Full Transcript: Interview of Carol Anne Douglas

about *off our backs*

Wednesday, January 21, 2026

Interview conducted by Julie R Enszer and Chloe Berger on behalf of *Sinister Wisdom*

Copyedited by Ella Stern

Julie Enszer (00:00:03):

Hello, my name is Julie Enszer. I'm the editor and publisher of *Sinister Wisdom*, and I am here today. It is January 21st, 2026, and we are recording an oral history interview with Carol Ann Douglas from *off our backs*. And I am accompanied by Chloe Berger, who's the editor of the *Wild Shrew Literary Review* and a board member of *Sinister Wisdom*. And we're really excited to have this conversation this morning, Carol Anne. So let's start out with, will you tell us how you first became involved with *off our backs*?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:00:41):

Yes. I got involved in the women's movement in early 1972. I was living in New Hampshire, and I got involved with a group in Cambridge, Mass called Boston Female Liberation. And they were affiliated with a magazine called *The Second Wave*. So I was briefly on that. Then I was going to be moving to DC in September, and people said, oh, you should go to *off our backs*. You should join a newspaper *off our backs* if you wanna be on another publication, which was the first I had heard of it. So I moved to DC with my then-husband in September of '72. And the very first day I was in DC I went to the offices of *off our backs*, at which point they informed me that they had just closed the group. So, which was very frustrating, and that I could write for them if I wanted. I didn't really know what to write. So I wanted to belong to a feminist group. So I joined a very straight group called the Women's Lobby, but at least I got, I was lobbying Congress about labor legislation, particularly minimum wage for house workers.

Carol Anne Douglas (00:02:19):

And the first thing I wrote for *off our backs* was a report on–I can't think of the name of the group, a very straight women's group. Anyway then I read the newspaper every month, and the July '73 issue said that a number of women had left the group and they were looking for new members. So I went immediately to their next meeting, which was Thursday, July 11th, 1973,

which I mark as a very important date in my life. And I went to the meeting and, you know, never left <laugh> until the paper folded in the fall of 2008.

Chloe Berger (00:03:28):

And how did *off our backs* start?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:03:31):

off our backs started in around January of 1970. It was started by several women, actually, I always had disputes as to who started it. I know that there were splits pretty early. There was a split early of lesbians who felt that their voices were not heard, and some of them founded the Furies lesbian separatist collective. The women who stayed were mostly straight or heterosexual. And some of them were journalists, especially Onka Dekkers was a very prominent journalist. And they had splits. One split probably was over what they should cover. I know Onka had wanted to endorse George McGovern for president—not to have *off our backs* endorse him, but she wanted to write something endorsing him. And that was prohibited because, both because he was a man and because it was straight politics, and it was not cool at the time to write about straight politics. I mean, I was at *off our backs* the night Nixon resigned, and I was saying, Hey, don't you wanna watch this? And they're like, ho hum, <laugh>. But also, at that time radical feminists and groups such as *off our backs* were not real interested in ERA because it was too reformist. Later, I think when Sonia Johnson was protesting the ERA and getting chained to the White House, we did cover it.

Julie Enszer (00:05:39):

That's so interesting. Now, *off our backs* was the long, is it fair to say it was the longest running feminist newspaper?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:05:47):

Well, I believe so. It ran almost 39 years.

Julie Enszer (00:05:56):

Got it. And tell us–so, so I guess how we were thinking about organizing this next phase of talking about it is talking about it by decades. And I'm really interested in the kind of ethos that you've started to talk about of the collective in the 1970s, sort of their relationship to radical politics. And just more broadly, how did they think about themselves as a collective? How did they organize their work?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:06:30):

Well, it didn't become a collective until, I think, ’74 or ’75, maybe ’74. I don't remember exactly when it started defining itself as a collective. But it was non-hierarchical from the beginning, but didn't have different officials. Mostly we did everything. There were one or two women who ran the office and who got very, very minimal salaries, especially in the beginning in the seventies, that was $50 a week, I think. And let's see, to think, well, again, I didn't join until 1973. At that point, I'd say, what,there were about 10 women, and a few more joined over the next year. They're mostly heterosexual. There was one lesbian couple, and they were, in a sense, the center of things. One of them was especially articulate and, woman, an excellent journalist, Fran Pollner, who changed her name to Fran Moira. And she was a backbone of the collective, of *off our backs*. And, let's see, there was a fair amount of militancy about the time I joined. There was tension between–not so much in *off our backs*, but in the movement generally, there was tension over the question of whether a woman named Jane Alpert had possibly collaborated with the FBI. There was a generally militant perspective or perspective that you don't collaborate with the government, certainly not with the FBI. The Weather Underground was active. One of the first times I was at the paper someone phoned and said, we'd gotten a communique from the Weather Underground, and someone had left the communique in a phone booth a block away, and people were to go get it. That was kind of exciting. And a very short time later our office was broken into, and no money was taken, but both typewriters were taken. We produced it on typewriters at that time, and we had–this was a huge financial loss. The paper had very little money. It was all supported by subscribers and a little bit of advertising, very little. There was the community fundraiser, I think Women Make Movies was having a show. And at the fundraiser, they raised money for us to buy new typewriters.

Chloe Berger (00:10:32):

So the paper really thrived in the 1980s. Can you tell us your memories from that decade?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:10:49):

Well, I'm not ready to talk about the 1980s. There's a lot to say about the seventies. There was a lot of political dialogue and confrontation. In, I think it was ’74, a group called Collection of Lesbian International Terroris (CLIT) came along with what were called the papers. And they were, again, very, very militant lesbian separatists. One paper actually was titled “Straight Women Are Men.” And I thought that was so stupid. I wanted us to not publish that one. But they insisted. We published them as a whole, and one woman on *off our backs* had gotten

involved with one of the CLIT women. So it's very, very intense. And we did have to do that. But at, at that point, we were having very, very long meetings, as in weekend-long meetings to debate politics. And women were starting, more women on the paper were starting to come out. I was still living with my husband, but in the process of separating, and I must say people were very good about, you know, accepting that I wanted to be a lesbian, I was in transition. And, you know, nobody gave me any grief about that. I actually left him in, I think, '75.

Julie Enszer (00:12:53):

So, were the women behind the CLIT papers, did they all live in DC?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:13:00):

They lived in NYC. The *off our backs* women lived in DC, Maryland, and Virginia.

Carol Anne Douglas (00:13:06):

But then–I'm sorry, There *really* is a lot to say about the seventies. Some people on the paper started defining themselves as separatists. But another thing that might have happened just before that–again, there was a lot of debate in *off our backs* about what groups might be backed by the FBI or CIA, and the New York radical feminist group Redstockings produced a manifesto, a sort of magazine-size publication that laid forth their feminist principles, which are pretty heterosexual, which said that focusing on lifestyles, including lesbian, and certainly things like music festivals were not really going to move to political change. And there should be political change, not social change. And that confronting men was what would really help most women, and definitely not lesbian separatism or cultural feminism. And also the Redstockings publication charged that Gloria Steinem was a CIA agent because she had participated in a group around 1960 that was, let's see, a trip to Russia for young people, but [they said] that it was a CIA front. Later when dealing with this issue, Steinem said, yes, she had participated in that, but she was never involved with the CIA.

And anyway, we published that, which was very controversial. And I'd like to jump ahead to say much later, like around the late nineties or 2000 when we were in financial trouble, I actually called Gloria Steinem, you know, who I didn't know. And the Ms. Foundation did give us money despite that. She was very gracious about that despite the history I'm trying to mention all the salient points, but there were so many. Around this time, we got, in '74, '75, we got some members who were more leftists, like one who had gone to Cuba to help harvest–And that was

when we started defining *off our backs* as a collective and adopting some, what should I say, leftist practices like criticism, self-criticism that is, at the end of each meeting, we would go around in a circle and each one of us would say, either I criticize myself for something <laugh> and not being,

I don't know, not being politically sensitive enough about something or failing to do something, a task we had said we would do. Or I, for me, it was always, you know, I jumped in and criticized myself before somebody else criticized me for it. You know, better criticize yourself first. And I, as you can tell, probably, I was not real fond of that practice, which was based on Chinese Communist practice. And I was in graduate school in political science, and I knew a fair amount about China, and enough not to glamorize it, enough not to think that Mao's party organization was any kind of model, but many people, including some on *off our backs*, thought it was.

Julie Enszer:

Mm-hmm.

Carol Anne Douglas (00:18:16):

And, let's see. So much happened then. Oh, there was the SLA, the Symbionese Liberation Army that kidnapped Patricia Hearst. I, having come from an upper middle class background and a Catholic private school where actually a cousin of Patricia Hearst was one of the students, I felt pretty sure, and I still think, that she was, she was acting. That was, that was how she could get by. 'Cause I know that's what I would've done in her position. I would've said, yeah, sure, sure, I'm a revolutionary. But then when some of the members, I guess, of the SLA were arrested, I think some were killed, including a couple of lesbians–But the SLA had also, you know, killed a Black man, I think a high school principal or something. Even though they were led by a Black man. I did not think there was anything admirable about them, and nor did a friend of mine, but we had endless arguments.

They really wanted to have an editorial that was supportive of them, you know, and, and saw them as martyrs and was able to water it down. But I was deeply upset about that. And after that, we actually had a very—*I* think—good shift: we didn't do editorials anymore. If we wanted to do editorial kind of writing, we would each do our own. And often there would be, you know, two or three different points of view on a subject where there was disagreement and what we called commentaries. And I was usually one of those who wrote. And I really liked the fact that we had opposing commentaries.

Let's see, what else? So I, the, the seventies was sort of shifting between

what I would call broadly leftists, although in a way we were all leftists and lesbian separatists. And there was, those were both very important trends. We did always have at least one heterosexual woman on the paper, though. And she was in a difficult position, actually. There was a heterosexual woman who was a very good friend of mine, and then there were a few more. But, so we were never all lesbians, so we were never defined as a lesbian publication, although I think essentially we were, I mean, most of us were lesbian, and we certainly printed a great deal that was lesbian. Another thing was, we really tried to cover everything that was happening in the movement, and some of our coverage was critical. For instance, there was, oh, God, I can't think of the name, the feminist, there were some feminist businesses that were starting, some women started—there was the Women's Bank—and we would cover controversies. There were usually controversies involved, people in the groups who had fallings out with each other. And we, it was always our policy to cover every side. And lemme say something related to that. Oh, and there were several efforts in Washington to start a women's building, especially in the Women's Center, or to have different women's groups get offices in the Women's Center. But we always said that because we were journalists, that we were reporting on the groups, we didn't think that was appropriate. We offended some people, I guess, because we felt that as journalists, we had to have a separate office. We were always very busy. I mean, it was a lot of work, always, to put out the paper. We did all the production ourselves, which was very hard for me because I'm very not graphically talented. And I often got criticized for that: criticism, self-criticism that because I wasn't very good at it, meant that I didn't really care [or that] I was not really politically serious because I was not very good at laying out the paper. We laid it out physically, we would type out a page and then wax the back of it and lay it out on paper, cut it with an Exacto knife and we would make headlines with letterpress. And so it was very basic.

Oh, and you mentioned something about, was everybody always in Washington? No, in the mid seventies, we had a Chicago collective started by Francis Chapman, a woman who had been one of the early members of *off our backs*, who then moved to Chicago. And it was very cumbersome. We would have meetings over the phone. Of course, there was nothing like Zoom then. And at least once, I think twice, we paid for the women from Chicago to come to DC and spend one of our wonderful, all-weekend-long meetings talking about politics with us. And then we had rumors that one woman in Chicago was an agent. I mean, of course, in the seventies,

you're always worrying about agents. And [that rumor] all fell apart. They sent articles, but there was so much difficulty in working together that we didn't–and I think, I think our "Ain't I a Woman" issue was at the end of the seventies. I'm sorry, I don't remember whether that was '79 or '80, so I'm just gonna talk about it now with the seventies. At one point a group of women, about five women, came to our meetings and said that, you know, we didn't have enough women of color. We didn't, we didn't have any. At that point, I think we did get one Chinese-American woman, Adriane Fugh-Berman, but I don't remember whether she joined before or after that. And they demanded that we let them publish an issue where they wrote everything, or women of color wrote everything, and they did all the work. And after a little talk, we said, 'Yes, okay.' And, but I will say parenthetically, that actually only two of them came to actually do the work of putting it out: Diana Onley-Campbell and Colevia Carter, but they really couldn't do it all themselves because they weren't used to doing layout. So I, and another one or two women from *off our backs* came and helped them. I mean, they made all the decisions. There were all the articles from women of color, but I think there was no reason really not to help them do the physical layout. Anyway, it was called the "Ain't I a Woman" issue.

Right. I think that does the seventies, but it's really hard to be adequate and cover–there was so much happening.

Julie Enszer (00:27:54):

Do you have a recollection of about how many subscribers you had during the 1970s?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:28:04):

Well, I mean, it would've been in the low thousands. I think we had to list in the front of the publication how many subscribers we were. And we had heard that publications multiplied by three. Well, and of course, a lot of them were sold, at that time, on newstands. And in women's, gay, other alternative bookstores. Quite a few were, and I don't remember how many were subscribers and how many [were] newspapers. I think, oh, I have a vague memory of a print run of 10,000. And we would estimate that one more than one woman read each paper, which was at that time, probably pretty accurate. Which was why we multiplied by three.

Julie Enszer (00:29:23):

So now, do you wanna go into the 1980s?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:29:31):

Okay.

Well, around the late seventies and eighties, and again, we covered political demonstrations. We covered, oh gosh, I think the anti-porn movement began in the late seventies and into the eighties. And we covered that. And some of us, you know, participated in actions on that. Like, there was a movie called Snuff that apparently in snuff films, a woman was actually killed. Maybe it was or wasn't in Snuff, but some of us protested that.

And then in the early eighties, there was a kind of reaction against some feminist politics. There was a famous conference in 1982, a Barnard conference. There was a feminist theory-oriented conference at Barnard every year. And there was one in particular that several women from *off our backs*, including me, went to. And I was completely stunned. I was completely blindsided that [it] showed a vast chasm in the movement over issues like pornography and sexuality. And people such as Joan Nestle spoke. And I was, I was stunned that virtually every feminist I admired from Susan Brownmiller, Ti-Grace Atkinson—I was actually staying with Ti-Grace Atkinson that weekend, and went to the conference with her—people who had any kind of critique of heterosexuality, whether it was a critique of heterosexuality, as in Adrienne Rich's article on compulsory heterosexuality, which was, I believe, published in the seventies, to a lesbian feminist critique, to critique of pornography, to a critique of s and m, which I had frankly, virtually never heard of, [to a critique of] butch/femme. I, I was just completely stunned, and I couldn't understand why you would be a feminist and not have a critique of sexuality or of dominant forms of sexuality. Although I could certainly understand not excluding heterosexual women.

And we covered the conference. I actually made a mistake.

This was from someone else's notes. Another woman on *off our backs* had taken notes of Gayle Rubin's talk. And I assumed from the notes, putting them together, I'm assumed mistakenly that if she was talking about pedophilia, she must have been criticizing it. But we got a response from her saying, no, I was not criticizing pedophilia. Oh. I, I was just beyond stunned by it all. And Esther Newton, who actually has become a friend of mine at Carefree, was kind of an uber butch, and I shouldn't say uber because that implies something, but a key butch who spoke about butch as Joan Nestle spoke about being femme.

And I must admit, I personally didn't, butch/femme just never resonated with me, and especially because people who were into that would call me a femme. And I did not identify as a femme. I had aspired to be a little bit androgynous. I'm not terribly androgynous. But anyway, that was nothing I identified with.

And anyway, we wrote–and I definitely *was* upset about sadomasochism and some of the other women were. I think, and I've said this in print, that if SM had been very prominent when I was coming out, I might've been afraid to come out. Anyway. And, and I was horrified that anyone would not, and still am, that anybody would not oppose pornography, by which I do not mean censorship. Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin devised an ordinance that they were trying to get jurisdictions to accept, and the ordinance stated that women who had been harmed in the production or use of pornography would be empowered to sue.

That is not state censorship, but it was consistently referred to by opponents as censorship. [They said] it's a slippery slope to censorship of any kind of sexual materials. And MacKinnon and Dworkin were vilified. And that was also a big part of the early eighties. Oh, God, what was the name of the woman, Linda Lovelace, maybe, who sued because she said she had been forced to make pornography—be used in the making of pornography—and she wanted restitution. And Catharine MacKinnon, who was an attorney as well as an academic, had represented her. And to me, that's very clear cut. I suppose people felt it was less clear cut that women could sue who whose male partners used pornography in sexual abuse of them. But I still don't see that as censorship.

Anyway, these were very big divisions and we published many, many things from women with all points of view on the subject. And some women who identified strongly as radical feminists were angry at us for publishing the point of view that was more afraid of censorship than of abuse, maybe. Although those included, like, Adrienne Rich signed on to that, which, again, surprised me. [That group signed on] to being alarmed about talking about pornography or about opposing pornography in any way, because it could be censorship.

Anyway, some radical feminists felt that we should only publish things that were radical feminist, but by their definition. But again, we felt we were a newspaper, and any women who were active in the movement in any regard, we should publish. And we did publish. And we did publish some letters by men also, although not articles by men, but there were some anti-pornography men and some gay men like John Stoltenberg. I know him, but I haven't seen him in a while. We would publish letters by them. Anyway, it all felt so very divided.

Another thing that was–one thing was unifying at that time was the publication of the book Evi Beck edited, *Nice Jewish Girls*, about Jewish lesbians. That was incredible. That book and books by women of color, Audre Lorde and bell hooks and all, were the books that everybody read, you know? And of course, of course, we always published many book reviews. I wrote book reviews for almost every issue of *off our backs*. And of course, we had women of color reviewing books by women of color. But at any rate, the book, the things written by Jewish women writing as Jewish women and women of color were the things that everyone was reading, even though a lot of other reading became separated by political trends—you might mostly have read women who were your own political trend, i.e. socialist feminist, radical feminist, lesbian feminist, anti-pornography feminist, pro-sex feminists. I mean, which always was irritating to those of us who didn't define as [pro-sex], like, who's not pro-sex. I mean, Ti-Grace Atkinson was critical of any form of sexuality, but most lesbians are pretty pro sex.

Let's see. And in terms of *off our backs*' internal operations, there was a change: some of the more militant people had left the collective by the early eighties. And there was a conscious effort on the part of some of us to be friendlier. And I think the way I personally saw it, which is very biased, is that those of us with a long-term perspective who did not expect an immediate revolution or a revolution very soon sort of were the voice of the paper. And I wrote articles like, "what if the revolution isn't tomorrow?" and that we need to be long distance runners.

Carol Anne Douglas (00:42:43):

And, but again, we were also friendlier. We always had friends who came to work to help us put out the paper. Oh, and mailings, I forgot to mention mailings with the seventies. I mean, we always mailed the paper ourselves. I should talk more about the process. After we physically put out the paper, which would take at least a weekend that we called layout weekend, we would take it to the physical printer.

In the early seventies, right about the time I joined the paper, there was an article about art. And in the article about art—again, this is 1973—there was a photograph of a woman–no, I'm sorry, it was a photograph of a painting of a woman putting in or taking out a tampon. And the printer refused to print the issue if we had that in it. So people drove all around trying to find a printer that would take it. And interestingly enough, the Carroll County Times in a conservative town in rural Maryland was the place that would print it. So after that, we were printed by the Carroll County Times, so people would drive it out to Carroll County and then bring it back.

And then we would have, it would usually be two whole evenings where we would sit on the floor, and again, friends would come. We always had a listing in the paper of the friends who

helped out, as well as the collective members would come and physically, you know, put labels on and then bind them up into different zones based on zip code, and then someone would take them to mail.

So it was really an intensive work process. And considering practically all of us had full-time jobs, it was quite a lot of work. And that was the case through, through the seventies and the eighties. I'm trying to think what next. Then by the mid to late eighties, especially late eighties, the collective started getting smaller. And I was really nervous because a woman named Tricia Lootens, who came all the way, moved from Indiana to DC primarily because she wanted to work on *off our backs*–she and I wound up being the only ones at lay out, or practically the only ones. And then she got a job teaching English at the University of Georgia. And I said, "oh, great. Carol can talk to Anne." <laughs> Now, I can't do this all myself, but, so Tricia started, in order to get more collective members, she started "friends nights." Again, this was in the late eighties where during the week she would arrange things friends could do, and, and we got more collective members, which was wonderful.

Julie Enszer (00:46:43):

So, the collective got a little smaller in the late eighties, but then got re-energized.

Carol Anne Douglas:

Yes.

Julie Enszer:

And do you have a sense of why that kind of happened at that time?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:46:58):

Well, a lot of it was things in people's personal lives took precedence. Where people got a little tired of being that political, or they got more demanding jobs–in some cases, more demanding jobs. And as one friend of mine said, Carol Anne, you wanna do the same thing with the same people, always. And I said, well, yes, <laugh> doesn't, everyone? Well, no, everyone doesn't. <Laugh>

Julie Enszer (00:47:24):

Uh-huh. So then, do you wanna transition and talk about the nineties?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:47:32):

Okay. The nineties. I'm not sure the nineties were totally different from the eighties. . I mean, the internal workings of the collective were about the same. We were starting starting around, let's say roughly '90, although it might not be '90–In the nineties, we started paying more for our office workers. Well, we had been paying a little more than the $50 in the seventies, but we were starting to pay more decent, although not great, salaries to have an office worker.

Julie Enszer (00:48:41):

And June Howard was one of them, right?

Carol Anne Douglas (00:48:45):

Yes. June Thomas.

Julie Enszer (00:48:46):

I'm sorry. June Thomas.

Carol Anne Douglas (00:48:48):

June Thomas. Yes, she was.

Julie Enszer (00:48:50):

Yeah. And was that in the eighties or the nineties? Do you remember, or–?

Carol Anne Douglas:

I don't remember the exact years of June Thomas. I would say the nineties. I think it was in the nineties. [Editor Note: June Thomas worked for *off our backs* from 1985 until 1990] But yes, we had an office worker who, well, we'd always had some–the difference between office workers and other collective members was that the office workers did the office tasks, primarily keeping up the subscriptions. Not to say that others of us didn't help with that, especially in the earlier years. But it was primarily the office workers—who were collective members—who kept up the subscriptions and subscription database and the books and the correspondence. Although, again, we all always participated in selecting manuscripts, editing manuscripts, and deciding on their placement in the publication. I was an office worker myself for about half a year in 19-I think-76 when it was $50 a week. But we realized we couldn't always, you know, have people at that salary.

Julie Enszer:

So the nineties aren't characterized by big conflicts, though, in the same way as the 1980s.

Carol Anne Douglas:

Well, I'm sure there always were conflicts. And the conflicts of the eighties were really not so much within the collective. The conflicts of the seventies were very much within the collective. The conflicts of the eighties were not similar–I mean, we might have had slightly different perspectives on sexuality and all that, but not extreme. We didn't have terribly much in [the way of] political differences, by my definition.

Carol Anne Douglas:But there were certainly very strong differences in the movement. The nineties don't seem as distinct to me as the seventies or the eighties. Can you ask more questions?

Julie Enszer:

Yeah, let's talk a little bit about, then–you mentioned earlier that there were some financial problems in the late nineties, early 2000s.

Carol Anne Douglas:

Right.

Julie Enszer:

And so let's talk a bit about the final decade of *off our backs*.

Carol Anne Douglas:

Well, certainly starting in the nineties, again, subscriptions fell off. We started–in the nineties, I think we started needing to ask our subscribers to make donations. We started sending out mailings at least once or twice a year. And our subscribers were very generous. And we started occasionally asking for grants, which again, as I'm sure you know, is a very demanding job that is, again, something that was probably office workers working on. You know, as you know, there were fewer bookstores—

Julie Enszer:

Mm-Hmm.

Carol Anne Douglas:

So we had fewer outlets to sell it. Oh, and I should say libraries were also a major, major supporter of us, always, from the very beginning, libraries paid a higher rate and were very stable subscribers. You know, a library isn't too likely to unsubscribe. And we did have women's centers also at an institutional rate. And advertising was always difficult and problematic because we weren't locally based, like, say, the *Washington Blade*. So we didn't really get local subscribers. We would get occasional subscriptions from publishers, you know, we would try. But again, as there were more and more national publications–there was, like, the *Women's Review of Books*, publishers were more likely to advertise there than in *off our backs*.

Again, we also covered, especially starting in the late seventies and through the eighties and nineties, we went to a lot of feminist conferences, especially the National Women's Studies Association, we would go to every year and both cover it and sell the newspaper there. And it was always very exciting to meet women there who was enthusiastic about it. And I personally went to quite a few National Women's Studies Association meetings, and I'd say parenthetically, the Jewish Women's Caucus there had some of the most interesting programs, and they would let you attend if you weren't Jewish. I mean, I always went to it because that, and the Disabled Women's Caucus, or the Disability Caucus had, I thought, the most interesting, provocative sessions. And those were the places where I made friends. And I should need to go back to the early eighties to say that we had, we're the first feminist publication to put out an issue entirely by women with disabilities. I think that was 1982. It was ’81 or ’82, probably ’82. And that was where I met Judith Witherow. <cries> Sorry.

And of course we published more articles by her after that.

Julie Enszer:

She was such a great person.

Carol Anne Douglas:

She was a very dear friend.

Julie Enszer:

Mm-Hmm.

Carol Anne Douglas:

And, let's see. And at one point, oh yes, then there was a group called Women's Braille Press that asked us to make our publication available for people who weren't sighted. And we tried for one issue to, ourselves, read the issue and put it on. Then we realized that was way too much work given everything else we were doing. But I think at some point we tried to have another group of women doing that for us.

Anyway, I think, I think we did.

Julie Enszer:

Mm-Hmm. And so what went into the decision to close in 2008?

Carol Anne Douglas:

Money. <chuckles>

Julie Enszer:

Mm-Hmm.

Carol Anne Douglas:

We just, we just couldn't afford it anymore. We all sat in office and we felt it was important to operate out of an office. And, so I said, money was getting less. We got–again, our subscribers were always generous. I'm sure we got thousands of dollars a year in donations. We did get some grants several times from the Ms. Foundation, at least once from Astraea. But, let's see, I'm trying to think. Oh, and we got some bequests. We got one bequest for $300,000, and that kept us going longer.

Then there was a decision to pay more for office workers. And, and I think salaries that were *maybe* over 20,000, but for a couple of salaries that were 20,000 ish, or at least one that was. And on the theory that if we had more, if women could put more time in, they would. And we changed it basically to a magazine format, [thinking] that that would look more professional and we would be more successful.

It looked nice. But, it didn't lead to more success.

And I was a cheapskate in terms of *off our backs*. I didn't necessarily agree, but that was certainly the majority opinion. So we did that. Fiscally conservative, I'd say I was pretty fiscally conservative in terms of *off our backs*, 'cause I knew we had such limited resources

So I'd say it was financial.

Chloe Berger:

So of all your contributions to the paper, are there any essays or book reviews or interviews that stand out to you?

Carol Anne Douglas:

What things that I wrote that stand out to me? Well, I was really excited to interview a number of fascinating women. Alix Dobkin, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Batya Weinbaum. Catharine MacKinnon really, really stands out. That's just off the top of my head. I'm sure there were more–Zillah Eisenstein. And <laughs> Mary Daly, I interviewed, and then she withdrew the interview, even though I said she could edit it how she wanted. She said some very controversial things and we put 'em in the transcript, but I said, "Look, I'm sure you wanna keep this out, but you can edit it." No, she just–<waves hand> and that was frustrating.

And International women's–oh, I haven't talked enough about international women. We always tried to [have them] be a focus, and that was a particular focus of mine. And I interviewed some fascinating international women, like, ah, Madhu Kishwar, who was the editor of *Manushi*, an Indian feminist—Indian from India, of course—feminist journal. And Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy, who were French feminist activists, very, very radical. \ And a friend from Costa Rica, who's still–a leading feminist from Costa Rica, who's still a Facebook friend, whose stuff I look at almost every day, and I'm not thinking of her name right now, dammit <laugh>. I could fill it in later. And Gila Svirsky, who is a feminist peace activist from Israel, an American Israeli feminist peace activist, you know, who's still a Facebook friend, and I actually, I got to see her and her wife, Judy Kushner, when they were here last year to escape the intentional bombing in Israel.

Anyway, it was incredibly interesting to me to interact with international women. And we always had an international news section, which was obviously mostly taken from other sources. But I was always in charge of the international news, so it would usually say something like, it would

have CAD on it somewhere, because that was what I did. And we had women who went to the different international women's conferences. Joreen went to one of them—Jo Freeman [Joreen]—one or more of them,–the UN International conferences. So I'm kind of understating it here because there's just so much material, but always cared a lot about being international.

Julie Enszer:

Yeah, those international perspectives. I was reading the paper a lot in the 1990s, and those international columns really always felt so significant, kind of lifting up that work. Chloe, you have the next question.

Chloe Berger:

Yeah. Is there anything that you wish you would've done differently during your time working on the editorial collective?

Carol Anne Douglas (01:05:45):

I don't think there's any point to saying "woulda, coulda, shoulda." I mean, we could have worked harder to have more women of color on the paper, but I…and we did have some, but there were periods when I don't think that was a big interest, working on a predominantly white woman's paper. And it was–the thought of trying to totally restructure it. I mean, it seemed to me, some women of color were saying that they should—which is true—they should be involved in projects from the beginning. And coming into a project was not–that was already designed by white women… <sigh> I don't know. I'm, I'm sad about that, more than rethinking the past, I'm sad about that. Mostly I think we did the best we could, given our limitations: our personal limitations, and our financial limitations.

Chloe Berger (01:07:29):

And what are you most proud of in your decades of work for *off our backs*?

Carol Anne Douglas (01:07:36):

Mm. Just that we kept doing it for so damn long. <laugh> That we just kept on and on and on and on. And our attempt to be international and our attempt to–we did try to include <sigh> as much as we could. But yeah, it was a lot of work. And I mean, I once calculated it all. This is just an average: about 40 hours a month. And when you have another full-time job, that's a lot <laugh>.

Julie Enszer (01:08:24):

I was really struck, when you were talking about the 1980s and the kind of swirl of movement debates that this was relative–you know, you didn't know it at the time, but this was relatively early into your tenure with the magazine—with the newspaper, sorry.

Carol Anne Douglas (01:08:44):

It did become a magazine. And now I mostly refer to it as a journal.

Julie Enszer (01:08:48):

As a journal.

Carol Anne Douglas (01:08:50):

Journal, because that kind of includes them both. It was always a journal. <laugh>

Julie Enszer (01:08:55):

Yeah. I mean, it just really struck me that you sustained that work for a long period of time, and it was a huge time commitment on a weekly basis as well as a monthly basis. Are there things that really stand out to you that made it sustainable? Like what kind of kept giving you energy to come back every week and continue the work?

Carol Anne Douglas (01:09:21):

Well, I love to write, and I love to be in print. I love to have my work in print. And that was my way to do it. And I was also, I was always fascinated by the issues. I was completely fascinated by everything. And the friends, some of my best friends are people I know from *off our backs*. One of my very best friends, Tacie Dejanikus, was the person who most welcomed me the first evening I came to *off our backs* [in] 1973. I mean, and Trisha Lootens, who I mentioned is also a close–I mean, and even ones who weren't really close friends–[it was] the connection with other women, the chance to–[This was] what I loved most about the women's movement. I could never have been happy in something like now. [We had] small groups where you could immediately make a difference, where you could speak up. You didn't have to go through a hierarchy. You could just discuss any issue. And I love that. I love the non-hierarchical collective atmosphere. I love that very much. And just meeting feminists from all over and knowing what feminist work was happening. I mean, it was all always fascinating.

Julie Enszer (01:11:07):

Is there anything else you wanna add about that we haven't talked about that you feel like is important to have on the record about *off our backs*?

Carol Anne Douglas (01:11:21):

Well, I think we really always had principles.

We, we really cared about feminism. We really cared about working together. We cared about working informally. I loved it that our meetings weren't perfectly structured. We did have diversions and jokes. Let's see. When I was asked questions about *off our backs* when I was working on it, I would always say the reasons we were able to stay together for so long was the frequency of issues, the fact that you just had to always keep working on them. Even in the seventies, when we would have these insanely long weekend meetings and all, we could only talk politics or interpersonal issues for so long, because we always had to get the issue out. And actually, I think when we went to a magazine quarterly format, then sort of dribbling into less-than-quarterly, I think that was a mistake because I think the pressure of putting out something regularly kept us going.

And the other thing, I think, was having a sense of humor. That we did joke in meetings about silly things, and we did have an agenda, which we covered, but we could break from the agenda for jokes and comments, which sometimes people found frustrating. But yeah, I'd say the need to get things done and the ability to joke were what kept us going for almost 39 years.

And was certainly what inspired me. I guess I kind of thrive on work.

Julie Enszer (01:13:48):

That's great. Well, thank you so much. You know, I was looking at the archive of, *off our backs* before this conversation and just remembering what important work is in all of those issues and all of that documentation of so much activism that happened. So, thank you.

Carol Anne Douglas (01:14:12):

Well, thank you. Thank you for doing *Sinister Wisdom*. I'm very happy with the fact that you have all these extra programs too, that you do. That's really good.

Julie Enszer (01:14:28):

Well, good. Well, we will be in touch with a transcript in the, hopefully in the next week or two.

Carol Anne Douglas (01:14:37):

Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you for interviewing me about *off our backs*. I really appreciate it.

Julie Enszer (01:14:42):

Great. Thank you both. We'll talk soon. Okay.

Carol Anne Douglas (01:14:46):

Thank you. Thank you Chloe. Thank you. Bye.

Additional comment from Carol Anne Douglas:

I am grateful to *Sinister Wisdom* for allowing me to discuss *off our backs*. The publication was called *off our backs: a women's news journal* until around 2000, when it was changed to *off our backs: a feminist news journal*. (It was always a feminist news journal, and always written in all lower-case letters, as were the writers' and workers' names.) Although this is an interview with just one staff member, *off our backs* was always published and edited by a collective group. Working with those women was one of the highlights of my life.

In the early ’70s, *The New Women's Survival Sourcebook* called *off our backs* “the *New York Times* of the women's movement.” We aspired to live up to that designation.

In the ’80s, a magazine of erotica chose a title that resembled ours. We were distressed by that because it confused many women.

Toward the end of the interview, I suggested we might have done better if we hadn't changed to a quarterly format. That was too glib. We didn't have the energy to do that.

An early issue of *off our backs* had a cover that depicted a tombstone saying, “She hath done what she could.” I think that's a good epitaph for us.