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"A Troublesome Weed Which Spreads Like Wildfire": *Fireweed: a feminist quarterly* and the Politics of Diversity

Marcin Markowicz

> **fire·weed** n : a hardy perennial so called because it is the first growth to reappear in fire-scarred areas; a troublesome weed which spreads like wildfire invading clearings, bombsites, waste land and other disturbed areas.
>
> — "fire·weed," *Fireweed* no. 13, 1982

Looking at the history of *Fireweed*, it becomes clear why this precise definition continued to reappear on the first page of its every issue, surviving numerous structural and design changes introduced by editors over the years. This revolutionary feminist literary and cultural quarterly did nothing but spread like wildfire, invading and transforming the space inhabited by Canadian literature and culture. In this article, I provide a short historical and critical account of what started as *Fireweed: A Women's Literary & Cultural Journal* in 1978 and soon became *a feminist quarterly of writing, politics, art & culture* — a pioneering publication which, "through careful tending," transformed itself into a legitimating platform where concerns of diverse communities of women "surfaced," where women from across the country could make their voices heard and share their writing with each other and the world (Hunter 41). As the 1980s was a crucial decade for the development of feminism and women's writing in Canada — with the mid-eighties being "a high-point in the recognition of feminist culture" in the country — I focus on the first twelve years of *Fireweed*'s existence, spanning the period between 1978 and 1990 (Godard, "Feminist" 209). The "politics of diversity," as I conceive of it, relates directly to the policy of diversity adopted by the founding editorial collective at *Fireweed*'s inception. In order to analyze how the politics of diversity plays itself out in the pages of *Fireweed*, I take a holistic look at the quarterly's aesthetic and publishing practices and engage in a critical analysis of

selected content, primarily editorial notes and statements. The latter allows me to shed light on the invaluable work of diverse women who edited *Fireweed* at various stages, women whose editing practices, ideas, and writing provoked controversy by troubling the notion of a unified and unitary women's movement still prevalent at the time. Hence, to examine the history of the quarterly is to revise our knowledge about the beginnings of third-wave feminism in the Canadian context. *Fireweed* was by all means one of the most important literary and cultural journals published in Canada, yet both its history and legacy seem to be slowly falling into oblivion. The time has come for them to resurface.

Despite the recent turn in literary and cultural studies towards the analysis of periodicals in their socio-political and historical contexts, little scholarly attention has been paid to Canadian literary magazines published post-1970. Back in 1996, Barbara Marshall, Professor of Sociology at Trent University, stressed the importance of "attend[ing] to how feminist politics are practiced in [the] feminist press," while acknowledging that not enough attention was being paid to feminist media "as a rich record of feminist theory in practice" (471). Even though Marshall focused on non-literary feminist publications, feminist literary and cultural journals published in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s offer a valuable insight into the nature and practices of feminist publishing and serve as equally crucial records of the history of Canadian feminism and Canadian feminist literature. Women behind initiatives such as "Rise Up! A digital archive of feminist activism in Canada" have engaged in the processes of recovery and digitization of newsletters, newspapers, and magazines produced by feminist groups throughout the 1970s to 1990s. Hardly any feminist literary publications have found their way into the digital archive so far (which is not surprising considering the fact that the project does not focus on literary publications), even though, as in the case of *Fireweed*, such publications often worked as spaces where writing met activism in the form of politically-inflected, bold, and provocative special issues, editorials, essays, short prose, and poems.

Recent Canadian scholarship has turned to the exploration of the importance of editing, the histories of specific editors, as well as the

processes and contexts that have surrounded and affected cultural production in Canada. Edited by Dean Irvine and Smaro Kamboureli, *Editing as Cultural Practice in Canada* (2016) collects essays that provide insight into the role of editing, pondering upon "the capacity of editing as cultural practice to transform cultural discourses by providing the stimulus to think differently" (3). This capacity is believed to function within "various realms and constituencies," including literary magazines such as *Tessera* or *West Coast Line*. Yet, none of the contributors to the collection touches upon the notion of this transformative capacity within the realm of literary magazines, but rather focuses on editors and editing of Canadian novels, poetry anthologies, scholarly editions of canonical works, etc. In their "Introduction," Irvine and Kamboureli reflect on what it means for editing to be considered a cultural practice:

> Editing puts working concepts of culture into practice and thus inserts cultural production into collective spaces . . . but it can also identify a void, and rectify it by making visible what dominant forms of cultural production render invisible or inconsequential. By generating the conditions necessary to create new spaces for cultural work and, in the process, creating alternative perspectives that expand established cultural idioms . . . [e]diting as cultural practice can spawn new avenues and venues for the production and dissemination of literary and intellectual work, at once critiquing the limits of existing discourses and conferring legitimacy to previously marginalized voices. (3)

The founding editors of *Fireweed* identified the void, responding to the prevailing sense of injustice with regard to the underrepresentation of women writers. Even though, in its first years, the founding editors failed to live up to their promise of embodying diversity, *Fireweed* did eventually become a platform that allowed various communities of women to collaborate, learn from one another, and embody their often unacknowledged differences. Most importantly, however, it generated the conditions necessary for these women to make the invisible visible, to "expand established cultural idioms," "critiqu[e] the limits of existing discourses" and "confer[ ] legitimacy to previously marginalized voices."

The emerging discipline of feminist periodical studies invites scholars to rediscover periodicals as objects of study in their own right, yet scholarly work on feminist literature and literary production in Canada

has rarely focused on feminist literary and cultural periodicals. In "Introduction: Feminist Periodical Studies," published in the September 2018 issue of *American Periodicals*, Tessa Jordan and Michelle Meagher declared that, "while the field [of periodical studies] has expanded tremendously in the last decade, there has been limited engagement with feminist periodicals published in the wake of the women's movement's second wave" (93). Jordan's article "*Branching Out*: Second-Wave Feminist Periodicals and the Archive of Canadian Women's Writing" was published in *English Studies in Canada* in 2010 (followed by an unpublished PhD dissertation on *Branching Out* defended at the University of Alberta in 2012). Jordan and Meagher's essay brings a promise that, in the future, more work will be published on specific cases of feminist periodical production. So far, however, Jordan is one of a handful of scholars who have published work that could be labelled as exemplary of feminist periodical studies.

Barbara Godard, an indefatigable promoter of feminist studies in Canada and author of important critical analyses of the relationship between feminist periodicals and cultural value, was the only one to write a critical account of the history of *Tessera* (1984-2005), a pioneering publication she co-founded and co-edited.[1] When it comes to *Fireweed*, Larissa Lai's article "The Time Has Come: Self and Community Articulations in Colour. An Issue and Awakening Thunder" (2014) is the only case study so far to analyze one of the *Fireweed* issues[2] ("Awakening Thunder: Asian-Canadian Women," published in 1990). Lai sees *Fireweed*'s special issue as a "groundbreaking" example of anti-racist cultural production. The 1990s, Lai writes, were the epitome of anti-racist cultural production in Canada, with the special issue of *Fireweed* being "the first Asian Canadian women's special issue" with an "eruptive capacity" that stemmed from and responded to the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of its production (Lai 64). *Fireweed* may not have been focused exclusively on Asian-Canadian concerns, yet it lent its already-established platform to a collective of Asian-Canadian women, so that they could create a "rupture" (Lai 64) by articulating their concerns with race, identity, and politics. Throughout its history, *Fireweed* worked as a space where many similar "ruptures" were made for the first time by diverse communities of women.

"Taking the Floor and Making the Space for Ourselves"

In "Alternative Publishing in Canada," Lynette Hunter speaks of Canada of the late twentieth century as a "print society," participation in which was possible only on condition that one had access to print. Godard also saw the promise of liberation from the stiflingly patriarchal and exclusionary tendencies of the establishment in self-publishing, i.e., in "taking the floor and making the space for ourselves" ("Women of Letters" 270). Before *Tessera* began its publication in the mid-eighties, however, Canada had already had a number of magazines, including literary ones, "where women wrote for other women" (269). Those publications served as material and discursive spaces for women who would otherwise find themselves "marginalized from the print society" (Godard 1994; Hunter 48; Marshall 1995). According to Godard, "since the late 1960s, there have been more than 300 feminist publications in Canada," with "more than 50 feminist periodicals appearing regularly" in the late eighties ("Feminist" 212-15). In the 1970s, women began creating their own outlets in the form of magazines, newsletters, newspapers, and journals in response to the notorious marginalization of women's and feminist issues in the mainstream media. These included general interest publications "seek[ing] to reach a wide, broadly defined feminist community," such as *Branching Out* (1973-1980), *Kinesis* (1974-2002), *Herizons: Women's News + Feminist News* (1983-87; 1993-), *La Vie En Rose* (1980-88), *Broadside: a feminist review* (1979-89), as well as literary and cultural magazines such as *Fireweed* (1978-2002), *Room of One's Own* (now *ROOM*) (1975-), *CV 2* (a feminist editorial collective took over in 1984 and ran the publication until 2000), *Tessera* (1984-2005), and *(f.)lip: a newsletter of feminist innovative writing* (1987-1990) (Marshall 1995; Godard 2002; Devereux 2016). In the 1970s, *Room of One's Own* and *Fireweed* were the only literary magazines devoted to women's writing published in Canada.

Godard was disconcerted with how long it took women to realize the potential of collective work, "of the need to establish collective spaces" such as periodicals, publishing houses, bookstores, and art galleries "in order to inflect the production and reception of the unspoken rules and conventions of culture so as to *make meanings for women not on women*" ("Women of Letters" 267; emphasis added). The majority of feminist publications was created by collectives of women who, as Godard argues, struggled with the lack of sufficient symbolic and

economic capital, establishing collectives and engaging in a collective activity as a "legitimizing tool" and "a crucial feature of identity formation" ("Women of Letters" 267). This does not mean, however, that the degree to which communities of women lacked both symbolic and economic capital was the same for every group. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist collectives would consist of mostly white, middle-class, educated women. The Fireweed founding collective, for example, comprised seven women "who had acquired the necessary credentials to authorise them as publishers" (Hunter 48): Gay Allison, Rina Fraticelli, Pamela Godfree, Edie Hoffman, Joss Maclennan, Denise Maxwell, and Rhea Tregebov. They graduated from universities in Canada and the US and "had gained experience by editing for major commercial publishing houses such as Oxford University Press, or by working on established small magazines in Canada" (48). In this respect, and despite the still precarious position they were in, women from the Fireweed collective had greater chances of getting access to print and, thus, making room for themselves and others.

In order to fight economic obstacles, feminist publications engaged in various processes of gift economy. For example, when *Fireweed* lost its office space in 1981, the Toronto-based Women's Press came to the rescue, offering to share its own location, while *FUSE*, a non-feminist art publication from Toronto, would let *Fireweed* use its production space for layout in exchange for an ad in the pages of the quarterly. Though the latter was not stated directly, it was most probably the case, considering the fact that *Fireweed* had little money and the information about borrowing the space from *FUSE* and a *FUSE* ad appeared in the same, eleventh issue of *Fireweed.* Moreover, such practices had already been common in the larger field of alternative publishing. Interestingly, women at *Fireweed*, faced with the need for technological support with mailing campaigns, accepted help from the Body Politic collective, which published Canada's first gay publication, *The Body Politic*, between 1971 and 1987. This shows a high degree of cooperation and mutual support among members of variously minoritized communities active in the alternative publishing industry in Canada. Such cooperation and support were by all means necessary, as non-commercial publications with a limited readership could not profit from advertising the way mass publications did. As Godard said,

> advertisers refuse to place their ads in what they perceive as publications with a limited readership (single gender, that is) . . . feminist magazines must rely on revenue from subscriptions and the less profitable ads from professional women, from women's bookstores, ads announcing women's cultural events, [and] exchange ads with other feminist publications. ("Feminist" 221)

This is what can be seen in the pages of *Fireweed*: ads of other feminist, art, academic, and general-purpose publications from Canada and abroad (*Fuse*, *Kinesis*, *Incite*, *This Magazine*, *The Radical Reviewer*, *Connexions — an international women's quarterly*, *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, *event*); women's presses (Women's Press, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press); organizations, networks, and groups (Oxfam Canada, Network of Radical Lesbian Counseling, The Gay Self-Defense Group); and announcements of upcoming publications, calls for papers, and events such as 'self-defence for women' courses. From the 1980s to early 1990s, *Fireweed* published ads on a regular basis (they would mostly disappear in the 1990s) and these would often reflect the theme of a given issue. As Jan DeGrass stated in a review of feminist periodicals published in the March 1983 issue of *Kinesis*, "*Fireweed* wraps itself around a theme, dynamically and extravagantly utilizing all forms to explore content" (29).

Throughout the 1980s and after, the publishing practices of *Fireweed* reflected the tenets of what Jill Vickers defines as the "operational code" of English-Canada's second-wave women's movement. Noticing the strong embeddedness of Canadian feminism in the "broader Canadian political culture," Vickers enumerates its two major characteristics. Firstly, there is feminists' "capacity for collaborative action" despite ideological differences within the women's movement, reflected in their "attempts at inclusiveness" and willingness to bring together "feminists from across the political spectrum and from all regions into coalitions such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women" (41). Secondly, there is the "general acceptance within the Canadian women's movement of action by the state as a means of social change, and the willingness of even the most radical feminist groups to accept state funding" (Vickers 41; Hunter 466). In what follows, I would like to address the relationship between state funding and feminist publishing using the example of *Fireweed* before moving on to a discussion of how the politics of diversity played itself out in the journal's pages.

As Hunter declared, "*Fireweed* emerged into an authorised product through careful tending; it acquired grants and gained access for many writers from 1978 into the Eighties" (48). The "careful tending" suggests that a lot of effort was exerted on the part of editors who went to great lengths to acquire money, authority, and considerable cultural capital. *Fireweed* did seek state funding, but it took four years of entirely volunteer labour by the group of founding editors, their untiring perseverance, and ingeniousness before it received its first grants (from the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, and the Secretary of State Women's Programme) in 1982. Funding from the Canada Council has been accepted by numerous writers and publishers in Canada since the Council was founded in 1957; however, "in exchange for their editorial independence, feminist periodicals [from the 1970s to the 1990s] enjoy[ed] none of the safety nets of dominant practices" and were much less likely to secure government funding (Godard, "Feminist" 221). Godard drew a line between feminist and literary periodicals when discussing their potential for receiving funding from the state. Feminist periodicals were at a much disadvantaged position due to their inherently political underpinnings, while "literary and artistic journals" would "occupy a different position in the field 'funded as high art publications'" (221). The case of *Fireweed* is particularly interesting, for the quarterly can be positioned at the intersection of the two categories. The editors' decision to change the name from *A Women's Literary and Cultural Journal* to *a feminist quarterly of writing, politics, art & culture* after two years of existence (in 1980) was dictated by "the need to become more politically defined" rather than "broad-based" and thus "watered-down" (Kinesis Staff Writers 10; McKnight 236-37). Despite its strong literary orientation, *Fireweed* did not shy away from explicitly blending poetry and short prose with critical (often political) essays, reports, and various forms of art, and thus had to "struggle for legitimation" of its "hybrid practices" that were unconvincing to the Canada Council (Godard, "Feminist" 221).

In the ninth issue of *Fireweed*, published in 1981, editors informed readers that their application had been refused by the Council on the grounds that the publication was of "uneven quality," i.e., weak contributions outweighed stronger ones (Godfree, et al.,"Bread and Roses" 5-6). The Council expressed hope that the collective would continue

their activity despite this refusal of funding (6). To this, the editors responded

> We will. We had, however, hoped to use Council money not only to pay our contributors, but to bring our publication to a greater audience of women. With your [readers'] support, we will still be able to do so. Your increased subscriptions and donations can make us independent of government control. . . . We know the women's community supports us and we are determined to overcome this setback. (6)

In this assertion, editors showed their belief in and devotion to the project as well as their willingness to persevere and continue publishing against all odds. Most importantly, however, the editors realized the value of committed readership. In order to attract readers and survive economically, women behind *Fireweed* would engage in such practices as organizing the Fireweed Festival, fundraising dances and lawn sales, and reaching out to the community by publishing surveys to inquire about readers' interests and concerns.

An unexpected turn of events occurred half-a-year later, when the Canada Council reconsidered its decision after protests by *Fireweed* readers following the publication of issue 9. Such mobilization of readers proved that *Fireweed* had managed to accumulate considerable capital thanks to a strong community of supporters. Throughout its history, *Fireweed* acquired funding from such bodies as the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council (Writers' Grants Funds), the Secretary of State Women's Program (beginning in 1982, the first time since its inception that *Fireweed* had salaried staff), the Gay Community Appeal, and a Summer Canada Employment Grant (which allowed the collective to hire guest editors and pay writers to conduct research). Both the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council continued to support *Fireweed* throughout the eighties, but after the massive cuts to arts funding in the late 1990s, the grants "failed to cover basic production costs" ("Fireweed Notes" 5). *Fireweed* went back to being an entirely volunteer-run publication and editors had to resort to paying writers "who were never doing it for the money, anyway" with back issues instead of cash (Godard, "Feminist" 221; "Fireweed Notes" 5). Despite these financial constraints, *Fireweed* continued publishing until 2002.

Attempting Inclusiveness: *Fireweed* at the Crossroads of Second- and Third-Wave Feminism(s)

In 1978, *Fireweed* took off with a clear vision of what it was and what it wanted to become, a vision showcased in the magazine's first editorial statement:

> The Collective will attempt to publish work from women of *all cultures and classes* so that a *diversity* of views can be shared. We will print the work of established women as well as that of new and developing women, including work from *the Native and immigrant communities*. We believe it is important that we, as women, engage in an effort to expand our awareness and support of one another. We hope *Fireweed* will be a forum for sharing our ideas, our discoveries, our work, our joy, as well as our pain and obstacles with one another and with the community at large. It is a time to unify, to create and define our universe . . . and to participate in a renaissance of women's culture and, through this renaissance, help to create a more caring and humane society in which all of its members can grow together. (3; emphasis added)

From the very beginning, women at *Fireweed* attempted inclusiveness and embraced a policy of diversity. Rina Fraticelli, one of the co-founding editors, stated in an interview that the members of the collective struggled to put aside their "patriarchal-defined values of artistic qualities" and fight the "male censor" within themselves in order to open themselves to women's writing in its entirety (Burton 12). The message of the first editorial, however, remained rooted in second-wave feminist discourse, with its essentialist approach to the woman category and no explicit reference to racial, sexual, or class differences in the community. Despite the assertions of diversity, *Fireweed* did begin as a forum for second-wave feminist concerns and, in its first years, attracted mostly white, middle-class writers. Nine years later, a new editorial collective would reflect on the early work of *Fireweed*, noting that it did not live up to its commitment to represent "the diverse experience of all women" (The Fireweed Collective 6). In fact, contributions from women of colour, immigrant women, or Native women were very scarce or nonexistent during *Fireweed*'s first few years. As a result of changes to the editorial policy introduced with issue 13, *Fireweed* became the first feminist literary magazine in Canada to share its platform with guest

editorial collectives, whose members would soon bring to the surface and problematize issues such as racism, classism, and sexism within the women's movement. Throughout the eighties, *Fireweed* published seven landmark guest-edited issues, most of which were the first of its kind to appear in Canada: no. 13, "Lesbiantics" (July 1982); 16, "Women of Colour" (May 1983); 22, "Native Women" (Winter 1986); 23, "Canadian Women Poets" (Summer 1986); 25, "Class Is the Issue" (July 1987); 26, "This Is Class Too" (March 1988); 28, "Lesbiantics II" (Spring 1989); and 30, "Awakening Thunder: Asian Canadian Women" (February 1990).

From 1978 to 1990, the *Fireweed* collective was in a state of constant flux. As is usually the case with publications that require volunteer labor, the main reason for editors leaving the collective was their need for more time for self-care and self-development. Between 1978 and 1982 (issues 1-13), the number of collective members was stable, including the founding members — Fraticelli, Godfree, Hoffman, Maclennan, Maxwell (left with issue 11) and Tregebov — as well as the poet Carolyn Smart (joined with issue 10), Gillian Robinson (assistant editor at *Fuse*; joined with issue 11), and Sheilagh Crandall (joined with issue 12 after working as "fireweed organizer" for two years). Although the notes published in the "Ourstory" section provided reasons for each member's decision to leave, it is also believed that the editors may have resigned in the face of "adverse reactions from the community" regarding the apparent exclusion of diversity from the early issues of *Fireweed* ("Fireweed"). With issue 14, "Fear and Violence" (November 1982), the editorial collective changed almost entirely. Pamela Godfree, the only remaining member of the old collective, was joined by Sheila Block (former regional representative who moved from Vancouver to join the collective), Susan Douglas-Drinkwater (an art historian and critic, member of the Women's Cultural Building collective), Nila Gupta (an Indian-Canadian teacher and writer), Gina Mahalek (a freelance journalist and fiction writer; left with issue 14 "to resume her life as a 23-year-old in Rochester, New York"), and two production managers: Anne Nixon (a seamstress, worked on issue 13; left with issue 15) and Makeda Silvera ("a black woman, a worker, a lover, a feminist, a mother, a writer, a Rastafarian, a visionary") ("Ourstory 14" 110-11). Silvera and Gupta were the first women of colour to become members of the collective; Gupta left with issue 19 for unknown reasons, while Silvera

remained a member of the collective until 1990, joined along the way by Wendy Waring (a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto), Christine Higdon (a U of T student of labour studies), Kate Forster, Mary Horodyski, and Antonita Chan.

In "Racism: Two Feminists in Dialogue," a conversation between Silvera and Cy-Thea Sand (a founding co-editor of *the Radical Reviewer* and a frequent contributor to and co-editor of *Fireweed*'s themed issues), published in the March 1985 issue of *Kinesis*, Silvera recollected a meeting she once had with white, middle-class female editors and the moment she asked them about their target audience. "It became clear in that meeting," she recalled, "that white middle-class women were both the writers and audience because they argued that racism was secondary to the struggle against sexism"; it became clear "that the dearth of anti-racist material in feminist publications reflect[ed] the primacy of white, middle-class concerns . . ." (10). Back then, she decided "to work only with white women who know the true meaning of sisterhood and who want to interact with Black women for more than just a song or a dance" (10). Silvera's words point to a flaw in feminist publishing at the time, a void *Fireweed* intended to fill by engaging in cooperation with guest collectives and becoming a platform where the thus-far unheard voices and concerns would be heard. As the collective stated in the editorial to the open issue published in Winter 1987, it was mostly through the efforts of guest collectives that *Fireweed* "succeeded in broadening its audience and pool of writers as well as drawing out new perspectives and different concerns" (Fireweed Collective 5).

The guest-editing policy enabled women underrepresented within the women's movement to access print and voice their issues. *Fireweed* became a legitimating platform and an outlet that brought together various, often divergent voices and fostered an environment for mutual learning. A closer look at guest-edited issues of *Fireweed* published in the eighties reveals that each of them challenged the vision second-wave feminists had of themselves, feminism at large, and their work as editors. The collective, aiming to reach out to a broader community of women, applied for and received a Summer Canada Employment Grant that allowed them to hire guest editors ("Ourstory 13" 146). The first guest-edited issue, "Lesbiantics," appeared in July 1982. The guest collective included two members of the Fireweed collective, Pamela Godfree and Lynne Fernie, who also wrote the editorial, in which they stated that

"Lesbiantics" was not "a token gesture to a visible lesbian presence" because *Fireweed* "has published lesbian work from its inception," and they expressed hope for more submissions from lesbian writers in the future (Fernie and Godfree 5). In a review of "Lesbiantics" published in *The Radical Reviewer*, Wendy Frost stated that "Within the feminist press in Canada, there has been no continuous lesbian voice. There are no Canadian counterparts to such American journals as *Sinister Wisdom* and *Conditions* . . . no one publication that speaks to the experience of the Canadian lesbian" (qtd. in Herringer 14). Next to *Room of One's Own*, *Fireweed* was at the time the only outlet in Canada where creative work by lesbians was being published: "Until one of us wins the lottery or funding is more readily available," wrote Barbara Herringer in her review of lesbian journals in Canada and the US, "our diversity as Canadian lesbians will continue to make itself known in our communities, around kitchen tables, in the pages of feminist journals such as *Fireweed* and *Room of One's Own* or in the pages of lesbian journals being produced in the United States" (14). "Lesbiantics II," the 28th issue of *Fireweed*, was published in Spring 1989, but was not guest-edited (Silvera was an openly lesbian member of the collective) and did not have an editorial. Contrary to the 1982 issue, however, it did contain work by lesbians of colour. In 1995, *Fireweed* lent its space to De Poonani Posse, a collective of three black lesbians who used *Fireweed*, an already established platform, yet one that had never devoted an entire issue to Black lesbians or Black women, "as a jump off point" to publish the first issue of *Da Juice*, the first black lesbian magazine in Canada (Zeleke 15).

Fireweed 16, the Women of Colour issue published in May 1983, was the second *Fireweed* issue edited by a guest collective and marked the first time in the history of Canadian feminist literature "that women of colour collectively came together to talk in a single anthology" (Gupta and Silvera 5; Sand and Silvera 11). It was also the first to bring to the surface tensions related to racism within the feminist community at large, thus anticipating what would become one of the primary concerns for third-wave feminists in the 1990s. The guest collective consisted of Himani Bannerji, Dionne Brand, and Prabha Khosla, accompanied by Silvera and Gupta as managing editors. In an editorial entitled "We Were Never Lost," editors share with readers how two years prior to the publication of the issue, Silvera and Brand had reached out to the

Fireweed collective with a proposal to create an issue on women of colour, but "after a number of frustrating and fruitless meetings with the collective, we gave up the idea of guest editing an issue on the theme for *Fireweed*" (Gupta and Silvera 5). The decision stemmed from the Fireweed collective's "refusal to acknowledge that women of colour should have full editorial control over the production of an issue that would explore [their] lives" (5). When the new collective approached Brand and Silvera two years later, both women found the invitation "racist in fact if not in intent":

> Did *Fireweed* now feel the climate was right? Was it now "politically correct" to devote an issue to women of colour? Would this issue be seen as "taking care of" the matter? Having been "discovered" by white feminists, would women of colour then see the repetition of an herstorical pattern within the feminist movement which has consistently dealt with our concerns in a token fashion at best and most often not at all? (5)

Despite these reservations, they decided to use *Fireweed* as a platform from which they would "reach out to women of colour" and "educate white feminists" (5). As Silvera revealed in conversation with Cy-Thea Sand:

> The work on the *Fireweed* Women of Colour (W.O.C.) issue was anti-racism work in action. . . . Most of the middle-class white women with whom we were dealing had had minimal or no previous contact with women of colour. . . . They held many of the assumptions that we have come to understand as the basis of feminist imperialism — we had battles over the proper way of starting a sentence, battles over form and content, over the definition of a short story or a poem, problems around the usage of language. *There was much tension, weariness, and tears. But they made the decision to stay and work out the differences*. It was really *a testing ground* for white women at the Fireweed collective, for their commitment to struggle for a broader meaning of feminism and to fight against feminist imperialism. (Sand and Silvera 10; emphasis added)

In more than 160 pages, the editors collected poetry, fiction, reviews, critical essays, graphics, photography, personal experiences, and political commentaries by Black, Asian, and Native women. They selected "work that communicated," guided by "a combination of artistic and political

standards," while rejecting "white male literary standards which have been used to still the voices of peoples of colour of both sexes" (Gupta and Silvera, "We Were Never Lost" 6). The issue opened with a conversation between guest editors entitled "We Appear Silent to Those Who Are Deaf to What We Say," in which they criticized the women's movement in Canada for not identifying with and representing women of colour and immigrant women, "the overwhelming emptiness of the 'woman' category, the objectification of women of colour and immigrant women by white feminists, as well as lack of willingness on the side of white feminists to publish work by women of colour and deal with issues of class and race within the feminist movement (Guest Collective, "We Appear Silent" 8). *Fireweed* 16 was indeed a testing ground for the collective but, most importantly, it brought two communities together and provided an opportunity, especially for white women, to grow and learn from women of colour. In a note added in the last pages of the volume, members of the Fireweed collective pledged to fight racism in society and themselves, acknowledged their "power [as editors] to inform and to silence," and admitted to inadvertently working as agents of "white dominant culture" ("Ourstory 16" 155). They also decided to revise their editorial policy by explicitly stating that *Fireweed* would not accept submissions that were racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, classist, or homophobic, and made a commitment to set up a "consciousness-raising group" with an aim to learn "more about our world, our sisters" and "stop using power in an oppressive way" (155). The issue's concern with fighting racism among women resonated with *Fireweed* readers who, in letters to editors published in *Fireweed* 19, expressed their gratitude and admiration for the work published in *Fireweed* since the arrival of issue 16 and the educational and illuminating discussions held by its guest collective. One reader saw *Fireweed* as "challenging the divisions between women of colour and white women" and thanked the editors for "providing the forum" for fighting internalized racism and sexism ("Letters" 114).

It is crucial to recognize that the publication of the Women of Colour issue did not escape a backlash. While some reviews praised the issue for its "profound class consciousness" and masterful selection of work, the guest collective was harshly criticised by feminists working outside the Fireweed circle for its promotion of "hatred for white women rather than men" (Sand 20; Sand and Silvera 10). Silvera explained that

women of colour "used the feminist journal as a forum to air [their] discontent and to engage in analysis," and what particularly troubled her in the aftermath of the publication was some feminists' negative reaction to women of colour "having spoken at all" (Sand and Silvera 10). Yet they did speak. The medium of the magazine helped them showcase bold and revolutionary work by women of colour (such as fragments of Makeda Silvera's upcoming *Silenced* and Bannerji's *The Story of a Birth*) and problematize important aspects of women of colour's lives. "This Women of Colour issue is *herstoric in Canada*. It is the first work of its kind to be published here," the collective stated in the editorial (Gupta and Silvera, "We Were Never Lost" 6; emphasis added). In 1989, with *Fireweed* 16 long out of print, the issue was reprinted as *The Issue Is 'Ism: Women of Colour Speak Out, Fireweed's Issue 16* by Silvera's Sister Vision Press, further establishing the special issue as a major, continuously timely, and resonating accomplishment.

In a review of *Fireweed* 16 published in *Broadside* in October 1983, Anette Clough expressed hope that special issues made by and for particular communities of women would not be necessary in the future, and that *Fireweed* would succeed in presenting "the concerns and aspirations of all women, with the voices of minority women getting equal time along with those who have so far had more opportunities to make their voices heard" (11). Yet, in the years to come, *Fireweed* did not change its policy and continued giving the floor to guest editors. In fact, this is what made it stand out among other feminist publications in Canada. The medium functioned as a tool for minority women who, at the time, lacked capital to create a platform of their own, but could take *Fireweed* and make it their own. January 1986 saw the publication of the "Native Women" issue of *Fireweed* (no. 22), the first "anthology" of Native women writing in Canada, edited by Ivy Chaske (of the Dakota Nation) and Connie Fife (Cree Canadian poet and editor) as Managing Editors, and Jan Champagne, Edna King, and Midnight Sun. Significantly, the idea to publish an issue on Native Women was initiated by the Fireweed collective, which had been doing its best since the publication of issue 16 to truly serve a broader base of women of colour and working-class women. As the guest editors stated, the issue took two years of hard work to complete and also required some willingness to learn on the part of the hosts, whose suggestion that submissions be only from Canada met with resistance on the part of Native

editors who, "as Women of sovereign nations," would not recognise "imposed boundaries" and accepted submissions from Native Women living across North America (Chaske and Fife 5). The coming together of Native women writers, "unheard, silenced, and invalidated too often," allowed them to speak their own truth, acknowledge and define who and what they are, celebrate their lives, bridge the distances between Native women across the continent, form networks, and affirm their "togetherness in spirit" (5).

Until the end, *Fireweed* remained true to its promise of serving a broader base of women. Two issues on class (nos. 25 and 26) were published in 1987 and 1988, and the Asian-Canadian Women issue, "the first Asian-Canadian women's writing anthology," appeared in 1990 (Lum 19). Cy-Thea Sand co-edited the first "Class" volume, using other feminist periodicals such as *Kinesis* and *Room of One's Own* to invite contributions from "poor and working-class women from all across Canada" whose lives "would not otherwise be recorded" ("A Little Night Reading" 24). With the publication of "Class Is the Issue," *Fireweed* became the first feminist journal to devote an entire issue to class, gathering short fiction, poetry and critical essays by a group of working-class women writers who had not been published before, and already known Canadian writers such as Dionne Brand and Makeda Silvera (Rudland 14).

The number of "ruptures" *Fireweed* made within the field of Canadian feminist literature throughout the eighties speaks to how important the journal was to the promotion of women's writing in Canada. The founding editors' struggle to embrace diversity and their subsequent failure to do so emphasizes how much learning and work there was to accomplish to truly represent the politics of diversity. Despite the criticism levelled at the Fireweed collective in the late 1970s and early 1980s, its members' tireless performance of the labour of love was instrumental in keeping *Fireweed* afloat. Despite countless obstacles, they managed to attract a substantial readership and thus gain cultural capital, thanks to which the journal could secure funding in the decades so difficult for feminist publishing. Throughout the entire history of *Fireweed*, but especially in the 1980s, women editors, including guest editors, set an exceptional example of how editing a journal could be a work of cultural practice. By becoming a platform for so broad a range of women's voices and concerns, *Fireweed* inserted, and

at times "forced," the cultural production by diverse communities of women into collective spaces where those communities were not properly represented. Bold, educational, and pioneering editorials, critical essays and creative writing that appeared in its pages stimulated the (at the time, rare) thinking about the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In this respect, *Fireweed* was the first Canadian feminist literary journal of the 1980s where, with many obstacles along the way, third-wave feminism could take root.

Notes

[1] Godard's "Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value: The Canadian Context" (2002) is a particularly valuable contribution to our knowledge about feminist periodicals within a larger cultural field, while "Women of Letters: Reprise," from *Collaboration in the Feminine* (1994), engages in a critical analysis of the legacy of *Tessera*.

[2] Aside from Lai's work, Pauline Butling (2002) provides a short analysis of a celebratory issue of *Fireweed* published in 1996, pointing to its importance as a "commemorative publication" (230).

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