UNEXPECTED FEMINISMS: HOW POPULAR CULTURE BROUGHT FEMINISM BEYOND THE MOVEMENT


This dissertation examines the role that popular culture played in disseminating feminist ideas beyond the organizations and activists that identified as feminist in the United States during the second wave of feminism (roughly the 1960s through the early 1980s). I accomplish this through case studies of three women who occupied public positions during this period--author of Sex and the Single Girl and editor of Cosmopolitan Magazine Helen Gurley Brown, humorist and newspaper columnist Erma Bombeck, and country music star Dolly Parton. Each woman constructed strategic public personas that both reproduced and subverted gender norms. I analyze the texts--their writings, their personas, and, in the case of Parton, her body--produced by these three women for coded challenges to female gender norms. Data have been collected from archives, newspaper and magazine articles, and the variety of texts produced by the women themselves, including books, newspaper columns, and songs. This dissertation challenges the dominant narrative of second wave feminism which focuses on the work of self-identified feminist organizations and activists, resulting in a history that describes the activities of white, middle class, heterosexual women who, by dint of their privileged social identities, had the luxury of thinking about gender in isolation of other identity categories. Examining the popular experience of second wave feminism expands our understanding of how different populations participated in this wave of feminism, including those women who did not affiliate with a recognized feminist organization. In looking at three women who occupied a public position within popular culture, this dissertation illustrates how feminist ideas were communicated through media that was readily available to anyone in the United States who had access to television, radio, magazines, or newspapers during this period.