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Interview of June Thomas about *off our backs*

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

Chloe Berger (00:00:06): Can you tell us how you first became involved with *off our backs*?

June Thomas (00:00:12): It's something that I have since learned is a relatively common way of getting involved with *off our backs*. For the sake of my second book, I've been speaking with some women who were on the Furies, and Coletta Reid told me a story that I recognized. She moved to D.C., she wanted to get involved with feminism, and you can't look up feminism in the phone book. I actually don't remember how I heard about *off our backs*, but it turned out to be the perfect thing to be involved in when you move to a new city, and also it was absolutely foundational to a lot of things in my life. Even admitting that I don't remember exactly how I heard about it, I do remember going to the *off our backs* office. There was a real place that you could go to: a concrete address which was in Adams Morgan, on a very cool block on Columbia Road. Just a couple of doors down from So's Your Mom, which was a great deli. It was one of the first delis I ever saw. Denise Kulp was the office worker at that point, and she suggested that I could be an intern, and I did not know what an intern was. We didn't have interns at that point in Britain, or I'd certainly never heard of them. I thought that just meant that I could just show up when I fancied it, like it was a volunteer—which it kind of was, everything was volunteer for the most part at *off our backs*. I was not very good at…it took me a while to understand that, actually, I needed to tell her when I was going to be there, because she needed to have tasks for me. I recognize it now, having had many jobs where there are people who haven't really been in the workplace, so they don't understand how work works, and I, at that point, was one of those people. But eventually, without ever really understanding what an intern was, I became an intern. That was in the very beginning of 1985. I don't remember exactly how long it took for me to become a collective member rather than an intern and a friend. By the end of that year, I was on the collective.

Julie Enszer (00:02:35): And what did it mean in 1985 to be a member of the collective? How did the organization structure its work?

JT (00:02:42): I did watch Carol Anne's fantastic interview that you did, and she didn't definitely mention friends, but I think it's important to kind of describe also what friends were. So, there was the collective. The collective were the people who made decisions about what was going to be in the magazine, and I do think that was kind of the separation point between the collective and of the people who were around the magazine. And then there were friends. Friends might do different things. For the most part, they came to layout weekend and they helped with layout. But they weren't necessarily involved, and they might write for the paper. Many of them did, but they just weren't involved in the decision-making, and they kind of weren't obliged to come to layout in the way that collective members were.

I remember very well, I was kind of interviewing to join the collective, and Vicki Leonard—Victoria Leonard—who had been on the Collective for a long time, and who became a really good friend of mine, was the person in my kind of interview, I guess you could call it. She said if you have any kind of agenda for joining *off our backs*, reveal it now. And I thought that was so cool that I might have an agenda that I might need to reveal. I didn't, because I wasn't very imaginative. But after that point, whenever people were joining the collective, I always asked if I could be the person to ask that question, and I think every time I tried to make it even more ominous-sounding: "Have you got an agenda? If so, reveal it now!" Obviously, if anybody did have an agenda, they definitely wouldn't reveal it in that way.

JE (00:04:42.000): What were the issues that were kind of roiling within the pages of *off our backs* and in the collective during the 1980s? That was such a rich and conflictual time in the history of feminism.

JT (00:04:59): It was. I was around at *off our backs* between about 1985 and about 1990. I think I left towards the end of 1989, when I left DC. Obviously, the big issue at that point was the sex wars, the fallout from the Barnard Conference. And I certainly was aware of that, and McKinnon and Dworkin, and the Meese Commission, all of those things. But I have to say…and not because I was checked out, because for many years, I was the office worker. In other words, I was the person who was there every day, or most days, so I was definitely present body and soul, but that kind of was not what being part of *off our backs* was for me. It was more about the books that were coming in, the kind of international stories. The thing that I was always very conscious of, and I'm afraid to admit that this might just be about me being quite selfish or self-centered person, was just what an amazing opportunity it was to be at *off our backs*. One of the key things was that from exchange subs, we got publications from all over America, from all over the world. I felt that I was getting this education not only in running a newspaper, which everybody on the collective was doing, but also in feminism—the books and the magazines that came in. DC had an amazing feminist bookstore in Lammas, and it had a great gay bookstore in Lambda Rising. But they didn't get all those publications that we got.

I remember writing book reviews and interviewing people, because people were always coming through DC. So, it was more the being on the collective, the camaraderie of that relationship, which is a very unusual relationship. It is a kind of friendship. I would say I was friends with everyone who I was on the collective with. But it's not like when you're on the collective, you're not there to be friends, you know? But it's also being on the *off our backs* staff was very hard work, it was a lot of hours, it was grind work. It wasn't fun work, although it was great fun. But it wasn't a job. It was a vocation; it was something that we were doing because we were really invested in these ideas and wanted to be writing and sharing our thoughts. It was more that kind of fantastic experience of having a role. Feminism and the women's liberation movement, all of those things are very vague conceptual ideas. But when I was at *off our backs*, I felt like it was really clear what my role was in this movement, and what I was doing for feminism, and that felt really fantastic. Again, very selfish, perhaps self-centered view of what feminism meant, but it was really great.

CB (00:08:32): How did things in the collective change from the 80s to the end of the 90s?

JT (00:08:37): I was there between about 1985 and 1989. And it was quite a settled period. There was some turnover, we got new collective members. Jennie Ruby joined, and someone who I feel very bad that I can't remember her name, because she was a fantastic member of the collective. She was, I believe, a working-class woman, but she had gone to Harvard Law School. That was a really important perspective that she brought. But it was still—I watched Carol Anne's interview, and it was still in the friendly era. We weren't having big ideological disputation within the collective. We all got on, so it wasn't a tremendously…it was a time when there were big arguments roiling feminism, but there weren't big arguments riling the *off our backs'* collective. When I think back on the stories that I think were really important from that time, or not important. Because certainly the kind of NWSA coverage that Carol Anne especially would do, the coverage of what we know shorthand as the sex wars was hugely important. But the stories that I remember were things like Adrian Fugh-Berman, who was on the collective before I joined, and I think went on leave because she went to medical school. That was a big-time commitment so I don't recall her. I think she sometimes came to layout, but she wrote a series of really important articles about being a woman and a feminist in medical school, and this was, again, the mid-80s. Yeah, it's 40 years ago, but I remember being shocked that things were as sexist and patriarchal as they were in medical school at that point. Or Tricia Lootens wrote a piece called "Lovers Who Don't Make Love," which was a sociological piece, but that also felt really important, along with some of the book reviews.

And I often would fill in as Chicken Lady. For those who didn't read *off our backs* in that period, that was kind of the "What's On" section. Vicki Leonard usually did it, but sometimes I would; maybe I took over at some point. Just kind of seeing what was going on around DC, but *off our backs* was never really a DC publication, it was a national publication, so it would be "what's going on around the country?" It was a tricky department to run, because how do you do a "What's On" for a national publication? But when I look back sometimes, as I have been doing research, and looking at old issues of *off our backs*, it's a great place to see what was happening. I don't know that I had a sense of playing that role, but now I realize we definitely did.

JE (00:12:19): How do you see—after *off our backs*, you went on and became a very influential journalist in the United States, and in mainstream journalism. I'm wondering if you would reflect a little bit: is *off our backs* one of the places where you learned about journalism? And how do you connect *off our backs* with some of your later career work? Or do you?

JT (00:12:47): Yeah. Oh, no, totally. Everything I learned, I learned at *off our backs*. We're doing this literally with our hands. We typed things out on electric typewriters in columns, and then we put wax on the back, and we stuck it on a sheet of layout paper, and then we proofed it, and then we had to type out words. If there was a typo, we would type that word and stick it over the top, and you would always go home with loads of words stuck to your sweater, because you would lose words and have to type them 2 or 3 times. That particular layout skill obviously has been replaced by technology. But [we also learned] all of the skills of deciding what are we going to publish from submissions that are sent to us, asking for submissions on topics, deciding what we feel is important in the movement to cover. I am constantly surprised—again, shouldn't be—by how good the news coverage was at *off our backs*, both nationally and internationally, because it was done very seat-of-the-pants. We didn't have any subscriptions… well, we had the exchange subscriptions. But women on the collective would see stories, and they would cut them

out of newspapers from across the country, and follow up, and people were great writers. Some, like Carol Anne, were great at writing, a great narrative writer. Fran Moira, as she was in the collective: fantastic science writer, just a beautiful writer. And we had to come up with headlines. We had to run a magazine. We had to [do], as the office worker, things like depositing checks and adding people to the subscription list. Those, and also learning to write. I remember Paula Krebs, who's now the Executive Director of the MLA—I know you know her, Julie. She had worked at the AP when she was in graduate school, and I remember showing her things that I was writing, because often we would be writing things during layout weekend, and her just very gently pointing out that I may have overwritten some things. As a writer, you learn by being edited, and so having really great editors in a deadline situation was amazing. Everything that we did other than the specifics of layout, which, again, have been replaced by technology, but you still have to do layout, you just do it in a different way. You still need the same things in a story. I absolutely think that it was the first step on the rest of my journalism career.

I actually didn't go straight from *off our backs* to journalism. I actually spent a couple of years in Spain, but then I went to Seal Press, a feminist publishing company. I believe that the connection was made because at *off our backs*, I had interviewed Barbara Wilson, as she then was Barbara Sjoholm. And maybe I'd reviewed some of their books or something. But there was nothing careerist about *off our backs*, you know? You were not going to get a job from it. It wasn't that kind of "if I work here, you maybe can be noticed by X," but that was because you couldn't take it into the straight world, and there weren't any jobs in feminism, so you were doing it for the love of the thing itself. At the same time, I definitely did get jobs from it. I got the job at Seal probably because of my work at *off our backs*. I never got a straight job because of it, because I don't think people had any understanding of what it was. It sounded weird, so if you hadn't seen it, you probably wouldn't think, "oh, well, she'll know about journalism." It was a fantastic grounding, and a fantastic place to learn.

JE (00:17:40): Are there particular contributions that you think of that you made to *off our backs* during the four or five years you were there that feel important?

JT (00:17:53): Probably this is something that you shouldn't say about yourself, but I think in my time as… I did write most months, and those pieces were fine. But I actually think that probably my biggest contribution was in being part of the collective fun. For example, having food at layout, having sustenance, because it was really hard work. You had to get there early Saturday morning, and you didn't leave until the end of Sunday when you had the magazine full. Every page needed to be full. You couldn't turn in an empty page, and that had to be well organized, but if it was hard to fill a page, you had to not chivvy them along, because that sounds negative, but you had to maintain a good vibe. I hope that I was able to do that and make being at collective meetings—which again, this was the height of must-see TV, too, and every Thursday night, you had to be in the collective meeting in the office. So, making that be as fun and pleasant as possible, I actually think that was probably my biggest contribution.

CB (00:19:28): Is there anything you wish you would have done differently during your time working on *off our backs*?

JT (00:19:35): It was a mostly white collective. Many of the friends were women of color. And I don't say this as an excuse or a justification, but I know for myself, it was the consciousness of how much time this was, and how it was its own reward. You didn't even get prestige. There wasn't even, you know, you would walk into the bar, and everyone would applaud you. Nobody knew who the hell you were. It didn't have any reward except the work itself. I never actually tried to get anyone to join the collective, because it felt like, "would you like to do hours and hours of uncompensated work for a long period?" So, while I do feel that that was a failure of me as a collective member, and of the collective, I also kind of know what was going on in my mind, at least, I don't know that I feel too bad about what was going on inside my head at that time. Otherwise, we were shockingly international; that feels amazing. And I don't mean in the composition of the collective, I mean in what we published.

Alice Henry was on the collective when I was there—again, somebody who I then later lived with in London. These were the kind of connections that you could make. That kind of makes it sound like an exploitation situation, but you would work closely together, you were friends. Her partner was British, and she had worked on the Spare Rib collective. And that kind of international feminist publication interaction, that was amazing. It was amazing for me, who had grown up reading it and didn't know anybody. I know I'd never lived in London at that point; I didn't know anyone who was on the Spare Rib collective, so that felt really amazing, too.

Another thing that was something I wish had been different on the collective: I was the only working-class woman on the collective. As I said, toward the end, there was a Harvard Law School graduate—I'm ashamed that that is how I identify her, I wish I could remember her name—I think she was working class. But it was a pretty middle-class to upper-middle-class group of women. Some of the friends were working class. So again, that was a limitation, but also again, am I gonna ask more marginalized women to do some free work? I always felt a bit wrong.

JE (00:23:09): I know you weren't involved when *off our backs* eventually changed format and then closed. But I also know you've thought a lot about these formations from the 70s, 80s, and 90s through your book, what they meant, and how the world has changed. So, I wonder what reflections you have on the end of *off our backs*, the loss of it, and what that means.

JT (00:23:22): I'm so torn, because as I said in my book, I don't think the purpose of these institutions was ever to exist forever. We didn't ever, at least in my time there, ever kind of do goal-setting exercises or any of those kinds of things. But if we had, I'm fairly sure that longevity wouldn't have been a value that we were optimizing for. Certainly, as a researcher, *off our backs* has been valuable to me throughout its run; from those early 70s right into the last issues, they're great resources. But I just suspect that everything has its time, everything has its moment. I think that [it was] the time for a publication that relies on newsstand sales. I know that toward the end, there was some donations, there were some grants, but I do think it kind of needed to be self-supporting, and that just became extraordinarily difficult as a publication. But I think I also agree with Carol Anne that it needed to be a publication, that it needed to have that "we do this every month. We do this 11 times a year, and we just gotta keep going," because that was a necessary part of the DNA of *off our backs*. The same group of women, or a new group of

women could have created something with a very similar name online, but I think that particular publication, that was how far it was supposed to go.

CB (00:25:31): What would you like people to understand as the legacy of *off our backs*?

JT (00:25:32.000): The publication stands for itself. I do think it is worth looking at those issues, pretty much any one of them. They are great slices, like a time machine, to go back to July 1978. You can just drop in, and it is so much fun, and also a great learning experience to read what was in those pages. I think I was only there for 5 years max, maybe more like 4, so I'm not taking this as credit to myself, but the women on the collective really took seriously their intention of covering the movement, of going to conferences and writing up lots and lots of breakout sessions and plenary sessions and just doing the work. The work stands for itself, I think.

But I also do think that there is something that is maybe not so visible on the page, partly as a business story. I mean…I don't know if this is just my idea, or if it's just accepted, but I think that one of the things that didn't cause but had a large role in the shrinking of the subscription base of *off our backs* was *Ms. Magazine* deciding not to take ads anymore. Now that was seen as a positive thing for *Ms.*, but that meant that there were no more exchange ads. Many of the ads that ran on *off our backs* were in exchange for…for example, we had an exchange ad with Alison Bechdel for running *Dykes to Watch Out For*. We had an exchange ad with *Ms.*, or maybe we paid for it. We might have paid for it, it would have been worth paying for it, I actually don't remember. But [it was] providing women with a way of encountering the magazine for the first time. Because again, women come to consciousness as feminists, maybe as lesbian feminists at all different times. They're not necessarily in a feminist bookstore. Feminist bookstores, of course, became less common. It just became more difficult to discover. And as somebody who worked in podcasts for many years, where discovery is the biggest challenge, discovery was also a challenge for *off our backs*. As the whole ecosystem declined, as there were fewer bookstores, that was another outlet that ceased…not ceased to exist but became far less common. It became much less of a common experience for women to have an opportunity to go through the shelves in feminist bookstores. So, I think it was a little bit of the times, and there was so much work to put out the magazine, and people joined the collective to put out a magazine, not to not do feminist business. I think there wasn't a vision to counter everything that was causing the end of feminist institutions, or the decline. I think feminist institutions are rebounding. I think they're having another moment right now, and of course there's a lot of feminism online. But I don't see a publication like *off our backs* covering conferences, but then again, I might not know. I'm also very conscious that in the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement, you know, notes from the first year, notes from the second year, there was this idea that you could read everything that was being published. There's no hope of that anymore, so maybe that's just an impossible dream now.

JE (00:30:14): Is there anything we haven't asked you about that you want to share about *off our backs*?

JT (00:30:18): I guess this is not unique to *off our backs*, but just this role of being on a collective with someone. I don't even know what you call it, a collective mate? A collective colleague? I remember I went to Athens, Georgia a couple of years ago with somebody who I

was spending time with, somebody I was on the collective with, who was a teacher at the university, University of Georgia? Yes, the University of Georgia, for many years. And people kept saying, “how do you guys know each other?” Well, we were on a collective together. It’s a very special and unique relationship, and it is something that we particularly experience in political environments. Maybe old school political people were in cells, I don’t know, cellmate, that’s also something quite different. That’s just such a special…why you have a commitment to something, so much that you put in all this time and sacrifice for something that is its own reward. That’s very interesting to me. But it was an incredible learning experience in so many ways, and lots of fun as well.