Lady Sisyphus: *Room* Magazine and the Survival of Feminist Literary Magazines in Canadian Publishing

by

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Abstract

Canadian literary magazines play a key role in writers' and editors' careers and in maintaining a healthy literary ecosystem. From the 1970s to the present day, feminist literary magazines have been on the forefront of diversifying this role and challenging the legacies of oppression in the publishing industry. However, a thorough examination of the financial history of *Room,* Canada's oldest feminist literary magazine, and its contemporaries shows that this critical work has been thwarted at every turn by financial pressures and the threat of closure. Lack of funds and a historic over-reliance on volunteer labour has also contributed to systemic inequality even within feminist publishing spaces, posing a challenge to publications with intersectional feminist mandates. *Room* remains an important force for change in Canadian publishing, and the future of organizations like it lies in strategies at the intersection of ensuring financial survival and executing intersectional feminist mandates.

Keywords: literary magazines; feminist publishing; Canadian periodical studies; *Room* magazine

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Introduction

The Strength and Vulnerability of Feminist Publishing

Between 1975 and early 2024, feminist literary journal *Room* magazine published the work of approximately 3,169 women and gender diverse writers, poets, playwrights, artists, interviewees, and editors. It took thousands of hours of work—some paid, but the vast majority volunteer—to bring those works from writers' desk drawers, notebooks, and notes apps into the hands of readers across Canada and beyond. It also took capital to pay the creators, print the pages, and ship the magazine.

Still, for much of their history, feminist publishers—in particular, Canadian feminist literary magazines—managed to operate in the "economy of the gift,"[1] run via volunteer labour and funded largely outside of the open market. In her analysis of Canadian feminist periodicals at a time when the last of them were beginning to die out, editor, critic, and scholar Barbara Godard explained that "its disinterest in the profit motive is both the strength and the vulnerability of feminist publishing."[2] Yet while it is evident that feminist periodicals have exhibited this disinterest in the *profit* motive, examining the broader history of feminist periodicals and the archival materials related to *Room* magazine's financial history shows that the volunteers and employees of feminist periodicals have had their time and energy monopolized by concerns about money. Survival in a capitalist economy is a precursor to fulfilling the mandate to publish works elevating the voices of women and gender diverse writers, and for feminist periodicals, survival has never been a sure thing.

One of the central tenets of this report is that financial pressures have always underscored much of the decision-making at *Room* and other feminist literary magazines, even when there are also compelling values-based explanations for those decisions. It is paramount that our eyes be wide open to the ways that economic and political interest underpin our own practices and decisions, especially as equitable pay grows as a priority and we further exit the gift economy Godard identified as the primary site of feminist publishing to enter into a more engaged and prolonged tussle with capitalist realities.

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1. Barbara Godard, "Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value: The Canadian Context," *Women's Studies International Forum* 25, no. 2 (2002): 209.

2. Godard, 213.

Feminist literary magazines exist as a contradiction in a capitalist economy, and find themselves in a double bind: unstable financing threatens their ability to make an impact aligned with their mandate, but traditional ways of increasing capital are often complicated by that same mandate. In a community that values process as much as or more than product, de-centring ethics for the sake of a revenue-generating process, even solely with the goal of persisting, is a type of death. For feminist literary magazines to have a viable future in Canada, there is a desperate need to find strategies that allow feminist literary magazines to remain stable while remaining wholly aligned with their mission. To this end, this report reviews the financial history of feminist literary magazines in Canada from 1970 to present with a particular focus on *Room* magazine, drawing conclusions about how financial realities have affected editorial and programming decisions as well as publications' ability to execute their feminist mandates, and examining potential avenues for healthy growth.

The first section covers the impact of literary magazines in Canada more generally and of feminist literary magazines in particular. This is followed by an examination of white feminism in Canadian feminist publishing, ways feminist literary magazines have grown toward intersectional feminism, and the legacies of oppression in the contemporary publishing industry, concluding that there is a significant ongoing need for the type of work feminist literary magazines do to diversify and expand CanLit.

The second section reviews the details of the financial history of feminist literary magazines with a focus on *Room*, beginning in the 1970s and concluding in the late 2010s. This section discusses the significant role state funding has played in financing Canadian feminist literary magazines and how that has impacted their mandates, as well as the challenges and successes in earned revenues over the years.

Adding a critical piece of context, the fourth section delves into the widespread reliance on volunteer labour in feminist publishing spaces and examines its impact on intersectional feminist mandates, revealing that contemporary feminist literary magazines are by necessity moving away from this practice and have an even more significant need for financial stability.

Finally, the last chapter examines lessons from *Room* magazine's experiences between 2017 and early 2024, proposing some strategic approaches to increasing revenue and organizational capacity that would allow organizations to continue to centre their mission and remain true to the foundational principles of feminist publishing.

A Note on Data

There is a persistent lack of data on the publication trends, staff, and other realities of magazine publishing, particularly in Canada, and particularly with enough granularity to discuss literary magazines specifically. This report attempts to comment on the issues in literary magazine publishing based on the data that is available, and also on data from other subsets of publishing. Literary magazines have a symbiotic relationship with book publishing and play an important role in the overall ecosystem of the publishing industry. As such this report will spend some time with information about publishing practices in the broader publishing industry, and in book publishing in particular.

While this report attempts to draw conclusions about the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+, racialized, and disabled people in publishing, there are glaring gaps in the data and existing scholarship specifically centring these voices and histories. This report is written from an intersectional feminist lens in the tradition of the work of theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, and its first conclusion is that current scholarship on financial conditions in publishing from an intersectional feminist lens is woefully inadequate. I am echoing Stephanie Toth in her report "Women in Canadian Publishing: Gender Equity in the Canadian Book Publishing Industry" in calling for a larger quantity and higher quality of data[3] to facilitate meaningful scholarship on these topics and lay the foundation for effective strategies to improve conditions for all.

Situating *Room* Magazine, the Author, and the Report

Room was established in Vancouver in 1975 and is Canada's oldest feminist literary magazine still in publication. *Room* publishes poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, essays, reviews, interviews, and art on a quarterly basis. For its first forty years of publishing, *Room* identified itself as a publication by and about women; since 2015, *Room* has clearly stated its intent to publish writing by people of all marginalized genders; namely, cis and trans women, trans men, Two-Spirit, and nonbinary people. In that same time, Room has also committed to centring the voices of BIPOC, 2SLGBTQ+, and disabled writers of marginalized genders.

3. Stephanie Toth, "Women in Canadian Publishing: Gender Equity in the Canadian Book Publishing Industry," *Summit Research Repository, Publishing Program Theses*, https://summit.sfu.ca/item/34672, 49-50.

Room is a nonprofit society incorporated with the BC Government under the Societies Act and is legally registered as the West Coast Feminist Literary Magazine Society. *Room* is edited by members of a rotating editorial collective called The Growing Room Collective.

Originally founded as *Room of One's Own* in reference to Virginia Woolf's seminal essay, *Room* underwent a rebrand and a shortening of its name in 2007. Throughout this report, I refer to the magazine as *Room* across its entire history, but use *Room of One's Own* when quoting documents from before the rebrand and when referencing the *Room of One's Own* fonds held at Simon Fraser University's Special Collections.

I joined *Room* as its publisher in May of 2022. As publisher, I am responsible for managing *Room*'s finances at every level, from strategic planning and multi-year budgeting to quarterly reports and monthly bookkeeping. I am also responsible for securing funding for operating costs and projects through grants and fundraising and for managing circulation, distribution, and sales. My role involves team leadership through working in collaboration with the managing editor and supervising other staff and contractors. Finally, I also manage *Room*'s events and our partnership program with organizations such as Indigenous Brilliance, Unbound Reading Series, Hush Harbour Press, and Art Ecosystem. Much of the information I bring to this report from 2007 onward is from material available to me on *Room*'s digital repository on Box. I also bring my experience at the organization and insight from speaking to the Board, Growing Room Collective Members, fellow and former staff, contributors, and readers extensively on a regular basis.

In my short time at *Room*, I have dealt with the financial aftermath of the 2020 cancellation of the four-year-running Growing Room Festival and the Covid-19 pandemic, and shepherded the organization through a financial crisis and a major crowdfunding effort. I've witnessed how this financial instability has drained the team and pulled resources from our programming. Yet I've also seen the immense impact *Room* has had on the writers, editors, artists, and staff we've worked with over its nearly five decades of operation, despite persistent struggle. I write this report with the hope that feminist and mission-driven publishers after me may have a theoretical foundation through which to understand the landscape they are entering and the organizations they are inheriting, and with the dream of making reliable support for marginalized artists and workers an achievable goal for which to strive in our fight for an equitable, diverse, and accessible literary ecosystem.

Chapter 1: The Impact of Feminist Literary Magazines on the Canadian Literary Landscape

1.1 Introduction to Literary Magazines

> "Periodicals' seriality both encourages experimentation because of the lower barrier to entry and, at the same time, creates a detailed record of this sustained experimentation. This combination of experimentation and sustained engagement is yet another characteristic of periodicals that can help place them at the centre and the forefront of cultural and political movements."[1] —Tessa Jordan, *Feminist Acts:* Branching Out *Magazine and the Making of Canadian Feminism*

Feminist literary magazines are a particular subset of small-circulation literary magazines that nonetheless play an important role in the literary ecosystem for writers, editors, publishing professionals, and literature itself. In North America, these magazines gained prominence in the 20th century as cultural figures in the US and Canada concerned themselves with their national identities and the question of a national literature: "if you wanted to be a nation, you had to have a literature, but then you had to have literary magazines that would publish the emerging literature of that nation."[2]

Literary magazines are places where writers can learn, experiment, and innovate in ways that are not rewarded by the book publishing industry. In an early monograph on the subject, *The Little Magazine: A History and Bibliography,* the authors made the bold claim that literary magazines "have introduced and sponsored every noteworthy literary movement or school that has made its appearance in America during the past thirty years."[3] To this day, literary magazines show a "spirit of conscientious revolt against the guardians of public taste,"[4] and Marco Roth, founder of *n+1,* argues they are "serving" larger publishers by taking risks and cultivating talent.[5] Raymond Hammond, editor-in-chief of the New York Quarterly, adds that "since the phenomenon of the creative writing program has blossomed since the '60s, I

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1. Tessa Jordan, *Feminist Acts:* Branching Out *Magazine and the Making of Canadian Feminism.* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2019), 52.

2. Aaron Burch et al., "A Roundtable on the Contemporary Literary Magazine," *Mississippi Review* 36, no. 4 (2008): 35.

3. Charles Allen, Frederick J. Hoffman and Carolyn F. Ulrich, "*The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 2.

4. Allen, Hoffman, and Ulrich, 3.

5. Burch et al., "A Roundtable on the Contemporary Literary Magazine," 36.

think that one of the functions of the little magazine has become to be a stalwart against homogenization of the work."[6] In a sweeping 1982 report on Feminist Print Media submitted to the Women's Programme Secretary of State, Canadian editor, writer, and broadcaster Eleanor Wachtel identified the outsized impact of Canadian little magazine *The Tamarack Review* when compared to its 1,400 copy circulation, "all but 100 of which were institutional (i.e., libraries). One of the most influential publications in the history of Canadian letters was attracting 100 individual subscribers!"[7] Small periodicals had the potential to be enormously relevant to the broader field of CanLit.

Beyond shifting literary trends, literary magazines also have a notable impact on the careers of writers, who often get their start in literary magazines. In their roundtable on contemporary literary magazines, *The Mississipi Review* called them a ""Triple A" farm system" for new writers, often providing a chance to work with an editor for the first time, gain new readers, connect with established writers, and start a publication history.[8] As a training ground and a modest source of income between longer projects, literary magazines support writers throughout various stages of their careers.

Literary magazines play a critical role in a healthy literary ecosystem in several key ways. Their serial nature and independence encourages risk-taking and innovation, allowing writers to experiment and grow. A variety of editorial perspectives and a format that rewards the new and unconventional means literary magazines help keep broader literary industries and trends from becoming homogenous, particularly as a handful of teaching methods proliferate and corporate publishing continues to consolidate. Finally, literary magazines support writers' careers, both as a place to learn the process of working with an editor and getting published, and later in one's career as a place to try new things and supplement an income. However, susceptible to the same prejudices as the broader publishing industry, early literary magazines conferred their benefits unequally across the population, leaving women and other marginalized writers behind for many decades.

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6. Burch et al., 37.

7. "Feminist Print Media" by Eleanor Wachtel, 1982, CA ON0034 10-075-S2-F3, Deborah Yaffe Collection, University of Ottawa Women's Archives and Special Collections, 21.

8. Burch et al., "A Roundtable on the Contemporary Literary Magazine," 34.

1.2 Introduction to Feminist Literary Magazines

Creating Feminist Spaces in a Patriarchal Industry

In the 1970s, feminist literary magazines joined mainstream literary magazines in trying to make an impact on literature and writers. They were badly needed, as "the percentage of women published in little magazines of the sixties and most of the seventies revolved somewhere between five and fifteen percent," even though literary magazines were purportedly "showcasing radical, alternative, non-mainstream, and marginalized authors and aesthetics."[9] Women were being systematically excluded and they knew it. In *Feminist Acts,* Tessa Jordan recounts how Pulitzer Prize-winner Sharon Olds received a note with her first rejection from a literary magazine saying "If you wish to write about your children, may we suggest the *Ladies' Home Journal?* We are a literary magazine."[10] Feminist periodicals wanted, first and foremost, to publish more women in an industry that defined art by patriarchal values.

Part of this exclusion was due to who the decision-makers were behind the scenes. Literary magazine publishing is a subset of the larger publishing industry and closely related to book publishing, so some insights from the book publishing industry may shed light on working conditions for publishing professionals and writers of marginalized genders. The publishing industry had long been known as "the gentleman's profession" and was largely run by white men "with independent means who, instead of having to pursue a trade, could spend his time engaging in leisurely activities."[11] At the office, the work environment was hostile, with women finding themselves "ensconced in jobs appropriate to their socialization and 'feminine' talents" and subject to sexual harassment, patronization, and disrespect.[12] Additionally, much of the industry's business happened out-of-office "at mens-only social clubs with exclusive memberships… effectively barring anyone who didn't belong to this specific subset of upper class men from participating meaningfully in the book publishing

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9. Marcin Markowicz, "Agents of Change: Feminist Literary Magazines, Editors, and the Politics of Cultural Production in Canada (1970-2000)," PhD diss., (Adam Mickiewicz University, 2020), 67.

10. Jordan, *Feminist Acts*, 156.

11. Toth, "Women in Canadian Publishing," 14.

12. Thaba Niedzwiecki, "Print politics: Conflict and community-building at Toronto's Women's Press," MA diss., (University of Guelph, 1997), 20-21.

industry."[13] By 1989, the London-based group Women in Publishing found that women outnumbered men in the industry, but that women were paid less, promoted less, and held fewer positions of power across the board by large margins.[14] They named their seminal report "Twice As Many, Half as Powerful."

Canadian feminist literary magazines emerged in the context of the broader Women in Print movement, when feminists of the 1970s turned to print and other media as a way to communicate, organize, take action, and create social change. The decade saw an "explosion of women's presses across the country, owned by women, publishing women authors, expressly for women readers" and the creation of a network of feminist literary magazines, newspapers, general interest magazines, and even a distribution company.[15] The number fluctuated, but Canada had somewhere around twenty-five feminist periodicals by the end of the decade[16] (more per capita than the USA[17]), and a handful of them were literary in nature.

Feminist magazines were a rare place where women were involved at all levels of production and decision-making, providing valuable experience to women new to the industry and, for women who had day jobs in publishing, a change from toxic work environments where unprofessional quasi-domestic demands[18] and sexual harassment[19] abounded. From its earliest iterations, feminist publishing was process-driven, and "the 'experience of production' was highly valued as a feminist activity."[20]

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13. Toth, "Women in Canadian Publishing," 14-15.

14. Fenella Greenfield, "2 Fenella Greenfield: 'You were invisible'," *Women in Publishing: An Oral History,* March 12 2018, https://www.womeninpublishinghistory.org.uk/content/themes/a-gentlemans-profession/2-fenella-greenfield-recalls-feeling-invisible-work.

15. Jamie Harker and Cecelia Konchar Farr, "Introduction," in *This Book is an Action* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 5.

16. Lois Pike, "A Selective History of Feminist Presses and Periodicals in English Canada," in In the Feminine: Women and Words ed. Ann Dybikwski, Victoria Freeman, Daphne Marlatt, Barbara Pulling, and Betsy Warland (Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1985), 215.

17. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 13.

18. Greenfield, "2 Fenella Greenfield."

19. Sue Bennett, "3 Sue Bennett on being propositioned by a senior colleague at work," *Women in Publishing: An Oral History,* March 12 2018, https://www.womeninpublishinghistory.org.uk/content/themes/a-gentlemans-profession/3-sue-bennett-propositioned-senior-colleage-work.

20. Laurel Forster, "Spreading the Word: Feminist Print cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement," Women's History Review 25, no. 5 (2016): 813.

Women editors of feminist literary magazines published thousands of writers whose voices might very well have otherwise never seen the light of day. Based on an internal audit, from 1975 to 2000, *Room* published over 1,000 contributors; consider the potential total number if we were to tally all of the contributors to *Fireweed, CV2, Makara,* and the creative sections of more varied magazines like *(f.)lip, Kinesis,* and *Branching Out*. Women writers found themselves with far more opportunities to get their start, as writers had long done, in literary magazines. This contributed to women writers' careers and proved that there was indeed room for women in literature, even if women had to carve that room out for themselves.

Feminist literary magazines also created opportunities for women's writing to influence the literary trends of the era just as writing in male-dominated literary magazines did. Canadian literature had long left women writers in the margins, with only a handful of women allowed their share of the spotlight. The works of Canadian women writers became a precious lifeline for Gayla Reid, founding editor at *Room,* who before *Room*'s founding in 1975 felt "ill at ease" and like there was a disconnect between her private life and her academic study of literature; "in the '60s, nobody in graduate school dreamt of teaching or studying [these Canadian women writers]."[21] By the time *Room*'s 25th anniversary issue featuring Reid's essay was published forty years later, then-editor of *Room* Virginia Aulin shared that "I accepted as a matter of course that there was also an established cadre of Canadian women writers."[22] Feminist literary magazines like *Room* were part of the determined and prolific movement that created space for women in Canadian literature, as "editors worked as makers of culture, producers of meaning, mentors, interpreters, enablers, community builders, tastemakers, and activists,"[23] leaving a lasting imprint on CanLit.

Collective Governance and Non-hierarchal Leadership Models

Feminist publishing emerged directly from the political feminist movement, and the Canadian feminist movement in particular also had strong ties with leftist politics.[24] Feminist publishing absorbed structural lessons from feminist and leftist movements, prioritizing non-

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21. Gayla Reid, "View with Room," *Room Magazine* 25, no. 1 & 2, Spring 2002, 9-10.

22. Virginia Aulin, "Celebration," *Room Magazine* 25, no. 1 & 2, Spring 2002, 6.

23. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 19.

24. Chesman, "Listings," 45.

hierarchal governance and placing as high a value on process—how things were done—as on outcome. Eleanor Wachtel wrote in her 1982 report on Feminist Print Media that:

> "reacting against the hierarchical structures seen as characteristic of patriarchy, the women's movement developed a dedication to horizontal collective structures: arriving at decisions by consensus, rotating tasks, and skill-sharing. Almost all publications strive for this form of organization."[25]

Feminist publishing was not only an opportunity to publish feminist writing, or writing by women, but also an opportunity to engage in a professional space that in itself was (or attempted to be) feminist. At a time when women were severely underrepresented in the publishing industry, joining a magazine's collective and participating in the editorial and production process was a chance to learn skills and gain valuable experience that might contribute to a future (paid) career elsewhere in publishing.[26] It was also an opportunity for budding feminists to connect to each other and to the writers in their pages, building community; "the processes of collectively producing, writing and publishing was a feminist commitment, and as much activism as other forms of consciousness-raising."[27]

A Brief Structural History of *Room* Magazine

Room of One's Own was founded as a collective in 1975; "everyone at that time was in a collective," said *Room* founding editor Gayla Reid, "and now we had one, too."[28] From its first iteration as gatherings of women in attics and basements,[29] to the dozens of editors crossing paths on Slack, Box, and Zoom in early 2024, *Room* has always kept the Growing Room Collective at its centre, working to maintain the difficult balance between practical functionality and non-hierarchal values. *Room* has always been edited by either the whole collective or, as early as issue 1.2, a rotating subset of collective members. Numerous issues, including as early as 6.1 in 1981, credit guest editors. In 1995, starting with issue 18.1, the collective seemed to further stratify, publishing a more traditional masthead with formally

25. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 44.

26. Jordan, *Feminist Acts,* XXVII.

27. Forster, "Spreading the Word," 820.

28. Reid, "View with *Room*," 11.

29. Reid, 9.

titled editors. These editors, however, still changed issue-to-issue, maintaining the collective editorial vision of the organization.

There are many challenges that come with the collective model of governance, particularly for larger organizations. As it has matured and grown over its nearly 50 years of operation, *Room* has had to adapt. Increasingly, maintaining the collective editorial vision has emerged as the most important priority, and the collective has been more comfortable siloing administrative and production tasks to specific roles. According to *Room*'s application to Canada Council on February 28th, 2007, *Room* had by then settled into a collective-centred model with titled roles for administrative tasks that supported an editorial cycle involving 3-5 editors per issue. Creative control over the contents of each issue remained with the issue editors, while specific collective members handled finances, print production, sales and distribution, marketing, events, and other tasks that were not strictly editorial.

As of 2024, the collective is now made up of over 35 people, and as *Room* has slowly brought on paid staff, the administrative roles have been consolidated into the current two full-time publisher and managing editor roles and the part-time marketing lead, with support from a contract designer, contest coordinator, and reviews editor.

1.3 White Feminist Histories

A History of White Feminism in Canadian Feminist Publishing

> "A look at early issues of *Room* and *Fireweed* suffices to establish that editors of both publications also inadvertently perpetuated what Joseph defined as "white female supremacy." Having founded their publications in the 1970s, the two collectives took off with a utopian idea to serve all women; however, their respective mandates were nothing but reflective of the second-wave sensibility that, in essence, disregarded the complexity of racial, class, and sexual differences within feminism and among women in general."[30] —Marcin Markowicz, *Agents of Change: Feminist literary magazines, editors, and the politics of cultural production in Canada (1970-2000)*

For many years Canadian writers and editors who were people of colour, 2SLGBTQ+, working class, and disabled were consistently underserved and over-excluded even by publishers claiming to be progressive and anti-oppressive. White women from middle-class and higher backgrounds dominated the Canadian feminist publishing scene of the 1970s.

30. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 152.

While many of these women made overtures to more diverse communities in their editorials and calls for submission, these efforts were often tokenizing or exposed writers of colour in particular to a hostile environment. The white editorial leadership was focused on nurturing their own growth as writers and publishers and fighting for (white) women's work to influence the broader literature of the time. In the rush to carve out space in the dominant patriarchal culture, many were left behind.

Women of colour often found themselves instantly rejected, or at best the subject of heated debates. In archival documents related to Sister Vision Press, press co-founder Stephanie Martin shared that women of colour were being rejected even by "so called feminist or progressive publishers" because "we didn't write right, we didn't talk good (...) our language did not conform to "Literary" standards. Also, at that time, issues around race and class was being sidestepped by white folk."[31] In a conflict that was emblematic of the conversations happening in feminist spaces across Canada, several women on the Women's Press collective were removed from the press after lengthy conflicts over the implementation of an anti-racist policy, as outlined in competing press releases from 1988.[32] Editor and critic Barbara Godard summed up the split as "one group of socialist feminists operating under a non-racist policy eliminated from the collective… by another group which took charge on an explicitly anti-racist platform," and furthermore criticized everyone involved by pointing out that "neither group of white women embroiled in this conflict envisaged a pro-active policy of soliciting publications by women of colour."[33]

Godard identified a troubling lack of progress even in a conversation explicitly about anti-racism. Even when trying to rectify their racist systems, tokenism abounded: examining the UK publishing industry in *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics,* Simone Murray explains that many Black women went on to establish their own magazines and presses in "a refusal to allow Black women's writing to be fed through the cultural filter of white feminists' perceptions, and then to be marketed to largely white, middle-class audiences as

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31. Markowicz, 52.

32. "Women's Press - Press releases [Anti-Racism direction]," 1988, 10-001-S1-F4297, University of Ottawa Women's Archives and Special Collections, Ottawa, Ontario. https://omeka.uottawa.ca/arcs-en/items/show/194.

33. Godard, "Feminist Periodicals," 216.

diverting handbooks to black women's experience."[34] In Canada, Godard identified the same separatist trend, with new periodicals founded by excluded women taking on "the burden of presenting alternative visions of democracy and gender relations." Godard lists a number of periodicals doing such work and explains that they were "attempting to survive in the marketplace with only a fraction of the readership of the feminist tabloids and newspapers founded in the 1970s… [and] had even less symbolic capital to start with and so faced great economic difficulties."[35] None of the periodicals Godard listed were actively publishing at the time of the article being written.

Prospects were only marginally better for queer women, who faced censorship from funding bodies, especially in overtly political publications.[36] Published in 1982, "Lesbiantics" was the first of *Fireweed*'s trailblazing special issues, which were an early light in an era of homogenous feminism. In an interview for *Room*'s fortieth anniversary anthology, co-founder Gayla Reid shared that lesbians on the *Room* collective challenged other members to make more space for lesbian writing, explaining that "learning to identify the sneaky ways in which homophobia can assert itself was a challenge right across the women's movement, and *Room* was part of that."[37] On the other hand, Marcin Markowicz noted that Sandy Shreve, guest editor of *Room*'s labour issue Working for a Living—the product, perhaps, of *Room*'s "working class consciousness"[38]—lamented receiving almost no submissions from "most areas of the Maritimes and the North, from women of colour, Native women, women with disabilities, illegal immigrants or lesbians."[39] Reaching diverse readers and writers and creating an environment supportive to their work remained an ongoing struggle at *Room* for several decades.

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34. Simone Murray, *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 84.

35. Godard, "Feminist Periodicals," 216.

36. Barbara L. Marshall, "Communication as Politics: Feminist Print Media in English Canada," *Women's Studies International Forum* 18, no. 4 (1995): 467.

37. Leah Golob, "Riding the Wave: An Interview with *Room* Co-Founder Gayla Reid," in *Making Room*: *Forty Years of Room Magazine,* ed. Meghan Bell (Halfmoon Bay: Caitlin Press, 2017), 20.

38. Andrea Chesman, "Listings," in *Guide to Women's Publishing,* ed. Andrea Chesman and Polly Joan (Paradise, CA: Dustbooks, 1978), 45.

39. Sandy Shreve, "Introduction," *Room Magazine* 12 no. 2 & 3, Summer & Fall 1998, 6.

Oppressive Legacies in Contemporary Publishing

The discrimination BIPOC, 2SLGBTQ+, and disabled writers and editors faced in the early years of the Women in Print movement has seen some improvement, but it has far from vanished since the turn of the millennium. Today, the publishing industry is laced with legacies of oppression. While there is little data about the realities of Canadian magazine publishing, particularly on the literary side, the symbiotic relationship between literary magazine publishing and book publishing means industry-wide data is relevant to the activities of feminist literary publishers—and that data is damning.

The Association of Canadian Publishers (ACP) 2022 Canadian Book Publishing Industry Baseline Diversity Survey reveals a persistent bias toward whiteness in publishing, as "most publishing firms do not reflect the communities around them"[40] and there is significantly less diversity at the heads-of-firm level than all other levels of the publishing industry; "interns still represent the most diverse department in the survey."[41] The gender wage gap, too, is alive and well: the Quill & Quire reported the gap at 25.6% in a survey that had 14% male respondents, and according to the ACP survey of the same year, only 18% of the whole industry was male.[42] As Stephanie Toth explains it in her sweeping report on women in publishing, "for such a small subset of the workforce—less than one-fifth—to outearn the majority of the workforce to such a dramatic extent, suggests a lack of pay equity in the Canadian publishing industry."[43] Put another way, women outnumber men in the publishing industry four to one, yet still earn, on average, 25% less.

Toth identifies several trends that lead to pay inequity and workplace homogenization in publishing, including a culture of sexual harassment,[44] a widespread culture of overworking that disproportionately punishes women and rewards men "who tend to have fewer domestic responsibilities and thus more freedom and energy to consistently work extended

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40. Association of Canadian Publishers, "Results of the 2022 Canadian Book Publishing Industry Diversity Baseline Study," 2023, 34.

41. Association of Canadian Publishers, 25.

42. Quill & Quire,"2018 Salary Survey," 2018.

43. Toth, "Women in Canadian Publishing," 21-22.

44. Toth, 6-12.

hours,"[45] and men's documented likelihood to promote in their image, something that is exacerbated by the social culture of publishing.[46] The widespread use of unpaid internships and low wages also contributes to inaccessibility for workers from lower-income backgrounds, which disproportionately affects 2SLGBTQ+, BIPOC, and disabled workers.[47]

The homogenous nature of the publishing workforce reflects directly on what works are published. In The Writers' Union of Canada's survey of authors with books published in 2020-2021, BIPOC, 2SLGBTQ+, and disabled writers "indicated barriers encountered in their careers, working harder than others to get the same treatment, being excluded from work or networking events, and losing out on opportunities to those less qualified."[48] BIPOC writers in particular were "less represented, but receiving greater recognition" in, for example, awards lists, potentially leading to an inflated perception of progress in the industry.[49] The survey also reported that write-in portions contained a widespread desire for more diverse staffers within the publishing industry to improve support for marginalized writers.[50] Marginalized writers are hungry for publishing professionals who are able to engage meaningfully with their work and for platforms that can uplift their writing without forcing it to conform to the gaze of the dominant culture.

In the 1970s, feminist periodicals emerged to do exactly that for the white women who helmed them, rejecting patriarchal standards of art and publishing women's voices proudly. Today, *Room*'s mandate is to serve a much wider swathe of writers who continue to face an uphill battle as it once served the women who founded it.

Literary magazines are a critical authoritative voice in an industry that is reliant on gatekeepers to sift and select from a large pool of hopeful writers. The work of feminist literary magazines has long challenged the most damaging structures behind publishing: "signifying practices which challenge the symbolic order, feminist periodicals establish

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45. Toth, 22-23.

46. Toth, 16.

47. Toth, 29.

48. The Writers' Union of Canada, "Diversity in Canadian Writing: A 2020-2021 Snapshot," 2022, 5.

49 The Writers' Union of Canada, 5.

50. The Writer's Union of Canada, 4.

counter-institutions that would legitimate alternate ways of knowing and structures of editing," Godard explains.[51] In an industry that remains fraught with the legacies of oppression, we still need responsive, adaptable publishing spaces in which to legitimate new ways of knowing and structures of editing.

1.4 Intersectional Feminist Futures

Room magazine and *Fireweed* both underwent decades-long processes of transformation that led them away from white feminism toward an intersectional feminist vision. These experiences contain many valuable lessons as we consider the future of feminist publishing.

Opening the Editorial Doors at *Fireweed*

At *Fireweed,* collaboration and a feminist commitment to shared governance coupled with editorial independence were key to achieving some of the most authentic and meaningful progress toward anti-racist and 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive goals in the Canadian publishing landscape during the 1980s and 1990s. Its approach has similarities to *Room*'s contemporary Partnership Program, which is the basis for some of the recommendations at the end of this report on next steps for feminist publishers, and as such is worth examining.

Fireweed began as a collective of four women in 1972 and is notable for being the only one of the periodicals in this report to have included diversity in its mandate from its inception, aspiring to publish a wide range of voices and specifically mentioning culture and class as areas of focus.[52] However, *Fireweed*'s collective remained all-white for its first four years and did not live up to its unique mandate. Writer and editor Makeda Silvera, who joined *Fireweed* in 1982, was a driving force behind the steps the collective did eventually take to include and represent women of colour, particularly the establishment of a guest-edited special issues policy that went on to produce issues about a variety of communities.[53]

In a "challenging" process that took several years, involved a frustrating false start for women of colour involved, and required the collective to "face their prejudices and reassess their position and values as editors," the *Fireweed* collective learned to bring on collectives of

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51. Godard, "Feminist Periodicals," 213.

52. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 72.

53. Markowicz, 153.

guest editors and relinquish full editorial control.[54] Following this, *Fireweed* went on to explicitly state in their editorial policy that they "would not accept submissions that were racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, classist, or homophobic."[55] Between 1982 and their last issue in 2002, *Fireweed* produced fifteen special issues dedicated to specific marginalized identities, including issues centring lesbian women, women of colour, Native women, Asian-Canadian women, Jewish women, Black lesbians, sex workers, fat women, and, in 2000, Trans/Sribes, an issue of works by trans people.[56] In a model that was unique and ahead of its time, *Fireweed* grew under a diversified collective to do critical work uplifting the voices of Canadian writers marginalized on multiple axes.

While there is some information on women of colour in Canadian feminist publishing, *Fireweed*'s trans writing issue Trans/Scribes is the only pre-2010 mention of trans people found amongst all of the materials studied for this report. Additionally, little to no mention of disabled communities made it into the various primary and secondary sources consulted on feminist literary magazines in Canada. There is a near-total lack of data on the involvement of trans and disabled writers in Canadian feminist publishing from 1970-2000, and very little data available even after this time. This makes it difficult to asses the impact trans and disabled writers had on the feminist movement in Canada, provide context for the needs of trans and disabled writers today, and make recommendations based in sound data. This would be a fruitful avenue for further study that would support efforts to make evidence-based changes in the future.

Embracing Intersectional Feminism at *Room* Magazine

Room collective members began to make a concerted effort to disrupt homogeny in the collective and publication in the mid-2010s. According to Meghan Bell, who was involved with Room from 2011 to 2019, *Room* had by then acquired a "reputation" for being inclusive of queer women.[57] Rose Morris, editor with *Room* for eleven years and current board member, shared that the collective met in 2014 because "the idea to change *Room*'s tagline to

54. Markowicz, 170.

55. Markowicz, 171.

56. Markowicz, 238-243.

57. Meghan Bell, interview with the author, February 13 2024.

something more gender-inclusive had just been brought up for the first time." Morris believes the collective "had already been publishing trans people's work for years," but the tagline was still Canada's Oldest Literary Journal By And About Women. It was far from a unanimous decision; some collective members "left shortly after that conversation emerged because [they] disagreed with publishing the work of trans and gender diverse folks." *Room* emerged from these conversations in mid-2015 with a younger collective, a new tagline—Literature, Art, and Feminism Since 1975—and an explicitly trans-inclusive submissions policy.

This was just the start of the changes. Morris shares that after this change, the majority of the collective "were committed to intersectional feminism," but that "the collective really started to diversify in a meaningful way, and, in my opinion, become more radical and frankly publish better and more exciting work, around 2016 or 2017." Morris says much of this change was driven by Managing Editor Chelene Knight's "dedication to finding ways to reach out to marginalized communities and encourage submissions from writers who might otherwise not have found the magazine or known they were welcome within its pages,"[58] something Knight recalls doing very intentionally. Thinking about what it meant to have an authentically diverse collective, Knight says the team "realized we have to transform everything, even our approach. Where are we showing up if we want to call in a specific group of people? Where are they and how can we craft a message that is going to speak directly to them?"[59] All but two collective members were white around this time, and publisher Meghan Bell identified three main reasons: recruitment was largely done within members' existing communities, which were white; being on the collective was all-volunteer and labour-intensive, and those with the time and resources to donate were disproportionately more likely to be white and upper middle class; and, finally:

> "The third reason, which [then-collective member Nailah King] pointed out very accurately, is that people of colour didn't feel comfortable joining the collective because they saw that it was all white… [Nailah] pointed out, people see all these white names on the collective, they see all this white content in the magazine, and they think, they're not going to publish me, so they don't even try to submit."

58. Rose Morris, e-mail message to the author, February 14, 2024.

59. Chelene Knight, audio message to the author, February 17, 2024.

The collective put out a Women of Colour issue as "a big way of trying to signal, we want submissions from women of colour." The collective also actively worked on recruiting women of colour to the collective, and then made the move to add their photos to the site so that the diversity of the organization was clearly visible to writers of colour interested in *Room*. With gusto, Bell shared that "it worked." The Women of Colour issue had received more submissions than any other issue in recent memory, even though the submitter pool was restricted.[60]

Since then, *Room*'s collective has radically diversified, and is now over 50% BIPOC and over one-third 2SLGBTQ+. Of the eight issues edited in 2022 and 2023, six were led by BIPOC editors from a variety of backgrounds; four were led by trans and/or nonbinary editors; and, likely thanks to these changes, the content in *Room*'s pages has been consistently diverse. We did not run a campaign or set a quota to achieve this; it is simply a typical year at *Room* now. In addition to a generally more diverse publishing schedule year-round, since 2018, *Room* has put out special issues themed Queer, Indigenous Brilliance, and Around the Table: Asian Voices, each edited by representative teams from the collective. From 2018-2024, *Room* has partnered with the Indigenous Brilliance Collective, Art Ecosystem Collective and workshop series, Hush Harbour Press, and Unbound Reading Series for Black writers as part of outreach and events programming. Finally, under the leadership of the most recent team, *Room* drafted an accessibility policy in collaboration with Art Ecosystem, created an accessible event-planning guide, and is in the process of creating reflowable and text-to-speech compatible ePub versions of all recent and future issues of the magazine.

The Continued Need for Feminist Magazines

At the height of the Women in Print Movement in 1982, Eleanor Wachtel observed that there was "remarkably little overlap between [feminist] publications. Each seems to have defined its own particularity, whether it be regional, topical, or philosophic."[61] The industry has lost this variety. *CV2,* which was reborn as a feminist magazine during the Women in Print movement, continues to publish, but stopped defining itself as a feminist publication in 1998,[62] though the current mandate specifies that "a key component of our vision

60. Bell, interview.

61. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 14.

62. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 195.

for *CV2* centers around inclusivity" and "active inclusivity means seeking to diversify both our readership, and the kind of work we publish."[63] *Herizons*, a feminist general interest magazine that started as *The Manitoba Women's Newspaper* in 1979, continues to publish today.[64] More recently, *Canthius* magazine (2015-present) and *Minola Review* (2016-2022) have published as explicitly feminist magazines, and *Plentitude* magazine (2012-present) has emerged as "Canada's only queer literary magazine."[65]

Room remains the only Canadian feminist literary magazine that emerged during the Women in Print movement still publishing under an explicitly feminist mandate. The field greatly narrowed at the turn of the 21st century, but rather than shuttering its doors, *Room* has continued publishing, expanding its mandate and serving the needs of underrepresented writers across the country to this day.

The Little Magazine: A History and Bibliography claims that the instability of literary magazines is a natural part of the publishing cycle, and that "for the most part, each magazine serves its separate purpose before it dies: that purpose generally is to give finished form and some degree of distribution to the personality and the convictions of its editor or editors."[66] Yet Todd Zuniga of *Opium Magazine*—which itself stopped publishing in around 2013—explains one of the many reasons literary magazines might value longevity:

> "I've been published in a couple of magazines that now don't exist—so what does that mean to my story? Does that mean I need to take them out of my bio? I think it means so much to writers to be in a magazine that, first of all, they're excited to be in and, secondly, that is going to be around so they can feel proud of that—not when they get published, but three years down the road when they meet somebody else that has been published in that magazine."[67]

As the sense that women writers have "made it" spread and feminist literary magazines shuttered their doors, both the continued inclusion of diverse voices in the industry and the backlog of published works in those magazines became at risk. While *Room*'s early issues remain out of print, we are an ongoing organization with our own archives, an office, and

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63. "About," CV2*,* accessed February 11, 2024, https://contemporaryverse2.ca/about/.

64. "About," Herizons*,* accessed February 11, 2024, https://herizons.ca/about.

65. "About," Plentitude*,* accessed February 11 2024, https://plenitudemagazine.ca/mandate/.

66. Allen, Hoffman, and Ulrich, *The Little Magazine,* 6.

67. Burch et al., "A Roundtable on the Contemporary Literary Magazine," 46.

staff, and this led to the digitization of *Room*'s archives across a period of nine years. In 2015, collective members donated their time to scanning and reading older issues of *Room* for the 40th Anniversary Anthology, which itself commemorates the writers featured in the pages of *Room* from 1975 to 2015. This also resulted in scans of all of *Room*'s back issues available as digital PDFs, and in 2023 the staff were able to make these free-to-read for all collective members and available to purchase on *Room*'s website, with the addition of all contributor names in the history of *Room* now appearing in search hits.

Feminist literary magazines also have an ongoing contribution to make beyond preserving their back issues. These publications have a far broader goal than "to give finished form and some degree of distribution to the personality and the convictions of its editor or editors."[68] The magazines are generally not edited by a single editor or even a single editorial team, and the editorial perspective is constantly evolving. Feminist literary magazines have more "personalities and convictions"[69] to share with the world, are far from having completed all of their goals, and still have critical work left to do. The greater vision of the magazine is one of social change, and the industry is still in need of changing.

1.5 Conclusion

History can seem inevitable in retrospect: a line, from A to B to C. In reality, a complex mix of factors and, above all, an immense amount of thought and labour went into carving out the first spaces for women and gender-diverse writers in publishing, and then for growing and expanding those spaces to become truly inclusive and anti-oppressive. *Room* and its contemporaries were the product of thousands of frustrating closed doors, indignities suffered, dreams jotted down, passionate conversations shared, and nascent visions nurtured.

Those visions have grown to become a part of a radically transformed industry. Though far from universally followed, philosophies of anti-oppression have reached the highest echelons of publishing. Slowly, the gears of change turn. Feminist literary magazines ensure the fresh voices of the industry are diverse, and that those voices are nurtured with as much expertise and care as editors bring to mainstream writers and stories. Though still flawed, the

68. Allen, Hoffman, and Ulrich, *The Little Magazine,* 6.

69. Allen, Hoffman, and Ulrich, 6.

diverse and vibrant literary ecosystem beginning to emerge today is one of the legacies of feminist literary magazines.

Though *Room*'s commitment to intersectional feminism and centring BIPOC, 2SLGBTQ+, and disabled voices is recent, it is still at the forefront of the work of anti-oppression being done in the broader publishing industry—this time, largely without contemporaries. *Room* is one of the few magazines—and the only literary magazine—from the Canadian Women in Print Movement to have survived with its feminist mandate intact well into the twenty-first century, and its future is far from secure. As *Room* has confronted its own historic inequities, the homogenizing effects of relying on unpaid labour have become increasingly evident. Building an equitable workplace and structure of governance moving forward has become a high priority. To become an organization capable of living up to our intersectional feminist mandate, we have undergone numerous internal changes that have only increased the already sizeable struggle to fund our operations, putting our very existence once more in jeopardy, as it has been many times throughout our history. The challenge remains what it was fifty years ago: to survive without compromising our principles, and to leave some energy left over for the work that we showed up to do in the first place.

Chapter 2: Financing Canadian Feminist Literary Magazines: Money vs. Mandate

2.1 Introduction

> "Feminist media in Canada operate in a more or less continuous state of financial crisis which saps their energies and shortens their effective life span; this is a period when many have died or are going under."[1] —Eleanor Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media"

The above statement from Eleanor Wachtel's 1982 report could have been made forty-two years later. In June of 2023, *Room* undertook a $20,000 crowdfunding effort to help us out of a deficit that threatened our ability to pay staff and editors and meet grant requirements, and which could have returned us to an all- or mostly-volunteer organization and undone a decade of progress on the path to making *Room* an equitable workplace.

Canadian feminist literary magazines rely on largely the same funding sources as other Canadian cultural magazines, though the feminist mandate can introduce unique challenges to accessing some of these revenue streams. Small-circulation literary magazine publishing in Canada is supported by grants from governments, universities, and foundations; sales of subscriptions and of single issues through newsstands or direct mail; ad revenues; and donations and fundraising.[2] The exact order of this list varies across periodicals and through the years, but its contents have largely remained the same.[3] This section of the report will go over the various revenue sources employed by Canadian feminist literary magazines and touch on the expenses that have historically been the most challenging. For purposes of clarity, I specify the relevant fiscal year rather than the calendar year in this section when discussing *Room* in particular, to remain consistent with existing records. *Room*'s fiscal year begins October 1st.

2.2 Government Funding

> "To harness their power as the advance guard, feminist periodicals require financial support; the mainstream press does not require this support for the same reason that

1. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 4.

2. Wachtel, 38.

3. Lit Mag Collective, Zoom Meeting on Budgets, June 23, 2023.

> it cannot advance the culture in the same way: its fortunes are tied to existing beliefs about the status of women through its reliance on advertising revenue."[4] —Tessa Jordan, *Feminist Acts:* Branching Out *Magazine and the Making of Canadian Feminism*

The Canadian artistic and publishing landscape was forever altered by the 1951 Massey Report, which "made possible the notion of state funding for both the arts and universities, ideas that are now just as Canadian as publicly funded health care."[5] The Massey Report specifically mentioned that Canada needed its own literary tradition, and that Canadian publishing was an important part of supporting and canonizing this literature;[6] ironically, the sentiment is echoed in the first issue of *Room* about a women's literary tradition.[7] This investment in the arts was a nationalist attempt to create a distinctly Canadian culture—one that had no space for the rich Indigenous cultures being eradicated within Canadian colonial borders. The Massey Report, the subsequently established Canada Council for the Arts, and the governmental policies implemented in its wake tried to create a Canadian cultural identity that eradicated Indigenous arts and culture, defined art by elitist and Eurocentric standards, perpetuated systemic racism, and focused overwhelmingly on works produced by men.[8] These organizations have changed significantly over the years, but the idea of producing a Canadian cultural voice continues to underpin their work.

In 1970, parliament tabled the "groundbreaking" Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada.[9] In the aftermath of the report, federal funding became a more achievable goal for feminist organizations. In contrast to their American counterparts, Canadian feminists were largely more open to accepting "action by the state as a means of social change," and "even the most radical feminist groups" were open to receiving state

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4. Jordan, *Feminist Acts,* 55.

5. Owais Lightwala, "All I Want for Christmas Is a New Massey Commission," *Canadian Theatre Review* 187 (2021): 94.

6. Patricia Demers, *Women's Writing in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2019), 15.

7. Laurie Bagley, Lora Lippert , Gavla Reid, and Gail vanVarseveld, "Editorial," *Room Magazine* 1, no.1, Spring 1975.

8. Lightwala, "All I Want for Christmas," 94.

9. Government of Canada, "Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada," April 14, 2021. https://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/en/commemorations-celebrations/royal-commission-status-women-canada.html.

funding.[10] International Women's Year (IWY) in 1975 provided some opportunities for those feminist groups to enter the state funding pool. *Room* launched in 1975 with IWY funding, and *Branching Out* eventually received a grant for a special issue that year. However, despite long consultation with their local office, *Branching Out* received only 12% of the grant funding they requested for IWY, and even that was only after an initial rejection followed by a wave of support letters to the state from *Branching Out* readers led to a revised decision to grant partial funds.[11]

Some feminist magazines continued to receive funding following IWY, but it was spotty and it came with strings attached. The funding bodies in charge of supporting Canadian art remained entrenched in the status quo, and "as of 1982… the phenomenon of "invisible colleges", i.e. male academics being members of culture-making bodies such as the Canada Council, engendered the underrepresentation of women artists in the country."[12] Funding was restricted from the experimental feminist magazine *(f.)lip* for aesthetic considerations, *Fireweed* for supposedly not meeting standards of quality, and from *Branching Out* for not being sufficiently literary or artistic, despite their publishing both visual art and poetry in each issue.[13] In 1987 *Herizons*, a general-interest feminist magazine, lost government funding after a letter-writing campaign by anti-choice activist group REAL women to a newly instated Conservative government.[14] As late as 1989, The Secretary of State's Women's Program did not allow projects which "promote a view on sexual orientation."[15] Feminists had to contend with "an unwritten preference for the "apolitical arts" at best, and outright rejection based on political stances at worst.[16] Feminist magazines were effectively presented with the choice to self-censor or go under.

As the most strictly literary of all of Canada's feminist magazines, *Room* had more luck than its peers. *Room* was one of the few that received an operating grant after International

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10. Marshall, "Communication as Politics," 466.

11. Jordan, *Feminist Acts,* 22.

12. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 61.

13. Markowicz, 57.

14. Godard, "Feminist Periodicals," 214.

15. Marshall, "Communication as Politics," 467.

16. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 57.

Women's Year, and was able to become a repeat recipient. Founding editor Gayla Reid recounted:

> "We had the International Women's Year funding for a year only. At the end of that year, George Woodcock, renowned author and anarchist, wrote a stellar letter for our first Canada Council application. I suspect it opened doors. And the Canada Council officers were unfailingly supportive."[17]

This new feminist collective was able to enter the ranks of publications receiving stable funding. We will likely never know if Reid's guess was right, and if *Room* would have had a harder time securing support without a respected man acting as its champion.

A thorough review of *Room*'s grant applications to the Canada Council for the Arts, letters received from the Canada Council for the Arts, and Financial statements both in the *Room of One's Own* fonds at Simon Fraser University's Special Collections and in the internal digital archives at *Room Magazine* reveals much about the story of *Room*'s relationship to federal funding bodies.

Room's first Canada Council grant was $5,000 in FY1977 (worth $22,679 in 2023). Actuals are not available for FY1977, but this made up just over 50% of the projected budget included in the application for the grant, helping *Room* cover printing and binding, administrative costs ("stationary, office supplies and equipment, long-distance phone calls, etc."), contributor payments (including translators), distribution, and advertising.[18] While there are some gaps in the record, grant applications, grant receipt letters, and financial statements in the *Room of One's Own* fonds at Simon Fraser University Special Collections do confirm Eleanor Wachtel's insight that *Room* was "locked into a very small grant for its first few years, limiting the growth of the publication."[19]

Figure 1 compares *Room*'s Canada Council grant and *Room*'s expenses for years between FY1978 and FY1999 in which reported actuals are available (as opposed to only projected expenses). For the most part *Room*'s Canada Council grant grew incrementally over the years, but it also decreased in relation to *Room*'s expenses. The dollar amount fluctuated up and

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17. Golob, "Riding the Wave," 20.

18. Application to the Canada Council from *Room* for FY1977, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

19. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 43.

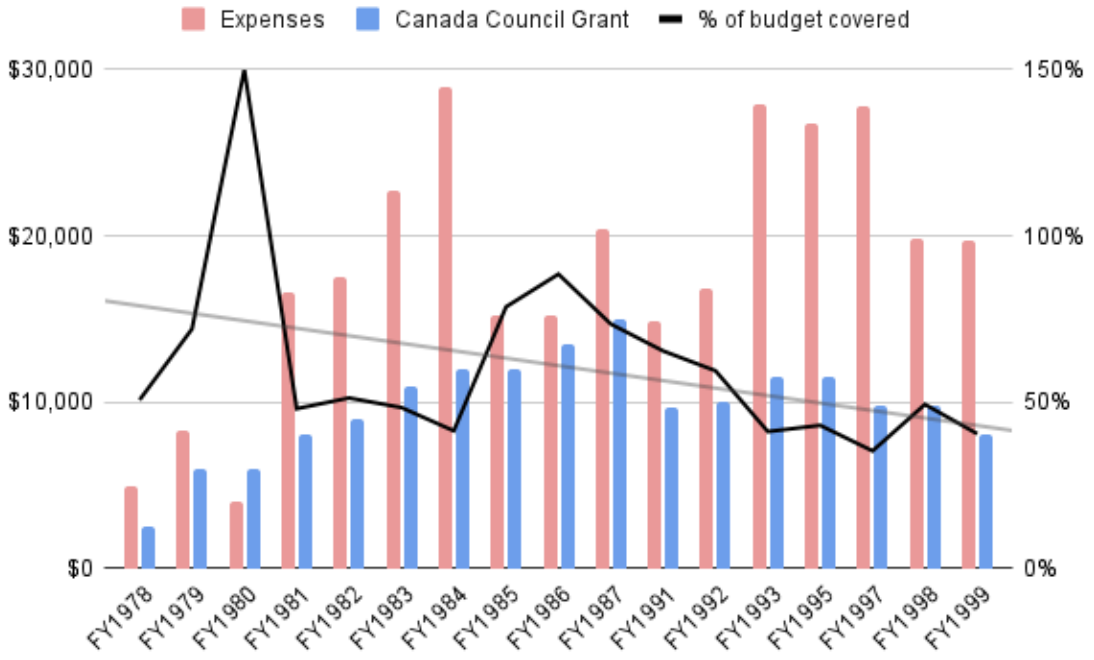

Figure 1. *Room* Magazine Actual Expenses compared with Canada Council Core Grant from years between FY1978 and FY1999.

down over the following decades, but Canada Council provided between 40% and 80% of *Room*'s funding until 2000, with only one notable drop for the first few years of the 1990s, when federal funding cuts led Canada Council to reduce *Room*'s grant by 25%.[20] After that, *Room* saw some disruptions to its institutional funding in the early 2000s caused by being significantly behind on the publication schedule,[21] as will be discussed in the section Staffing Feminist Literary Magazines. This was the last interruption to *Room*'s Canada Council funding.

Since the early 2000s, *Room* has regularly received operating funding from the Canada Council, the Canada Periodical Fund, the BC Arts Council, and the City of Vancouver. Canada Periodical Fund, BC Arts Council, and City of Vancouver grant funding have increased incrementally each funding period, helping the organization handle inflation, rising

20. Letter to *Room* from Canada Council, November 29, 1993, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

21. Letter to *Room* from Canada Council, December 17, 2001, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

costs of printing and distribution, and slowly increasing editorial honoraria to more equitable amounts. *Room*'s Canada Council grant also increased incrementally each year after being reinstated, though it took until 2015 to reach the high point it had hit in FY1988. From 2016 through to 2020, Room's Canada Council grant increased at a much faster rate as it launched the Growing Room Literary Festival and transitioned from an all-volunteer team to one with paid staff. The transition to paying staff, and the role played by grants, will be discussed at length in the section Equitable Pay as an Anti-Oppressive Practice: Adding Paid Staff to Room Magazine.

As of the writing of this report, *Room*'s consistent institutional funding has allowed it to publish for forty-nine years. Specifically, *Room* has had access to unrestricted operating funds, which for the most part can be used toward all magazine-related expenses except deficits. Even though it dropped, *Room*'s Canada Council grant survived the 1990s federal funding cuts by a Conservative government that eventually led to the shutting down of *Fireweed.*[22] Comparing *Room, (f.)lip, Fireweed, CV2*, and *Tessera,* Marcin Markowicz credits *Room*'s longevity at least in part to its "relatively stable financial situation."[23] Though it is nearly impossible to pinpoint exact causation at this scale, the stability of *Room*'s arts grant funding could very well be the reason *Room* remains one of the few feminist magazines, and the only Canadian feminist literary magazine, to have survived well into the new millennium.

2.3 Earned Revenues

> "For the fraught situation, negotiated repeatedly, is that support is needed from the very economy that a feminist project of social transformation contests."[24] —Barbara Godard, "Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value: The Canadian Context"

Though subsidized by the state, Canadian small-circulation arts magazines, including feminist literary magazines, also bring in earned revenues. Major categories include subscriptions (in later years, including contests) and single-issue sales (direct, bookstore, and newsstand), advertising revenue, and donations and fundraising. Examining the challenges and successes of *Room*'s earned revenues and the trends experienced by its peers reveals the

22. Godard, "Feminist Periodicals," 217.

23. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 82.

24. Godard, "Feminist Periodicals," 212.

inherent tension between fulfilling a feminist publishing mandate and surviving in a capitalist economy.

Subscriptions

Canadian feminist literary magazines are small circulation magazines in one of the largest countries in the world by land mass, which comes with certain inherent challenges. As Eleanor Wachtel neatly sums up in Feminist Print Media:

> "Feminist publications are subject to all the disadvantages the magazine industry as a whole experiences in Canada—a relatively small population stretched out across 4,000 miles; saturation of the market by American publications; foreign-dominated distribution; rising material and postage costs, and so on."[25]

Circulation has always remained low for feminist literary magazines. In 1982, "most feminist periodicals circulate[d] fewer than 2,000 copies."[26] According to data gathered from Canada Council applications in the *Room of One's Own* fonds at Simon Fraser University's special collections and from *Room*'s internal documentation, *Room*'s circulation has generally fluctuated between 700 and 2,000 copies per issue from its founding in 1975 to today. The first record in FY1977 lists approximately 1,000 copies per issue,[27] with a low of 485 in 1985 and a high of 2,735 at the height of the Growing Room Festival, the largest event *Room* has ever put on, in FY2019.[28]

It was, and still remains, extremely difficult to compete with American publications. Publishing is an industry of scale, and the per-unit cost of a small circulation magazine is exponentially higher than the per-unit cost of any magazine printing higher numbers. This puts the profit margin on each issue slim to none. Wachtel reported feminist magazines sometimes keeping their subscription rates "well below cost,"[29] a practice that can only be maintained with either advertising revenue (low for feminist magazines—see "Advertising"), or the support of subsidies. This is still an issue forty-two years after Wachtel's report; until a

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25. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 35.

26. Wachtel, 17.

27. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, March 19, 1979, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

28. *Room* internal circulation data.

29. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 39.

price change in late 2022, *Room* had been selling at the same cover price since 2015 and was absorbing a 40% increase in printing costs from FY2021 to FY2022. When I joined Room in 2022, there was no regularly-maintained costing sheet to monitor the relationship between the cover price and the cost of production, likely a result of staff turnover and lack of experience, which will be discussed in the section Staffing Feminist Literary Magazines.

Contests

The largest change to subscription sales in *Room*'s history has been the introduction of contests in which the entry fee is the cost of a subscription to the magazine. In 1994, *Room* collective members took a "calculated risk" and ran a contest with a cash prize. This first contest had "about a hundred entries, which covers the cost of the prize and the subscriptions to which entrants are entitled."[30] The success of this first contest was followed by yearly contests at *Room,* with the exception of a few years following the collective turnover in 1998.[31] By FY2007, contest entry fees accounted for 28% of all subscription sales, growing incrementally year by year until, from FY2014 to present, contest entry fees have settled at about 50-60% of *Room* subscription sales on average; see figure 2. At a Lit Mag Collective meeting on budgets in June 2023, a group of contemporary Canadian literary magazines shared that the majority had contests, and of those that did, contests made up anywhere from 40% to 60% of their subscription revenue on average.[32]

Contest entry fees are controversial in some circles, and when contests saw a jump in FY2017, then-publisher Meghan Bell reports that *Room*'s collective had lengthy discussions about the potential inclusion of free entires open to writers for whom the entry fee was prohibitive. Bell understood the collective's concerns around accessibility, but as the person responsible for balancing the books at the time, she was very aware of how large a role contests played in *Room*'s financial health and was against the policy.[33] Eventually the

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30. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*,August 8, 1994, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

31. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, March 30 1998, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

32. Lit Mag Collective, Zoom Meeting on Budgets, June 23, 2023.

33. Bell, interview.

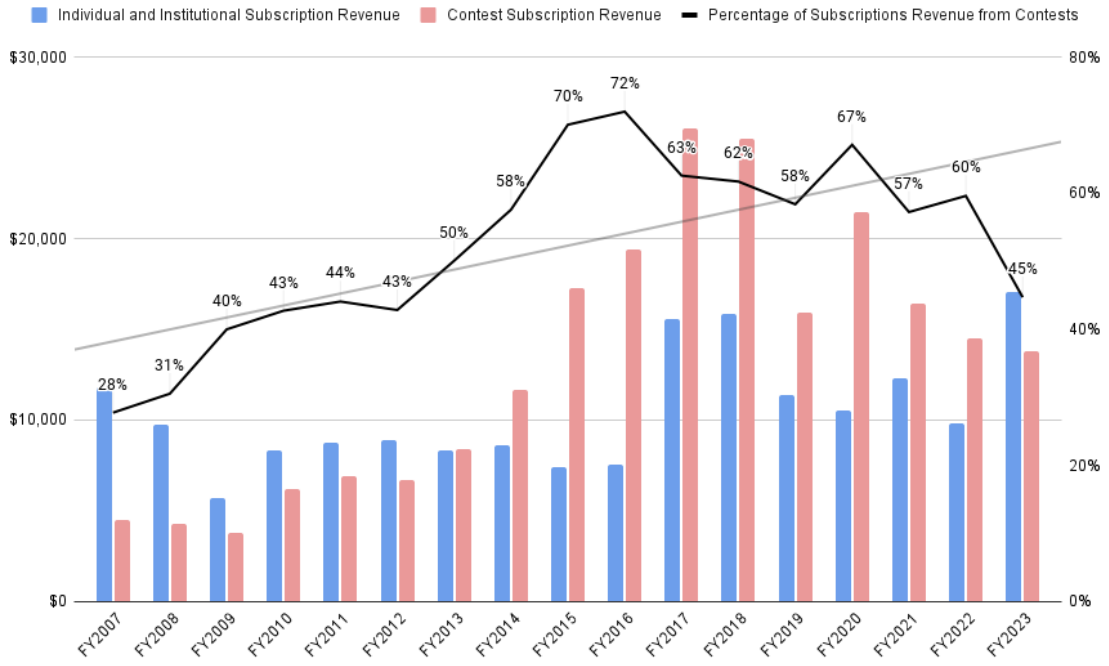

Figure 2. *Room* Magazine FY2007-FY2023 contest subscriptions versus individual/ institutional subscriptions revenues, including percent of total subscriptions revenues from contests.

collective decided to offer limited free entires, and as of this report *Room* offers a maximum of ten free entries per contest upon request.

Contests are a way in which literary magazines make up for the fact that the vast majority of their audience is made up of writers who hope to be published, rather than readers who wish only to purchase the magazine. At *Room* specifically, they do have the benefit of connecting emerging writers with more established writers, who are hired to judge the contests. Contests provide a career milestone for winning writers, as well as a cash prize and an honorarium to the judges; financial opportunities for writers are significant in such an underpaid industry. Despite this, the primary motivation for continuing to run contests remains their impact on subscription sales.

Contests are a compromise for a feminist organization like *Room;* they don't fit neatly into the philosophies from which feminist literary magazines emerged. Yet, we need contest entry fees to survive long enough to continue providing those very opportunities. By providing a paid opportunity for an established writer and a career milestone for new writers, connecting

submitters to a potential mentor and peer in the industry, and increasing accessibility through limited free entries, *Room* has made contests work within its mandate as part of its tightrope walk between feminist praxis and survival in a capitalist economy.

Single-Issue and Newsstand/Bookstore Sales

The Canadian Magazine Publishers Association (CMPA, now known as Magazines Canada) was integral to feminist magazines' ability to reach newsstands and bookstores, which is critical for visibility, if not always for revenues. The CMPA brought many feminist periodicals to Canadian newsstands that would otherwise not have been picked up by national distributors because of their small size, and even created promotions to support some following the closure of three feminist titles in one year.[34]

However, given distribution costs, widespread returns, and industry standard discounts for bookstores, newsstand and bookstore sales were a challenge for magazines with slim margins. In her report on feminist publishing, Wachtel called newsstand and bookstore sales "a form of exposure and promotion" for feminist periodicals, rather than a source of income, true of most small-circulation magazines.[35] In her Update of Feminist periodicals, the median[36] revenues from newsstand and bookstore sales made up a meagre 10% of sales revenues, and Wachtel mentions that "returns from bookstores and newsstands are a significant problem for most small publishers."[37]

Never high, newsstand sales have taken a further hit in recent years. Accounting for about 25% of sales revenue for *Room* in FY1977,[38] newsstand sales dropped down to 18% of sales revenue in FY2009 and 11% in FY2015. In 2020, *Room* lost the bulk of its newsstand distribution when Barnes & Noble closed down its magazine program, going from 666

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34. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 55.

35. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 38.

36. Throughout her reports, Wachtel cites the median as a "typical" publication, as a few outlier publications ran much larger numbers and had very different profiles (Wachtel 1985, 20).

37. "Update on Feminist Periodicals" by Eleanor Wachtel, 1985, CA ON0034 10-075-S2-F4, Deborah Yaffe Collection, University of Ottawa Women's Archives and Special Collections, 21.

38. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, March 19, 1979, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

issues ordered by the American distributor in January 2019 to 43 issues ordered in December 2020.

Magazines Canada remains a consistent source of newsstand distribution, and direct outreach to independent bookstores was one of the strategies *Room* implemented in 2023, though the benefits were expected to be advertisement, exposure, and industry connections rather than significant direct income. As newsstand sales continue to decline, a potentially immense impact could be made for small-circulation literary magazines if bookstores reconsidered how literary magazines are shelved.

From a production standpoint, literary magazines belong with their brethren on the glossy racks; from the perspective of a consumer, on the other hand, the experience of reading most literary magazines is more like that of reading an anthology. At every sales market I've attended as *Room*'s publisher, without fail, numerous visitors flipping through our pages struggled to categorize us and reacted with surprise and confusion once I explained that we are a magazine. Many literary magazines, *Room* included, now publish themed issues, enhancing the experience of reading a cohesive, curated selection of literary content, laid out with the textual simplicity of a book rather than with the media-rich, segmented spreads of many magazines. It could potentially be appropriate to shelve literary magazines with anthologies rather than with general interest magazines and tabloids. It is beyond the scope of this report to examine how such a change might be implemented or even recommended, but it is a potential future avenue of inquiry.

Direct single-issue sales are a much more significant portion of sales revenue in the 2020s than newsstand sales. This is one of the avenues where *Room,* a magazine with a forty-nine-year publishing history, has an advantage, as a substantial number of in-stock back issues remain available online and are a regular source of semi-passive income. In 2023, the staff made all back issues of *Room* available as PDFs and added contributor names to issue webpages for increased search hits. The staff are currently working on creating accessible ePubs for issues from 2020 onward. These sales help sustain new issues of *Room* and keep a valuable repository of feminist literature available to read.

Advertising

Low circulation is one of the many factors limiting advertising revenue for feminist literary magazines. Historically, advertisers did not bring their business to small circulation literary magazines because of both their low circulation and the quality of their audience, which "refers to the spending power of the readers, their disposable income, and their likeliness to dispose of it."[39] Feminist magazines were often directly opposed to the lucrative advertisements many other magazines targeted to women readers. Popular advertisements stereotyped women as "barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen" and *Branching Out* contracted with a specific agency that refused to place ads with floating body parts[40]—that is, the women's headless bodies often found in perfume, car, and drink advertisements. Ethical considerations meant the most lucrative advertisements geared toward women were not available to these periodicals, both because editors would not run them and audiences would not respond well to them. Running the types of advertisements that kept magazines profitable would be directly counter to feminist magazines' entire purpose.

Advertisements remain a minimal source of income for *Room* today, and a group of literary magazines at a Lit Mag Collective meeting shared that this was typical.[41] Ad exchanges with other magazines remain an important component of our print ad schedule. The combination of the small circulation typical of literary magazines and a feminist mandate made advertising a poor source of income for Canadian feminist literary magazines. Many ads that made it in were part of a robust network of ad exchanges, and "ads in small mags are often simply a form of donation, a sentimental show of support for the (struggling) enterprise."[42] Advertising has been a small part of sustaining literary, and especially feminist literary, magazines.

There is a silver lining: never reliant upon advertising in the first place, small circulation magazines—particularly literary or feminist ones—were not hit as hard by the industry-wide collapse of the advertising subsidy model as larger magazines. In fact, the growth of web advertising has helped keep advertising revenues largely flat across time, even when print

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39. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 37.

40. Jordan, 86-87.

41. Lit Mag Collective, Zoom Meeting on Budgets, June 23, 2023.

42. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 38.

advertising revenue dropped. The same content limits remain on the types of advertising the organization will accept, but the web provides an opportunity to reach beyond our limited circulation and increase revenues by taking on ads more frequently.

Room's online presence has provided a new and significant source of advertising both via the *Room* website and the newsletter, which was launched in 2010 with an initial 160 subscribers and surpassing 10,000 subscribers and a 44% open rate as of early 2024. The Fédération Internationale de la Presse Périodique/International Federation of Periodical Publishers (FIPP) claims that "at this current moment newsletters are almost unparalleled both in generating audience insights and the potential they harbour to make inroads into niche segments and interests."[43] FIPP attributes the rapid growth of newsletters to the culture introduced by Substack, and shares that "87% of publishers and marketers [are] actively investing in email and 94% [are] scaling their email programs in 2021."[44] Newsletter advertising is a place of great potential area of growth for small-circulation magazines, both for in-house advertising efforts and as a venue to increase advertising revenue.

Web advertising is more fraught. The "cookie-pocalypse"—the ongoing phasing-out of third-party cookies by Chrome, following on the heels of Firefox and Safari—has been called "an extinction-level event" by marketers and advertisers,[45] but the rapid changes to web use during the pandemic and in the wake of these updates still contain many avenues for innovation and new revenue streams. FIPP identifies the specificity of periodicals' audiences as a valuable asset, explaining that:

> "What third-party data held by others offered was aggregations layered upon each other to create customer attributes rather than people. It worked for Big Tech, but not for everybody else. What if brands got together with publishers to provide smaller groups of customers with higher-calibre, increasingly personalized experiences? 'To replace indiscriminate targeting with real value at every step of the customer journey,' as the Adobe report puts it, with first party data acquired by publishers would be the foundation for strategic partner- ships."[46]

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43. Juan Señor, Jayant Sriram, and Inês Bravo, "The Reinvention of a Medium: The Newsletter Economy," *Innovation in Media 2022-23 World Report,* 2023, 27.

44. Señor, Sriram, and Bravo, 24.

45. Juan Señor, Jayant Sriram, and Inês Bravo, "Beyond the Third-Party Data Play: How to Build Your Own First-Party Data Operation," *Innovation in Media 2022-23 World Report,* 2023, 11.

46. Señor, Sriram, and Bravo, 12.

This presents both challenges and opportunities. Fran Wills, the CEO of the Local Media Consortium, explains that "small publishers in particular will feel that they cannot compete in this world… without third-party cookies and targeting, they don't have the scale to compete." However, literary magazines may find some success with encouraging log-ins to provide detailed audience segments[47] (as long as these are accompanied by comprehensive data protection policies), and mission-driven publications have the added advantage of invested audiences: "over the last few years, successful media companies have transitioned away from the transactional print-advertising model to one built on reader-relationships."[48] The word "relationship" is not always used in a way that would align with a feminist publication's definition in the context of advertising, but forming meaningful relationships with our readers and writers has always been a high priority at *Room*. Those relationships may be a way to provide value to advertisers who share our principles while sharing genuinely relevant content with readers and writers.

Advertising revenue has not been a reliable source of income for feminist and small-circulation Canadian magazines because of a small size and at times "low quality" of audience, as well as because of ethical considerations. However, moving forward, the wider reach of online advertising and the niche, invested audiences of feminist literary magazines and similar publications may provide promising opportunities to grow advertising revenues, contributing to overall organizational stability.

Donations and Fundraising

For a not-for-profit industry driven by a mission and values, there has not been much coverage of the role of donations and fundraising in Canadian feminist publishing. In 1985, Wachtel reports the median periodical received a mere $105 in donations (compared to a median $4,000 in subscriptions.[49] *Room* reportedly received $200 in donations in the same year. This was a small amount even at the time, making up less than 1% of the year's budget.[50] *(f.)lip*—experimental and independent—had no government funding and seems to

47. Señor, Sriram, and Bravo, 18.

48. Señor, Sriram, and Bravo, 12.

49. Wachtel, 21-22.

50. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 83.

have been unique in that donations were a significant part of its budget. *(f.)lip* named their donors "Matrons," starting the first issue in 1987 with 36 Matrons and listing 72 one-time donors and 7 repeat donors by 1989.[51] However, there is no indication of a widespread culture of regular donations to Canadian feminist literary magazines.

Financial documents from the *Room of One's Own* fonds at Simon Fraser University Special Collections and from *Room*'s internal documents corroborates the lack of widespread public or corporate fundraising. With the exception of a few years in which there appear to have been fundraising efforts, such as the thirtieth anniversary in 2005 (appearing in FY2006) and the years of the Growing Room Literary Festival, donations have remained a small part of *Room*'s budget.

There are numerous potential reasons for this. The first has been explored under struggles with advertising: the audiences of Canadian feminist literary magazines were small and made up of an oppressed class with less independent financial wealth, and furthermore, Wachtel argues, with less familiarity giving financially to their political causes.[52] The second is that fundraising is laborious work, and feminist publishing is chronically short on labour. Editorial collective members were already busy doing the work of reading and selecting submissions, editing and communicating with contributors, formatting and typesetting, distributing, writing grant applications, filing taxes and other paperwork, and the dozens of other tasks that went into getting issues of their magazine into readers' hands. If feminist literary magazines had had the labour power for more canvassing and fundraising, there are many other likely places—such as promotion of subscriptions or expansion of advertising programs—where that labour might have been spent. This will be discussed further in the following section.

Room does now have some capacity for this labour, as it has two full-time staff and one part-time staff member, but this has only underscored just how labour-intensive fundraising is and how unsustainable it is without dedicated fundraising staff or volunteers. In 2023, *Room* launched a crowdfunder to help the organization recover from a deficit. Myself and the Marketing Lead both worked extensive overtime hours sending hundreds of emails, writing thousands of words, editing graphics, sourcing sponsor logos, creating social media content,

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51. Markowicz, 91.

52. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 40.

administering donor information, and mailing out perks. *Room* did not have the funds to compensate these hours, though we were able to take some paid time off following the fundraiser. It was a herculean effort that is not sustainable as a yearly activity, particularly as the fundraiser was only as successful as it was due to the imminent danger *Room* was in; just under half of the funds were raised over the course of two days after the staff extended the fundraiser and began a social media campaign headlined "If *Room* can't reach $20k, this spells *the end of the magazine as we know it.*"[53]

There is one regular source of donations that should be noted: anecdotal evidence suggests editors of feminist magazines invested their own money into their organizations, and writers have made gifts as well. *Branching Out* staff were known to have bought numerous gift subscriptions for friends as both an advertising tactic and financial contribution.[54] In a 1999 application from *Room* to Canada Council, *Room* acknowledged the "swallowing of some out-of-pocket expenses" as one of the many contributions made by collective members, and in a note to accompany the balance sheet it is noted that "many contributors have chosen to receive extra copies of the issue of the magazine containing their work or extended subscriptions to the magazine in lieu of an honorarium.[55] To this day, part of a contributor's payment at *Room* comes in the form of two contributor copies and a one-year subscription, and during the 2023 fundraiser, many contributors from both recent years and from *Room*'s past made donations, particularly in the "sponsor a future contributor" category. Several current collective members also donated to the crowdfunder, a few having made major donations. Additionally, between 2011 and 2019, some collective members donated honoraria directly back to the magazine to help sustain the rapid growth the organization was experiencing and increase its capacity to pay collective members who could not afford to work without honoraria.[56] Giving back is a widespread, if quiet, practice in an environment where volunteers and staff are often also the most passionate readers and supporters of their organizations.

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53. @roommagazine, "If Room Can't Reach $20k," Instagram, May 21, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cs6vx7FNROo/?img_index=1.

54. Jordan, *Feminist Acts,* XXIV.

55. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, March 30 1999, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

56. Bell, interview.

2.4 Conclusion

A unique confluence of factors has affected the financial history of Canadian feminist literary magazines, from Canadian nationalist support for the arts, to their position as small-circulation Canadian magazines in competition with US content, to the constraints and opportunities brought on by their missions. Throughout the history of *Room* and its compatriots, a struggle emerges between maintaining ethical, sustainable publishing processes, and remaining financially solvent. Potential sites for improvement do emerge throughout the narrative, such as reassessment of grant program structures, seeking out more innovations like contests, investing in web advertisement portfolios, re-categorization in bookstores, and the potentially under-tapped resource of fundraising and nonprofit positioning. The first step to making such change possible is to establish a foundation for long-term strategic planning.

In grant narratives over the years, there is a worrying trend of mass member turnover followed by re-hashing of the same struggles experienced by the preceding team. Institutional knowledge is low and innovation slow, because beneath this financial map is the foundation of volunteers and low-paid workers running these publications whose limited energy was frequently spent on survival and rarely on evolution and growth. The following section will delve into this historic over-reliance on unpaid and under-paid labour, as well as examine the process of adding staff to *Room,* a change which has both alleviated many of the struggles of the past and generated its own challenges. While the tightrope between money and mandate remains the same, the weight staff and volunteers are carrying across the chasm beneath is growing as *Room* ages and expands. Moving forward with both a history of financial struggle and a recent commitment to adequately compensate workers, *Room* will need to find new approaches to generating revenue to sustain increasing expenses, particularly as the living wage continues to skyrocket.

Chapter 3: Staffing Feminist Literary Magazines: Volunteer Labour, Longevity, and Intersectionality

3.1 A History of Reliance on Women's Unpaid Labour

> "Reliance on the unpaid work of production staff and contributors is the greatest on-going subsidy, and frequently leads to fatigue, burnout, and the ultimate demise of important feminist forums. The grind of production under difficult conditions has claimed many periodicals."[1]—Barbara L. Marshall, *Communication as Politics: Feminist Print Media in English Canada*

Feminist magazines have always run on hundreds of hours of volunteer labour. In 1982 Eleanor Wachtel reported that "all publications [in the report] rely extensively, if not exclusively, on volunteer labour."[2] Marcin Markowicz estimates that three hundred volunteer editors worked on *Room, CV2, Fireweed, Tessera,* and *(f.)lip*.[3] This practice was widespread and affected the longevity of publications, their quality, consistency, and the number of issues they put out per year.

Room founding editor Gayla Reid shared that in its early years, "*[Room]* used funding for three things only: printing, contributor honoraria, and mailing costs"; editorial, production, and administrative labour went uncompensated.[4] With the addition of a few miscellaneous costs, early financial statements and grant applications corroborate this. At a Canadian Periodical Publishers Association's meeting discussing new Canada Council policies from 1976, an unnamed *Room* representative noted that though magazines were encouraged to pay their writers (and *Room* did so from the very first issue), funding would not be provided for any editorial salaries, as the subsidy per issue would become too high. At the smaller magazines, editors were expected to "do part of it for love." Under this, she writes an editorial comment: "Sheee-it! Editors are people too!!"[5] *Room* did not pay any administrative

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1. Marshall, "Communication as Politics," 468.

2. Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 45.

3. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 93.

4. Golob, "Riding the Wave," 20.

5. CPPA AGM meeting notes by unnamed representative from *Room*, October 1976, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

honoraria to collective members until 1992,[6] and internal documentation shows editors remained unpaid until 2009. Collective members may have been driven by a belief in the impact of their work, a passion for the work itself, the communities around the work, and a "deeply felt enthusiasm,"[7] as Gayla Reid put it, but they were not motivated by pay.

The commitment to non-hierarchal, or at least less hierarchal, governance allowed *Room* and its peers to spread a greater amount of work around as smaller loads on the backs of volunteers, and allowed for flexibility as the capacity of individual volunteers shifted. However, there was still a high incidence of burnout and volunteer turnover. Editors were often balancing their volunteer commitments to feminist magazines with full professional and personal lives. Many were writers or otherwise in or adjacent to the publishing industry, already underpaid professions.[8] Women also shouldered the brunt of domestic labour, accounting for 75% of all unpaid household work done by parents in Canada in 1986.[9] The labour of publishing feminist literary magazines was an after-hours commitment that might be second, third, fourth, or fifth on the list of priorities for any given volunteer. *Fireweed* published its volunteers' parting comments, and "what surfaced most often was the editors' need for time, especially for self-development and self-care."[10] In Room's FY1982 grant application to the Canada Council, then-*Room* member Eleanor Wachtel reflected on the closures of *Branching Out*, *Upstream*, and *Makara:*

> "Volunteer exhaustion, the subsidization of the production costs of the magazine by its publishers, became terminal. Which is another way of saying that money was certainly the reason the publications folded. Had there been money to pay people, they wouldn't have burnt out."[11]

If magazines were lucky, they dealt with high volunteer turnover rather than total shutdown. In an interview with Tessa Jordan for *Feminist Acts,* Sharon Batt of *Branching Out* shared that

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6. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, August 14, 1992, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

7. Golob, "Riding the Wave," 20.

8. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 95.

9. Patricia Houle, Martin Turcotte and Michael Wendt, "Changes in parents' participation in domestic tasks and care for children from 1986 to 2015," Statistics Canada, June 1, 2017, 4.

10. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 94.

11. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, October 25, 1981, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

trying to retain volunteers "was like constantly walking on water and not quite knowing if everything was going to sink."[12] Staff and volunteer turnover leads to poor retention of institutional history and knowledge, time wasted re-solving the same problems, missed paperwork, inconsistent quality, and increased responsibility on the few volunteers who do remain over longer periods of time. If no new volunteers could be found, publications folded.

Room tried to address this issue by providing modest honoraria for the administrative tasks for which the collective found it most difficult to secure volunteers. In the cover letter of *Room*'s FY1993 Canada Council grant application, editor Joy Tataryn explains that additional funds from the previous year were spent on a part-time staff member dedicated to administrative work. FY1992 financial statements report $793 in professional fees ($1,481 worth in 2023).[13] Administrative tasks were compensated on and off from 1992 onward, though *Room* did not start paying editorial honoraria until 2009. Even with periodic administrative honoraria, the worst periods of instability were still in *Room*'s future.

In its early years, *Room* had a handful of long-term editors who remained on the collective for longer periods of time, providing stability to the magazine. Gayla Reid and Eleanor Wachtel were listed as members in *Room*'s publications for fourteen and thirteen consecutive years, respectively. However, almost a decade later, when Virginia Aulin joined in 1997, "all of the collective members save poet Clélie Rich had left in quick succession" and as a consequence "*Room* was languishing."[14] *Room* had incurred a deficit and the new collective was "struggling to understand what came before" due to an "inherited a situation of inadequate records."[15] It took the return of an experienced editor and several years of catching up on overdue government paperwork, unpaid bills, and unanswered mail before the collective could begin to publish regularly again. All administrative salaries were cancelled during this time. The delays followed the collective into the new millennium: *Room* almost did not receive a 2002 operating grant from Canada Council because it was still six issues behind its production schedule. The council initially gave *Room* a "one-year suspension,"

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12. Jordan, *Feminist Acts,* 98.

13. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, August 14, 1992.

14. Aulin, "Celebration," 7.

15. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, March 30, 1998.

reinstating the funding when *Room* showed that it was "very close to eliminating the lapse."[16] *Room* could have died then, and Aulin shares that many readers thought it had.[17] It took several years, but the collective was able to bring *Room* back on track.

For most of their existence, feminist magazines—including *Room*—relied extensively on volunteer labour. The rich history of feminist publishing that exists despite this is a testament to the "tremendous effort, sacrifice, and commitment on the part of editorial collectives" and their "unshakeable belief in the work they could do and the influence they could have as editors."[18] Yet there were limits to what volunteer editorial collectives could sustain. Unpaid administrators and editors are one of the factors that led to the closure of so many Canadian feminist magazines and made the environment at *Room* unsustainable in the twenty-first century. Lack of compensation caused organizational instability, fluctuations in quality and printing schedules, widespread burnout, and, as will be discussed in the following section, exclusion of marginalized voices within feminist collectives. When facing the future, feminist publishers will have to grapple with the impact of a long history of unpaid labour and face the challenge of growing past the limitations imposed by lack of compensation.

3.2 The Impact of All-Volunteer Collectives on Intersectional Feminist Mandates

In addition to issues of consistency, quality, and labour distribution, the widespread reliance on unpaid labour in feminist magazines exacerbated the inequities outlined in the section A History of White Feminism in Canadian Feminist Publishing. Underpaying means "you're automatically going to end up being more likely to have to hire someone from a middle class or higher background, which again, is going to exclude a lot of people of colour," explains Meghan Bell, former *Room* publisher and collective member from 2011-2019.[19]

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16. Letter to *Room* from Canada Council, December 17, 2001, MsC 61, Series 8, *Room of One's Own* fonds, Simon Fraser University Special Collections, Vancouver.

17. Aulin, "Celebration," 7.

18. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 103.

19. Bell, interview.

This has long been known to editors at feminist magazines. Responding to reader criticisms of the *Branching Out*'s lack of content about "the problems of women in prison, women working in menial jobs, and women living in isolated areas," editor Sharon Batt said in the November/December 1976 one-year anniversary issue that because they couldn't "afford to pay contributors a reasonable rate, it is a regrettable fact that most [submitters] will be women who can afford to forego payment for their material."[20] The same was true of the unpaid editorial staff.

While there is a limited amount of research available about the barriers marginalized editors faced in feminist publishing in Canada, some insight might be gleaned from Canadian workforce statistics and insights from neighbouring industries. As discussed in the section Oppressive Legacies in Contemporary publishing, there is a notable wage gap in publishing, and the wage gap for women of colour and disabled women across Canada is significantly greater than the average for all women.[21] In her report on women in Canadian publishing, Stephanie Toth notes that "it is a well-established fact of the working world in general that each of these groups experience magnified pay inequity," and that there are gaps in generational wealth and in hiring and promoting. In a review of articles featuring the first-hand accounts of the experiences of women of colour in publishing, Toth also found that women of colour, and Black women in particular, overwhelmingly cited unpaid internships and low wages as a barrier to their participation and success in the industry, including Associate Director of Marketing for HarperCollins Ebony LaDelle's having "had to work two jobs until she became a manager to make ends meet, while many of her white colleagues were living in apartments purchased for them by their parents."[22] Publishing may no longer be an industry for exclusively gentlemen of leisure, but it remains an industry that frequently demands of its workers great sacrifice, independent wealth, or both. This issue is only magnified in all-volunteer collectives.

On top of the unpaid labour of editing and administrative work, editors of colour and lesbian editors who did join volunteer collectives took on the labour of advocating for their

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20. Jordan, *Feminist Acts,* 76.

21. Canadian Women's Foundation, "Fact Sheet: The Gender Wage Gap in Canada," 2018. https://canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Gender-Wage-Gap-Fact-Sheet_AUGUST-2018_FINAL1.pdf.

22. Toth, "Women in Canadian Publishing," 29-30.

communities. Co-founder Gayla Reid explained that "*Room* was challenged by its own lesbian members to promote greater visibility of lesbian content" and to ask themselves, "were we making choices driven by homophobia?"[23] At *Fireweed,* Makeda Silvera was part of a small group of women of colour and lesbians doing similar work; when her peers burnt out and left the collective, she tried to stay behind to help *Fireweed*'s new collective carry on an intersectional feminist mandate. However, she left after a single issue with the new collective, finding the work "draining" without "the resources to replenish," and feeling that the new group was not as dedicated to carrying forward *Fireweed*'s progressive politics.[24] Constantly defending one's right to occupy space is exhausting and has kept many a marginalized person from professional, academic, and leisure spaces alike. That all of the work was unpaid only adds to the weight women of colour and 2SLGBTQ+ people carried in majority-white collectives, and does not bode well for the inclusion of disabled editors.

The challenge of recruiting and retaining volunteers for feminist magazines was only magnified when reaching out to editors from diverse backgrounds. Working for free has never been and will never be accessible, and this was a significant factor in the overwhelming whiteness of feminist publishing for much of its history. At *Room,* this reality reached a critical point in the mid-2010s, when the collective decided to commit openly and fully to an intersectional feminist mandate. It took an immense effort to overhaul the collective's makeup and systems to make this dream a reality, as well as a new commitment to equitable pay practices that took years of work to implement and remains a challenge to maintain to this day.

3.3 Equitable Pay as an Anti-oppressive Practice: Adding Paid Staff to *Room*

The story of *Room*'s emergence from a white-dominated, cis-centric collective to one that prioritized the voices of BIPOC and 2SLGBTQ+ writers and editors—and, more recently, disabled writers and editors as well—was documented in some detail in the section "Embracing Intersectional Feminism at *Room* Magazine," but there was an additional key factor to the transition: the addition of paid staff.

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23. Golob, "Riding the Wave," 20.

24. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 116.

Room first paid collective members for their work during a short stint starting in 1992 when typesetting, bookkeeping, and subscriptions management were done on an honorarium basis.[25] However, by 1998, a new collective returned to the all-volunteer model following a "financial shortfall due to smaller grants and poor management of subscriptions."[26] There is a gap in *Room*'s records between the last documents donated to SFU's fonds—dated 2002—and the first digitized applications held internally at *Room* from 2007, but honoraria were reintroduced for a designer and an accountant sometime in that gap. By 2009, lead editors began to receive modest honoraria for their work.

By 2013, running the magazine with primarily unpaid staff was becoming increasingly untenable. Meghan Bell, former publisher and a collective member from 2011 to 2019, shared in an interview that longtime member Clélie Rich had burned out after many years as an unpaid managing editor right around the same time as there was "very high volunteer turnover," and it was becoming increasingly difficult to get anyone to do the time-consuming and tedious work of managing circulation. After some new advertising strategies, *Room* saw a dramatic increase in contest revenue and put that funding toward a paid, part-time Managing Editor whose duties would include circulation.

This was not a unanimous decision; "of course, there was a bit of backlash from some members of the collective who said things like, 'well, why are we saying that circulation deserves to be paid?'" Ultimately, the collective ended up going forward with the decision to assign the first paid staff member to circulation because "it's easier to find volunteers for the glamorous jobs, for the fun jobs and the creative jobs, than it is for the technical boring ones."[27]

When Chelene Knight joined the Growing Room Collective, she was one of two women of colour on the collective and "working full-time [elsewhere], and a full-time single parent commuting over an hour to my job… financially responsible for my child at the time and also my parent." However, Knight was passionate about *Room* and quickly stepped up as Managing Editor. At this time, the Managing Editor honorarium was still very low; in *Room*'s financial statements, only $5,000 was reported in staff salaries for all of 2015, for a total of

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25. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, August 14, 1992.

26. Application to the Canada Council from *Room*, March 30 1998.

27. Bell, interview.

$416 monthly. Knight's experience accelerated an ongoing conversation at *Room* about the unpaid labour in the collective. Knight shared that the collective was responsive to the need for change:

> "We wanted to create an opportunity for folks like myself to hold these positions of power. I think when we look at the history of *Room*, these kinds of positions or even the collective as a whole was really only available to someone who had spare time or someone who was coming from a place of privilege and didn't have to necessarily be paid in order to contribute."

Meghan Bell and Chelene Knight proceeded to work together, with support from the board, to slowly increase *Room*'s capacity to pay staff across the next several years. It was a frustrating and roundabout process that Knight recalls involved "a lot of hoop jumping."[28] Bell recalls that it was "extremely difficult to create new staff positions," and she felt that "you can't really just ask for money for a new staff role into your operating grant. You can ask for money for existing staff roles, so you have to create them somehow." One example is the City of Vancouver grant *Room* now receives yearly, which required *Room* to have full-time staff before it would qualify for a grant tier that would not even come close to funding said staff.[29] *Room* would have to commit to spending substantially more than they would be receiving before they could even qualify to receive it. As of early 2024, *Room*'s City of Vancouver grant has increased fivefold since the first year Bell secured it for the magazine and now covers 64% of the cost of one full-time staff member. Both explicit and implicit granting requirements led to an awkward, backwards development of the staff roles, where *Room* sought donations and used projects to sustain new staff positions in the hopes that they would be funded in the future.

Against all odds, the collective was able to create a part-time and a full-time staff position by 2018. Even though it was challenging, the process itself revealed why it was such a necessary step. Knight says that in efforts to increase their grant funding and secure donations, "we spent a lot of time and energy trying to prove why this paid role needed to happen… not just for the person in the role, but for the future of the magazine. What would it look like to always have as diverse a collective as possible, all the time?" The answer was an across-the-board improvement at the magazine, including the hoped-for diversity that would follow the

28. Knight, interview.

29. Bell, interview.

changes. Knight says the work the collective did to re-think their approach to diversity and inclusion was "very deep and intense work, things that I think we tend to skip, or we *have* to skip, again, if we don't have the time energy and finances to really get deep into those kinds of conversations"[30]

Changes were felt amongst the volunteers, too. "Adding the paid positions made the unpaid work that people do feel more valued," says Rose Morris, collective member from 2013 and current board member.[31] Morris explains that while volunteer staff "always tried very hard to value the unpaid labour and express gratitude for it," there was an imbalance of power because of the difference in the amount of unpaid time volunteer staff put in, versus volunteer editorial collective members. The paid Managing Editor is now tasked with guiding and managing the volunteer editorial collective, and Morris shares that "since the paid positions were created, it feels like those of us who do primarily unpaid work in the collective are given more support, shown more gratitude, and checked in on more to see how we are doing with the work we've taken on." Payment was a key part of improving staff retention for the Managing Editor role, which Meghan Bell said had a high degree of burnout because of "the demands for emotional labour from the collective."[32]

Overall staff and volunteer retention has improved since adding salaries, but it hasn't been without its challenges. The tension between limited money and expensive goals related to the mandate—accessibility goals and fair wage goals, primarily—put a lot of pressure on Meghan Bell, who, as the first publisher, wanted to meet the goals of the mandate and please collective members, but was also ultimately responsible for balancing the budget at the end of the year. This remains an ongoing issue six years later; the publisher is the first point of contact during the financial stage of any new creative initiative, and is usually the one who outlines the limitations of the budget. Costs are becoming increasingly tied to mandate-related goals such as higher honoraria and wages, ASL interpretation and accessible venues, and Host Nation welcomes, and for good reason. However, as costs balloon, creating a balanced budget that achieves the central tenets of the project, subscribes to grant requirements (which often limit the percent of grant funding or what funding can be spent

30. Knight, interview.

31. Rose Morris, e-mail message to the author, February 14, 2024.

32. Bell, interview.

on), and meet all mandate-related goals becomes a near-impossible task. The publisher deals most directly with this financial reality.

This is a draining experience even before considering the the pressures encountered in online spaces surrounding CanLit. In 2021, *Room* faced pressure from the community online to raise staff wages and to expand the managing editor position to non-urban applicants. *Room* kept the managing editor position based in Vancouver, but did raise wages for both the publisher and managing editor.[33] This was a necessary move, as the positions were paid under the living wage for Metro Vancouver as set by Living Wage BC even after the increase, but one that would have significant repercussions for the organization.

Room's staff still face the pressure of being underpaid, and as a consequence, often being emerging publishing professionals taking on the weight of a nearly fifty-year-old institution that is now a fixture of CanLit. The increase in staff wages occurred shortly after the shutdown of the Growing Room Festival and did not come with multi-year strategic planning required to increase revenues to meet the new expense. Following this change, *Room* rapidly drained its savings and faced a major deficit at the end of 2022. The staff—which had by then completely changed over—worked unpaid overtime to raise new funds, cut costs, and run a crowdfunder to return *Room* to a stable place. In trying to create a more equitable workplace for its staff, *Room* had once again unwittingly contributed to an environment that engenders burnout and draws resources from the core programming that best serves the organization's mandate.

Despite these challenges, adding paid staff has undoubtedly turned *Room* into a more equitable organization that is more capable of serving its intersectional feminist mandate. Above all, paid staff roles have created an opportunity for diverse publishing professionals to contribute their fullest selves to an organization that serves an important role in Canada's literary ecosystem. Chelene Knight says the collective put a lot of thought into what it meant for *Room*'s leadership roles to be truly equitable positions:

> "What often happens is you've got people taking on these roles, but because they have day jobs and family obligations and all kinds of things, they can't show up fully.

33. Room Magazine, "Hi friends, we'd like to acknowledge some concerns…" Facebook, March 31, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/roommagazine/posts/10157673433286106/?paipv=0&eav=AfYrSyNrq7okXLRxDNXCl8HWyuyOmUqHmbI2KGwc9XWbNc7rTU591jWuYcYyhSp7T1E&_rdr.

> So when you think about coming from a place of privilege, you get to show up fully, because you don't have to leave anything behind or anything on the table in order to occupy these roles."[34]

Since adding paid staff and making the collective a more intentionally inclusive space, *Room* has seen "a dramatic flourishing of BIPOC-led and 2SLGBTQ+ led publications, events, and outreach initiatives. Our pages have never been so diverse, and our programming has never been so vibrant," according to the 2023 crowdfunder.[35] "The collective changed in that we were thinking bigger," adds Chelene Knight; "we were thinking about all the ways to take what we've already done and go even big bigger and bolder with it."[36] This "thinking bigger" led to the four-year run of the beloved Growing Room Festival, and all three interviewees from *Room* independently volunteered the opinion that the quality of the magazine improved dramatically as pay increased and the collective diversified. Paying staff has been a critical step in *Room* becoming one of the most integrally diverse spaces in Canadian literary publishing today.

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34. Knight, interview.

35. "Keep Room Magazine Going: A Fundraiser," IndieGogo, May 8, 2023, https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/keep-room-magazine-going-a-fundraiser#/

36. Knight, interview.

Chapter 4: Growing *Room* Magazine

4.1 Introduction

So far in this report, I have examined the historical impact and continued need for the work of Canadian feminist literary magazines. I've also used the example of *Room* magazine to outline how their ceaseless financial struggles distract from their core mission and interfere with their valuable impact on the literary ecosystem, and yet many of the avenues available to increase revenues also conflict with the core mission. This places feminist literary magazines, and *Room* in particular, in an unstable and contradictory space within the publishing industry.

What can be done about it?

This is a complicated question that is impossible to fully answer. While the exact mix of factors pressuring feminist literary magazines are unique, the scope of their financial struggles is hardly singular in Canadian publishing, and the economies through which publishers are navigating are unlikely to undergo radical change overnight. However, *Room* has experienced an immense period of change in the past ten years during which its programming grew beyond anything it had previously achieved. Numerous lessons emerged from this period—lessons that can be examined against lessons from the broader publishing industry to provide insight on potential sustainable pathways into the future.

4.2 More than a Magazine Factory: Lessons from the Past Decade at *Room*

Lessons from the Growing Room Festival

The Growing Room Literary & Arts Festival—or just Growing Room Festival, as it is usually referred to—emerged in 2017 out of the celebration of *Room*'s fortieth anniversary and the daydreams of a collective growing in capacity after the introduction of paid staff. By the end of the last full festival in 2019, *Room* had held 54 events across ten days attended by 900 people.[1] Paloma Pacheco for *The Tyee* said the festival had "come to play an important role in generating a renewed sense of community" in an "unravelling" CanLit.[2] The 2019 festival

1. Meghan Bell, "Growing Room: A Feminist Literary Festival 2019 Final Report," 2019, *Room* digital archives.

2. Paloma Pacheco, "Hey CanLit, It's Time to Make Room," The Tyee, March 1, 2019, https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2019/03/01/Can-Lit-Make-Room-Feminist/.

spotlighted over one hundred established and emerging women, trans, nonbinary, and Two-Spirit writers.[3] It included a full day of Indigenous Brilliance panels, workshops, and market stalls, as well as panels and workshops such as "Writing on Mental Health," "Black Voices Raised," "Writing While Black," "Writing Our Relations: Connecting to Territory & Community," "Cut To The Feeling: A Night of Queerotica," workshops and panels on craft, confidence, and humour, and programming for young adults. All venues were ground-floor venues or had elevators, all had gender neutral washrooms (or washrooms temporarily adapted to be gender neutral), and ASL was available upon request for all events.[4] The Growing Room Festival was deeply aligned with *Room*'s mandate, serving marginalized writers from across the country in meaningful ways. The event was beloved and *Room* continues to receive regular inquiries about whether the festival will be returning.

The festival also caused an influx of attention unlike anything *Room* had ever seen. According to *Room*'s 2018 application to Canada Council, media coverage included:

- CBC Books
- *The Globe and Mail*
- *The Toronto Star*
- *The Georgia Straight*
- *Vancouver* Magazine
- Read Local BC
- *The Quill and Quire*
- *Discorder* Magazine

On Twitter, the #GrowingRoom2018 hashtag:

- Reached 496,994 accounts
- Garnered up to 1,746,612 impressions
- Was used by 257 different Twitter accounts in 11 days

The festival connected *Room* to a broad network of writers in all stages of their careers, sharing audiences and opening up collaborations. It put the organization into regular contact with universities, publishers, fellow literary magazines, and news organizations. The collective

3. Bell, "Growing Room."

4. Meghan Bell, Jessica Johns, Chelene Knight, Arielle Spence, Isabella Wang, and Yilin Wang, "Growing Room 2019 Festival Program," 2019.

blossomed. In all grant narratives, board meeting notes, final reports, and anecdotal conversations, the Growing Room Festival is acknowledged to have had an enormous impact on *Room*'s visibility across the country and beyond.

Both the festival days themselves and the increased visibility translated directly to revenue. The final budget report for the 2019 Growing Room Festival compared with the FY2019 financial statements show that in-person Growing Room sales accounted for 21% of *Room*'s single issue and subscription sales across the entire year. This is without accounting for the surge in online sales sure to have accompanied the increased activity on both social and traditional media. *Room*'s paid circulation more than doubled between FY2013 and FY2018, and reached an all-time high of 2,735 in the fall of 2019 (see figure 3). Additionally, the 2019 Growing Room Festival generated $13,832 in pay-what-you-can ticket sales and donations during the festival; $14,103 in sponsorships; and $14,429 in sales of books by speakers and panelists for Massy Books, *Room*'s bookstore partner. The event came, of course, with big costs, and *Room* finished FY2017 through to FY2019 with a small deficit despite the new revenues. However, *Room* was seeing growth it could never have imagined just a few years before. The Growing Room Festival was one of *Room*'s most meaningful projects in service of its mandate, and it generated an immense amount of revenue and visibility for the organization as a whole.

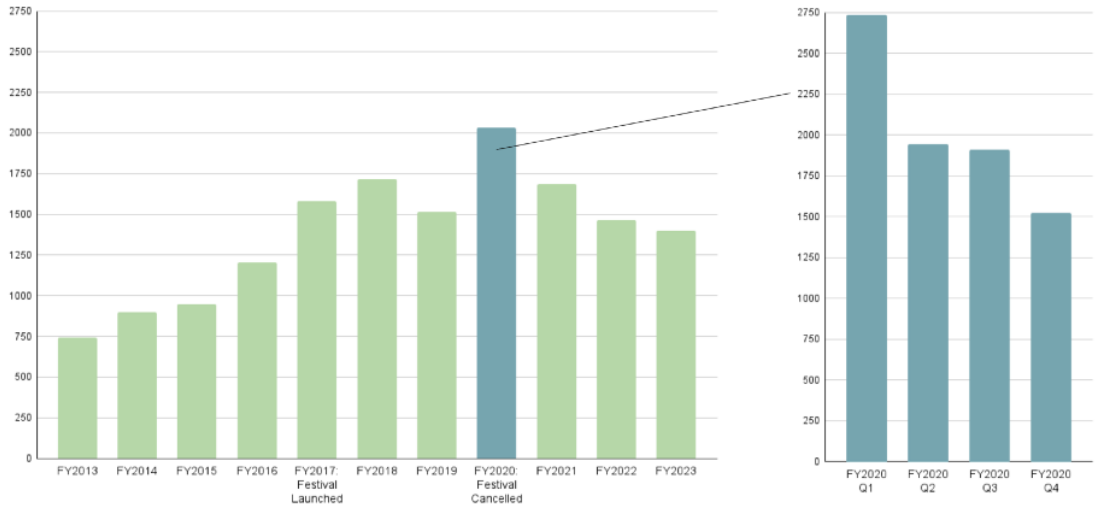

Figure 3. Room Magazine Paid Circulation from FY2013 to FY2023, showing FY2020 (the year the Growing Room Festival was cancelled) quarter-by-quarter.

There was a Growing Room Festival planned for March of 2020. It would be *Room*'s most ambitious festival to date, and the collective ran its largest-ever print run of the current issue in anticipation of the heightened sales demand. Many of those issues still sit in boxes stacked at the *Room* office today. In the end, *Room* ran one day of programming on March 9th before cancelling the 2020 festival due to concerns around Covid-19. Some events transitioned to virtual or had already been online, but the vast majority of the festival was cancelled as Canada teetered into two years of intermittent lockdowns. Figure 3 shows FY2020—the year the last festival was planned and promoted but ultimately cancelled—quarter-by-quarter. The change was dramatic. Following the festival cancellation, the new surge in circulation, visibility, and engagement proved impossible to maintain. Years later, we have still not been able to claw back that growth.

In early 2021, then-managing editor and festival director Jessica Johns announced the cancellation of the 2021 Growing Room Festival. The structure of *Room* had changed to accommodate the festival, but it was still very much an internal project run by the staff who were also entirely responsible for the magazine. In its first year, the festival had had a dedicated coordinator, but that work was passed on to the *Room* managing editor and publisher in following years. In 2019, *Room* added a part-time submissions coordinator to take some responsibilities off of the managing editor to allow more time for work on the Festival. Several editorial collective members also held honorarium-based positions related to festival work. However, the bulk of the work was done by the managing editor.

This did not turn out to be sustainable. Jessica Johns shares that the 2020 cancellation "allowed the *Room* collective to take a step back from the festival, and the magazine in general, and assess our changed capacities," and that the team came to the conclusion that they would not be able to sustain both the magazine and the festival, "at least not in a way that offers them the individual time and attention that they deserve." In a sentiment echoed by current *Room* board and collective members who were involved with *Room* during the festival, Johns explained that to run the festival again, *Room* would need better boundaries and to ensure enough capacity that the staff could continue to implement the lessons they'd learned about "what we need in order to care for ourselves, too."[5] The current publisher and managing editor work full-time on the magazine and *Room*'s partner programs, and in the

5. Jessica Johns, "Growing Room Festival 2021 Cancellation," *Room Magazine* online, n.d., https://roommagazine.com/growing-room-festival-2021-cancellation/.

past used to run the Growing Room Festival on top of this work. Collective members have shared anecdotes of former staff going without sleep the entire festival weekend and working extensive overtime. Dreaming big, *Room* had once again landed itself in a place where its staff were burning out and having to take a step back.

Though it has been discussed several times, the Growing Room Festival has not yet returned to *Room* as of early 2024.

Lessons from the 2023 *Room* Magazine Fundraiser

At the end of 2022, following the cancellation of the Growing Room Festival and all other in-person events, a push from the community to increase staff wages, and a slowdown in sales, *Room* found itself in a significant deficit and facing a cash flow crisis. *Room* had limited time to both make up the deficit it had incurred and fix the systems that had the magazine overspending its revenues by such a significant amount. After cutting costs significantly and receiving some new grants, the organization was still in critical condition, and the staff launched a fundraiser in May of 2023.

The fundraiser was successful, bringing in $21,244 of a $20,000 goal. The funds were crucial to *Room*'s recovery, but what took the staff by surprise was the community revitalization prompted by the fundraiser. *Room* reconnected with dozens of publishers, fellow literary magazines, writers at all stages of their careers, festivals, news organizations, and more, generating collaborations, camaraderie, and advertising agreements that are still in place. *Room* saw a surge of social media activity across all accounts, and web sales during the six weeks of the fundraiser were 21% up from the preceding two months and 66% up from the same period the previous year. Print subscriptions to *Room* increased by 9%, and overall paid print circulation for the following issue rose by 12%. There was suddenly a timely reason for the community to rally around *Room*, increasing its overall visibility and reach rapidly after months of tinkering with advertising and marketing strategies had only managed to move the dial slowly and minutely. The current staff gained a better glimpse of the ripple effects the Growing Room Festival had had on *Room* beyond the festival profit-and-loss statement. It became apparent that *Room* was missing something.

Lessons from *Room*'s Partnership Program

Since the cancellation of the Growing Room Festival, *Room* has invested in its partnerships with local grassroots collectives running community programming that aligns with *Room*'s mandate. These organizations so far include the Indigenous Brilliance Collective, Art Ecosystem Collective and workshop series, Hush Harbour Press, and Unbound Reading Series for Black writers. Successful projects have included Indigenous Brilliance's reading series, extensive participation in the Growing Room Festival, and *Room* special issue; Art Ecosystem's year-long workshop series and weekend-long QTBIPOC market, show, and workshop event; Hush Harbour Press's online Black sonic storytelling project Speech Sounds; and Unbound Reading Series' ongoing reading and open mic series for Black writers.

Room began some of these partnerships while staff overlapped with partner organization leadership—for example, Jessica Johns co-founded Indigenous Brilliance with Massy Books while she was managing editor at *Room*. The program expanded when the collective saw what could be achieved if *Room* shared its administrative capacity and substantial resources with smaller, newer organizations. Our collaborative programming has largely been run by and for specific marginalized groups that have a pressing need for more projects led by community members; this is something *Fireweed* demonstrated was necessary in the early 1980s, when it began its visionary guest editorial policy. Our partner organizations have creative vision, but need resources. Working with *Room* provides access to grant funding only available to established organizations, financial knowledge and bookkeeping skills that are sorely needed in grassroots environments, an established social media and newsletter following tied to a nearly fifty-year reputation, a collective of experienced project managers and editors to consult with, and decades of tutorials, guides, past project plans, and structural resources. Meanwhile, supporting these organizations allows *Room* to be a part of programming that aligns with our mandate and is relevant to our collective members, writers, and readers without over-taxing the staff. Our collaborations increase our online presence, bolster our grant applications, and connect *Room* to new audiences. These collaborations—alliances, one might call them—are mutually beneficial and driven by *Room*'s mission.

4.3 From Brand Extensions to Feminist Publishing Alliances

The Growing Room Festival as Authentic Brand Extension: Intersecting Revenue and Mandate

The Growing Room Festival was started and run as its own project with mission-driven goals and a powerful impact for the populations *Room* serves, which is why it is all the more remarkable that it managed to also bring such seismic financial change to the magazine. It is a unique time in *Room*'s history where mission and financial goals truly aligned. This achievement is important to study while considering a sustainable path into the future. What worked about the Growing Room Festival was that it grew towards where *Room*'s readers were, taking root in other, related parts of their lives beyond the black-and-white pages of the magazine itself.

Publishers in the wider media industry have explored brand extensions at length and expanded beyond the pages of magazines to engage with readers in many different ways. Brand extensions are a strategy where a new product or service is launched out of an existing brand, diversifying revenue streams and "aiming to meet diverse customer needs, expand sales revenue, and increase market share." The approach of this strategy is generally to use the success of the existing product or service to boost the launch of the new product or service;[6] however, authors Cho, Walker, and Nowlin found that "cross-category revenue spillover does not necessarily act as a one-way path dependent on a sequential process (e.g., spillover from the parent brand to extensions)… but rather flow from any categories within the brand."[7] This means that a successful brand extension can support the pre-existing parts of the brand as well.

Room's team did this when it launched the Growing Room Festival. Not only was the festival a successful project in and of itself, it also raised the profile of the existing magazine. The Growing Room Festival also had the advantage of what authors Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella refer to as "authenticity."[8] The authors position the socio-culturally aware concept

6. Jihoon Cho, Doug Walker, and Edward L. Nowlin, "Cross-category revenue spillover in brand extensions: The role of within-category experience," *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 22, no. 5 (2023): 1188.

7. Cho, Walker, and Nowlin, 1195.

8. Susan Spiggle, Hang T. Nguyen, and Mary Caravella, "More Than Fit: Brand Extension Authenticity," *Journal of Marketing Research* 49, no. 6 (2012): 967.

of brand authenticity, as opposed to the cognitive approach of brand fit, as a more holistic way of assessing the effectiveness and purpose of brand extensions.[9] The authors found that:

> "consumers with strong self–brand connections may be especially appropriate targets for brand extensions that convey authenticity, even if similarity and relevance are low… They have positive attitudes toward the brand and are likely to respond to equity-enriching extensions that reflect the brand's essence, heritage, style, standards, and managerial commitment."[10]

This is good news for nonprofits and mission-driven publishers. Accounting for relevance to the mission is important because we need to stay true to our values and purpose; Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella demonstrate that it is also a good business decision. For once, the decision most in line with a publisher's mission may also be the best financial decision.

By providing a platform for marginalized writers and editors, a venue for book promotion, a professional development space that has been likened to a conference,[11] and a gathering place for feminist writers and readers in Canada, *Room* brought something meaningful into the lives of its audience and associated it with the magazine and with the organization as a whole. Marketing and promotional efforts could not achieve for *Room* in four decades what the Growing Room Festival did in three years. *Room* began to step out of its narrow scope and meet the needs of its readers outside of the time they spent on the magazine. They found, unsurprisingly, that readers were much quicker to turn to *Room* outside of the festival, whether to buy a subscription or contest entry, submit to an issue, start a collaboration, attend an event, or read back issues. The Growing Room Festival as an authentic brand extension is a helpful model to understand the cross-category revenue spillover caused by the festival, and a useful framework when considering future avenues of growth to sustain *Room* and mission-driven publishers like it.

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9. Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella, 967.

10. Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella, 981.

11. West Coast Feminist Literary Magazine Society Community and Target Audience document, Creative BC Funding Application, September 2019, *Room* digital archives.

The Pitfalls of Over-Extension

Like many magazines across the media industry, *Room* finds itself in a position where to sustain its core programming—that is, the magazine—it must consider dedicating the limited attention and time of staff and volunteers to other pursuits. This kind of pressure is one of the driving forces behind widespread consolidation and the sense that organizations inevitably corporatize as they grow. It is important to be aware that brand extensions can easily become extractive.

Authors Hede, Kerrigan, and Thyne critique the existing popular brand extension metaphor of a brand family and suggest that landlord and tenant might be a more apt metaphor, where "fundamental to renting is that earnings from renting property are viewed as 'passive income', as value extraction happens through the labour of others rather than the landlord."[12] They argue that this can be positive, "particularly in contexts where brand ownership is dispersed across several organizations,"[13] but their work does raise the question of power structures in relation to brand extension and organizational expansion. Publishers turning to brand extensions in an attempt to revive a struggling periodical may find themselves expanding their programming at the same time as their access to resources and their team capacity shrinks. *Room* ended up with a deficit and widespread team burnout following the Growing Room Festival. Expanding organizations may also find themselves drawn toward stricter hierarchies and a restructuring of priorities that threatens the organization's mission.

Canadian arts nonprofits have fallen into this trap before. In March 2024, ten employees resigned from publicly-funded nonprofit documentary festival Hot Docs due to, according to a public statement, "an ever-changing, chaotic, unprofessional and discriminatory environment" including "'lack of respect for protocol,' disregard of programmers' views, and 'breaches of contracts.'"[14] Hot Docs was once independent and filmmaker-run, but now Ezra Winton at *The Breach* accuses Hot Docs of "institutional pathologies [originating] in its adherence to tenets of neoliberal capitalism," claiming that "the pursuit of an American-

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12. Anne-Marie Hede, Finola Kerrigan, and Maree Thyne, "Re-thinking brand extension theory: Parents, siblings and off-spring or landlords and tenants?" *Marketing Theory* 23, no. 2 (2023), 260.

13. Hede, Kerrigan, and Thyne, 261.

14. Ezra Winton, "Hot Docs' corporate-sponsored, U.S.-centric model has failed audiences and staff," *The Breach,* April 3 2024, https://breachmedia.ca/hot-docs-corporate-failed/.

fashioned, pop-commercial growth meant that the festival's leadership eventually ran the non-profit, partially-publicly-funded organization as a kind of entertainment business."[15]

In the visual arts industry, ArtScape Toronto crumbled in its tussle with commercial real-estate. Trying to support artists with affordable space, the organization ended up in a receivership after organizational and financial mismanagement:

> [Artscape became] a behemoth that struggled to serve its artist-tenants and ultimately itself, begging larger philosophical questions: What does it mean for one organization to build up its own administrative and financial capacities on the backs of the cultural community it's trying to support? Who benefits most from this top-heavy model? Is it the artists and organizations desperately in need of space, or is it Artscape?[16]

Caitlin Jones, Executive Director at ArtScape Vancouver when the Toronto collapse happened, asks pertinent questions that mission-driven organizations must lead with from the start. Operating as feminist publishers, it is critical to examine and undermine these power structures when borrowing strategies and approaches from for-profit industries. How do we explore brand extensions without falling into hierarchal core/subsidiary program binaries and unequal distribution of labour? How do we seize opportunities for growth while prioritizing symbiotic and mutually-beneficial relationships?

Sustaining Growth through Feminist Literary Alliances

While not every feminist magazine or publisher in Canada was run by a collective, every single one studied for this paper put great thought into its leadership structure and came to something flexible that involved collaboration, flat or mostly-flat structures, and joint decision-making. As feminist and mission-driven publishers like *Room* find ourselves searching for ways to stay sustainable, relevant, visible, and solvent, we will inevitably draw from the strategies for-profit industries use to stay afloat in an economy designed around the endless increase of profit. Feminist leadership structures are one of the tools we can use to ensure we remain committed to our mandates and continue to do work that combats oppression while we branch out to survive.

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15. Winton, "Hot Docs."

16. Caitlin Jones, "Magical/Market Thinking: Reflecting on the Rise and Fall of Artscape," *Momus,* February 2 2024, https://momus.ca/magical-market-thinking-reflecting-on-the-rise-and-fall-of-artscape/.

It is also a tool we can use to avoid the persistent overwork and burnout that is central to the history of feminist publishing. As it existed, the Growing Room Festival was beyond *Room*'s capacity. Trying to split the staff's attention between the magazine and the festival eroded the steps Room was taking toward building an equitable workplace and caused severe overwork and burnout. But there are other ways to approach such immense efforts. Linked organizations leaning on the same logistical scaffolding while operating creatively independently is a model uniquely suited to already anti-hierarchal organizations carrying froward leadership values from the feminist movement. Alliances between either existing organizations, or dual departments within an organization, are a potential way for feminist literary magazines and mission-driven publishers more generally to invest in both their mandates and their financial stability while remaining within their capacities.

Room has been doing something like this in its partnership program, but we are still separate organizations choosing to come together. It becomes more complicated when the work is emblazoned with *Room*'s name and logo; how do we maintain cohesion? Does anyone have the final say? To successfully collaborate in this way requires full respect for others' visions and a willingness to relinquish power over the "brand" of an organization. The consequences of this kind of structure may at times mean making decisions that run counter to traditional business advice, and teams running mission-driven organizations that often engender strong emotional ties may not always find it easy to silo and let new creative visions take off under their own leadership. Yet it is true to the heart of this work: *Room* was always meant to be shaped and grown by a collective of people, rather than controlled by one or two individuals.

4.4 Conclusion

Room was able to use an authentic brand extension for a brief, shining few years to generate meaningful growth without compromising its mission, cohesion, independence, or collective structure. The launch of the Growing Room Festival was a unique time in *Room*'s history where its mission and its financial growth aligned. The project brought to light many lessons worth studying as we move into the future. It is clear that *Room* benefitted from meeting our readers in more than one place, and as we consider next steps, the needs of the people we serve should guide our vision. What more do marginalized writers in Canada need to

support them in their creative practice? In their careers? In their mutual advocacy? Where can we meet those needs? That is where we plant the seeds for growth.

The Growing Room Festival over-taxed and ultimately burnt out *Room*'s team, but flexible programming built in response to Covid-19 has lessons for us too: we can achieve more in collaboration. Since at least the birth of the Women in Print movement and the proliferation of feminist collectives, feminists have been dedicated to non-hierarchal and less-hierarchal leadership practices. Above all, feminist organizing has demonstrated that we are stronger together. These are some of the most promising principles to guide us forward as we try to balance mission and survival. Just as collective sharing of work kept feminist magazines alive in the past, it may be the only way forward now—this time, with equity in mind every step of the way.

Conclusion

> "I'll be blunt, and right to the point. After reading your volume 5, #3 edition of *Room of One's Own*, I am interested in subscribing, but over the past 2 years, I've subscribed to several feminist magazines and/or publications to have all of them fold up on me within six months.
> What I am asking for is either a guarantee, during the year(s) I subscribe, that if you do fold, I will either receive my money back that is left over, or back issues to cover the same cost. I am extremely tired and fed up with losing my money all the time. I would appreciate some form of response."[1] —Unnamed reader to *Room of One's Own*, May 20th, 1981.

I can't help but wonder what *Room*'s editors thought of this letter when it reached their P.O. Box—still the same P.O. Box number we have today—way back in 1981. Laugher? Despair? Irritation? Sympathy? The precarity of feminist publishing was ubiquitous and frustrating for everyone involved. I hope this reader subscribed, and I hope they would be happy to know that, against all odds, *Room* is still alive and publishing feminist literature forty-three years later.

The drive to continue publishing is twofold: the goal of literary magazines is to bolster the literary ecosystem in an ongoing way; and the goal of mission-driven publications like *Room* is to generate social change, and there is still a lot of work left to be done on that front. A palpable belief in the need to persist permeates the materials that have come out of *Room* and its contemporaries over the years, at times in the face of major crises and adversity.

Literary magazines are often overlooked, but their impact is deeply felt on writers' and editors' careers and in literary movements around the world. Feminists in the Women in Print movement knew that literature was an opening into the kind of complex interior self patriarchy tried to deny them: "while every revolutionary movement has had its poets and its poetry, no other movement has been so grounded in poetry as Feminism… art and politics blended, personal experience and art converged. There was no separation between a woman's self and her art."[2] Literary magazines became a place to proudly proclaim that rich interiority, and a way to open doors in publishing. Canadian feminist literary magazines have had a significant impact throughout their history:

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1. Excerpted in Wachtel, "Feminist Print Media," 3.

2. Polly Joan and Andrea Chesman, "Forward," in *Guide to Women's Publishing,* ed. Andrea Chesman and Polly Joan (Paradise, CA: Dustbooks, 1978), 3.

> "All feminist literary magazines contributed to the expansion of the literary and cultural field in their own distinctive ways, facilitating change in various roles—as legitimating platforms, communicative tools and hospitable publishing environments that engendered exchange, collaboration, dialogue, community-building, growth, and mutual learning."[3]

This critical work is far from over, and has over the years grown to encompass a much more thorough anti-oppressive approach rooted in intersectional feminism.

From the beginning, this work involved challenging the power structures that ran mainstream publishing. Feminist magazines and book publishers were largely composed of non-hierarchal collectives that emphasized collaborative decision-making and skill-sharing. When these collectives first emerged, they were largely composed of middle- and upper-class white, straight, cisgender women, and it was the collective structure itself that laid the groundwork for growing beyond the limited white feminist roots of the 1970s. While mainstream publishing dragged its feet, *Fireweed* launched a visionary guest editorial policy that centred marginalized voices. It took decades of hard work largely by women of colour, but today, *Room* is an intersectional feminist organization centring the voices of 2SLGBTQ+, BIPOC, and disabled people at every level and in every facet of our programming, providing opportunities in an industry still fraught with legacies of oppression. As the sole Canadian literary publication from the Women in Print movement to survive into the twenty-first century and one of the few feminist magazines still publishing in the country, *Room* is doing this work without the diversity of contemporaries it had when it was founded.

This mass closure of feminist publications can largely be traced back to persistent financial struggles. Government support for the arts has been critical to the continued survival of literary magazines across Canada, and many feminist magazines—*Room* included—are unlikely to have emerged at all without such support. Challenges across earned revenues—from the struggle to maintain healthy subscription numbers, to drops in newsstand sales, to barriers to lucrative advertising, to a lack of a donor culture—have made financial survival challenging for Canadian feminist and small circulation magazines from the 1970s to today. Feminist literary magazines face the challenge of growing revenues while remaining

3. Markowicz, "Agents of Change," 190.

dedicated to their mission, a complicated prospect when many traditional strategies for revenue growth do not align with the ethics and purpose of feminist publishers.

This has been an especially difficult problem to solve because an overwhelming reliance on volunteer labour has meant feminist magazines have not had many opportunities for innovation and creative growth. Lack of paid staff led to inconsistent quality, spotty publication schedules, poor institutional record-keeping and knowledge retention, frequent burnout and full-team turnovers, and in many cases outright closure of publications. It has also led to a consistently higher presence of privileged members in collectives; particularly, cis white women and those from middle- and upper-classes. This has made it challenging to meet the intersectional feminist goals feminist publications are growing into, and to be truly inclusive and diverse moving forward, feminist publishers have to reckon with the challenges of adequately compensating their workers, making the work of remaining financially solvent ever more difficult.

Lessons from recent years might shed light on future potential for growth. The Growing Room Festival, which ran from 2017 to 2020 and was cancelled first due to Covid-19 and later due to lack of capacity on the team, allowed *Room* to grow its reach and programming beyond anything it had previously achieved in its then forty-year history. The Growing Room Festival was an example of an authentic brand extension that aligned with the mission-driven organization's mandate. It allowed *Room* to reach readers and writers in new areas of their lives, widening *Room*'s impact and visibility, as well as opening up partnerships with fellow publishers, universities, media outlets, and more. While the festival itself was not sustainable for the team, combined with lessons from the feminist movement's history of collective governance and collaboration, as well as the success of *Room*'s partnership program, it is a promising model for how feminist and mission-driven publishers might sustainably and meaningfully grow in ways that both serve their mandates and support their ongoing financial survival. The rich history of Canadian feminist publications contains the seeds we need to plant new growth, and the tools we need to tend to each other in the process.

For too much of the history of feminist publishers in Canada, mission and financial health have been in direct conflict with each other. It is possible to apply our values to our financial decision-making. Engagement with and critique of revenue-generating processes within feminist publishing is necessary, but there is a trend toward continually dismantling and

deconstructing. We must follow this work with rebuilding. To truly fulfill our mission, we need stability; to begin to make meaningful progress toward stability, we must make a concerted, generative effort to invest in both mission and financial health in concert. We must look beyond survival and aim instead to flourish.

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