” with their enticingly entitled Letters to the Editor sections – “Loud and Clear” (*Mirabella*); “Free Speech: Your Views Count” (*Marie-Claire*); “Feedback” (*New Woman*) – to the reassuringly entitled Letters/Advice sections in the “traditionals” – “Readers’ Letters”/ “Intimate Advice” (*Good Housekeeping*); “Mail Call”/ “Your Call: Between Friends” (*McCall’s*); “The Last Word”/ “Ask an Expert” (*Chatelaine*) – the appeal to reader participation is inevitably there. But as for the response, the space devoted to those “views that count” is a farcical half-page at worst (*Marie-Claire*), and, with the exception of *Chatelaine’s* two-paged Letters and Advice columns, a minimalist one-page at best. Furthermore, letters are scaled down to the bare essentials, leaving the impression that editors take their “right to condense” more seriously than any of the ideas or thoughts that their “writerly-readers” might be trying to develop. In short, the paucity

of actual reader input to be found in my own brief survey of women's magazines currently available on the newsstands points to a glaring contradiction between the inclusive verbiage employed by editors when addressing their readership, and the exclusionary reality of those texts.

If, as we have seen, this inclusive verbiage has been an essential element of women's magazine culture since the late seventeenth century, the female editors who have inherited this tradition would appear not only to have mastered this linguistic technique, but to have developed it into an art. No doubt, editors use this kind of inclusive language to create in female readers a sense of the magazine being "their" magazine, of possessing it through their ability – or perhaps more accurately, their *desire* – to identify with the kind of woman who forms the magazine's target audience.

Hence, you are a "Cosmo girl" if you fit the image that recently retired *Cosmopolitan* editor of 32 years, Helen Gurley Brown, has of her readership:

Our reader is a young woman between the ages of 18 and 34 who loves men, who loves children, and is traditional in many ways. But she does not get her identity from another person. She's not just a mother, a sister, a wife, a girlfriend – she wants to be known for what she does. That's always been *Cosmo's* formula because love and work are equally important. (from interview in Garrison 23)

Likewise, the annual contest that *Chatelaine* magazine ran throughout the 1960s – "Are you Mrs. Chatelaine?" – which was open to "all *homemakers* living in Canada . . . [and was set up in such a way that it] explicitly or implicitly excluded single women, working wives and mothers, older women, working-class women and lesbians . . . [and] rewarded a middle-class, heterosexual and, ultimately, extremely conservative vision of Canadian

women” (Korinek 252, emphasis mine), is a blatant example of a magazine delineating its audience through a process in which the ideal reader is clearly defined, and then encouraged to identify with “her” magazine.

These two examples provide us with a good illustration of what Ballaster et al. are referring to when they speak of “the *implied* reader.” They also highlight the limitations inherent in an epistolary pact that pre-supposes who the reader is, without necessarily consulting the reader herself. One might venture that a magazine based on the premise that women need help (be it to cook better, look better, clean better or feel better) and devoted to the transmission of female-specific “service” information is not necessarily interested in the input of its readership. But still, the question remains: can an editor *know* her readership without *listening* to her readership? Without reader presence, can a “community of readers” be even said to exist? Which leads this discussion to *Ms.*, a magazine culture that differs from the “traditionals” and “glossies” not only because of its feminist content, but because of the centrality of the Letter to the Editor.

Letters and Ms.

I've been a reader since 1975 and have saved all the issues . . . It's the Letters to the Editors that best connect me with other women . . . My attitudes toward lesbianism, health care, racism and politics have evolved from a traditional mind-set to the left “margin.” And I've marched on Washington spurred on by *Ms.* . . . What pleases me most is the influence *Ms.* and feminism have had on my family. I have only to look at my children to feel hopeful for the future. (Kirkwood 4)

If the reader has always been, for the *Ms.* editorial staff, a driving and shaping force, the collective body upon “whom we depend on to keep our feet to the fire and our eyes on higher ground” (Gillespie Sept.-Oct. 1993), letters like the one above appear regularly in

the Letters to the Editor section of the magazine, attesting to both the influence that *Ms.* has had on individual readers' lives, and the feeling of "connected-ness" to other readers that this forum provides.

Unlike the vast majority of women's magazines, *Ms.* takes its Letters to the Editor section seriously. In treating the reader as "an essential collaborator in the process of producing feminist journalism . . . that [makes] a text out of the lives of the participants, editor, writer, and reader alike" (Thom 205), *Ms.* is rewarded by a continuously burgeoning mailbag – a mailbag that elicits the puzzlement and envy of many other magazine editors. Former *Ms.* editor Mary Thom illustrates this point when she tells of a young editorial assistant at an undisclosed women's magazine who, whilst having difficulty coming up with interesting letters for her magazine's column in the mid-eighties, called Thom to ask how *Ms.* managed to publish such a rich selection of reader mail: "Did we solicit responses, she wondered. Was there a trick to it?" (Thom 212). Although Thom was unable to help, she admits that this editorial assistant's "quandary underscored how enviable was the intelligent, responsive *Ms.* audience" (Thom 212). It also explains why authors who could command much higher fees at magazines who had two to three times the volume of readers would still continue to write for *Ms.*, "Just because they valued the feedback they would get when their work appeared in its pages" (Thom 212).

If *Ms.* takes its Letters to the Editor section seriously, so too do members of the visible and not so visible public: from feminist scholars to politicians, from advertising

executives to ordinary readers discovering answers in other readers' experiences. In 1981, the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College – initially an archive for women's suffrage books, photographs, and feminist memorabilia - included the magazine's Letters to the Editor in its collection. Though the papers of notable women make up the bulk of this historically significant collection, the library's manuscript curator later explained that the "illuminating" and "poignant" *Ms.* letters fulfilled the equally important task of preserving "a record of ordinary lives" (Thom 212).

Ms. reader's letters are also a record of the relationship between epistolarity and feminist activism, as the following two examples illustrate. In 1978, *Ms.* readers were encouraged to contact legislators who were as yet undecided on the extension of the deadline for the ratification of the highly controversial Equal Rights Amendment in the USA. They did so with a passion, with the result that "nearly all of the targeted lawmakers ended up voting to extend the deadline" (Thom 215). In 1980, when a Heublein's Club Cocktail ad slipped unnoticed by staff into the magazine – the ad's headline was "Hit me with a Club," beneath which a smiling woman with a black eye was pictured – more than a thousand readers wrote in to complain about an ad which, in their opinion, "At the very least trivialized violence against women and, worse . . . might be interpreted as an invitation to physical abuse" (Thom 134). Though the company initially denied the accusation, a box of some 400 readers' letters which the *Ms.* staff deposited at the ad agency was enough to convince Heublein to "discontinue an entire, multimillion-dollar campaign involving both print ads and outdoor billboards" (Thom 133). In a letter to former publisher Pat Carbine which was published in the October 1980 issue of *Ms.*, the

company's marketing Vice President explained that although "as we read the first few letters, we simply could not comprehend or accept the connection," by the end they were so moved "by the logic and depth of feeling expressed by your readers . . . [and by their] persuasive and difficult to refute" arguments, that the letters "ultimately convinced [them] that the advertising should be changed" (108).

Equally, the popularity of the letters section among readers themselves – as one reader put it, "That's always the section I read first" (Thom 205) – and the consciousness-raising effect that readers, through their letters, have had on others – one Chicana reader who went on to become an activist for women's rights in New Mexico recalls "getting a vicarious thrill that other women were taking risks that I was told I couldn't take" (Thom 205) – illustrate the seriousness with which readers take their own forum.

Each of the above-mentioned cases demonstrates the potential of the reader-cum-writer as activist, and the power of the letter as form. If it is hard to imagine a "liberated" *Cosmo*-girl occupying the same enviable position and carrying such influential clout, it is even more inconceivable that a one-shot preview issue of an "experimental" new women's magazine with a run of 300,000 copies should receive more than 20,000 letters of enthusiastic endorsement within weeks of its appearance on the newsstands, along with 26,000 completed subscription cards in the event that the magazine become a reality (Thom 24). This, though, is how the story of *Ms.* began back in 1972. Furthermore, those 20,000 letters were enough to attract financial backers and to give the magazine's then editor in chief and publisher, Pat Carbine – "[Her] experience as editor of *McCall's*, with

a circulation of 7 million, was that a typical issue drew perhaps 200 letters” (Thom 24) – the encouragement she needed to leave her secure and well-paying position at *McCall's* and sign on with *Ms.* In the words of co-founder Gloria Steinem, those first 20,000 letters gave the entire *Ms.* staff “the courage to keep going” (Thom 204).

When considering how a particular epistolary pact becomes established within a magazine, it is likely that in the case of *Ms.*, its letter-based beginnings set a precedent for the way in which the magazine would continue. However, if the early epistolary outpouring of its readers signaled to editors “the need to accommodate multiple columns of reader mail . . . An emphasis that Steinem had already been planning” (Thom 25), the resulting “sense of community that allowed *Ms.* to revive and survive” (Thom 21) would only become apparent as the years passed. Gloria Steinem has attributed this “sense of community,” in part, to the very different nature of the letters that *Ms.* receives compared to other magazines she has written for. The latter, she explains, were “smart letters, but just that. They were trying to show how smart they were. Or complaining, or adding, but [they] weren’t from the heart” (Thom 204). Steinem feels that *Ms.* readers’ letters, on the other hand, are written as if “they were writing to friends and people who were going through similar experiences”(Thom 204). Out of this very different tone, an epistolary pattern emerged that would set *Ms.* readers apart from other magazine audiences. Namely, that “as they wrote to tell editors and writers what they thought of particular articles, they used their own lives as a reference” (Thom 24).

Here, then, we recognize a fundamental shift from the *implied* reader in the “glossies”

and “traditional” women’s magazines, to the *inscribed* reader actually present on the pages of *Ms.*. Writing their lives into the text became a defining feature of the *Ms.* “writerly-reader,” an act that has been endorsed and encouraged by the editors of *Ms.* In her editorial in the first ad-free, fully reader-supported issue of *Ms.*, for instance, then-editor Robin Morgan explained to readers how she and her staff were “committed to helping you feel validated, informed, furious, joyous, argumentative, and hopeful” (July-Aug. 1990). True, the “helping” word is there, but the kind of help on offer, and the adjectives used to define what that help should be doing for women, speaks to the reader’s need to become politically active and personally empowered, not her need for practical advice. This dramatic departure from the kind of language used to address readers in the vast majority of women’s magazines is key to positioning the reader as an active participant in the making of the message, as opposed to a passive receptor of an all-knowing editor’s message. Unlike the standard women’s magazine formula which “simultaneously creates and offers a solution to the uncertainty generated in readers by the gap between what we are and what we ‘ought’ to be” (Ballaster et al. 107), *Ms.* readers are *interpellated* (Althusser) and defined by what they actually think and feel – no ‘oughts’ attached. Furthermore, *Ms.*’s policy of printing letters that represent a variety of voices, with a variety of differing opinions, ensures that the voices of women, as opposed to the “fictional construction . . . of woman as it is produced by hegemonic discourses” (de Lauretis 5-6, emphasis mine), are heard.

Ms.’s encouragement of diversity within its readership, and its refusal to set limits, however subtly, on *who* can belong to this feminist community, reflects its mandate of

“being a magazine by, for, and about women” (Tebbel and Zuckerman 270). This interest in, and attentiveness to, the reader is also evidenced in the in-depth reader surveys that the magazine has conducted since its inception. These surveys are notable for the unusually high return of response that they elicit, and for providing *Ms.* with an excellent profile of their readership (Thom 123). More important, though, is the emphasis that these surveys place on finding out what the reader wants to see on the pages of her magazine. Along with their letters, these surveys become a means through which readers help to shape the content of *Ms.* In this way the magazine becomes a reflection of its readers rather than a constructed social reality into which readers, like those of the non-participatory “glossies” and “traditionals,” must fit.

As for *Ms.* readers themselves, perhaps the best illustration of their uniqueness as a magazine audience occurred in 1990, when they agreed to back a fully reader-supported, “advertising-free revival of the magazine” (Thom 217). In the lead-up to this landmark in women’s magazine history, *Ms.* readers responded to the suspension of their magazine after a buy-out by Lang Communications in their habitual epistolary manner. And once again, the flood of impassioned letters that poured into the offices of *Ms.* proved the making of the re-making of *Ms.* In these letters, readers said that yes, “They would pay a premium for their magazine” – even if that premium annual subscription exceeded \$30 (Thom 217). The new owner, encouraged by these letters as well as Gloria Steinem’s insistence that an ad-free, reader-supported *Ms.* *could* work, agreed to give it a try. Hence, seven months after *Ms.* had disappeared from the newsstands and pundits had declared that along with feminism, “*Ms.* was dead” (Morgan July-Aug. 1990), *Ms.* re-

appeared in July 1990 as a bimonthly “magabook” boasting 100 ad-free pages.

Nine years later, readers continue to be the lifeline of *Ms.* Currently paying an annual subscription fee of \$35 (U.S.) for the privilege of reading a magazine that can literally *be read* from cover to cover, readers would seem to be willing to pay what it costs to belong to this unusual community of readers. It is unusual, and distinguishes itself from most other women’s magazine *audiences*, precisely because it is *not* an audience. *Ms.* readers are not passive receptors of “service”-oriented information deemed necessary to their lives by an authoritative, all-knowing editor, and designed to reinforce their dependence both on the magazine, and upon on an institutionalized and ultimately unattainable notion of femininity. As my reading of *Ms.* editorials and readers’ letters reveals, they are active collaborators in the making of a feminist text that challenges not only “the epistemological models, the presuppositions and the implicit hierarchies of value that are at work in each discourse and each representation of woman” (de Lauretis 6), but the traditional hierarchical positioning of magazine producer to magazine consumer as well. The many voices that make up this unusual community of readers contribute to both the shaping of “their” magazine, and to what Geraldine Finn (1993) describes as feminism’s “*unfinished* project of social change” (4). Finn also insists that “feminism does not speak with one voice” (4). A brief demographic survey of the many “writerly-reader” voices to emerge from my analysis of *Ms.* letters follows.

Ms. Letter-Writers: Who are They?

If diversity is what characterizes the *Ms.* readership, it remains that most of *Ms.*’s letter-

writers are female. Of the 660 letters analyzed, 42 were written by men.² That at least half of these were written by upper male management defending their company against accusations which had appeared in *Ms.* articles suggests that this figure does not necessarily denote readership. However, some female readers made reference to male partners who also read *Ms.*, which suggests that male readership might be higher than this figure indicates. Of the 20 or so letters that were not related to company matters, most of the writers either described themselves as “pro-feminist” or expressed pro-feminist views, a significant proportion were from gay men, and the highest ratio of male to female letters (five of fourteen) appeared in an issue in which readers were responding to a *Ms.* cover story on men. Interestingly enough, one of the men who contributed to this cover story first appeared in *Ms.* as a letter-writer, requesting that more “men’s voices” be included (Kimmel 4). One female reader’s response to this cover story – “Although men certainly need to be educating and talking about sexism . . . they need to have their own magazines to do this work, not take *our* space to try and prove how great they are” (Zahn 5, emphasis mine) – not only reinforces the notion that *Ms.* is a “women’s space,” but might explain, in part, why so few men write in.

In addition to being overwhelmingly female, *Ms.* readers are generally American. Of *Ms.*’s international readers, Canadians are by far the most visible. At least one letter from a Canadian is usually printed in each issue. Letters from the UK, Australia, Asia and Africa do appear, but are rare. Some of the letters from Africa are written by Americans working for international aid organizations. Most are written by local women who are

² An additional nine letters were signed with initials or with a first name that could belong to either sex. They have not been included in this figure.

building feminist networks through their community centers. Of all the letters that appear in *Ms.*, perhaps these latter are the most inspiring. From the letter from members of the YWCA National Council of Zambia who speak of the “painful sense of familiarity” with which they read *Ms.*’s cover story on domestic violence (Rude 9), to the letter from the São Tomé e Príncipe Women in Development group which, inspired by *Ms.*, organized a Take Our Daughters to Work Day (Demasio 6), these letters serve not only to connect *Ms.* readers around the world, but to remind *Ms.* readers that “sisterhood” is global. In view of *Ms.*’s preponderantly American readership, such reminders are perhaps necessary.

As for age – often “the great divider” in the world of women’s magazines – it would seem to be no barrier here: “At age 77, *Ms.* fits me” (Swanson 4); “I find that, being a 16-year-old female, *Ms.* suits my ideas and views” (Farster 9). Among those who declared their age in the five-year-period analyzed, the youngest was twelve and the eldest 81. That between these ages no dominant age group emerged suggests that age, in *Ms.*, is not really an issue. Age was *only* an issue when readers felt dissatisfied with the way that their generation had been portrayed in an article. Though such complaints were occasionally directed at an author whom the reader considered unauthorized to “speak” for her – “I am amazed at how often and how freely older feminists tell the women of my generation how we feel and why we feel it” (Kaplan 8) – far more readers complained about authors in their own age group – “As a young feminist of sorts, I’m disturbed by the voices of my “peers” . . . who seem to think it’s appropriate to discuss their clitoris over Thanksgiving dinner” (Lemley 5). This suggests that “age” is not so much the issue,

as differing viewpoints. Certainly, most readers would seem to be receptive to the cross-generational dialogue that exists in *Ms.*, seeing it more as an advantage – “I also want to hear from thirty- and forty-something feminists [because] I have much to learn from them” (Truitt 10) – than a drawback.

As far as what *Ms.* readers *do*, they are nurses, lawyers, students, social workers, educators, farmers, engineers, corporate executives, construction workers, writers, clergy, doctors, mothers, and artists. In short, *Ms.* readers *do* everything. The voices of the employed, unemployed, underemployed, too young to be employed, and retired come together on the letters pages. Letters from the well known – Toni Morrison, Ani diFranco, Ursula K. Le Guin, Anita Roddick, bell hooks, Rita Mae Brown, Judy Chicago – appear alongside the lesser known – Natsioux of San Francisco, California; Sherene Springer of Kettering, Ohio. Readers are heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian – “Surely you must realize that a sizeable percentage of your readers are lesbians” (Name Withheld (a) 5) – and gay.

Readers would also appear to be a racially diverse mix, and to come from a variety of backgrounds. All classes are represented. “Welfare moms” mingle with this self-described “well-educated, wealthy, white Republican” of the “Christian right” reader (Gibson 6). Granted, the latter is somewhat of an anomaly in *Ms.* As she says herself, “Many times in the pages of *Ms.* (and I read them all) I find myself stopping to take a steadying breath after catching an underhanded dig in the ribs.” However, the fact that she *still* reads *Ms.* suggests that readers do not necessarily have to agree with the

magazine's political and religious agenda – editorially, *Ms.* is anti-Republican and hostile to the Christian Right – to continue reading. If “proudly claim[ing] all of the above titles” sets her apart, the fact that she “*also* proudly claim[s] the titles of woman and feminist” is grounds enough, according to this reader, for inclusion (Gibson 6, emphasis mine).

Methodology for Analysis

This analysis of *Ms.* editorials and readers' letters takes the form of what Robert E. Stake (1994) defines as an *instrumental* case study, in that it is a study in which “a particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory” (Stake 237). Although, as Stake suggests, “The choice of case is made because it is expected to advance our understanding of that other interest” (237) – here, the Letter to the Editor as a means through which readers can become active co-producers of a magazine text – Stake also emphasizes that “the more the object of study is a specific, unique, bounded system” (237), the greater will be its usefulness in advancing that understanding. The value of any given *instrumental* case study, then, lies in the researcher's ability to draw from the material that which is specific and unique, and to frame what has been learned within a broader context of the *issues* under investigation. This analysis was designed to explore, at depth, the dynamics at work within a feminist textual community based on epistolary exchange, and to gain from that exploration a better understanding of *how* readers use their letters to engage with feminist issues, and establish connections to other feminists and to the magazine. Underlying this analysis was that assumption that *Ms.*'s participatory readership is distinct in the world of women's magazines. Stake's belief that “often it is better to learn *a lot* from an atypical case than *a little* from a magnificently typical case” (243, emphasis mine) suggests that a thorough investigation of this atypical

Ms. phenomenon can serve to illuminate the limitations inherent in the non-participatory reality of the *magnificently typical* “traditionals” and “glossies.”

In order to undertake this case study, photocopies were made of every editorial and letters section over the five-year-period being examined. As *Ms.* is a bimonthly magazine, the complete collection consisted of thirty full-page editorials and thirty letters sections, generally consisting of six pages each. These were arranged in chronological order, and filed in a binder. The issues were numbered one through thirty, and each letter was assigned a corresponding numerical code. On average, each letters section consisted of 22 letters. In total, 660 letters were analyzed.

For the analysis of Marcia Ann Gillespie’s editorials, seven areas of interest were identified: (1) the *tone* used by Gillespie to “speak” to her readership; (2) statements that revealed Gillespie’s *perception of her role* as editor; (3) statements that revealed how Gillespie *perceived/positioned the reader* in relation to the magazine; (4) statements that revealed Gillespie’s *perception of the magazine*; (5) statements in which Gillespie revealed *details about herself* to her readership, particularly those that related to her own sense of *belonging* to the magazine, and to the feminist movement; (6) statements that revealed Gillespie’s *views on feminism*; and (7) Gillespie’s *references to specific reader letters* to appear in the magazine.

Each of these “areas” was assigned a color. As editorials were read, statements pertaining to any of these seven areas were color-highlighted accordingly. A written document was

then prepared for each editorial, summarizing how Gillespie had “dealt” with each of these areas, and detailing any additional observations to emerge from the reading. Any editorial comment made in the letters pages in the form of an “Editors’ Note” was also highlighted, and taken into account. Color-coding each editorial proved to be a particularly effective method for assessing, at a glance, how Gillespie “constructed” her editorials, and the emphasis that *she* placed on each of these seven areas under investigation.

For the analysis of readers’ letters, a preliminary list of research objectives was prepared before embarking upon the reading. My main aim was to identify statements within letters that expressed: (1) a sense of *belonging, or not*, to the magazine; (2) a feeling of *connected-ness, or not*, to the editors, writers, and other readers of *Ms.*; (3) how readers *acted upon* these feelings, and their *reasons for joining, staying in, or dropping out* of the *Ms.* community; and (4) what *Ms.* actually *did* for readers both *emotionally*, and in *practical terms*. Elspeth Probyn’s (1996) suggestion that our quest to belong is driven by a yearning for connected-ness rather than any self-centered preoccupation with individualized identity-formation was my point of departure when examining expressions of belonging/non-belonging in readers’ letters.

Having established the parameters of this part of the textual analysis, the reading of letters began. Relevant statements were underlined on the letters themselves, and a “working document” was prepared for each of the thirty sections of letters. Though every letter was listed and the content of each letter briefly summarized, only those letters, or

parts of letters, that related to the four research objectives outlined above were transferred word for word into the “working document.” “Editors’ Notes” were listed in these “working documents” in the order with which they appeared, as were stylistic and content changes to the letters pages over the five-year period. Additional details that readers provided about themselves – name, address, age, sex, sexual orientation, civil status, race, occupation, etc. – were also recorded. This information helped to establish a general overview of *who* makes up the *Ms.* readership.

During the process of creating these thirty “working documents,” various themes and recurring patterns began to emerge. Jackie Stacey (1994) has suggested that when doing an analysis of this kind, the analysis should be “organized around discourses generated by the material itself” (77). This suggestion certainly proved to be the case here, as readers’ letters informed of aspects of “belonging” and “connected-ness” of which I had been unaware, or had underestimated in terms of their importance. It became clear, for instance, that *the search for self* on the pages of *Ms.* was a major preoccupation of readers, as was the need to articulate their *perception* of the magazine when expressing either satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with *Ms.* If, as I had somewhat expected, readers frequently used their letters to explain what *Ms. did* for them and *incited* them to do, as well as why they had initially *subscribed, continued to subscribe, or were canceling their subscription*, I was less prepared for the attempt on the part of readers to *merge their “real” life with their Ms. “world,”* and the extent to which readers described *Ms.* as a *safe place*. I was also struck by the feelings of *solidarity* that readers expressed for each other, and by how they used their forum to *forge connections* not only within *Ms.*, but

beyond the magazine as well. The tendency of readers to *talk about the actual process of writing to Ms.* – why they did it and how it made them feel – was another surprise. Central to each of these processes of connecting to the magazine was *feminism* itself. In effect, it was through articulating their perception of feminism that readers established their connection to *Ms.*

A list of these nine principal themes or recurring patterns to emerge out of “the material itself” was compiled, and each was assigned a color. Three other areas of interest were identified and also assigned a color: direct *references to Gillespie* or one of her editorials; *recurring words or expressions* used to describe or address *Ms.*; and *extreme reactions*, either positive or negative, to *Ms.* Returning to the thirty completed “working documents” – about 200 pages of “distilled” letters and “Editor’s Notes” – readers’ statements were color-highlighted according to which theme, recurring pattern, or area of interest they represented. Often, a single letter would contain a number of these themes.

When the color-coding was complete, the next step was to make these colorful “working documents” workable. The sheer volume of material meant that finding specific references was difficult. The information was there, but a system had to be devised to make it both accessible, and more manageable. Hence, another series of “working documents” was created. Using the main themes as headings, quotes from letters which were representative of each theme were assembled together. This meant returning to the original “working documents” and extracting all material relevant to each heading, a process that was facilitated by the color-coding throughout the text. Quite simply,

everything highlighted by the same color ended up in the same thematic-based “working document.” Each extracted quote was listed under the numeric code assigned to the letter from which it was taken, which meant that it was easy to refer back to the original letter if additional details about the letter-writer were required. Though laborious and “paper-heavy,” this system proved to be highly effective. When exploring certain themes, the “evidence” was at my fingertips, and back-up data was close at hand. In addition, the process of writing, and re-writing, segments of letters into these “working documents,” though time-consuming, did allow me to become fully familiar with the material, and develop a relationship of sorts with the original letter-writers. In a sense, it was through the act of re-writing these readers’ letters that I came to understand what it means to be part of the *Ms.* community, experiencing vicariously through these readers the pleasures and pains, the rewards and tensions, and the thrills and disappointments that the “processes of belonging” (Probyn 40), and “the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being” (Probyn 19) or, in this case, *Ms.*, would seem to evoke.

This understanding is, of course, entirely my own. As with all interpretive research, the observations made and the conclusions drawn from this reading of both Marcia Ann Gillespie’s editorials and readers’ letters are those of what Laurel Richardson (1994) describes as a “situated speaker, [a] subjectivity engaged in knowing/telling about the world as [she] perceives it” (518). However, just as *Ms.*, for one reader, is her “eye on the world” (Edison 4), the results of this analysis provide a glimpse, through this researcher’s eye, into the world of *Ms.*

Chapter 2

Epistolary Activism: Editor and Readers “Walk the Talk”

Robin Morgan has asserted that “feminism exists wherever women meet and talk and testify” (Crosbie 4). What emerges from this analysis is that if *Ms.* is the place where editor and readers *meet* to do their *talking* and *testifying*, it is through this exchange that the slogan Morgan coined for the movement, “The personal is political,” (Thom 4) becomes more than just feminist jargon. In editorials and letters alike, the dual elements that constitute this slogan – personal consciousness-raising and political action – are ever present. Underlying Gillespie’s editorials and the majority of readers’ letters is the need to reach out, and to incite each other’s activism. In inscribing their experiences of activism into the text, the personal *becomes* political. That the two overlap is evident in Mary Thom’s description of how, for one reader, “The journalistic account of feminist activity in *Ms.* *combined* with the readers’ response to make her feel part of a forceful community” (Thom 205, emphasis mine).

One of the purposes of this chapter, then, is to examine how Gillespie and *Ms.* readers use their respective forums to actively engage with feminist issues both within the magazine, and beyond the magazine in their personal lives. That these issues are hotly debated, and can serve to unite *and* divide readers, is a necessary component of *Ms.*-style community-building. As Dorothy Allison (1978) suggests, “An effective collective is capable of confrontation” (Allison 82). If struggle is both characteristic of, and essential to, the process of establishing effective feminist communities, it is the dialogue that

emerges out of this struggle that “serves so well to clarify [feminist] politics and goals” (Allison 84).

The epistolary tradition in *Ms.* is at least *conducive* to the building of an effective feminist community, in that the first step towards creating a dialogue among dissenting voices is to ensure that each of those voices is given the chance to “speak,” and be “heard.” Whether this can actually be achieved in a magazine which, for all that it encourages readers to speak out, will still, by its very nature, necessarily privilege one voice – the editor’s – over the collective voice of its large and diffuse readership, is one of the questions that underlies this analysis of editorials and reader’s letters. For if, as Geraldine Finn (1993) asserts, “Within feminism . . . there can be no privileged knowers and no privileged voices” (2), then the way that this feminist magazine reconciles this imbalance of power between editor and reader is key to our understanding of both community-building in *Ms.*, and *Ms.*’s epistolary pact.

A Brief Word about the Editor

Marcia Ann Gillespie’s involvement with *Ms.* began in 1981, when she became a contributing editor at the magazine. Formerly the editor of *Essence*, an African-American women’s monthly founded the year before *Ms.*, Gillespie’s succession to editor in chief of *Ms.* in 1993 made her the first woman of color to hold this position in a mass-circulation women’s magazine not designed specifically for black women. According to Mary Thom, one of Gillespie’s “editorial gifts” is her ability to include the rest of the staff in decision-making at the magazine (Thom 230-231). Though she is open to

suggestions from her colleagues, Gillespie recognizes that she does have the final word when it comes to what appears in the magazine. As Gillespie herself explains:

We meet on everything. I want people to have a sense of ownership . . . I won't lie to you, it gets difficult. I have to be prepared to be challenged . . . [That said,] I never pretend that I don't have the ultimate veto. If I feel very strongly against some article, it's not going to run. (Thom 231)

If this alerts us to the imbalance of power that exists within the structure of *Ms.* itself, Gillespie's active encouragement of staff input, and her willingness to be challenged, suggest that decisions must at least be arrived at through a process of negotiation. Likewise, Gillespie's desire that her staff feel a "sense of ownership" towards the magazine indicates that her editorship is built on a premise of shared accountability. Extending this "sense of ownership" to her readership, she has continued the *Ms.* editorial tradition of "taking her cues from that most uncommon group, the reader" (Thom 232). This has meant incorporating more news coverage, especially international news, into the magazine (Thom 232); and more reporting on women's sexuality which, as Gillespie explains, "The younger readers really push me, as do the editors, to reflect . . . in our pages" (Thom 231). Gillespie's belief that the richness of feminism lies in its very diversity – "I'm so tired of this idea that there's one way of making feminism" (Thom 231) – is reflected both in the articles she runs, and the new columns that she has introduced to the magazine since becoming editor (Thom 231).

Editor as "Caretaker": Establishing a Voice

Ms. is and will be a place of celebration and challenge. A place where the rainbow dwells. A magazine willing to confront the difficult issues, to explore controversial topics, to allow for our debates and our diversity of opinion. A publication that can hearten pilgrims and help others begin the journey. I want to continue the revolution begun 21 years ago in the first issue of *Ms.* But not alone: this magazine isn't an I, it's a We. . . . Can I be of service? Time will tell. (Gillespie Sep.-Oct. 1993)

In her first editorial entitled “The Welcome Table,” Marcia Ann Gillespie clearly outlines both how she perceives the magazine – “A place where the rainbow dwells” – and how she perceives her role as editor – “To continue the revolution begun 21 years ago.” She establishes her relationship to the reader – “Can I be of service?” – and most importantly, she emphasizes what for her is the underlying ethos of *Ms.* – “This magazine isn’t an I, it’s a We.” If her choice of “The Welcome Table” as the title of her first editorial is at once inviting, at once evocative of kitchen-based politicizing, Gillespie’s own concept of “The Welcome Table” says as much about her perception of feminism, as it does about her perception of the magazine:

This movement is the only true welcome table. A revolutionary place where those who are of different races, cultures, abilities, and sexual orientations and who come from different walks of life can meet and be unafraid to disagree, dream, and struggle to create a truly just world. (Sep.-Oct. 1993)

If, in the editorials that follow, Gillespie elaborates upon what being part of a magazine that is a “We” demands of both readers, and herself, it is in this first editorial that Gillespie provides her readership with both an insight into how such “we-ness” might be achieved, and an indication of how she will use her space to nurture this “we-ness” during the course of her editorship. That Gillespie devotes most of this first editorial to personal disclosures about herself and her “struggle” to overcome her initial alienation from a feminist movement that “seemed way too white and much too middle-class for its or [her] own good” (Sep.-Oct. 93) is significant. Setting a precedent of using her own life as both an example, and a referent, this editorial reveals as much about Gillespie, the person, as it does about Gillespie’s editorial approach. In effect, what Gillespie is saying

to her readers is that she *is* just another person who, like them, must grapple with issues of belonging and connecting, be that to the feminist movement or to *Ms.* itself.

The tone Gillespie uses to “speak” to her readership reinforces this notion that she, and her readers, are united by a similar quest – hence part of the same “we-ness.” Seemingly humbled by out-going editor Robin Morgan’s request that she replace her – “Huh, me?” – and prepared to share her feelings of trepidation with the reader – “Told her I had to think about it. Wouldn’t you?” – Gillespie’s clipped and often pronoun-less sentences give her editorials an air of casual intimacy. If she draws the reader in by asking direct questions, she does not presume to speak for her readership – “Don’t know about you, but my decision to become a feminist wasn’t easily made” (Sep.-Oct. 1993). It is interesting to note how Gillespie’s tone and editorial style combine elements of both of the editors discussed at the early *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Like Louisa Knapp, her sisterly, down-to-earth tone establishes Gillespie as “a peer” of her readers. Unlike Knapp but like Edward Bok, she projects her personality through her editorials and in signing them, makes the editorial page very much her own. Hence, she is both a “peer” of her readers, and a strong editorial presence.

That she manages to be such a presence without speaking condescendingly to her readers, or patronizing them, is what distinguishes Gillespie from Bok. Rather than using her position to assert her authority, Gillespie sees her position in terms of how *useful* she can be to the community. From the outset, Gillespie’s mandate is to serve:

The question I had to answer was: Could I be of real service to this magazine, to you the reader, and to this movement? (Sep.-Oct. 1993)

Over the course of the five-year-period that follows, Gillespie's perception of her role as editor does not change. Though she is four years into her editorship when she finally puts a name to what she does – “As the present *caretaker* of this feminist institution, I've gotta tell you that it's been a joy and an honor to be of service here” (Sep.-Oct. 1997, emphasis mine) – this notion of service is a constant in her editorials, whether stated explicitly or, as is more often the case, implied in the content. This is not to say that service, for Gillespie, is a matter of toeing the *Ms.* line. If serving the reader is a question of being *responsive* to the reader, of “listening to you, and asking lots of questions about what you want,” as well as “carefully reading the letters you've sent in response to what's appeared on these pages” (Sep.-Oct. 1995), serving the magazine can mean *not* taking some of the advice she was given when she was named editor of *Ms.*, and following her own intuition.

Editor as Activist: Living Feminism

Just four months into her editorship, it was running a cover story on pornography that found Gillespie at odds with her fellow “*Ms.*-ers.” Though Gillespie concedes that their advice to avoid issues that are “sore spots in the feminist community” was “well meant,” she insists that “steering clear of hot issues isn't on this *Ms.* agenda” (Jan.-Feb. 1994). As is characteristic of her editorials, Gillespie draws on both the personal, and the political, to *explain* her decision. Situating her own story of being constantly silenced as a child within the broader framework of African American oppression – “I come from people who were gagged, whose tongues were tied, whose words were stifled and silenced” – Gillespie refuses to be silenced on this one, or any other “hot potato” within the feminist movement:

Are we simply going to exchange one set of gags for another of our own making?
Uh-uh, I don't think so. (Jan.-Feb. 1994)

Humble she might have been when accepting the editorship of *Ms.*, but Gillespie makes it clear early on that her “care-taking” function is neither to be careful, nor to avoid confrontation. Service, to Gillespie, would seem to be a case of being true to oneself. The frequency with which she brings her own life into her editorials suggests that Gillespie’s intention, above all, is to serve by example.

As it happens, Gillespie often fails to be the example she would like to be. Her second editorial is a “guilt” piece, and it is here that she establishes one of her principal beliefs about feminism – “Our movement can’t be just about middle-class choice or battling sexism in the workplace” (Nov.-Dec. 1993) – and her recognition of the fact that for herself, as well as for others, “It is often easier to sing the song than live it.” Chastising herself for having walked past a woman and child in need on the sidewalk, a “shamed” and “haunted” Gillespie addresses the reader directly:

Like you, I want to think that I am a good person, a caring person, a feminist dedicated to justice in more than a “me and mine” sense. Like you, I want to believe that I’m walking on the good foot, doing the activism, the politics, the volunteering, the lobbying. (Nov.-Dec. 1993, emphasis mine)

If Gillespie does not presume to speak for her readers when it comes to how one *becomes* a feminist, she is prepared to assume that she and her readership share a common code when it comes to *living* feminism. In this first of two “guilt” pieces, Gillespie constructs a cautionary tale out of her own failure to act. She is hard on herself, but equally hard on the reader. Because “sometimes we act justly, and sometimes we stumble,” Gillespie’s seasonal message to her readership (this *is* her Christmas editorial) is a lesson in humility:

We need to remind ourselves and each other that the mantle of justice we say we are weaving must be one that covers all of us, not just some. (Nov.-Dec. 1993)

This inability to let her readers off the hook, to allow them to rest on their laurels – even at Christmastime – is typical of Gillespie. As she says herself, “I’m telling you this story in deliberate counterpoint to this seasonal mix so carefully choreographed to invoke charity not rage, do-gooderism not revolution.” If a recurring theme in Gillespie’s editorials is that it is through revolution, not Band-Aid solutions, that social injustices will be rectified, complacency would seem to be an anathema for Gillespie, and fighting it, one of her major preoccupations. In this instance, it is her own complacency that reminds her that the feminist movement must “advocate ceaselessly for the women by the side of the road, the ones rarely in our meetings, the ones whose voices and stories are most often ignored” (Nov.-Dec. 1993). In her other “guilt” piece – this time, over her failure to “write the letter, join the march, fax or phone the White House” *before* President Clinton accepted “the latest repugnant version of welfare reform” (Sep.-Oct. 1996) – Gillespie “kicks” herself for not heeding her own exhortation in a previous editorial to “get out of our kitchens and stop being so narrowly focused about the issues that [directly] concern us” (Sep.-Oct. 1996). Whether the issue is domestic violence – “Let us mobilize as never before to ensure that women are protected” (Sep.-Oct. 1994) – or the resurgence of the Republican party – “We need to provide raucous opposition – challenging, criticizing, offering clear alternative solutions” (Jan.-Feb. 1995) – Gillespie’s editorials, more than anything else, are rousing calls to action. Her over-riding message to her readership is clear: advocate, mobilize, and oppose loudly.

Rousing her “sisters” to act, then, is how Gillespie generates “we-ness.” It is not enough

to simply read about the movement on the pages of *Ms.* “We-ness” is about getting involved, making phone-calls to the White House, campaigning for social change, and *not* walking past the woman in need on the sidewalk. Indeed, Gillespie’s notion of a *readership* would seem to have little to do with the actual act of *reading*. Rarely does Gillespie use her editorial space to discuss the contents of the magazine. When Gillespie speaks of “we,” “our,” or “us,” the terms apply equally to readers and *all* feminists. One has a sense, when reading Gillespie’s editorials, that the majority of them could appear *anywhere*, apply to *anyone* with a social conscience. In fact, apart from those editorials in which specific *Ms.* concerns are addressed and the reader, in her *capacity* as reader, is consulted – in an editorial detailing Gillespie’s redesign of the magazine, for instance, or in celebratory issues that mark important milestones in *Ms.*’s history – Gillespie’s editorials are surprisingly *nonspecific* to *Ms.* Having expected to find the opposite – editorials that created “we-ness” through an engagement with reader-specific content within a reader-specific context – and struggling to define what these editorials actually were, it was a reader who finally supplied the answer:

Hurray for Marcia Ann Gillespie’s editorials! They have a way of hitting me in the stomach and heart at the same time – tweaking my conscience and reaching my soul. I will continue to subscribe just for these *essays*. (Stanley 8, emphasis mine)

Gillespie’s editorials, then, are like essays. Carefully constructed around an event or issue that has tweaked *her* conscience, Gillespie begins with a story, usually her own, develops a highly politicized argument out of that story, and invariably proposes some plan of action. Moving from the personal to the political to the policy-like conclusion, these formulaic pieces inevitably contain a moral, but the intent is not so much to proselytize, as to create awareness and provoke a response. Gillespie’s editorials incite action: one

can never just *read* Gillespie's words, there is always something one must *do* with them. If this is indicative of how Gillespie *perceives* her readers – as fellow activists, as “sisters” (and “brothers”) united by a common cause – the fact that readers *do* react, and consequently *act*, suggests that Gillespie's message – advocate, mobilize, oppose loudly – is getting through:

Marcia's editorial has spurred a response. A group of us discussed it briefly via our mailing list . . . I posted President Clinton's e-mail address and asked others to join me in writing. At least four women have written that I know of, and many others may have written without posting it to the listserv. This editorial has stayed with me all week . . . Thank you for reminding us so eloquently of an important privilege of being a citizen of this country. (Kerr 5)

This reader's reaction to Gillespie's second “guilt” piece – “The Phone Call Bill [Clinton] Never Got” (Sep.-Oct. 1996) – illustrates the impact that Gillespie's editorials often have upon readers. In exposing her own inaction, Gillespie “spurs” others to act. In demonstrating how *not* to be a citizen, she “reminds” others of how to use their “privileges” as citizens. The community, for Gillespie, is not contained *within Ms.* She and her readers are part of a larger constituency – they are “citizens” first, and readers second. In effect, what Gillespie is constructing is what Nancy Fraser (1993) refers to as a *feminist subaltern counterpublic*. These counterpublics, which “emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics . . . [and] help expand discursive space” (Fraser 15), have a dual character. As Fraser explains:

On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies. (15)

In urging her readers to *use* their privileges as citizens, Gillespie is also ensuring that the discursive space *within Ms.* expands into that wider public.

Gillespie's perception of the *Ms.* readership, then, is distinctly different from what Ballaster et al. (1991) describe as the "homogenous domestic community" nurtured into being by many women's magazine editors, in which "[t]he world is constantly on the margins of the magazine's field of vision, understood both as threat and *unreality*" (165). For Gillespie, there is a movement between the *Ms.* world and the "real" world. Furthermore, her constant reminders to readers to get out of their "kitchens" and *act* contrasts sharply with "the absence of any notion of civic, public, or collective virtue" (Ballaster et al. 160) to be found in most women's magazines. As Ballaster et al. go on to say of these latter:

The world of politics is ultimately distant from that of 'real life,' the world of women. There is no indication that readers might apply pressure for change through political process, or influence political decision-making through participation. There is no discussion of the processes by which political reality and policies are produced, and of the ways in which citizens might join in their production. (160-161)

If this description of the general ethos of the standard women's magazine suggests a tendency on the part of these editors to treat their readers as passive and apolitical entities who have little interest in the larger world, much less a desire to actively engage with that world, it also highlights how very different Gillespie's attitude towards her readership is.

Not that Gillespie's tendency to dwell on her failings and "kick" herself publicly in order to convince others to use their privileges as citizens is always appreciated by readers.

Note, for instance, the following reaction to the same “guilt” piece that “spurred a response” for the reader above:

Gillespie writes as if Clinton was waiting to learn that there was a progressive constituency behind him so that he could do the right thing and veto the welfare bill. So, ladies, it is our fault that we didn't do enough to stop him. Next time you read *Ms.*, stop, think about Bill, and start feeling guilty about what you're not doing to save the world. (Fink 5)

If Gillespie's guilt provoking tone has bothered this reader, she is equally disturbed by Gillespie's *faith* in the system. For this reader, writing letters and making phone calls to the president is a waste of time, and gives too much credence to a system which is not, in her opinion, even going to listen. Gillespie's insistence that her “one call might well have made all the difference in the world” (Sep.-Oct. 1996) strikes this reader as naïve, and reminds her “of being in a codependent relationship and not having the strength to break out” (Fink 5). For this reader, Gillespie's activism is not activist *enough*.

Obviously, Gillespie's highly personal editorial style and particular brand of activism “speaks” to some readers, but not to all of them. In printing these opposing reactions side by side on the letters pages, Gillespie indicates that if “steering clear of the hot issues” is not on her agenda, the same rule applies to readers – even when that “hot issue” is Gillespie herself. What also emerges from these two very different reactions to Gillespie's editorial is that if changing the world is the common goal of this feminist textual community, there is no set formula for how to achieve this. In drawing attention to the lack of consensus within feminism by printing a wide range of differing viewpoints on the letters pages, *Ms.* would seem to be actively embracing what Rosemarie Tong (1989) describes as “a major challenge to contemporary feminism [which is] to reconcile

the pressures for diversity and difference with those for integration and commonality” (7).

Editor as Facilitator: Stirring the Pot and Stepping Back

It is significant that in the five-year period analyzed, Gillespie never engages with any of the specific arguments that readers present against her in their letters. However, her recognition that such opposition is both constructive, and indeed necessary, is evident in those few editorials in which the magazine itself is discussed. Celebrating *Ms.*'s twenty-fifth anniversary, she also celebrates its readers who have “stuck with us through thick and thin, cheered us on, scolded us, debated with us, and constantly challenged us to stay the course” (Sep.-Oct. 1997). Just as Gillespie frequently challenges the reader “to stay the course,” it is understood that the reader must, and will, do the same for the magazine. If Gillespie is hard on herself and sets a high standard for her readers, she urges her readership to be equally tough on *Ms.*:

Please keep demanding more from us, pushing us to constantly strive to make this magazine ever more responsive to your needs, ever more relevant to your life, and an ever more vibrant, powerful, and empowering voice of this movement of ours.
(Sep.-Oct. 1995)

This appeal to her readership appears in an editorial in which Gillespie introduces her redesign of *Ms.* two years into her editorship. Reinforcing the notion that *Ms.* is a “We,” not an “I,” Gillespie devotes this editorial to detailing both the changes she has made, and how she made those changes, a process which involved “hit[ting] the road going to colleges and conferences, meeting readers, talking sister to sister, and quietly listening to women all across the country” (Sep.-Oct. 1995). Bringing attention to *Ms.*'s uniqueness in the world of women's magazines, she emphasizes that if “readers' opinions really

matter” to all editors, “This is especially true if you are the editor of a totally reader-supported publication.” If Gillespie’s wish for the magazine is “to do more celebrating of our movement’s accomplishments, our hell-raisers and changemakers; get looser and funnier; surprise, shock, and motivate you, while also continuing to provide tough reporting that unflinchingly confronts the problems women struggle with” (Sep.-Oct. 1995) she waits for the “Go, girl” from her readers before proceeding with those changes. Having outlined the changes, Gillespie reiterates the notion that *Ms.* is a “We,” not an “I”:

And yes, I really do want to hear from you. I want your suggestions and your criticisms – what you loved as well as what you hated in this issue. If you think the recipe calls for other ingredients, tell me . . . Keep talking to me about all the things you want to see – the writers, the stories, the topics. (Sep.-Oct. 1995)

And yes, Gillespie hears from them. The letters pages become awash with readers’ reactions to the changes, and readers’ suggestions for improving the recipe. New readers join because of the changes. Long-time readers threaten to cancel their subscriptions over the changes. Readers are alternatively thrilled, dismayed, excited, or annoyed by the new “look” – thinner, glossier paper and a smaller size due to rising paper costs – and the revised content – “More constructive, upbeat, and relevant to my personal experience,” as one reader describes it (Davies 5). In fact, the redesign of *Ms.* keeps readers talking amongst *themselves* for months.

As for Gillespie, her next editorial begins with the announcement that she “had planned to address several of the major concerns many of you raised in your letters” regarding the redesign, but that just as she “was finishing that editorial, came the surprising announcement that . . . the jury in the O.J. Simpson trial had reached a verdict” (Nov.-

Dec. 1995). Though two brief “redesign” explanations are squeezed into the first paragraph, the rest of the editorial is a powerful and rousing *essay* on what the O.J. Simpson verdict means for feminists. Following the standard Gillespie formula – Gillespie’s personal reaction as she and her fellow “*Ms.-ers*” gather round a television set as the verdict is announced, the larger implications for feminists and then the ubiquitous Gillespie question, “So where does the leave us?” – Gillespie concludes, as usual, with a rallying call to action:

Feminism should be the place where outrage about *both* sexism and racism is heard, shared and addressed . . . Let us refuse to be pulled into the polarization by declaring that we don’t choose between the two because the eradication of these twin evils is essential to our struggle for human rights. In a society that polarizes people, let us be the ones who build the bridges. (Nov.-Dec. 1995)

Having abandoned that editorial addressing reader concerns over the redesign, Gillespie never does return to the subject in subsequent editorials. While she continues to tackle the “big” issues, alerting her readership to the world’s injustices and rallying support for her numerous causes, readers are left to take the redesign into their own hands, using their letters to both voice their opinions and respond, sometimes harshly, to each other’s concerns:

I am writing in response *to the letters* . . . about the *Ms.* redesign. I do not understand this talk about the texture of the paper or the apparent lack of pages. I do not think we should be wasting our time complaining about such trivial matters. (Guinard 6, emphasis mine)

One senses that Gillespie, having solicited reader opinion and then launched the redesign, is content to print readers’ letters and let her readers do the talking. Though the above letter might suggest that if Gillespie does not actively participate in the discussion, she “speaks” nonetheless through printing letters that serve to bolster her own opinion, the fact that *Ms.* prints numerous letters that are highly critical of Gillespie’s changes

suggests that Gillespie is open to readers' opinions. Furthermore, that she never enters into the debate itself is characteristic of Gillespie, and how she handles every other "hot issue" that results in a healthy, and inevitably divided, response from readers. Gillespie is a facilitator, not a mediator. Once her readers are talking, Gillespie would seem to step back.

Gillespie's willingness to let her readers do the talking is equally evident in the "Editors' Notes" that dot the letters pages – "dot" being the operative word here, suggesting a strong move away from the epistolary tradition in the early periodicals where the editor's role, as discussed in the previous chapter, was to provide authoritative answers to reader queries. Though the placement of the apostrophe in "Editors' Notes" makes it difficult to know the extent of Gillespie's involvement in the writing of these pieces, their scarcity is consistent with Gillespie's non-interventionist policy. So too is the fact that they are rarely used to defend the magazine against readers' criticisms, but rather, to provide additional information, to clarify a point, or to stand corrected by one of *Ms.*'s ever-vigilant readers. Humility generally characterizes the latter: when a reader picked up on a credit line of a cover photo stating that the clothes used for the shot were made by one of the companies *Ms.* had cited for sweatshop practices several months earlier, for instance, "the Editors" readily admitted, "You are right – we blew it" (Ed. Note(a) 9). In cases where an article generates a particularly hostile response from readers, it is the author of the piece who intervenes, not "the Editors."

If the lack of editorial intervention on the letters pages means that readers, through their letters, must become responsive to each other, it also suggests that “care-taking,” for Gillespie, is not about caring for her readers but rather, about creating a space in which caring *about* the issues, the magazine, and not least one another, becomes a shared responsibility. That readers assume this responsibility is evident in their letters. That their letters bear a striking resemblance to Gillespie’s editorials in terms of tone, form, content and *intent*, suggests that Gillespie is, to an extent, just another voice, albeit a loud one, among many.

This suggestion is not without its contradictions: Gillespie might come across as just another “sister-activist” trying, and sometimes failing, to “walk the talk,” but she does have the ultimate power when it comes to deciding which of those other “sister-activists” get “heard.” However, in generating “we-ness” through allegiance to the cause, rather than an allegiance to the magazine, Gillespie takes the emphasis off the editor to reader relationship and places it instead on the issues up for discussion. The resulting epistolary pact is one based not so much on *who* speaks, thus reinforcing the positions that editor and reader occupy in relation to the text, but rather, on *what* is said and as a consequence, *done*.

Katherine Shevelow (1989) has suggested that “[p]rint culture can provide the bricks and mortar for constructing a prison – or the dynamite for shattering its walls” (198). In cultivating the notion that *Ms.* is no cozy “family circle” with a mother-knows-best editor protecting her readers from the world, but rather, a group of revolutionary feminist

activists using the dialogic process to incite each other's activism and change that world, Gillespie would seem to see both her own contribution to print culture, and that of her readers, as serving to do the latter.

As for how Gillespie's "sister-activists" see *their* contribution to print culture, what emerges from this analysis of their letters is that they, like her, use their forum to tell a story at once personal, at once political; at once self-reflective, at once pro-active. That there is another thesis in this material – what can we learn about *feminism* between 1993 and 1998 through *Ms.*'s Letters to the Editor? – attests to both the value of the letter as form, and the wealth of information to be found in readers' letters. At one level, these letters provide us with a record of *not* so ordinary feminist lives over this five-year period. At another level, they provide us with an invaluable account of the major debates taking place within feminism during this same timeframe. In the section that follows, what these letters reveal about the individual reader's relationship to *Ms.* – how she discovers *Ms.* and why she reads it – and the reader as a member of a feminist collective – debating the issues and living the activism - is examined.

Readers as Newcomers: Discovering Ms.

This analysis of *Ms.* letters indicates that readers *become* readers in a number of different ways. Many readers would seem to be introduced to *Ms.* through Women's Studies classes or their campus Women's Center. That *Ms.* runs a University Program that recruits responsible corporations to purchase copies of the magazine for distribution to Women's Studies departments gives one "18-year-old black feminist" who attends Spelman College and "can't afford to subscribe," the "chance to read [the] magazine"

(Ellis 8). Readers also hear about *Ms.* through friends. Among these friends, a surprisingly high number are men:

I am a first-time reader of your magazine, who was guided to you through a new male friend. I never thought I would ever meet a man who actually read such great and intense feminist writing . . . I loved “1994 in Review” . . . I am so grateful that there are more women like me out there. (Name Withheld (b) 4)

Other readers “discover” *Ms.* through their mothers. For some of these second-generation readers, *Ms.* has been a constant in their lives. As such, they do not so much “discover” *Ms.*, as consider it to be part of a continuum:

I would love to say I have been a reader for all of your 25 years in print but, seeing as I am 19 years old, it’s not possible. My mother, however, was a charter subscriber and I like to think that she read your publication while I was in utero” (Taylor 7)

For another daughter of a charter subscriber, her mother’s “collection of ancient *Ms.* magazines” is an important link to her mother, who was killed when this reader was twenty. Paying tribute to both the mother who introduced her and her sister to *Ms.*, and to her mother’s friend who, in buying their subscriptions “throughout [their] lean university years,” enabled them to continue reading *Ms.* after their mother’s death, this reader also pays tribute to *Ms.* for having been “a lifelong contributor to [her] education as a feminist woman” (Kelly 5). For this reader, *Ms.* is about connections: to feminism, and to individual women who have been important to her in her life.

For a young reader whose mother is the subscriber, “Snatch[ing] it up before my mom even had a chance to look at it” alerted her to “what many of our sisters [working in the garment industry] must go through each day to earn their bread,” and inspired her to organize a boycott of “companies that profit from this barbaric practice” at her school (Witt 9). In fact, the frequency with which readers draw a link between their mothers’

reading of *Ms.*, and their own, suggests that *Ms.* is, to a certain extent, a mother-to-daughter legacy.

Of course, there are also those readers who stumble upon *Ms.* accidentally. For a male Ani DiFranco fan, seeing his favorite singer on the front cover was what prompted him to buy the magazine. However, he “ended up devouring it cover to cover,” discovering in the process that his “new aspiration in life is to be a feminist!” (Barbeau 4). Another newcomer who “does not label [herself] a feminist” discovered *Ms.* through her building’s recycling bin:

I was disappointed that there wasn’t anything else. I never thought that your magazine would appeal to me. But on a whim, I took it. I was amazed. I was either enlightened or entertained by every article I read – and I read them all . . . Your magazine has shown me that there is – and ought to be – more depth to reading material than fashion, men, and weight control. (Lebowitz 9)

This reader’s assumption that *Ms.* would not “appeal” to her is echoed by many new readers to *Ms.* One reader, now a regular subscriber, “ignored” *Ms.* for years because she “never expected to find anything other than a lot of predictable, P.C. chant-rant.” However, when she finally bought a copy “because the issue was about abortion” – an area of special interest to her – what she encountered was “all this really good writing. I encountered (forgive me, but I didn’t expect this) *subtlety*” (Lias 9). Another first-time reader was amazed to find that “every word spoke to *me*. Not to someone who wants to tighten her tummy or learn how to snag a man.” Lending the magazine to her university friend who “called *Ms.* some kind of Nazi Terrorist mag” would, she hoped, not only change her friend’s attitude towards *Ms.*, but “help change her life, as it did for me” (Mercer 9).

That such preconceptions about *Ms.* exist – “a lot of predictable, P.C. chant-rant”; “some kind of Nazi terrorist mag” – might explain the wariness with which some readers would seem to approach *Ms.* What emerges from these readers’ letters is that reading *Ms.* requires courage – as much the courage of one’s own convictions, as the courage to stand up to others:

When *Ms.* began publication I avoided it because someone might see me buying it or reading it and get in my face. I could not take a stand because I had no insight, never mind courage. I was wandering around in a fog that prevented me from seeing and understanding. (Hodge 5)

Equally significant is that for this reader, buying her first copy of *Ms.* was symbolic of having emerged from that fog, and only possible *because* she “now embrace[s] controversy.” This suggests that for *Ms.* to fulfil its role of empowering, educating, and challenging women, women have to be *ready* to be empowered, educated and challenged. If for some readers, *Ms.* is simply a means to enlightenment – “I subscribed to *Ms.* because of a vague feeling that I had things to learn” (Loeffelbein 7) – the frequency with which readers speak of their need, first and foremost, to feel *entitled* to such enlightenment, would seem to indicate that a certain level of feminist consciousness is required in order to become a reader. If this means that readers must grow into *Ms.* before they can grow as a result of *Ms.*, it also means that when readers are “ready” for *Ms.*, *Ms.* will be there for them:

I felt embraced and welcomed into this group that I wanted to be a part of before, but never felt strong enough for. No longer am I afraid to say – shout – that I am a feminist. (Mercer 9)

Readers as Readers: Why They Read Ms.

Although many readers read *Ms.* because of what it *is* – “The one reliable, consistent source for information on women worldwide” (Morgan 6) – an equally significant number read *Ms.* because of what it is *not* – “Full of articles and advertising telling women how to be sexy and good enough to find and/or keep a man” (Hodge 5). Readers consistently bring attention to what distinguishes *Ms.* from the other women’s magazines available at the newsstand. For some, these distinguishing features are reason not only to read *Ms.*, but to financially support *Ms.*:

Just a note to explain why I am finally subscribing to *Ms.* on my college student budget, even though the women’s resource center of my college offers complimentary copies. No ads. I cannot say this too many times! How refreshing to read an entire magazine and not be subjected to products, models, face creams and lustrous 12-hour lipstick. *Ms.* is meaty and intelligent. *Ms.* is political. *Ms.* does not waste an issue on how to control your weight during holiday season cocktail parties. Maybe you can’t offer that 12-bucks-for-a-year deal that other magazines can, but you are well worth the cost. (Isikoff 9)

For others, choosing *not* to subscribe but buying *Ms.* at the newsstand can be an equally supportive gesture towards both *Ms.*, and women in general:

Because my newsstand has *Ms.* up there in the wall-o’-glossy women’s beauty magazines, perhaps some woman who would normally pick up one of those commercial “how-to-hate-yourself-and-your-body” type magazines will get curious and give *Ms.* a try. (Davis 5)

Adolescent readers would also seem to be drawn to *Ms.* for what it is not. As one fifteen-year-old “feminist” who had recently discovered *Ms.* explains:

Like all teenage girls, I have had my fair share of subscriptions to such trash as *Teen*, *YM*, and *Seventeen*. Until *Ms.* I had never felt such a connection between myself and a magazine. (Andrews 5)

That *Ms.* is defined by what it does *not* offer the reader no doubt explains why readers react so angrily when *Ms.* runs a cover, or carries an article, that reminds them of the

“trash,” the “how-to-hate-yourself-and-your-body” content, available in other “women’s” magazines. That *Ms.* is also defined by what it is – “meaty,” “intelligent,” “political” – suggests that readers have an equally clear vision of what “their” magazine should be. In articulating their expectations of *Ms.* – “I am a longtime subscriber and admirer of *Ms.* magazine because of its feminist content and because I am spared the usual fashion spreads of half-naked, half-starved women” (Cameron 4) – readers help to set the parameters of “their” magazine. Furthermore, in providing detailed descriptions of how they actually perceive *Ms.*, readers help to ensure that those parameters are respected.

Reader’s letters, then, serve to both define *Ms.*, and to remind *Ms.* of its obligation to the reader. According to readers, what *Ms.* *should* be, and usually *is*, is: a “lively exchange of exceptional, intelligent thought” (Barnard 6); a magazine that is “willing to tackle the tough issues and get them right” (Shalala 7); a magazine that “promotes the empowering of women” (Dunn 6); a magazine that supplies “thoughtful, substantial, carefully researched articles from a variety of feminist perspectives” (Louis 4); a place where “finally, ‘everywoman’ doesn’t always have to be white!” (Sreenivasan 6); a magazine that reports “the facts and statistics and ideas and possibilities reported nowhere else . . . [including] stories of incredible women worldwide” (Aase 4); a magazine that “teaches and encourages us to *live* feminism . . . [and] challenges us not to . . . follow the status quo” (Kearsley 6); “a structure of media wherein women are able to define themselves, and articulate for themselves those definitions” (DiFranco 9).

Readers as Feminists: Debating the Issues

What emerges from *Ms.* letters is that if certain issues serve to unite readers, others serve to divide them. Areas such as women's health, gender violence, reproductive rights, and any serious miscarriage of justice tend to bring readers closer together, even if opinions differ on how to *deal* with the issue. In chapter 3, two cases of readers building solidarity *through* a specific feminist issue are examined in detail.

There are other issues, however, that serve to alienate readers from both *Ms.*, and each other. In the five-year-period analyzed, gun control was one such issue. While gun-toting feminists criticized a cover story which, according to one reader, "Treat[ed] women as a homogeneous group and . . . portray[ed] women gun owners as in a "panic" and as dupes of the NRA" (Sere 5), another reader was not alone in "applauding" the authors "for their thorough disarming of NRA myths that encourage women to buy guns" (Linden 6).

Politics, especially around election time, also prove divisive: not so much a Republican/Democrat split, as a choice between the lesser-of-two-evils – always Democrat – and opting out altogether. One "faithful reader" for most of *Ms.*'s twenty-five years canceled her subscription when it finally "dawned" on her that *Ms.* was "still waiting for Daddy to come in and fix everything." Criticizing *Ms.*'s support of *any* candidate, even the more female-friendly candidates, she suggested that "as long as women depend on the government to provide the solution to their problems, they will remain marginalized and disenfranchised" (Cunningham 4).

The letters reveal that religion, too, is a sensitive and often alienating issue for readers. A reader who described herself as a “progressive Christian feminist (yes, we do exist!)” was not alone in expressing her concern over what she perceived as “an anti-Christian bias in the tone of her favorite magazine” (Burton 7). An article on Z. Budapest was welcomed by a fellow Wiccan – “It was a joy to see an influential person in feminist spirituality profiled in my favorite magazine” (Mills 7) – yet shunned by another reader – “There is very little difference between the fundamentalist Christian right *you so abhor* and the trend in feminism to accept such superstitious hocus-pocus as that promoted by Z. Budapest” (Bailey-Johnson 8, emphasis mine). If this reader’s perception of *Ms.*’s attitude towards the Christian right explains why that “well-educated, wealthy, white, Republican, Christian right” reader discussed in the previous chapter might be feeling those “underhanded dig[s] in the ribs,” this reader’s use of “you” to address the magazine is the form of address most commonly used by *Ms.* readers.

Two other issues that elicit a healthy and invariably divided response from readers are pornography and sexuality. *Ms.* received “hundreds of letters” in response to Gillespie’s “hot potato” cover story on pornography, prompting the magazine to do a special report on these letters in a subsequent issue (Ed. Note (b) 6). Obviously readers, like Gillespie, were not prepared to remain “silent” on this “sore spot within feminism” either. A cover story on women’s sexuality, “A topic guaranteed to generate a dialogue in the letters column” (Thom 208), delighted some – “I loved your articles on redefining sex for women” (Sauer 5) and infuriated others – “Shame on you . . . [for being] unwilling to publish any positive and unqualified references to feminist women practicing S/M and

doing sex work” (Christina 5). However, what generated the most response from readers – resulting, in one case, in a canceled subscription (Dessen 4) – was the *cover* of this cover story. Depicting what one reader described as “a woman’s face in the throes of a wild sexual experience” (Cameron 4), this cover, according to another, “Crossed the line into what we’re fighting so hard against.” She added, “Please don’t offend the true-blue subscribers to *Ms.* for a “quickie” (i.e., a one-time purchaser)” (Wheeler 4).

What emerges from the five irate letters that were printed in response to this cover is that if readers are resigned to seeing images that objectify women in other magazines, they do not expect to find them in *Ms.* An “Editors’ Note” appearing after these letters explained that *Ms.* had “received a record number of outraged letters” because of this cover (Ed. Note (c) 5, emphasis mine). However, rather than concede defeat and close the matter, the editors seized on this opportunity to open up this feminist debate and promote further discussion:

But your objections point to a powerful topic for a future issue: Do we have sexual images of women’s bodies that we don’t consider exploitative? How can we talk about sex if we have no images? (Ed. Note (c) 5)

In providing an answer that was both *receptive* and *reactive* to reader concerns, *Ms.* implicated the reader in the search for a solution. In this way, the magazine becomes a site of shared responsibility. Rather than *Ms.* being solely accountable to its readership, readers and magazine become accountable to each other.

Readers as Activists: Talk Becomes Action

Courage, as we have seen, is sometimes required to become a *Ms.* reader. *Ms.*, in turn, is a source of courage for its readers. Readers frequently write in to thank *Ms.* for giving

them the courage to act, to speak out, and not least, “To be ourselves” (Two Feathers 4). Through *Ms.*, readers find the courage and motivation they need to write to their senators, organize marches, stand up at meetings, participate in demonstrations, contact companies with dubious reputations, strike those companies off their shopping lists, confront personal traumas, readjust their thinking on certain issues, inject feminism into their professional and personal lives, send checks in support of women in need, boycott products, create ‘zines, resume voting, and set up chapters of empowering groups they have read about in *Ms.* in their own areas. If Gillespie’s editorials and the articles in *Ms.* alert readers to the issues and help to incite their activism, it is in the letters pages that readers articulate how they act, why they act, and what their activism means to them:

Your magazine always prompts me to write: to the president, to Hillary Rodham Clinton, to the senate, or even just to local government. There are times it feels like “spitting into the ocean”; and others when I hope that I can light a candle in the darkness. (Beal 7)

Though other readers express similar doubts about the effectiveness of their letters, *Ms.* readers are still prolific letter-writers, and seemingly responsive to Gillespie’s encouragement to use their “privileges” as citizens. Over the five-year-period analyzed, Hillary Rodham Clinton was the most frequently written-to person. The president was a close second, with senators and representatives following behind. In addition to writing letters, readers frequently send copies of *Ms.* articles to these same individuals. Encouraging others to do likewise would seem to be a *Ms.* reader preoccupation:

This article should be sent to every member of congress, to be read before voting on service cuts. I am sending it to my representatives; will you? (Guarraia 4)

Ms. articles are also incorporated into reader grassroots activism, both concretely – “Upon reading “Right to Life” a certain woman under its intoxicating influence violated

several copyright laws and guerilla-Xeroxed a sheaf of copies she then leafleted local bathrooms with” (Mahoney 10) – and speculatively – “The only idea I do have is to take a leaf from the anti-abortionists’ handbook and hand out reprints of this issue [on silicone breast implants] in front of the plastic surgeons’ offices” (Ross 5). *Ms.* articles are used for teaching purposes in readers’ classrooms, are distributed to fellow-workers in readers’ offices, and are posted on the walls of readers’ health centers. On a lighter note, *Ms.* even ends up in one reader’s memo pads:

I haven’t the space, in my tiny, cramped room, to be left with hundreds of pages of re-re-read words. I could send them to a recycling center, but that seems so impersonal. So . . . I make my own recycled paper . . . It’s deliciously empowering. And I have a fierce delight in knowing that embedded in the fibers of each sheet I make is the immutable DNA of a magazine I admire and cherish. Every grocery list, phone message, and birthday card reminds me of you. A quirky tribute, I know, but a sincere one nonetheless. (Galland 9)

Quirky, perhaps, but what this reader’s letter illustrates is the very deep attachment that readers have to their magazine. At one level, this attachment inspires individual action and leads to personal self-realization. It is articulated throughout readers’ letters, and it is evident in gestures like the one above. It is consolidated for a fourteen-year-old reader through the act of paying for her subscription to *Ms.* “with [her] own money” (Dodge 9). It is highlighted by an 81-year-old, great-grandmother whose “soul-searching, budget crunching weekend” results in a “check in the mail” on Monday, because without *Ms.*, she “would always have this insatiable desire to know what was going on in the world” (Sebastian 9). If it is reinforced by the many readers who order gift subscriptions of *Ms.* for women’s resource centers, for relatives and friends – “For every woman in my life . . . I care about” (Quinn 4) – the incredible attachment that readers would seem to have to

their magazine is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the single-most recurring phrase to emerge from this reading of *Ms.* letters is “I read it *cover to cover*.”

At another level, this attachment to *Ms.* inspires readers to seek each other out and to establish, through their letters, cause-related links and special interest networks. Sometimes, the letters forum is used like a campaign headquarters. A reader who wrote in to alert other readers to a company that inserted anti-choice literature in its baby product packaging, for instance, inspired a number of readers, *and Ms.*, to pursue the company as she had done, and then report back to the letters pages with their various findings. That readers used her alert, and their own experiences with the company, to spread the message beyond *Ms.* – “This interaction will of course be shared with all your readers, with my NOW colleagues, my pro-choice nurse-practitioner, and anyone else who may be interested” (Name Withheld (c) 8) – offers an important insight into how readers use their forum as both a site of activism, and a springboard to further action. Readers often speak of *Ms.*-related discussions taking place within their electronic “communities” – “By the way, the e-mail lines have been burning with disabled feminists discussing how happy we are that *Ms.* finally knows we exist” (Cooper-Dowda 7) – and use their mailing lists to rally additional support for a *Ms.*-inspired cause, as well as to put other women on to *Ms.*:

[After reading the 25th Anniversary issue] I turned on my computer, fired up my Internet account, and wrote to my human dignity mailing list, urging the . . . activists with whom I communicate electronically to run right out and lay hands on a copy.
(Kight 4)

Perhaps the most interesting example of community building through *Ms.*, however, was triggered by a letter from an “American farm woman” whose feelings of isolation within

her own community inspired her to write to *Ms.* for help. Suggesting that “a national network of rural feminists could become a valuable resource to women” like herself, she asked *Ms.* to act as a “clearing-house” for their letters, and volunteered to “compile a mailing list and get a newsletter rolling” (Lucey 9). An “Editors’ Note” after her letter was supportive of her initiative:

We have received several letters like Patricia Lucey’s, all asking for help in fighting the isolation of rural feminists. It’s a great idea. If you’d like to help organize a rural network, or be on a mailing list, please write to “*Ms.*”, Rural Network, [etc]. (Ed. Note (d) 9)

As a result of this reader’s letter, and of *Ms.*’s support and participation, a rural feminists’ network was soon “up and running” and a newsletter was being produced by the original letter-writer. That this reader had identified a real need was evidenced by the fact that “readers responded in droves” (Ed. Note (e) 9). That *Ms.* provided these details as well as information on how to join the network in a follow-up “Editor’s Note” attests to *Ms.*’s interest in, and encouragement of, these kinds of reader-generated initiatives that build community not only within the reader’s forum, but *beyond* it as well.

When considering how *Ms.* readers use epistolarity to build connections to each other and to the magazine, as well as to debate feminist issues and to incite each other’s activism, it is important to remember that *Ms.* was born of late 1960s and early 1970s feminism – a time when “women’s liberation” consciousness-raising groups were being created in cities across North America, and protest gatherings or “speakouts” were being organized to bring women together to “talk personally” about their experiences of illegal abortion and sexual harassment. If the need for a magazine like *Ms.* grew out of its original founders’ recognition that “women were beginning to share details of their own lives in

order to, first, forge a connection with other women, and, second, change the world” (Thom 4), what they also recognized was that “most women across the country had no way to connect themselves to [the] movement” (Thom, 7) and needed a national feminist publication to provide this vital link.

The nature of the dialogue that exists two decades later between editor and readers, between readers and other readers, suggests that members of the *Ms.* community continue to share details about their lives in order to forge connections to other women, and to change the world. In the chapter that follows I examine how readers negotiate belonging to *Ms.*, and use epistolarity to establish their *own* place within the magazine. Arguing that the search for self on the pages of *Ms.* is as driven by the desire for personal affirmation, as the desire to feel connected to others *through* feminism, I suggest that it is this on-going negotiation between self and text, editor and readers, readers and other readers, that is, to a large extent, responsible for creating a sense of community within *Ms.*.

Chapter 3

Negotiated Belongings, Building a Textual Community

Ms. is more than just a “much needed source of information and analysis” (Bleier 7). It is a site of personal transformation and self-affirmation. It gives courage, strength, and hope. It inspires action and provokes thought. It challenges preconceptions and re-confirms beliefs. It lives up to expectations. It falls disappointingly short of the mark. It causes readers to weep: tears of anger, tears of sorrow, tears of joy. It reminds readers that they are not alone. It alienates readers who cannot find themselves in its pages. *Ms.* is necessary to its readers: “[*Ms.*] has always been vital for womankind” (Ruthsdotter 4). *Ms.* is the mouthpiece of its readers: “[*Ms.*] speak[s] for all of us.” (Krasnec 8). *Ms.* is its readers: “We are all *Ms.*” (Jeffries 8).

“Becoming” *Ms.*

Through their letters to the editor, readers articulate what *Ms.* means to them, and express their sense of connected-ness to the magazine. Although some letter-writers make no direct reference to *Ms.* itself, and use their letter solely as a means to discuss the content of a particular article, the majority of letter-writers would seem to see the act of writing into *Ms.* as having a dual purpose: a) to address an issue raised in *Ms.* – as discussed in the previous chapter – and b) to express, through their discussion of that issue, their relationship with, and feelings towards, the magazine. These letters, then, become a site of negotiation – and frequent tension – as readers engage with *Ms.* content not as content alone, but to reinforce their own sense of belonging to the textual community:

Your article proves that feminism is about women using their knowledge, care, talent and power to do wonderful things in their communities . . . I want to thank you so very much for everything you do. Your magazine has played a major part in my excitement and dedication to the feminist movement. (Leech-Black 4)

Equally, when the content of an article does not conform to an individual reader's perception of *Ms.*, that reader's sense of belonging to the *Ms.* community is often brought into question:

I subscribe to *Ms.* for its unapologetically feminist perspectives. I don't always agree with the views expressed, but usually they are thought provoking. Not this time. There are plenty of magazines out there devoted to publishing gossip and photographing glamour. Please don't become one of them. (Hughes 8)

Ms. is all of us, perhaps. But *all* of *Ms.* is not always us. Just who "us" *is* begs the question of what "a community" *is*, which will be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis. What emerges from each of these letters, though, is the notion that *Ms.* is the sum total of its parts: both the medium *and* the message. In blurring the line between what an individual writer opines on the pages of *Ms.*, and what *Ms.* in its entirety should represent, readers seem to be setting an impossible, and inherently contradictory, task for their magazine. That is, to be all things to all readers: to celebrate the many faces of feminism whilst simultaneously speaking to, and for, each separate self. Granted, *Ms.* readers do not expect, as the last letter-writer readily points out, to agree with *everything* *Ms.* prints. That said, my reading of *Ms.* letters suggests that the content of *Ms.* is measured not only in political terms, as discussed in the last chapter, but also in personal terms. What this reading also reveals is that readers, when responding to an article, rarely differentiate between the voice of an individual writer and the collective voice of *Ms.*

This tendency of readers to see the content of their magazine as either a positive or negative reflection upon their lives explains, in part, the need to confirm or re-claim their individual right to belong through their letters. The fact that *Ms.* is seen to concur with, and give its tacit approval of, the views expressed within its pages could explain why readers feel compelled to remind *Ms.* of its obligation to represent each one of them. Yes, we are all *Ms.* But only as long as *Ms.* continues to *be* all of us.

An impossible and inherently contradictory task, perhaps. But I would suggest that it is the very impossibility for *Ms.* to be all things to all readers at all times that results in a letters section that is a dynamic forum, and produces, however paradoxically, a sense of solidarity among its readers. Moreover, that it is this constant tension between what readers expect *Ms.* to be, and what *Ms.*, from one issue to the next, re-becomes, that compels readers to write in and re-establish not only their own place in *Ms.*, but their overall vision of what “their” magazine should be. Just as *Ms.* is in a constant state of re-becoming, readers, through their letters, are constantly re-becoming *Ms.* It could be ventured that it is this on-going process of negotiation through articulation, of re-defining *Ms.* through the definition of self, that ultimately *is Ms.*

Conceptually, then, *Ms.* is a process, not a product. A dynamic process *whereby* and *wherein Ms.*, through its readers, could be said to actually come into being. Extending Elspeth Probyn’s (1996) notion that “in writing we become-other, becoming that of which we write and think” (153), a close reading of *Ms.* letters indicates that in writing in to *Ms.*, readers tend to both become-other and become-self: becoming that to which they

seek to belong (and feel they have a right to belong) through making the object of that longing – *Ms.* – *into* themselves. This is significant, both for what it says about *why* readers write in to *Ms.* – not only to attend to the issues, as we saw in the previous chapter, but to attend to questions of their own belonging – and *how* they write. For if, as Probyn suggests, “the processes of belonging are always tainted with deep insecurities about the possibility of truly fitting it, of even getting in” (40), *Ms.* readers would appear to be in little doubt that they *should* be “in” – an assumption that might serve to counter those insecurities, as well as strengthen their resolve to “fit in”, to “get in”, by forcing *Ms.* not only to *be* them, but accountable to them as well:

Keep up the fabulous work. Stay conscious and self-aware and critical and thought-provoking and not pretty. You help keep us sane and push us forward. And you are the *only* magazine we subscribe to. Let’s be faithful to each other, ok?
(Mullins and Steiner 4)

If this letter from two satisfied readers speaks to what *Ms.* in their opinion *is*, and as a consequence *does* for them, the actual intent of this letter is not so much complimentary as cautionary: we will continue to be loyal to “you” so long as “you” continue to be loyal to us. Though readers are not always as direct when “deal-striking” with *Ms.*, this letter is fairly “typical” both for the highly personal tone used to address the magazine – *Ms.* becomes a singular “you,” we are each other’s “other” – and for drawing attention to the reciprocal nature of the relationship between *Ms.* and its readers.

Indeed, the very notion of “belonging” to *Ms.* would seem to be based on reciprocity – or at least, the *expectation* of reciprocity. If readers frequently express the sense of belonging they feel when they read *Ms.* –

How do you always manage to produce an editorial mix that succors my soul in just the right way at just the right time . . . It is wonderful to know that I am not alone.
(Cowling 4)

– there would seem to be an equally strong tendency among readers to see *Ms.* as belonging to them. In part, this could be attributable to *Ms.*'s ad-free, totally reader-supported status. As readers are well aware, without the reader, there is no *Ms.* Undoubtedly, this knowledge provides readers with a certain sense of power vis-à-vis *Ms.*, giving them the “right” to intervene when *Ms.* has let them down. The way that readers occasionally exercise this power is to cancel their subscription or, as is more often the case, to *threaten* to do so in the hope of finally being heard. However, the fact that this power, when acknowledged by readers, is generally perceived more as a source of pride than a privilege to be flaunted –

There are so many good parts, but I think my favorite is the absence of advertising – knowing that “we the people” support continuation of this great magazine. (Stanley 7)

– suggests that there is more to *Ms.* readers' seemingly territorial attitude towards the magazine than its reader-supported status. That readers have a vested interest in *Ms.* is evident in their letters. That their investment in the magazine is emotional as well as political is equally evident.

What emerges from their letters is that if *Ms.* has an obligation to its readers, that obligation is to their souls. If *Ms.* owes the reader anything, it is to remain true to what readers expect “their” magazine to be. Readers love *Ms.* with a passion: it is “my haven” (Henry 8), “like my best feminist friends” (Mathewson 5), “irreplaceable to me” (Wexler 6), “my beacon of hope” (Gosnell 10), “a major factor in my survival” (Elliott 9). To see *Ms.* becoming a stranger is to lose more than just a magazine: it is, as one longtime reader

who can no longer find herself in the pages of *Ms.* puts it, “heartbreaking” (Name Withheld (a) 5).

Reacting to Ms.

This profoundly emotional connection to *Ms.* is articulated throughout readers’ letters and is one of the defining features of this feminist magazine’s epistolary pact. Whether praising or criticizing *Ms.*, the language used by readers to describe their feelings towards articles, and by extension *Ms.*, is impassioned. Like Gillespie’s editorials, their letters are expressive, invariably eloquent, and emanate from somewhere deep within the reader – a place where mind and heart meet to produce a response that is reasoned but rash, introspective but impulsive. *Ms.* hits readers hard. And readers care fervently about, are fiercely protective of, their magazine. It *matters* what *Ms.* says. The fact that it matters, and matters deeply, is not merely *understood* by *Ms.* readers, but explicitly stated in their letters:

When I saw the “new look” of *Ms.*, I was horrified at first . . . My heart sank and my stomach curdled tremblingly around it. *Ms.*, dear *Ms.*, dumbled down? (Louis 4)

Just how *Ms.*, an inanimate magazine, becomes “*Ms.*, dear *Ms.*,” is one of the motivating questions underlying this chapter, and one that this reading of *Ms.* letters will illuminate. What is clear is that *Ms.* provokes an extremely emotional response in its readers, and that *Ms.* is a highly affective medium with a devoted and circumspect readership.

Indeed, this combination of affectivity, devotion and circumspection would seem to be the prime motivator behind readers’ letters, and their most characteristic element. Therein lie both the reason, and the route to resolution. Anger, for instance, is a common reaction to a particular article in *Ms.*, or to a perceived change in the magazine’s overall ethos.

However, because this anger *at Ms.* conflicts with the reader's sentimental attachment *to Ms.*, a tension arises whereby temporary fury with the magazine is measured against longstanding devotion to the magazine, resulting in a letter in which anger is translated into disappointment, and expectations of *Ms.* are juxtaposed with what *Ms.*, on this occasion, has proved to be. In such letters, "anger" is expressed in terms of feeling hurt, feeling let down, feeling saddened:

Although I began "The Many Faces of Feminism" with warm, proud feelings, I was in tears by the time I finished because once again, in my beloved women's movement, Jewish activist lesbians and/or feminists are invisible. Why . . . [does] *Ms.* keep forgetting us? I would like to say that this omission is inexcusable, but I know that I will excuse you because I'm not about to cancel my subscription to the most brilliant, mostly right-on feminist magazine I know of. But please, hear my hurt. (Cohen 5)

If this letter illustrates the tension that arises out of loving *Ms.* whilst simultaneously feeling rejected by *Ms.*, it also points to one of the ways that readers try to resolve that tension. Here, "deal-striking" with *Ms.* is subtly presented, but present none-the-less. The reader reminds *Ms.* of her power as a consumer, but insists that canceling her subscription is not really an option. Rather, she asks that *Ms.* "hear" her hurt. Her plea to *Ms.* is not so much an ultimatum – losing *Ms.*, one imagines, would be equally hurtful to this reader – as a call for recognition, an attempt – through her own textual reification – to re-become *Ms.* In a sense, the very presence of her letter on the pages of *Ms.* confirms that she *has* been heard, that she *has* re-become *Ms.* If becoming textually manifest is one way that readers can re-inscribe themselves into the community, it remains that for this reader – and I would venture *most* readers – belonging to *Ms.* is contingent upon being able to find oneself in *Ms.* If issues of inclusion and exclusion are frequently discussed in *Ms.* letters, the very real effect that *not* finding oneself in *Ms.* can have upon its readers – "I was in tears by the time I finished" – perhaps explains why.

Reaching Out Through Ms.

Extreme though it may seem, this reader's reaction is by no means atypical. Indeed, reading *Ms.* often induces a powerful physical reaction in readers, and recounting the physicality of that moment would seem to be an important, even cathartic, exercise. If this narrative technique adds an element of dramatic immediacy to their letters, it is also indicative of the need that readers would seem to have to share their actual "real life" reading of *Ms.* with other readers. As Mary Thom (1997) has suggested, what sets *Ms.* readers apart from other women's magazine readers is that when they write in, they use "their own lives as a reference" (Thom 24). To this I would add that more than simply bringing their own lives into *Ms.*, readers would seem to want to *merge* their lives with the lives of other readers. Extending Norman Denzin's (1989) notion that story-telling is a "performative self-act" carried out before an audience who in turn, become "part of the story being told" (Denzin 72), sharing one's "reader-self" with the rest of the community helps to foster that process of assimilation. Hence, the propensity of readers to explain what happens to them when they read *Ms.*:

I had to share my reaction . . . I was so absolutely outraged by what I read that I couldn't sleep that night and stewed on the facts for days . . . In short, *Ms.*, I feel as though I have been awakened by your publication . . . And I feel mad! But does it feel good! (Farrar-Roff 7)

Hence the propensity of readers to explain *how* they read *Ms.*:

As always, I eagerly grabbed my *Ms.* from our mailbox, and sat down amid the dirty dishes, soiled laundry, piles of clutter, and clamoring kids to read it cover to cover. (Lucey 8)

By offering other readers a glimpse of how *Ms.* fits, quite literally, into their personal lives, readers not only help to bridge the gap between their "real" world and the world of *Ms.* They also render the common link between them more tangible, more real. Hence,

ones private experience of reading *Ms.* – the emotions it stirs, the conditions in which it is read – becomes part of the shared experience of reading. If *Ms.* is the textual community to which readers belong, then articulating how that belonging is actually lived – over sleepless nights; amidst the dirty dishes – brings the community into being. Readers read about each other reading *Ms.* and in recognizing themselves, recognize that a community of readers indeed exists. The fact that these descriptions of reading, when provided, are generally extraneous to the actual point being made in the letter, suggests that their inclusion is driven not so much by expediency, as a simple desire to connect. Lives, then, serve not only as points of reference. Lives serve to reach out to other readers.

Of course, this desire to reach out, to create a sense of belonging based, in part, on the shared act of reading, would not exist if readers did not feel that they had something in common with the rest of the readership. That they all read *Ms.* is certainly the common denominator. That they are all feminists – or fallen or aspiring – is, as indicated in the previous chapter, taken for granted, if not a given. However, subscribing to the same magazine does not create a community of readers, any more than sharing a label constitutes a movement. So this desire to connect, and the feeling of connected-ness that so many readers express in their letters, can not be attributed solely to their shared experience of being *Ms.* readers, and feminists. Rather, it would seem to lie in how readers perceive their magazine, and their connection to *it*. As one reader explains:

Every time I read *Ms.* I feel like writing a letter back – not to an abstract identity but to real people I could have a long lunch with someday in some tiny out-of-the-way diner. This month I wanted to write three letters back, so I figured it was time to act. There's a letter of congratulations (to you and to me): thank you for giving me the courage to stand up at a recent meeting at a major state university and insist that a poster mock-up showing a half-dressed woman was offensive, not "stylish" . . . I almost added a fourth

letter: a cover letter and résumé, just in case you had an empty desk somewhere. But I think that for now, being a *Ms.* reader is one of the best jobs I could have. (Reid 4)

Ms., then, is not some “abstract identity.” It is peopled by living and breathing souls. It is a place that readers can imagine themselves inhabiting even if, as this reader admits, being associated with *Ms.* – and the responsibilities that such an association entails – is a job in itself. If this letter illustrates the very real presence that *Ms.* has in its reader’s lives, it might also help to explain the incredible attachment that readers would seem to have to their magazine: an attachment that is as much about communicating that feeling of connected-ness (or lack of, as is sometimes the case) as it is about sitting at home with the latest copy of *Ms.* and feeling connected (or not). *Ms.* is more than just a magazine. *Ms.* is a group of *real* people one could sit down and have lunch with.

In her essay on the link between gender, talk and friendship, Jennifer Coates (1997) suggests that “for women, talking with friends is constitutive of friendship; it is through talking that we do ‘being friends’” (246). Furthermore, what her ethnographic study of female friends talking revealed was that an “ethic of reciprocity” characterized their conversations, and that it was through this exchange of support and ideas that women not only “did” friendship, but talked themselves into being. These two concepts – that talking is constitutive of friendship and that “the self,” as Coates argues, “does not pre-exist conversation but arises dialogically within conversation” (247) – are useful to our understanding of *Ms.* Returning to the notion of *Ms.* as a group of people one could sit down and have lunch with – in other words, friends – and extending Coates’ notion of talk to include writing – the only way *Ms.* readers *can* “talk” to each other – then the seeming need that readers have to communicate with each other, to connect, becomes

clearer. Without writing, there is no community of readers, there is no reading self. To rephrase Coates: for *Ms.* readers, writing in to *Ms.* is constitutive of readership; it is through writing that we do “being *Ms.* readers.”

And just as talk, in the best of friendships, is not so much a choice as a *must*, what emerges from the majority of *Ms.* letters is that readers *have* to write. Whether compelled by excitement, anger, duty, joy, despair, or just the simple desire to share, writing to *Ms.* is almost always driven by a sense of urgency, an uncontainable need to connect:

I just had to write and tell *someone* what all of this has meant to me. I absolutely love who I am becoming! . . . Feminism is the most powerful gift a young woman could receive. (Thornton 5, emphasis mine)

No matter that that “someone,” that confidential ear, happens to be 200,000 plus people. In truth, that “someone” is, for many readers, the collective entity that hears and speaks to them as nobody else does. In the words of one 15-year-old reader, “*Ms.* has provided me with the support and reassurance that my friends and family can’t” (Andrews 5). That *Ms.* is seen as a friend and confidante, often seeming “closer” to readers than those in their immediate circle, could explain why *Ms.* is frequently addressed in the singular, as a person. *Ms. is* “someone”: *Ms.* is all of us, hence each of us.

Writing in to *Ms.*, then, both connects readers to, and is constitutive of their sense of belonging within, the community. If readers’ perception of *Ms.* as a friend or group of friends is reflected in the way they address *Ms.*, writing *about* themselves allows a relationship, based on reciprocity, to develop. That readers recognize the potential of

writing to forge strong bonds and foster a sense of familiarity is evident in the response of one reader to the change of editorship at *Ms.*:

I felt a physical sense of loss upon reading that Robin was leaving *Ms.* And a surge of support for Marcia in this new position. Thank you, Robin, for all that you've done and all that you will do. Good luck, Marcia! I look forward to getting to know you better. (Springer 4)

If this reader feels familiar enough with out-going editor Robin Morgan and in-coming editor Marcia Ann Gillespie to address them on a first-name basis, the bond between her and Morgan is strong enough to induce “a physical sense of loss” upon “losing” Morgan. It is in her final comment, however, that the reader reveals how such familiarity, such bonds, are established. “Getting to know you better” happens by reading what you write. Getting to know any member of the *Ms.* community better – be it an editor, writer, or another reader – is achieved through reading them. In other words, to become textually manifest is to enter into a *personal* as well as a political relationship with others.

This relationship exists at all levels of *Ms.*: between readers and the editor, between readers and writers, between readers and readers. If the fact that a relationship exists is readily acknowledged by most readers, the degree to which readers become personally involved in the relationship varies. Sometimes, just knowing that there is somebody out there with whom you can relate is enough:

Ms. empowers me no matter who writes the article, but there is something special about being able to say about the author, “she really knows where I'm coming from. She's a lot like me”. (Lewis 5)

On other occasions, recognition of a fellow soul-mate is a mixed blessing, strengthening one's relationship with the *Ms.* community on the one hand, but reinforcing one's “real

life” loneliness and unhappiness on the other. As this 17-year-old, black reader who “can’t seem to find anyone like me in (the) town” where she lives explains:

When I read of Nicole Breedlove in the “Faces” profile, I cried. Partly from the reassurance that there are other sister outsiders out there. But mostly because I will never share in all the cool things Nicole is doing. (McLune 4)

In other words, finding oneself in *Ms.* might be reassuring, but rather than empowering this reader – I *too* could do all those cool things – it serves to distance her from the person with whom she identifies. But if this “sister outsider” (Lorde 1984) reader cannot imagine any reconciliation between her own life and that of another “sister outsider” in *Ms.*, some readers are less inclined to rule out such a possibility. For these readers, “getting to know you better” means leaving the pages of *Ms.* and meeting over coffee. For these readers, the relationship has become so close, so “real” – “do we inhabit the same body?” (Graham 5) – that crossing the line between textually knowing someone and physically being with them seems both natural, and entirely feasible:

Christine: I love you. If you move to Seattle I’d like to be your friend because you are one hot damn bad-ass beautiful bulldog. I hope you get really famous and rich and donate it all to the abolition of capitalist advertising. (McGaughan 5)

This reader’s response to an article by Christine Doza entitled “Bloodlove” in the “Generation F” collection (May-June 1995) illustrates the kind of enthusiasm that *Ms.* inspires in its readers, and the feeling of connected-ness that readers feel towards those who write for *Ms.* It is unlikely that Doza will move to Seattle and the two will become friends. However, that the *desire* to concretize the relationship is there is significant in itself.

What is also significant is that unlike the previous reader, who identifies with Nicole Breedlove because she is a “sister outsider” just like herself, this reader, by her own admission, sees very little of herself in Doza and the other writers who contributed to this series. And yet, she still wants to be Doza’s friend. In spite of not being “queer, black, or 21,” she still thinks “those F-sters are chicks I can dig” and Doza, perfect friend material. If the reader’s explanation is that writers like Doza tap into her “inner voice,” what emerges from this letter is that identifying with those one encounters on the pages of *Ms.* is not necessarily contingent upon *being* like them. This point is reinforced by another reader – this time a male reader – commenting on the same piece by Christine Doza:

Who I am – white, male, over 30 – would, I don’t doubt, cause Christine Doza to look past me without seeing...My life has almost nothing in common with the life Doza describes. Yet, somehow she touches me. It’s possible she’d never believe that. I am, afterall, the *enemy*. I can’t say her anger isn’t justified. There’s a lot of shit in the world, and it makes me angry, too. Because I, too, sometimes feel isolated and powerless, I spend a lot of nights home alone, behind a closed door, writing. I’m occasionally reminded, as she is, that I’m not the only one. (Skiff 5)

Identifying, then, is not so much a case of *being* the same, as *feeling* the same. Readers are “touched” by the lives they read about in *Ms.*, even when those lives, on the surface, bear little resemblance to their own. You can *be* “the enemy,” and still *feel* a sense of solidarity with your accuser. If the “glossies” are about the gloss – “the luster or sheen of a polished surface” (Funk and Wagnalls 1980) – *Ms.* is about the core – what goes on deep down below the visible signifiers. Perhaps this is why *Ms.* speaks to, and for, such a wide range of people. We cannot all *be* something. But we can all *empathize* with someone.

“To identify,” then, can take a number of forms. Some readers identify because “she’s a lot like me.” Others identify through their “inner voice.” Still others identify with the feelings expressed, if not the life that is lived. If articulating how and why one identifies (or not) with what one has read is the sum and substance of most *Ms.* letters, it is clear that belonging to *Ms.* is not contingent upon sharing an identity with everyone else. Rather, I would suggest that it is where the diversity of voices and experiences that constitute *Ms.* meet to *talk* about identifying, or not, with a particular article – ie. the letters section – that membership in the *Ms.* community is established. As Thomas Bender (1978) argues, community is “an experience...As simply as possible, community is where community happens” (6).

Solidarity between Readers

Occasionally, though, a story will touch readers so deeply that “identifying” becomes unnecessary, and a simple message of support is all that will, indeed *can*, be offered. In these instances, readers assume the role of comforter, and their letters serve to show their solidarity with the person who has been violated. As a reader responding to one such story puts it, “What happens to one of us diminishes us all” (Antall 4).

This particular story – “Journey to Justice” by Natalia Rachel Singer (Nov.-Dec. 1994) – details a young woman’s fight for justice after being gang-raped. Readers were “shocked,” “horrified,” “outraged,” by what they read. One reader, a nurse educator, turned her anger into action, vowing to “use Krista’s story to enlighten my students about sexual violence” (Antall 4). Another reader described putting off reading it because she feared that it would leave her “deeply depressed and disturbed,” but found to her surprise

that when she did, “more than anything, it instilled in me inspiration and admiration for Krista Absalon’s courage in the face of the nightmare she went through” (Pew 5). The other four readers whose responses to this story were printed were equally inspired by Absalon’s courage. But it is the way that they rally around her which is most significant. In one letter that pays tribute to Absalon’s personal strength, the writer insists that “there are many who stand with Krista in spirit” (Lynch 4). In another, the support is forthcoming even if the value of the form itself is questioned:

I know that letters like this are only a small part of the answer, but nevertheless I want to offer my support to Krista and to voice my concern over this abuse of the justice system and the blatant abuse of power by the judge and attorney involved. (Denham 4)

What emerges from each of these letters, however, is that Krista Absalon has become part of these readers’ lives. As one reader who describes herself as “a 39-year-old newcomer to the feminist philosophy and to your magazine” explains:

Because of the excellent writing in this story, Krista was not an anonymous victim for me. She was a living, breathing woman who looked to the justice system for help. I had to stop reading several times to fight back the tears that came from outrage, sadness and hopeful joy. Krista will be in my prayers. (Wilson 4)

If readers cannot identify with her experience, the ability to feel compassion for Krista *because* of what she has experienced has connected them to her and made her seem “real.” In turn, one imagines that their letters, if only “a small part of the answer,” will provide moral support for Krista Absalon and help her heal. And nor does the cycle of reciprocity end here. Three years later, a letter appears in *Ms.* from a university student whose friend was gang-raped at a frat party shortly after Krista Absalon went through her ordeal:

I spoke to a counselor at the women’s center at school to try and make sense

of the anger I was feeling. She gave me a copy of *Ms.* It had an article about a woman who was gang-raped while out at a bar one night. I can honestly say I have never been so angry because of a magazine article in my life. I have read every issue since. I hope to use [my BA in social work] in working with victims of rape and domestic violence. (Martin 7)

If the story of Krista Absalon helped this reader come to terms with the gang-rape of her friend, it is likely that her chosen career path was as influenced by the incident, as the sense she was able to make of it because of *Ms.*

Indeed, the story of Krista Absalon is illustrative of a number of the dynamics at work within the *Ms.* community. From the original printing of the article, through reader response, to the reverberations that this article had upon lives, the story served to bring a serious miscarriage of justice into public view, create a meaningful dialogue, promote solidarity, inspire action, provide support, offer comfort, and establish bonds between strangers. In short, through reciprocity – a simple exchange of words – people were emotionally effected, lives were concretely changed, and networks of relationships were established. To return to Thomas Bender (1978):

A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation. Relationships are close, often intimate...Individuals are bound together by affective or emotional ties rather than a perception of individual self-interest. There is a “we-ness” in a community. One is a member. (7)

That *Ms.* is a safe place to allow such intimacy, such “we-ness,” to develop is evidenced in the highly personal details that readers provide in their letters, and the fact that withholding one’s name is a rare occurrence. Readers speak candidly and openly of childhood abuse, loneliness, living as a disabled person, sexual harassment in the workplace, the traumas of “coming out,” the trauma of *not* being “out,” the pleasures of

S&M and bondage, battles with bulimia, struggles to overcome addictions, gynecological problems, what it means to be a “welfare mom,” how living “one-sided” after a mastectomy feels, how living as a “fat person” feels, what to do when you’re fourteen and feminist and called “fuzzy legs” at school. Through these disclosures about themselves, readers reach out to other readers offering solace, advice, encouragement and information. As one reader comments, “I have learned much in your articles, and a surprising amount in the letters from readers” (Mothes 10).

Even more surprising, however, is that of the many personal details that do appear in *Ms.* letters, the details that are provided rarely concern readers’ “real life” relationships with their partners. Of the 660 letters analyzed, ten at most described how readers *felt* about their significant other. And of these ten, the feelings were overwhelmingly positive, with only one reader hinting at any “trouble” in the relationship – this, a director of a women’s center on a “conservative and extremely apathetic campus” for whom *Ms.* provided “the strength to get out of bed and continue working for feminism” and who hoped that her partner, upon reading the special issue on women’s sexuality, would “finally understand that my feelings about sex are not just the feelings of one woman” (Parker 6).

But apart from this letter, there are no complaints, no “getting into the nitty-gritty,” no discussion whatsoever of “relationship problems” with partners in general, and men specifically. This revelation certainly sheds light on the accusations of “male-bashing” and “victim-mentality” that “post-feminist” critics level against feminists, *and Ms.* One can only assume that one such critic – writer and journalist Donna Laframboise (1996) –

had not considered the content of *Ms.* letters when she attacked *Ms.* for its “anti-male hostility and self-indulgent emotion” (34). My reading of *Ms.* letters suggests that nothing could be further from the truth.

Steering well clear of anti-male sentiments and self-indulgent emotions, then, *Ms.* readers use their letters to build relationships rather than talk *about* their relationships. Their letters are about questioning *the* issues, not quibbling about their private lives. In fact, details of lives are only important in so much that they act as gateways *to* the issues. If this is what emerges from readers’ letters, it is also how readers perceive their magazine:

I look to magazines like *Ms.*, to feminism in general, to offer not a reflection of but a reflection upon my reality, my day-to-day life. (Capers 9)

Through providing useful information based on what they have experienced, readers seek to enlighten and empower other readers going through similar experiences. If the knowledge one acquires through reading *Ms.* contributes to personal growth, it is through sharing that knowledge that the community grows. Many readers express their gratitude to *Ms.* and to other readers for having informed them of an issue that has proved vital to their emotional or physical well being. Reciprocating with information that might help others – “Now it is my turn” (Atherton 4) – is a common way that readers show their gratitude. If *Ms.* readers recognize the value of such reciprocity – “If we’re well informed, action becomes inevitable” (Henry 6) – they seem to reciprocate out of a sense of responsibility to others.

In House Reader Activism: So . . . Breast-Feeding Sucks?

This sense of responsibility is also evident in the way that readers stand up for each other. The case of Sara Cadiz, a reader whose letter was printed in the Sep.-Oct. 1996 issue of *Ms.*, is a typical example. It also illustrates how readers debate feminist issues within the magazine. Expressing her “frustration” and “sadness” over the seeming absence of articles about women like herself – a breast-feeding, stay-at-home mother and feminist – Cadiz suggested that this exclusion was reflective of *Ms.*’s indifference to these “womanly arts,” a suspicion that was reinforced by *Ms.*’s lack of response to her two previous letters requesting “more articles about the importance of breast-feeding and the value of mothering.” Disheartened – “Do you hear me? Do you know that my sisters and I are out here wondering, ‘where do we fit in?’” – Cadiz took action:

Because of your apathy to these issues, I’ve decided not to purchase your magazine anymore. I will borrow my issues from the local library and watch and wait for your recognition of the importance of mothering. (Cadiz 5)

Cadiz’s letter is an *almost* typical “unhappy” *Ms.* letter, and contains many of the elements that characterize such correspondence: expectations of *Ms.* are not met; the search for self is unsuccessful; *Ms.* is supposed to “hear,” but has not; retaliatory action is either taken, or threatened. Quite simply, if you do not care about me, why should I care about you? What is *untypical* about Cadiz’s letter is the twist in her final solution. Whereas most “unhappy” readers either stay in (conditionally) or drop out (unconditionally), Cadiz takes the middle road: *Ms.* may have lost a customer, but it has not lost a reader.

However, because of Cadiz's letter, *Ms.* is at risk of losing both customers *and* readers.

Two issues later – the usual turn-around for responses to articles and letters – four letters are published in response to her letter. Of these, one does not support Cadiz:

I think the woman who wrote you saying you don't pay enough attention to mothering is off-base. As a mother, I find that *Ms.* consistently speaks to my concerns and experiences, and it constantly reminds me that my own experience of motherhood is only a small part of a broad tapestry. (Two Feathers 5)

The other three letters, however, support both Cadiz and her observations. As it happens, *Ms. did* print something about breast-feeding, and in the Sep.-Oct. 1996 issue no less. A fictional piece entitled "Tales from the Breast," Hiromi Goto's story told of one woman's disastrous experience with breast-feeding. The message of the story – "that breast-feeding sucks" – was not lost on one reader, a "lesbian mom" whose partner breast-feeds their daughter. Nor, for that matter, was the irony:

So you decide to publish *something* on breast-feeding. I haven't been sitting around waiting for *Ms.* to print something about breast-feeding, but now I'm pissed. Sara Cadiz will probably never subscribe to *Ms.* again. I'm not sure I will either. (Zwart 9)

This reader's conclusion – that "it is hard enough to find social support for breast-feeding, without having it cast in such an extremely negative light in a "feminist" magazine" – is echoed by another reader – a "breast-feeding, stay-at-home mom" – who was already "steaming about the fiction" when her husband pointed out Cadiz's letter:

I thought it unbelievably insensitive and mean-spirited to respond to (Cadiz's) plea with a short story that pretty much denounced her path of empowerment. I was ready to do as she had, withdraw my subscription, but my husband reminded me that he had recently renewed it for me, as he has done for a number of years. And I have faith that you will soon realize that there are many women who find childbearing, nursing, and rearing one of the most exciting, strengthening courses of their lives, and you will commend this path in future issues. (Holm-Hudson 9)

If this exchange indicates that readers *read* each other, for the latter two readers, solidarity with Cadiz is shown by threatening to do as she has done: cancel their subscriptions. The last reader, however, has “faith” that *Ms.* will change its way of thinking to *her* (and Cadiz’s) way of thinking, and assiduously points out just what this entails. The most interesting aspect of her letter, though, is the opening sentence: “I’ve never written to you, and I hope I won’t need to again” (Holm-Hudson 9). Unlike the majority of published letter-writers for whom “writing in” is constitutive of readership, and one of the more pleasurable aspects of being a member of the *Ms.* textual community at that, this reader sees “writing in” as extraneous to her role as reader. It is what one does when provoked. The purpose of writing is to complain. Not to say that this reader’s perception of why one writes is any less valid because it is such an anomaly. On the contrary, by its very uniqueness it serves to reinforce the perception that most letter-writers have of “writing in” to *Ms.*, as well as to highlight the diversity within *Ms.*

The third letter in support of Sara Cadiz reiterates the “ironic” timing of story and letter. Though this reader does not threaten to cancel her subscription, she is “in total agreement with Sara Cadiz that breast-feeding is a feminist issue and needs to be taken up as such.” She adds:

Sadly, I believe that the story will have a bigger impact than the letter. (Smylie 9)

In view of the continuing attention that Sara Cadiz’s letter receives – three more letters are published in the May-June 1997 issue – as well as *Ms.*’s response – a “pro-breast-feeding” article is published in the Jan.-Feb. 1997 issue – one cannot help but speculate upon the accuracy of this statement.

Either way, what is clear is that Sara Cadiz's letter generates an issue-based, on-going dialogue between readers. Through this dialogue, readers both re-affirm their own positions on this feminist issue, and establish a relationship with other readers based on *where* they are positioned. For Cadiz and her supporters, becoming textually manifest forces *Ms.* and the rest of the community to "hear" them, to recognize not only the "importance of mothering," but the existence of those "sisters . . . out [there] wondering, 'where do we fit in'" (Cadiz 5). For those who disagree with Cadiz, becoming textually manifest proves that different patterns of identification exist within *Ms.*, and allows an alternative discourse to develop. If these "counter-statements," as Kenneth Burke terms them, are expressions of reader resistance, such resistance ensures that the dialogue between readers remains "critical and transformative, rather than merely reproductive" (Branaman 452).

Typically, and as indicated in the last chapter, the editorial voice of *Ms.* remains silent throughout this discussion. Even when the accusations against *Ms.* are flying, *Ms.* does not rush to its own defense but rather, allows readers to sort the matter out among themselves. That they are attentive to what is going on in is evidenced in *Ms.*'s running of a "pro-breast-feeding" article in the midst of the discussion. That another discussion, complete with threats of canceled subscriptions, was in fact taking place in the letters section concurrently – this time among women who were "just sick and tired of all the emphasis on children" (Gates 5) and were looking forward "to seeing something on child-free families in the future" (Peterson 4) – suggests that *Ms.*, if aware of the

impossibility of being all things to all readers, is also well aware of how to intervene silently, and let the “letters section” do their talking.

Most significant, however, is the recurring theme that emerges from these contrapositive discussions taking place between readers. This theme – the search for self on the pages of *Ms.* – is key to our understanding of how readers negotiate belonging to both the magazine, and to feminism. For if, as we have seen, readers do not necessarily have to share an identity with “someone” they encounter on the pages of *Ms.* in order to identify with what has been said, it is equally evident that finding oneself in *Ms.* is important to readers – if not *all* of the time, at least *some* of the time.

Including Exclusions

Just *how* much of the time varies. If, as Elspeth Probyn (1996) suggests, “wanting to belong, wanting to become, (is) a process that is fueled by yearning” (19), it follows that the degree to which an individual *desires* inclusion will determine the *amount* of inclusion required to keep the reader reading. What is clear is that if readers are happy to embrace diversity within *Ms.*, they are less willing to tolerate exclusion from *Ms.* Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say what they *perceive* as exclusion. How else to explain the fact that similar “kinds” of readers – mothers, lesbians, heterosexuals, black readers, Caucasians, “fat” people, generation-X feminists, Middle-Eastern women, working-class women, middle-class women, disabled readers, animal advocates, Wiccans, progressive Christian feminists – will alternatively find themselves, or not, in *Ms.*?

Compare, for instance, these two letters from black readers. The first is from a 28-year-old who has been reading the magazine since high school:

Thank you for recognizing women of color. Too often we're marginalized, treated like the flavor of the month. You incorporate our lives so seamlessly, as opposed to other magazines that spotlight black women periodically. (Esdaile 6)

The second, from a resident volunteer in a homeless shelter, addresses an article about contraception:

It is almost as if [the author] is trying to use the experience of one poor black woman to warn white, middle-class women – who are the primary readers of this magazine, whether you like it or not – about NorPlant . . . If *Ms.* wants more black readers, it has to attend to these issues rather than gloss over the real story in order to make it readable for your white audience. Tokenism is not inclusion! (Fritz 6)

For one reader, *Ms.* incorporates the lives of black women “so seamlessly.” For the other, *Ms.*'s incorporation of black women stings of “tokenism.” If these two letters highlight how readers' perceptions of *Ms.* can differ quite dramatically, they also provide an interesting insight into what “belonging” might actually be. Less a “state of being” than a “way of seeing,” it could be posited that belonging to *Ms.* is based not so much on *what* one reads, as *how* one reads it. It follows that “belonging” will never be experienced in the same way by any two readers.

Certainly, letter-writer Fritz's suggestion that *Ms.* is aimed at a white, middle-class audience is not the perception that many of those white, middle-class readers have of *Ms.* In fact, this reading of *Ms.* letters reveals that the readers who complain most often of having difficulty finding themselves on the pages of *Ms.* fall into this category:

I cherish my *Ms.* and life around me halts when the new issue arrives. But I can't help feeling “left out” sometimes. I connect with the women on a spiritual level, but I feel in

a minority – white, heterosexual, middle-class, married, mom.¹ (Brevoort 4)

If this reader's letter puts a new slant on what it means to be part of a "minority," the fact that she is far from alone in feeling this way suggests that the content of *Ms.* might have evolved since Mariana Valverde, critiquing *Ms.* in the 1980s, suggested that the magazine "show[ed] womanhood and feminism to be primarily white, middle-class and heterosexual"(McCracken 282). It could also mean that members of this particular "minority" are so used to being visible in all forms of popular culture, but *especially* women's magazine culture, that *any* invisibility is interpreted as exclusion.² It should be mentioned that the majority of this self-perceived "minority," when requesting inclusion, do not so much assert their "right" to textual recognition, as approach the matter diplomatically – praising *Ms.*, whilst simultaneously offering gentle suggestions as to why their inclusion might be expedient. As this self-described "Caucasian, heterosexual, middle-class, generation-X feminist" who feels that in spite of coming "from the "privileged" stratum," she still has "something to offer the feminist struggle," explains:

I love the magazine . . . I am, however, concerned that I cannot find myself in *Ms.* . . . I am asking *Ms.* for two things. One is not to forget women like me. The second is to help us bring our stories together in the global quilt of feminism. I want to support each of you in your struggle, but also find a common ground where we can come together . . . Together we have a bigger voice and make a greater difference. (Truitt 9)

¹ Such self-labeling is common in *Ms.*, and suggests that readers would seem to feel the need to "declare" themselves to the community upon becoming textually manifest. Many letters begin: "As a (*age, sexual orientation, color, class, religion, occupation, or any number of variations thereof*)...I was moved/shocked/disappointed (etc.) by your..." Though it is difficult to ascertain why readers provide these details, two possible explanations are so that others will "get to know you better," and to lend authority to the opinion being expressed.

² Or perhaps there is another explanation: that it is not that a disproportionate number of white, middle-class women actually *feel* "left out," but rather, that *Ms.* makes a point of running their letters to counter criticisms such as Valverde's. This, of course, raises the question of just how much control readers actually do have over their forum, as well as the degree to which an interpretative reading of *Ms.* letters such as this one can be a true indicator of what *Ms.* readers, en masse, really feel. This will be discussed in the conclusion.

If not exactly apologetic for the “privileged” lives they have led, these readers would seem to recognize the advantages they have had in comparison to many *Ms.* readers, and thus tread carefully.

Canadian readers also tread carefully, as do men. In both cases, issues of belonging are linked to the perception of whose “space” *Ms.* is. For Canadians, the perception of *Ms.* as “an American publication” means that if the lack of Canadian content is “understood,” it is still not entirely accepted. “Faithfully read(ing) all your articles on U.S. women” demands that *Ms.* reciprocate and devote *some* space, at least, to Canadian women (Steinman 8). One reader wishes there was a “*Canadian Ms.* . . . so I could read more about issues and events that are directly relevant to me!” (Thompson 4).

As for men, the perception of *Ms.* as a “woman’s space” means that belonging to the community can be somewhat tenuous. Among regular male readers, recognition of *Ms.* as a “women’s space” will lend a certain tentativeness to their letters – “Okay, I know I’m going to catch some hell for this, but . . .” (Ashley 9) – and sometimes, an element of resignation – “I never expect my letters to you to be printed – I’m just a fat white guy” (Stasko 8). For male readers *discovering* the magazine, however, preconceptions about *Ms.* as *solely* a “women’s space” will occasionally prove unfounded, as well as lead to an important self-discovery:

I picked up my first copy of *Ms.* and what a thrill I experienced. I assumed that *Ms.* had nothing to offer me personally. What a mistake . . . The story that moved me most was “Hard Time” [about women in prison]. As a person with HIV, I thought I knew what isolation was . . . My conviction to keep fighting has become deeper because of your wonderful magazine. (Kirby 8)

For many Canadian and male readers, then, belonging to *Ms.* is a function of how the magazine as a “space” is perceived. Recognition that the “space” belongs primarily to others provides a justifiable rationale for exclusion, and makes it that much more bearable. Perhaps even more important, the ability to externalize exclusion – *Ms.* is an “American publication,” a “women’s magazine” – enables these readers to distance the “self” from the search.

Certainly, the readers who are most deeply “hurt” by what they perceive to be exclusion from the pages of *Ms.* are those for whom no external explanations can be found. For these readers, *Ms.* is their space. For some, it is one of the few spaces that they *do* find themselves, that they *are* visible. If this heightens their “hurt” at being excluded from that space, it also strengthens their resolve to fight for that space. As this reader who is “heartbroken” to find “less and less lesbian content” in *Ms.* and “can’t fathom why you have rendered us invisible in your pages” points out:

I recall that several times in the past you have published letters by heterosexual women who claimed that they didn’t see their lives reflected in *Ms.* I always wondered about that, since even back when Morgan was editor most of the magazine was geared to straight women, whose lives – as heterosexuals, if not as women – are validated everywhere you go. (Name Withheld (a) 5)

Whether, as here, the battle for visibility is waged over who is *entitled* to representation, or whether, as in the case of at least one of those “heterosexuals,” it is waged to secure a place within the “global quilt of feminism,” what is clear is that the search for self can be a complex, and sometimes divisive, process. Add a bisexual reader to this process –

A magazine that should know better publishes a self-celebratory roundtable discussion that purportedly recognizes “diversity” in feminism, and not only is a bisexual woman not invited to participate, but none of the participants so much as mentions bisexuality. (Clarke 6)

– and the battle for space becomes yet more complicated.

As to why *neither* lesbians *nor* heterosexual women can find themselves on the pages of *Ms.*, the answer perhaps lies in the different ways that readers assess what constitutes inclusion. For some, it will be a matter of content: who is *in Ms.* For others, it will be a matter of context: *to* whom, and *for* whom, does *Ms.* speak. Once again, *how* one reads *Ms.* determines what one reads *into Ms.* A content-oriented heterosexual and a context-oriented lesbian run the risk of being equally alienated by articles on lesbianism, for instance, if, as the lesbian letter-writer above suggests, “Articles with lesbian content are usually written *for* heterosexuals” (Name Withheld (a) 5, emphasis mine).

If this is reminiscent of letter-writer Fritz’s perception of *Ms.*’s packaging of black women – “gloss[ing] over the real story in order to make it readable to your white audience”³ (Fritz 6) – it also illustrates how tokenism is not inclusion – for anyone. From the white, middle-class, heterosexual reader who wants to see more stories that reflect her, to the lesbian or black reader who sees herself being reflected through how other people see her, what readers would seem to be saying to *Ms.* is that *how* their stories are told is as important as the fact that they *are* told. In recognizing that *Ms.* readers’ experiences are as varied as *Ms.*’s audience is diverse, *Ms.*’s task is not simply to incorporate each of its reader’s lives into the magazine. The real challenge for *Ms.* is to incorporate those lives “seamlessly.”

³ An “Editor’s Note” after this letter explained that so few details were provided because the article was a follow-up to an earlier article that *Ms.* had printed.

Of course, as *Ms.* attempts to reach an ever-widening diversity within feminism, as well as attract younger readers whose experiences of feminism are quite different from that of *Ms.*'s original second-wave feminist audience, it is only natural that this task will become increasingly difficult, just as the search for self for readers will be an increasingly complex process. However, because belonging to *Ms.*, indeed *becoming Ms.*, is as much about articulating that process as it is about finding oneself on the pages, through their letters readers will continue to *be Ms.*, and *Ms.*, in turn, will *be* its readers.

Conclusions

A question which necessarily arises out of this kind of research and should be addressed concerns the power of the magazine to determine which letters will be printed, as well as the possibility that some of the letters on which this analysis is based might not be written by “real” readers but in fact, “constructed” by editors to reinforce the magazine’s ideology. These problems are also addressed by Helen Damon-Moore (1994) who, in asserting that “[u]sing reader letters as evidence is not without its disadvantages,” goes on to explain how “letters are only selectively reprinted in magazines, we know little about their composers, and their very authenticity can always be challenged” (213). However, as Damon-Moore also insists, “Their value outweighs these disadvantages,” largely because researchers of women’s magazine culture “must utilize any evidence available about the all-important and often-elusive reader response” (213).

To the question of the authenticity of *Ms.* letters, the history of epistolarity in the magazine suggests that editors are faced with no shortage of letters – both supportive and critical of *Ms.* – thus minimizing the need to create letters to “fill out” this section. As for letters being selectively reprinted, I would suggest that even if *Ms.* does have the ultimate power when it comes to selecting and printing reader response, the fact that *Ms.* is attempting “to project an image of a community of readers mutually involved in the production of the text” (Shevelov 38) is significant in itself, and makes this research project worthwhile.

Certainly, this reading of *Ms.* letters reveals the “value” of the letter of which Damon-Moore speaks. In suggesting that *Ms.*’s letters are unique in the world of women’s magazines, I am also suggesting that the kind of relationship that exists between an editor and her readers determines both the nature of the letters the magazine will receive, and the nature of the dialogue that is created as a result. In offering us an alternative epistolary pact to that which has existed, and continues to exist, in most other women’s magazines, *Ms.* provides us not only with a comparative framework through which to re-examine these relationships, but to re-think more general notions of active and passive participation, and the potential for community-building within women’s magazine culture. I would venture that in creating a truly participatory readership, those categories traditionally used to define one’s relationship to a magazine – “audience,” “producer,” “consumer” – need no longer apply.

Here, the distinction Jean Baudrillard (1981) makes between *reversibility* and *reciprocity* as they pertain to audience involvement in the media proves helpful. Stressing that “reversibility has nothing to do with reciprocity,” he maintains that “the media are quite aware how to set up formal “reversibility” of circuits . . . without conceding any response or abandoning in any way the discrimination of roles [between transmitter and receiver]” (181). Suggesting that letters to the editor, like phone-in programs, are classic examples of these consciously constructed circuits based on “reversibility,” he posits that this kind of audience “feedback” does not affect “the abstraction of the process as a whole,” nor allow “any real “responsibility” in exchange.” (181). Reciprocity, then, implies the ability of the audience to *affect* the process as a whole, and to share responsibility *for* the product.

Baudrillard's discussion is applicable to the majority of reader-text relationships in women's magazines in which the "letters *page* sets up an intimate and comfortable world of shared concerns" (Ballaster et al. 147, emphasis mine), while the other traditional forum for reader correspondence – the advice column – presents the same problems each week without "draw[ing] out from them any sense of commonality or shared experience . . . [and with] no suggestion that women's problems may have political origins, be politically structured, or politically transformable" (Ballaster et al. 147). In demonstrating how the *Ms.* letters pages differ dramatically from these latter forms of reader correspondence, and how *Ms.* readers, through their letters, both affect, and assume responsibility for, their magazine, I have challenged this notion that letters to the editor can *only* serve to reinforce the roles of transmitter and receiver, or in this case, editor and reader. Furthermore, I have shown how a relationship based on reciprocity as opposed to "token gesture" reversibility designed to create the illusion of participation and little more, is both conducive to, and constitutive of, a feminist textual community.

The term "community" is somewhat problematic. As Leo R. Chavez (1995) points out, "The notion of community has become one of those all-encompassing concepts . . . [and] produced a wealth of interesting research," and yet, "Despite all the work that has been carried out on communities, the question still remains: What underlies a sense of community?" (Chavez 352-353). If one of the aims of this thesis has been to determine what does in fact underlie the sense of community in *Ms.*, it is necessary to consider how well the term "community" actually applies to a magazine. Certainly, the shift in focus

away from the idea of community as limited to a specific geographic locale allows for a looser interpretation of community. When considering the question of nationhood, for instance, Benedict Anderson (1983) has suggested that “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them,” it is “the image of their communion” which becomes constitutive of nationhood (6). Arguing that even where face-to-face contact is possible, “Communities are [still] to be distinguished . . . by the style in which they are imagined” (6), Anderson’s notion that a sense of connected-ness to others exists in the mind – is *imagined* – suggests that physical presence is not necessarily a requirement to be a member of a community.

As to whether Anderson’s notion of an *imagined community* applies to *Ms.*, I would suggest that if at one level it does, in that readers and editor do not physically meet, at another level it does not, in that their connected-ness to each other is based not so much on the *image* of their communion, as actual *articulations* of that image. This is, after all, the point of becoming textually manifest. Hence, Anderson’s notion of an *imagined community* would seem to be appropriate with two caveats. One, *Ms.* readers are engaged in a constant process of actively defining and re-defining the image of their communion, which suggests at least a degree of agency when it comes to determining the *nature* of their community, be it “real” or “imagined.” And two, the feminist movement, unlike nationhood, “Is in a permanent state of flux and re-vision, that is, it *responds* to the shifting circumstances of women’s lives and developments in our own individual and collective understanding of them” (Finn 4).

Thus, while Anderson's important and oft cited notion of *imagined community* applies well to matters of nationhood, it is not entirely adequate when describing either a feminist magazine, or a political movement like feminism, both of which are constantly being re-articulated, hence re-conceptualized, through individual feminist *interventions*.

Ann Ferguson's (1995) notion of a *feminist oppositional community* is, I believe, more useful to our understanding of *Ms.* Blurring the distinction between the "real" and the "imagined," she defines an *oppositional community* as a "network of actual *and* imagined others to whom one voluntarily commits oneself in order to empower oneself and those bonded with others by challenging a social order perceived to be unjust, usually by working on a shared project for social change" (Ferguson A. 372, emphasis mine). This more fluid interpretation of community seems to be particularly applicable to a group of "writerly-readers" who are linked by feminism, and who establish those links through a "shared project" like *Ms.* Furthermore, in creating a dialogue with, and building connections to, unknown feminist "others" through their letters, readers exemplify what being part of a feminist oppositional community entails. According to Ferguson, this is first, the ability "to prioritize a commitment to an imagined community of others over one's communities of origin," and second, to relate through "ongoing social practices that involve emotionally engaging social interactions with, or concerning, these others"(384).

Ferguson's notion of community as a site of *impassioned* interaction between actual or imagined others united by a common cause – feminism – both describes *Ms.*, and indicates that *Ms.* is indeed a community. Furthermore, her suggestion that in building

feminist oppositional communities, “We need to develop a culture that accommodates political disagreement between us without destroying the trust and respect necessary for our common purposes” (Ferguson A. 381) is the kind of culture that *Ms.*, through its letters forum, creates: a place where dissenting voices can articulate those disagreements, and through the on-going negotiation between individual perceptions of feminism, and feminism as it is presented on the pages of *Ms.*, develop a trust and respect for the many different voices working towards those common purposes.

Thomas Bender’s (1978) observation that community “can be defined better as an *experience* than a place” (6, emphasis mine) is also useful, emphasizing the affective nature of community – an important element of community-building within *Ms.* If bell hooks’ (1994) assertion that community is created through “a sense that there is a shared commitment and a common good that binds us” (40) sheds light on what compels *Ms.* readers to write in to the magazine, her insistence that it is “the sound of different voices” that brings a community into being (41) attests to the need to become textually manifest, to be heard, in order to create community in the first place. In a very real and concrete sense, it is through communicating with each other that the *Ms.* community is constituted.

James Carey (1989) has suggested that communication is “a sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality” (18). In rejecting the ‘transmission view of communication’ – “a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people” (15) – in favor of a ‘ritual view of communication’ in which notions of sharing, participation, association, and fellowship

are primordial (18), Carey posits that the essential function of communication is to build community. Though illuminating, Carey's ritual model seems somewhat inadequate when considering *Ms.*, and by extension, feminism. For if, as Carey suggests, ritual forms of communication serve to create "an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things" (33), then to what extent does a magazine that challenges that symbolic order, that encourages its readership to actively question the underlying order of things, fit into such a model?

I would suggest that *Ms.*'s ability to accommodate diversity and dissension, as well as its insistence that its readership have a voice in shaping an ever-evolving feminism, reflects the magazine's determination to both challenge the essentialist notions of womanhood so inscribed into the "traditional" women's magazine formula – in other words, the "underlying order of things" – and to allow its "writerly-readers" to be the "mouthpiece" of that challenge. It is an editorial stance that contrasts sharply with what Marjorie Ferguson (1983) observes in many other women's magazines, where editors prefer not to "trouble readers with those aspects of a changing world for women which they [are] assumed not to want to know about" (85, emphasis mine). In assuming that readers *do* want to know, and what is more, want to actively participate in changing that world, *Ms.* is, in Ferguson's opinion, "The one magazine that is both an intake mechanism for women seeking change, and a constant in the lives who are leading that change" (84). While my reading of *Ms.* letters confirms this, Ferguson's work – like most of the research that has been done on women's magazines – does not do a substantial analysis

of the *process* by which this happens. Therein lies the value of utilizing, as Helen Damon-Moore suggests, what evidence *is* available about the “all-important and often-elusive reader response.”

Although issues of gender construction and commercialism within the world of women’s magazines have been studied in a variety of ways, by a variety of researchers, the areas of reader participation through epistolarity, and the impact of the editor to reader, and *reader to reader*, relationship on a magazine’s potential to create a sense of community, have been to a large extent ignored. I see *Ms.* as the revolutionary sister to its “glossier” counterparts. In highlighting this feminist magazine’s unique Letters to the Editor forum, this thesis draws attention to the potential of the letter as form, and to an important, yet often overlooked, alternative voice within women’s magazine culture.

REFERENCES

- Allison, Dorothy (1978) "Weaving the Web of Community," in *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 4: 75-92.
- Altheide, David L. (1996) *Qualitative Media Analysis, Qualitative Research Methods*, vol. 38. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Althusser, Louis (1971) "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in his *Lenin and Philosophy*. London: New Left Books.
- Altman, Janet Gurkin (1982) *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Ballaster, Ros, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer and Sandra Hebron (1991) *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine*. London: Macmillan.
- Barrell, Joan and Brian Braithwaite (1979) *The Business of Women's Magazines: The Agonies and the Ecstasies*. London: Associated Business Press.
- Barthes, Roland (1976) *The Pleasure of the Text*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1981) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press.
- Beetham, Margaret (1996) *A Magazine of Her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914*. London: Routledge.
- Bender, Thomas (1978) *Community and Social Change in America*. Baltimore: Hopkins University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter (1968) *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken.
- Bird, S. Elizabeth (1992) *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Branaman, Ann (1994) "Reconsidering Kenneth Burke: His Contributions to the Identity Controversy", *The Sociological Quarterly* (vol. 35, no. 3)

- Burt, Sandra and Lorraine Code (eds.) (1995) *Changing Methods: Feminists Transforming Practice*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.
- Carey, James W. (1988) *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Chavez, Leo R. (1994) "The Power of the Imagined Community: The Settlement of Undocumented Mexicans and Cultural Americans in the United States." in Giltrow, Janet (ed.) *Academic Reading: Reading and Writing across the Disciplines*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.
- Coates, Jennifer (1997) "Women's Friendships, Women's Talk," in Wodak, Ruth (ed.) *Gender and Discourse*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Counts, Dorothy Ayers and David R. Counts (1995) " "They're Family Now": The Creation of Community Among RV-ers" in Giltrow, Janet (ed.) *Academic Reading: Reading and Writing across the Disciplines*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.
- Crosbie, Lynn (ed.) (1997) *Click: Becoming Feminists*. Toronto: Macfarlane Walter and Ross.
- Damon-Moore, Helen (1994) *Magazines for the Millions: Gender and Commerce in the Ladies' Home Journal and the Saturday Evening Post, 1880-1910*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Dancyger, Irene (1978) *A World of Women: An Illustrated History of Women's Magazines*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- De Lauretis, Teresa (1984) *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Denzin, Norman (1989) *Interpretive Biography*. Newbury Park: Sage
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau (1990) *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Eco, Umberto (1984) *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Eggs, Suzanne and Rick Iedema (1997) "Difference Without Diversity: Semantic Orientations and Ideology in Competing Women's Magazines," in Wodak, Ruth (ed.) *Gender and Discourse*. London: SAGE Publications.

- Ferguson, Ann (1995) "Feminist Communities and Moral Revolution," in Weiss, Penny A. and Marilyn Friedman (eds.) *Feminism and Community*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ferguson, Marjorie (1983) *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity*. London: Heinemann.
- Finn, Geraldine (ed.) (1993) *Voices of Women, Voices of Feminism*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Fonow, Mary Margaret and Judith A. Cook (eds.) (1991) *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Research as Lived Research*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fraser, Nancy (1993) "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in Robbins, Bruce (ed.) *The Phantom Public Sphere*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gamman, Lorraine and Margaret Marshment (eds.) (1989) *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*. Seattle: The Real Comet Press.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973) "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*. London: Basic Books.
- Gruneau, Richard and David Whitson (1993) *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. (1995) *The Education of a Woman: The Life of Gloria Steinem*. New York: The Dial Press.
- Hermes, Joke (1995) *Reading Women's Magazines: An Analysis of Everyday Media Use*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- hooks, bell (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Korinek, Valerie (1996) "Mrs. Chatelaine v Mrs. Slob," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* vol. 7.
- Lindlof, Thomas R. (1995) *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Lorde, Audre (1984) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. New York: The Crossing Press.

- McCracken, Ellen (1993) *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.* New York: St. Martin's Press.
- McRobbie, Angela (1982) "The Politics of Feminist Research: Between Talk, Text and Action," *Feminist Review*. Vol. 12: 46-57.
- _____. (1991) *Feminism and Youth Culture: From 'Jackie' to 'Just Seventeen.'* London: Macmillan.
- Moi, Toril (1990) *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Probyn, Elspeth (1996) *Outside Belonging*. London: Routledge.
- Radway, Janice (1984) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Richardson, Laurel (1994) "Writing: A Method of Inquiry" in Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Riley, Denise (1988) "Am I That Name?": *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shevelov, Kathryn (1989) *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical*. London: Routledge.
- Solomon, Martha M. (ed.) (1991) *A Voice of Their Own: The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840-1910*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
- Stacey, Jackie (1989) *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London: Routledge.
- Stake, Robert E. (1994) "Case Studies" in Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Steinem, Gloria (1992) *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*. Boston, Toronto and London: Little, Brown and Company.
- Tebbel, John and Mary Ellen Zuckerman (1991) *The Magazine in America: 1741-1990*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thom, Mary (1997) *Inside Ms.: 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

- Thompson, John B. (1995) *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Tong, Rosemarie (1989) *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press.
- Tuchman, Gaye, Arlene Kaplan Daniels and James Benet (eds.) (1978) *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weiss, Penny A. & Marilyn Friedman (1995) *Feminism & Community*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Williams, Raymond (1990) *Culture and Society*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Winship, Janice (1987) *Inside Women's Magazines*. London: Pandora Press.
- Woodward, Helen (1960) *The Lady Persuaders*. New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc.

Articles

- Garrison, Becky. "The Little Lady Who Started a Great Big Revolution," *The Women's Quarterly* (no. 13 – Fall, 1997: 22-25)
- Kuczynski, Alex, "Ms. Magazine is Bought by a Concern Led by Steinem," *The New York Times* (December 2, 1998: C1+)

Magazines

Ms. Magazine, 1972 - 1999

Chatelaine, Dec. 1960; May, 1999

Cosmopolitan, May, 1999

Good Housekeeping, May, 1999

Ladies' Home Journal, May, 1999

Marie-Claire, May, 1999

McCall's, May, 1999

Mirabella, April, 1999

New Woman, May, 1999

Editorials Cited

- Gillespie, Marcia Ann. "The Welcome Table." Editorial. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1993: 1
- _____. "Tis the Season." Editorial. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1993: 1
- _____. "Look Who's Talking." Editorial. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1994: 1
- _____. "Memories to Keep." Editorial. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1994: 1
- _____. "Now It's Our Turn." Editorial. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1995: 1
- _____. "Before Adding to the Recipe, I Listened Closely to You." Editorial. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1995: 1
- _____. "About the Verdict." Editorial. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1995: 1
- _____. "The Phone Call Bill Never Got." Editorial. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1996: 1
- _____. "We've Only Just Begun." Editorial. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1997: 1
- Morgan, Robin. "Ms. Lives!" Editorial. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1990: 1

Editors' Notes Cited

- Editors' Note (a). *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1996: 9
- Editors' Note (b). *Ms.* May-June 1994: 6
- Editors' Note (c). *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1996: 5
- Editors' Note (d). *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1994: 9
- Editors' Note (e). *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1994: 9

Letters to the Editor Cited

- Aase, Sara. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1997: 4
- Andrews, Lindsay. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1998: 4-5
- Antall, Gloria. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1995: 4
- Ashley, Brian. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1997: 9

Atherton, Carla Maria. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1997: 4

Bailey-Johnson, Arva. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1995: 8

Barbeau, Mark. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1997: 4

Barnard, Laura. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1994: 6

Beal, Abigail A. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1994: 7

Bleier, Hannah. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1995: 7

Brevoort, Gretchen M. Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1995: 4

Burton, Garlinda. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1995: 7

Cadiz, Sara. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1996: 5

Cameron, April. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1996: 4-5

Capers, Melissa. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1996: 9

Christina, Greta. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1995: 5

Clarke, Elizabeth. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1994: 6

Cohen, Crow. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1994: 5

Cooper-Dowda, Rus. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1994: 7

Cowling, Gail. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1994: 4

Cunningham, Barbara. Letter. *Ms.* Jul.-Aug. 1997: 4

Davies, S.E. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 4-5

Davis, Suebob. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1998: 5

Demasio, A. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1994: 6

Denham, Melinda. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1995: 4

Dessen, Lisa. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1996: 4

DiFranco, Ani. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1998: 8-9

Dodge, Tracy. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 9

Dunn, Lenay. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1995: 6

Edison, Suzanne. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1997: 4

Elliot, Maureen White. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1994: 9

Ellis, Ebony. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1996: 8

Esdaile, Lise. Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1994: 6

Farrar-Roff, Amy. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1993: 7

Farster, Meredith. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 9

Fink, Deborah. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1997: 5

Fritz, Marie J. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1997: 6

Galland, Nicole. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1994: 9

Gates, Gaelen. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1995: 5

Gibson, Jill K. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1996: 6

Gosnell, Susan. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1996: 10

Graham, Bonnie B. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1996: 4-5

Guarraia, Veronica. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1996: 4

Guinard, Nicole. Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1996: 6-8

Henry, Hannah. Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1994: 8

Henry, Karen. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1998: 6

Hodge, Elizabeth. Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1995: 5

Holm-Hudson, Karen. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1997: 9

Hughes, Beth J. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1998: 8

Isikoff, Amy. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1995: 9

Jeffries, Tamara. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1994: 8

Kaplan, Jacqueline S. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1995: 8

Kearsley, Jennifer. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1998: 6-7

Kelly, Lorna U. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1997: 5

Kerr, Sue. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1997: 5

Kight, Pat. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1998: 4

Kimmel, Michael S. Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1994: 4

Kirby, Ric Harrison. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1994: 8

Kirkwood, Shirley. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1997: 4

Krasnec, Maria. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1994: 7-8

Lebowitz, Suzanne. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 9

Leech-Black, Elspeth D. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec 1994: 4

Lemley, Nicole. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1995: 5

Lewis, Michelle. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1995: 5

Lias, Lisa. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1995: 9

Linden, Diana. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1994: 6

Loeffelbein, Ruthie. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1997: 7

Louis, Margot K. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 4

Lucey, Patricia. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1994: 8-9

Lynch, Heather L. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1995: 4

Mahoney, Margaret A. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1995: 10

Martin, Julie. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1997: 7

Mathewson, Lisa. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 5

Mercer, Krishna. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1995: 9

McLune, Jennifer. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1994: 4

McGaughan, Erin. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1995: 4-5

Mills, Marley. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1995: 7-8

Morgan, Melissa F. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 5-6

Mothes, Cheryl A. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1996: 10

Mullins, Kathleen and Steiner, Valerie. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1996: 4

Name Withheld (a). Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1997: 5

Name Withheld (b). Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1995: 4

Name Withheld (c). Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1994: 8

Parker, Juli L. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1996: 6

Peterson, Nanette. Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1997: 4

Pew, Katherine. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1995: 4-5

Quinn, Christina A. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1997: 4

Reid, E. Shelley. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1993: 4

Ross, Donna L. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1996: 5

Rude, Darlene. Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1995: 9

Ruthsdotter, Mary. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1996: 4

Sauer, Jennifer. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1996: 5

Schendel, Sarah. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1997: 4

Sebastian, Marion B. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1995: 9

Sere, Adriene. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1994: 5-6

Shalala, Donna E. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1995: 7

Skiff, Donald. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1995: 5

Smylie, Susan E. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1997: 9

Springer, Sherene. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1993: 4

Sreenivasan, Jyotsna. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 6

Stanley, Joyce. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1994: 7-8

Stasko, Michael A. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug. 1996: 8

Steinman, Carly. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1997: 8

Swanson, Arlene E. Letter. *Ms.* July-Aug 1997: 4

Taylor, Rachel E. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1997: 7

Thompson, Meghan. Letter. *Ms.* Sep.-Oct. 1996: 4

Thornton, Kimberley. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1994: 4-5

Truitt, Ginya. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 9-10

Two Feathers, Morwen. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1997: 4-5

Wexler, Cindy. Letter. *Ms.* Nov.-Dec. 1996: 6

Wheeler, Sage. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1996: 4

Wilson, Imani. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1995: 4

Witt, Clare. Letter. *Ms.* May-June 1996: 9

Zahn, Deborah. Letter. *Ms.* Mar.-Apr. 1998: 4-5

Zwart, Gretchen. Letter. *Ms.* Jan.-Feb. 1997: 9