

The New Woman and Visual Resistance: A Feminist Visual Rhetorical Analysis of *Hard Labor*

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Abstract: In response to changing social and political forces, feminist activists in Arkansas used community newspapers to spread awareness of events and topics, educate, and build coalitions in the 1970s. This essay examines the rhetorical choices of the cover image of one such newspaper, *Hard Labor*, arguing that the image, *The New Woman*, resisted notions of dominant narratives about womanhood in the 70s through rhetorical choices. By demanding that viewers resist as they look at images like *The New Woman*, cartoons contribute to coalition building by articulating feminist arguments about what womanhood is and can be in the 1970s and demystifying reproductive health.

Keywords: [care ethics](#), [resistance](#), [visual rhetoric](#), [coalition](#), [archives](#).

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Introduction: Looking for Feminisms in Arkansas

As a scholar interested in reproductive health, feminisms, and technical communication, moving to Arkansas presented a unique set of challenges for me. Currently, Arkansas ranks 47 out of 51 states (including Washington, D.C.) in “women’s health and reproductive care,” ranks last in available maternity care providers, and second to last in infant mortality (Grajeda, 2024). The stakes are high for women and pregnant people living in Arkansas, and as cuts to funding threaten rural hospitals (Luthra & Rodriguez, 2025), pregnancy can be risky and dangerous, and reproductive healthcare can be difficult to impossible to access. These dismal rankings and facts point to a history of lack in reproductive healthcare in Arkansas. I felt an urgent interest, then, in uncovering what this historical context might look like.

This interest and urgency led me to The Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, located within the Central Arkansas Library System, which includes archival holdings focused on the history, literature, art, and culture of Arkansas. Here, I wanted to learn more about the feminist history of Arkansas, particularly relating to reproductive health. Given Arkansas’s tenuous at best relationship with reproductive health, I was unsure what I might find as I requested a box of newspapers that claimed to contain materials related to reproductive health. In their piece on rhetorical attendance in the archives, Kat Gray (2025) has reminded us that, “the materials in the archive and the material lives they represent always exceed our expectations in ways we cannot predict until we encounter them” (p. 154). This rang true for me, as I was pleasantly surprised when I was met with issues of *Hard Labor*, a feminist community newspaper published by the Feminist Press Collective in Fayetteville, Arkansas in the 1970s.

The issues in the box were well-worn, with crinkling, rips and tears in corners, and faded edges. I was almost afraid to touch them for fear I might rip the pages further. Julie Homchick Crowe and Ryan Mitchell (2025) offered care ethics as a framework for scholars of rhetoric of health and medicine in the archives, and at that moment, I felt as if I were more than careful. However, Crowe and Mitchell urged that an ethics of care goes beyond caring for archival material physically in how we handle and preserve, but to “take archives

on their own terms” (p. 132). Taking these newspapers on their own terms, then, I forged ahead, remembering that these are “lively” (Cifor, 2013, p. 10) documents, meant to be handled, circulated, read, and discussed.

As I attended to these documents, letting the archives guide me as I thought, “What lives were present in these documents?” I was struck primarily by the use of visuals in the newspapers. Each page contains an image, a cartoon, an advertisement, or a photograph from an event as eye-catching as the content contained in the paper. Care ethics becomes an important framework for this project as I consider how to perform an analysis that is both careful and feminist in nature; these newspapers were circulated not long ago, some of the newspaper personnel still live in Arkansas. Royster and Kirsch (2012) wrote that, “an ethics of hope and care requires a commitment to be open, flexible, welcoming, patient, introspective, and reflective” (p. 145). Feminist care ethics is about returning to concepts and contexts, being slow and deliberate, and thinking. Care ethics thus naturally gives way to feminist visual analysis as I sought to “learn about the contexts of those who use rhetorical strategies under conditions that may be different from [my] own” (p. 145–46). Visual care ethics, then, lets me slow down. A framework of visual care ethics lets the images guide my viewing and understanding of the content contained in the papers. Visual care ethics is thus a feminist framework of looking that emphasizes attention to detail, lived experiences, and a reflection on how these multifaceted experiences may be present in feminist visuals.

These images challenge viewers to engage with the visual content in ways different from simply looking, they ask viewers to critically engage with feminist concepts and contexts by questioning dominant narratives about womanhood. In this essay, I present a feminist rhetorical analysis of how the cover image included in *Hard Labor* constructs and complicates feminist notions of womanhood. In particular, I am interested in the compositional choices presented in the images: the spatial arrangement, maximalist depictions, references to mythology, and gaze, and how these compositional choices may force certain receptions of feminist ideologies. The images and visuals included in *Hard Labor* represent both the struggle for reproductive freedom in the 70s and a commitment to education and liberation through visual rhetorical choices.

The illustrations adorning the pages of *Hard Labor* frequently came in the form of cartoon drawings, including the cover illustration, shown below. The images and visuals included in *Hard Labor* represent both the struggle for reproductive freedom in the 70s and a commitment to education and liberation through visual rhetorical choices. This tension between struggle and commitment forms a sort of visual resistance to conventional representations of and norms about womanhood, bodies, and health. By demanding that viewers resist as they look at the images, these cartoons contribute to coalition building by articulating feminist arguments about what womanhood is in the 1970s and demystifying reproductive health.

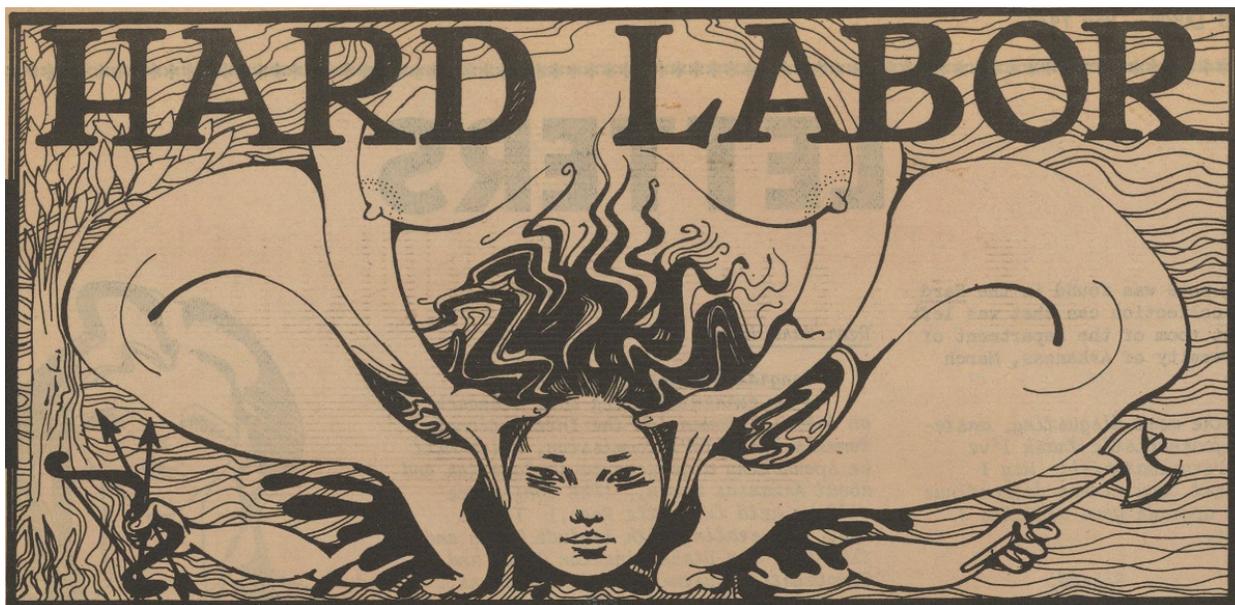


Figure 1: [The New Woman]. (1975.).

Hard Labor began its first issue with the claim that “Sexism in our society isolates us and keeps us mystified about our biological and social oppression... we must demand from society the right to understand and develop all our capacities and determine their uses” (Clevidence et. al, 1975, p. 2). One prominent way *Hard Labor* reaches its goals, as I will show in this analysis, is through its use of visuals. The images and visuals included in the newspapers represent both the struggle for reproductive freedom in the 70s *and* a commitment to education and liberation through visual rhetorical choices.

Hard Labor: Feminist Activism in Arkansas

Hard Labor was originally published by the Feminist Press Collective in 1975 and ran from 1975--1979. One such issue stated that *Hard Labor* is “A Journal of Feminist News and Opinion,” which sought women’s liberation and education in the wake of the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision by publishing community articles, reviews, letters, and poetry related to feminist and lesbian topics. In 1980, *Hard Labor* changed its name to *The Ozark Feminist*, but publication ceased after one year (Roberts Library).

Issues of *Hard Labor* are stored in the Lee Cowan papers at the Butler Center as well as the University of Arkansas Library Archives in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The University of Arkansas Library Archives houses a collection on The Women’s Library, a volunteer-run library in Fayetteville. Formed in 1982, the library ran educational events, community events, and of course, housed books related to feminist topics. The roots of the Women’s Library, though, trace back to the 1977 death of Mari Spehar, a Fayetteville woman and activist who died from complications related to an intrauterine device (IUD). Her death would change the course of feminist activism in Arkansas, as issues of *Hard Labor* and the *Grapevine* would be dedicated to her memory, and the Mari Spehar Memorial Health Project would form. The Mari Spehar Memorial Health Project’s goal was to educate women about their health by forming a clinic that provided educational materials, office hours, and cervix and breast exams (Zajicek, Lord, & Holyfield, 2003). When the space was closed, the library was born in downtown Fayetteville, and the library inherited the Mari Spehar Health Education Proj-

ect, over 300 books, sexual health education materials and photos of examinations, as well as files of women's periodicals (Zajicek, Lord, & Holyfield, 2003). The library received periodicals, newspapers, and journals as gifts and donations, so the holdings are not complete, but depict what feminist resistance was like during the time the Women's Library was open from 1982-2000. The Lee Cowan papers are similarly fragmented and incomplete; in addition to *Hard Labor*, the collection features two other newspapers: *Ours*, a newspaper published in Little Rock, Arkansas, from 1978-1987 and *Grapevine*, another Fayetteville newspaper that ran from 1970-1993. The University of Arkansas Library Archives has also digitized several issues of *Hard Labor*, so issues can be viewed online now as well.

Although incomplete, these fragments of newspapers display the “social circulation” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 23) of feminist resistance and coalition building in the immediacy of post-Roe Arkansas. Social circulation, a feminist methodology of analysis and understanding, focuses on “connections among past, present, and futures in the sense that the overlapping social circles in which women travel, live, and work are carried on or modified and can lead to changed rhetorical practices” (p. 23). The newspapers, thus, served as a form of social circulation for women as they allowed them to practice rhetorical resistance and build coalitions. These newspapers were material objects to be passed around and discussed, to be used by readers to find community, learn about their bodies, and share information. The first two issues were distributed for free before raising to 15 cents per copy for the third issue, as per the editor's note on the first issue.

One topic that frequented the pages of *Hard Labor* was sex and sexual health . Sample articles include: “Abortion–What is Happening to Our Right?,” “Involuntary Sterilization: The Outrage Continues–Minority Women are the Victims,” “Choosing Your Doctor” and “Manipulated Medicine.” Through these articles, profiles, and letters, newspaper authors and editors sought women's liberation and education, particularly as it relates to women's health and wellness. Accompanied by these written texts were illustrations that worked to enhance a reader's experience by creating feminist meaning through their production. These cartoons challenged a viewer's assumptions about womanhood through their use of symbolism, density, and mythology. What follows is a close reading of the cover image, *The New Woman* drawing, and its rhetorical effects.

The New Woman: Building Coalition Through Resistance

The most striking image of all included in *Hard Labor* is the cover illustration, titled *The New Woman*. Featured in nearly every issue of *Hard Labor*, the drawing, created by an anonymous artist, features the body of a woman holding her head in front of her vagina. The artist provides the following statement in volume 3, number 2:

The artist, who chooses to remain anonymous, would like to explain the symbolism of the cover illustration. Based on the existing title, HARD LABOR, the picture represents the New Woman emerging from the womb of womankind. Her face is round, like the full moon. Her hair, Medusa-like, is also the pubic hair of mature Womanhood– The Mother. The blood of birth–which is also menstrual blood– pours out, to mingle its salt with the salt of the primeval sea. In one hand New Woman bears the arrows and bows of Diana/Artemis, the Huntress (and sometime protector of men); in the other hand she bears the Labrys, the double-bladed ax, symbol of feminine love. New Woman, like ourselves, is ambivalent and paradoxical; She stands for eternity and rebirth;

she is fierce yet gentle, outgoing and introspective, innocent and knowing. If you gaze beyond the still depths of her eyes, you will know that She is vitality itself, constantly recreating Herself and all Humankind anew. To the left, a Woman trapped in a tree weeps—for all our Sisters and ourselves who are still not free.

All images in *Hard Labor* are black and white, and each cartoon included is a drawing by an artist (most remain anonymous like *The New Woman's* creator). *The New Woman* image features a feminine body crouching down and holding her head in front of her vagina. Two more hands below her hold a bow and an axe. To the side, a woman's face is trapped in a tree. Behind the woman are curved black lines. Newspaper cartoons, particularly political cartoons, have a long history of being subversive and displaying resistance. This cartoon is no different. The medusa-like hair, serving as both hair on the woman's head and pubic hair, angles out across the body, ending just below two uncovered breasts. Spatially, the New Woman is front and center. She is the focus of the illustration, dominant and headstrong. The New Woman looks directly at the viewer, not shying away from confrontation. This distinct illustration serves as a form of visual resistance to dominant narratives about womanhood, birth, sexuality, and gender. The body is feminine with soft curves while holding weapons.

In fact, the image is composed of many feminine visual multiplicities: the New Woman is at once a warrior, mother, friend, and foe. In this way, she disrupts several archetypes that were commonly held about women in the 70s. While the New Woman appears naked in the cover illustration, the image is decidedly not sexual. The New Woman is ready to fight for the woman trapped in the tree—a warrior. But she has also just given birth—a mother. She does both successfully, gazing at the viewer with a stoic expression. She has not just two hands, but four, holding both herself and her weapons. She holds her own fate, in this sense, and must fight for her future, as well as the future of other women—coalition. Menstruation and childbirth may be deeply personal experiences, but the New Woman, with her direct gaze and readiness to fight for fellow women, bridges connections that a woman's personal struggle also has innate political and coalitional value. *The New Woman* image, I argue, becomes a symbolic representation of the multifaceted fight for women's and reproductive rights.

The New Woman is symbolically dense, almost to the point of overloading the viewer with imagery. No single interpretation can fully capture the multiplicities present in the image, and the symbolic overload forces engagement from the viewer rather than casual glancing. *The New Woman* invites viewers on a journey of complex feminist struggle against norms about womanhood. In her work on feminist iconography, Rachel Molko (2023) wrote that “feminist icons may be able to pierce emotion, experiential, and ideological dimensions of culture to build community” (p. 1) by “requir[ing] viewers to engage in critical and emotional ways that implicate both subjectivity and social change” (p. 4). I argue that *Hard Labor's* use of cartoons operates in a similar function. Although not necessarily a feminist icon, the symbolism of *The New Woman* illustration in particular forces the viewer to directly acknowledge *The New Woman*—the direct gaze and references to mythology demand engagement from the viewer as they seek to uncover what *The New Woman* really is. Viewers cannot simply move on from this visual, but must directly grapple with the conflicting emotional response that might become present upon seeing *The New Woman*. She is both lover and fighter, and it is

impossible to ignore or overlook one of her many identities in favor of another.

The Medusa imagery in particular creates another interesting multiplicity. In mythology, Medusa turns those who gaze upon her face into stone. Similarly, it's almost difficult to look at the image because of the symbolic and graphic overload of *The New Woman*. There is just *so much* to look at, the gaze of the viewer may not know where to fall. Do you start with the New Woman's face, looking directly at you? Or the weapons she holds? Or her uncovered breasts? There is no one way to view *The New Woman*, once again reinforcing the multitudes she contains. The imagery of the Medusa-like hair, serving as both menstrual blood and birthing blood, is unifying rather than divisive. In this way, Medusa is a source of power and strength rather than fear or disgust. By reclaiming Medusa, *The New Woman* once again complicates ideas about what femininity is and can be.

By making the New Woman and her intricacies visible, *Hard Labor* is making an activist claim about the multiplicities of women while resisting traditional norms about womanhood. While the New Woman is still a caretaker, she is also a fighter, two identities that may not be thought of in the same person. In this way, the visual resistance persistent through *Hard Labor* serves as a form of visual activism. Eve Kalyva (2022) wrote that "visual activism can be understood as making a visibility claim: a gesture of critique that draws attention to itself as a way of making sense and claiming a presence" (p. 68). Just as the illustration of *The New Woman* asks us to reckon with ideas about womanhood, the cartoons throughout *Hard Labor* ask viewers to stop and look critically, and at times, such as with *The New Woman* illustration, sit in the discomfort. This uncomfortable viewing, I argue, functions similarly to the iconography Molko discusses: by forcing viewers to be uncomfortable, the image creates a sense of shared community and coalition.

Conclusion

Although these newspapers were published in the 1970s, their relevance still sings true today. Like Molko (2023) pointed out, feminist struggles still wage on, particularly after the 2022 US Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v Wade*. In fact, understanding and acknowledging the work of 1970s feminists may be more important than ever as we work towards further coalition building. One way feminists in the 1970s reached audiences was through the use of visuals in newspapers like *Hard Labor*, *Ours*, and *Grapevine*. What I have analyzed here only scratches the the surface of what is contained in these newspapers; the Women's Library in Fayetteville contains hundreds of similar feminist newspapers. These newspapers demonstrate the visual power of organization and display how visual resistance has long been an important strategy to feminist resistance of dominant narratives.

The New Woman displays visual resistance, an important coalitional building strategy for feminist in the 1970s, particularly through its use of symbolism, mythology, and maximalism. Not all cartoons included in *Hard Labor* are as maximally depicted, though. In contrast to *The New Woman*, other cartoons included in the newspaper are quite stark, such as the *At Your Cervix* illustration, which simply features an outline of a stereotypical woman shaped figure with her arms behind her back, turned to the side. Where the woman's cervix would be is instead a circular squiggle, which is then circled for emphasis. While *The New Woman*

Author Name

illustration is bursting with detail, this piece has only the marks on the cervix. The choice to emphasize the cervix by squiggly marks instead of a cartoon cervix or more realistic drawing could be a way of visualizing the relative mystery of women's health issues in the 1970s, uncertainty about women's health, or detachment from the body. The stark contrast between *The New Woman* and *At Your Cervix* raise questions related to how feminist activists used images to build coalitions around community sexual health education. Future work may continue this line of inquiry, considering the relationship between visual rhetorical strategies and sexual health education in community settings.

Biography

Martha Sue Karnes (she/her) is an assistant professor of Rhetoric and Writing at University of Arkansas Little Rock. Her research focuses on reproductive health, feminist theory, and technical writing. Her work has been published in *Computers and Composition*, *British Medical Journal Open*, and has forthcoming work set to appear in *Programmatic Perspectives*.

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