Fieldwork is full of surprises and insights. Connections between people pop up in unexpected and humane encounters. Traveling from South Carolina to Washington, DC, to attend National Council of Women’s Organizations (NCWO) meetings, conduct interviews, and observe events often reminded me of the movie *Trains, Planes and Automobiles*. Some trips were smooth, some not so much.

In January 2011, I arrived in DC for a council meeting. As I approached the meeting room at the National Education Association (NEA) building on 16th Street, N.W., I saw a yellow sticky note on the door. “NCWO meeting canceled because of snowstorm,” the note announced. I looked outside and did not see any snow. I called NCWO chair Susan Scanlan who explained that the NCWO follows the DC public school system on early dismissals or weather cancellations. DC Public Schools’ classes were let out early that day because of a possible snowstorm. Susan Scanlan stated, “We are a women’s organization and members have children being released from school early and they have to deal with them.” She added, “We have a few elderly members of the council. I couldn’t live with myself if one of them got hurt on the ice on a sidewalk.” Probably only scholars doing fieldwork on compassionate, feminist, and community- and/or family-oriented movements have to deal with research disruptions like a public school system letting out early. It was a frustration for me that day. But for my project as a whole, it was very telling about the worldview of many of these activists.
Americans are diverse, contentious, and individualistic. Some might claim that goes double for American women. Coordinating the messages and energies of citizens engaged in feminist politics, as many participants explained to me, is like herding cats. Amazingly, one coalition in Washington, DC, worked to speak for twelve million women. The NCWO channeled information, strategies, and responses for the now institutionalized women’s movement in the United States. *Push Back, Move Forward* is based on my interviews with NCWO activists and my observations at council meetings and events sponsored or cosponsored by the coalition.

**Make a Difference**

As the motto of the NCWO put it, “One woman can make a difference, but it is easier if we do it in groups.” Holding together a large and diffuse coalition is a challenge for any movement. Political organizing in the United States has become more specific and less broad. Coalitions, however, work against this grain. Coalitions bring diverse groups together who live and breathe separate, yet often overlapping and sometimes redundant, existences. *Push Back, Move Forward* is a study of a shifting coalition of mouthy women who stood up, showed up, and acted out. My study of the NCWO echoes and builds on social movement scholarship, gender and politics, and public policy analysis. A national coalition like the NCWO was part and parcel of long civil rights, labor, and women’s movements. It was intersectional and aware of the dominant power dynamics of well-resourced individuals, groups, and interests who might have disproportionate influence within a coalition. The efforts of groups and coalitions like the NCWO were foundational yet often uncelebrated, as they seemed unspectacular.

*Push Back, Move Forward* is based on fieldwork conducted in 1999–2001 and again from 2008 through 2014. Gaps in the fieldwork demarcate funding availability (often difficult in the field of women and politics); commitments to teaching, research, and service at the University of South Carolina; and family and cultural responsibilities.

From 1999 to 2014, I attended twenty-five NCWO meetings, which were held every other month in Washington, DC. I also conducted sixty-nine interviews with individuals involved with the NCWO. While doing fieldwork in DC, I was invited along when NCWO members attended events and meetings. My participant observations at more than forty-seven demonstrations, press conferences, congressional committee hearings, NCWO-sponsored trainings, and NCWO task force meetings also inform the research. In the spring of 2017 I verified the direct quotes from interviews, meetings, and events attended.
However, I was not able to reach a small number of people directly quoted. Please see Appendixes A, B, C, and D for lists of fieldwork, interviews, and events.

In addition to fieldwork, I followed the political activities of the NCWO through their email announcements, policy statements, and position papers. In the summer of 2011, I was given access to the files in the NCWO offices in DC and authorized to copy relevant documents, communications, and reports. One step feminist researchers try to take in their work is to give back to the group or people being studied. My small gesture of giving back for the kindnesses of the busy people in the NCWO coalition was to make a catalog or a list of the contents of their files, organize and box them up when appropriate, and leave the NCWO office with better organized archives than they had when I started.

Feminist scholars, as is well known, “frequently engage in participant observation. They are generally suspicious of Cartesian ways of knowing, or the High Science model, which depicts human subjects as solitary and self-subsistent and where knowledge is obtained through measurement rather than sympathy” (Tickner 2014: 103). Feminist methods also situate the researcher in the research process. Researchers periodically need to critically reflect on the power and powerlessness of the researcher in the project (Jaggar 2016b; Ackerly and True 2013: 135–159). As Gloria Steinem explained about the wisdom of many women, “Never having learned to separate mind and body, thoughts and emotion, or intellect from the senses, they trusted their own experience” (1992: 117).

The NCWO sought to empower girls and women as effective advocates for their visions and dreams. For many years the NCWO held an annual conference called “WESCAD” (Women’s Equality Summit and Congressional Action Day). Each year attendees were provided with advice from experienced speakers on how to effectively and succinctly advocate for issues on the Hill. In each training session I observed, demystifying politics was a powerful part of the lesson. In 2008, Lisa Maatz, a widely respected policy advocate and strategist at the American Association of University Women (AAUW), told the gathering at WESCAD how to frame an issue, pose an “ask,” provide data and research, and then close the deal with a story about a real person. “Your voice can make a difference,” Maatz admonished. “The best tool in your arsenal is a personal story. Not the statistics. Tell your story. Let them put a face to the issue. Real people. How it works in the district” (author’s observation and notes from WESCAD, March 27, 2008).

A second example was when Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), told young people preparing for their summer internships on Capitol Hill that they were all smart and she could demystify the federal budget for them (FMF Intern Briefing, July 21, 2011). Planning sessions I observed regarding proposed reforms to Social Security or health care reform went through similar steps. The last step, to cinch the point, was
to find a “real person” to provide a narrative story about the impact events were having on them.

In *Push Back, Move Forward*, I utilized stories about real people. It is part of the ethos in women’s politics to break silences and honor women’s experiences. When telling stories, I heeded the advice of battle-hardened advocates like Lisa Maatz and Eleanor Smeal. When the meaning of a story is grasped, so are its moral implications (Polletta 2006: 88). The final step should be to link individual narratives to public policies so everyone with similar stories can access resources to relieve their hardships.

**Not Dead Yet: Plan of the Book**

Chapter 1, this chapter, explains the political and cultural context of the NCWO. The powerful mantra of disability rights activists “Not Dead Yet” reflects a brave, steady stance for citizenship claims that many feminists can relate to. Many feminist activists and scholars have noted the frequent obituaries for the American women’s movement offered by various media and pundit sources. As Mark Twain quipped, “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated” (1897). The trope here is that, when a movement is declared “dead,” the intent is to shut up adherents and reinforce silence (Reger 2012: 3–4).

Silencing women is evoked frequently to maintain dominant discourses and patriarchal powers. U.S. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) on February 8, 2017, silenced Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) during consideration of President Donald Trump’s nomination of Senator Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III (R-AL) for U.S. attorney general. Senator Warren had been reading aloud from a letter Mrs. Coretta Scott King submitted to the Senate years earlier opposing, on the basis of race prejudice, Jeff Sessions’s appointment to a federal judgeship. McConnell, to explain his order, said, “She [Warren] was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted” (Wang 2017).

T-shirts, bumper stickers, and other celebratory memorabilia for this strong, mouthy woman quickly appeared and sold well. “Nevertheless, she persisted” was emblazoned on the merchandise. Persisting in a difficult environment, speaking up for people who are not equally represented in the halls of power, and maintaining an ethic of linked fate is foundational. Many people do this, often in groups and coalitions like the NCWO, many times without much credit or celebration, since their efforts are unspectacular, without razzle-dazzle, and not media worthy.

Chapter 2 discusses several precursor groups and coalitions whose work enlarged concepts of citizenship and public policy. The context for the NCWO is what came before: previous women’s coalitions, often divided by
race, which set the stage for actions of new coalitions such as the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and the NCWO. Their efforts meant subsequent groups like the NCWO did not start from scratch.

Chapter 2 includes a brief overview of conservative mobilizations and the impact of neoliberal market ideologies on communal proposals and policies. As explained throughout the study, free market neoliberalism concomitant with American individualism counters programs and reforms based on a sense of linked fate. Neoliberalism, also discussed, can even make President Donald Trump seem feminist (M. Ferguson 2017).

Chapter 3 explains the origins and operations of the NCWO. After the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and other setbacks, the women’s movement (not dead yet) did not shut up. Leaders of feminist interest groups in DC regrouped and persisted. They started to more formally work together. The first iteration of their cooperation was the Council of Presidents (COP). The NCWO evolved from the COP as smaller feminist groups and individual activists joined the growing coalition.

Chapter 4 theorizes the powers and cultural narratives evident in the NCWO’s 2003 query to the Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia about their all-male membership policy. The Masters Golf Tournament dustup led me to examine the cultural givens, contrasting what is neutral and “unmarked” as natural to what is harmful and subjugating. The chapter discusses the money and power aspects of the issues raised. My intersectional analysis of the Masters Golf Tournament includes the examination of unmarked, transparent categories of dominance “where power and privilege constellate on their own terms” and in relation to recognized and forbidden inequalities (May 2015: 23). I also examine in Chapter 4 a tendency in the media to handle complex gender justice issues in a “he said/she said” manner. The events highlighted the cultural and political aspects of the women’s movement as adherents continued to push for women to be taken seriously in all aspects of life.

Chapter 5 explores with Annie Boiter-Jolley, the chapter coauthor, the ways the NCWO worked the gender gap in elections. It is axiomatic that group prospects trace with election results. Working the powerful specter of the gender gap was one way the NCWO signaled political potential. Educating and mobilizing core constituencies of the coalition, such as the highly successful Church Ladies Project in 2008, is highlighted in Chapter 5. The long-term efforts to get out “her vote” illustrate the depth, breadth, and heart of the women’s movement and the NCWO’s part in the historic election turnouts of 2008 and 2012.

Chapter 6 discusses the NCWO’s involvement in the politics of Social Security. The NCWO responded to free market, neoliberal reform proposals for Social Security with a barrage of data and stories on the centrality
of Social Security to peoples’ economic prospects, especially women’s. The NCWO highlighted the female face of Social Security. Rather than reform through dismemberment into private accounts, the NCWO helped up the ante for Social Security by advocating that the years of care work that people (usually women) provide outside formal markets be credited to their work life when calculating their Social Security benefits. This and other ways to better reflect women’s lives in Social Security were also proposed by the NCWO.

Chapter 7 explores the involvement of NCWO in the Affordable Care Act (ACA), particularly the reproductive health aspects of the act. Health care reform has been an issue in American politics for decades. The huge coalitions involved in the passage of the ACA, including the NCWO, geared up in the early years of the Barack Obama administration and during the policy window of Democratic Party leadership in the U.S. Congress, especially with the House Speakership of Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). The centrality of elections discussed in Chapter 5 echoes here in the policy window for health care reform after the 2008 elections. The ACA included many advancements for women. At the same time, the women’s groups in the NCWO and allied partners were asked to “stand down” on a central principle of their movement: coverage of complete reproductive health care, to include legal abortion.

Chapter 8 examines global feminist issues in the NCWO’s agenda. The American-based NCWO had a borderless concern about women around the world. My examination of global feminism includes whether nonprofit organizations (NGOs) alleviate or eradicate social problems. The chapter discusses the pros and cons of Western feminist groups, including their concerns and actions and global gender issues.

The Conclusion links the NCWO to other research and issues of the women’s movement and the formalization of a diffuse social movement. I review the benefits and perils when a coalition claims to speak for more than twelve million women. A sense of linked fate regarding exclusionary membership policies, political representation, Social Security, health care, and global women weaves through these chapters. A coalition like the NCWO engaged in a lot of unheralded work that secured basic, foundational aspects of women’s well-being. Their work was not perfect. Their strength waxed and waned. In fact, as the Conclusion explains, the NCWO experienced hard times, lingered as an abeyance structure, and as of this writing is inactive.

Contrary to dozens of media reports over the past four to five decades that the modern women’s movement is “dead,” *Push Back, Move Forward* documents the entrenched and “given” nature of modern feminism in our culture and politics. “Women’s lib” coexists with counterinterests deriding, denouncing, and denying the accomplishments of the women’s movement in many aspects of American and world politics. Stopping the privatization of
Social Security, as Chapter 6 details, is unsexy, marginally newsworthy, and centered in devoted efforts. The Social Security actions were hard won, uncredited successes for groups like the NCWO. As NCWO chair Susan Scanlan explained, “I can’t get arrested in this town with a good story” (interview, emphasis in original). For the millions of people (mostly women) who consistently receive Social Security despite market volatilities, economic crises, or election outcomes, the good story of continuing the program is bedrock for their well-being. Tillers of change are required for political reform (Steelman, Woliver, and Steelman 2009). Change agents’ hard work can also create “life at its most artful” (Jasper 1997: 218). Social movements like feminism are cultural as well as political tillers of change.

**Necessary Movement Cultures**

Doing the spade work, civil rights activist and social justice leader Ella Baker consistently advised, was required if injustices were to be systematically halted and all people brought into full, deep citizenship (Ransby 2003). Often it’s women who work those spades. Working for a cause for the duration, playing the long game for justice, can be a deep pleasure, providing meaning in many people’s lives. Those in the women’s movement, for instance, have often been described as a community of readers (Sicherman 2010; Rochon 1998; U. Taylor 2010: 71). Women’s book clubs, literary societies, and study groups created safe spaces without adult men: “a school not governed by state authorities, the earliest versions of the club form represented a small step toward political action” (Clemens 1997: 196). Women’s self-education often included sororal learning and support (Lagemann 1979).

The arts and humanities often reflected the rebellion and resilience of people without official power (Preston 1995). Poets like Emily Dickinson moved the discourse as they also advised, “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant.” Audre Lorde explained, “For women, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language then into idea, and then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde quoted in Reed 2005: 89; see also Byrd, Cole, and Guy-Sheftall 2009). The affirmation possible in “women-identified” culture included musicians, artists, feminist book stores, memorials, and women-only safe spaces” (Whittier 1995: 66). Cognitive frames blending cultural and political activities were hallmarks of many enduring social movements.

When examined closely, movement cultures reveal courage and determination: “what counts as dramatic has often been defined in limiting ways based on male-centered views of heroic performance. If the goal is to change
the world, there is reason to believe that publicly performed or privately read poems have been a force as powerful as any other” (Reed 2005: 88). The uncounted girls and women who have taped and pinned copies of Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” to their mirrors and bulletin boards know this rings true. A poem can be a stimulus that empowers readers.¹ The cultural aspects of social movements inspired the mental constructs that energized individuals to work for social change and were as important as physical resources and networks (Jasper 1997: 75). These cognitive frames helped set the “cultural interpretation needed in order to establish the pre-existing meanings organizers can appeal to” for supporter mobilization (Jasper 1997: 78).

One activist and NCWO stalwart explained to me, “It [the NCWO] requires a great deal of unseen support and work. I would never miss a meeting for the interaction that we have as women with a common cause. . . . This is the finest contribution of the NCWO, because we do see that we are not standing alone—whether it is unmet needs, what the state of the art is, and moving along from there” (Ruth Nadel, interview, November 29, 2000). Feminist organizations also “develop theory not only of the women’s movement but for the movement” (Ferree and Martin 1995a: 13, italics in original). These processes were often strongly emotional and pleasurable as when bearing witness against evil and doing the right thing lent “dignity to one’s life even when stated goals are elusive” (Jasper 1997: 82). In addition, “like artists, activists create new moral possibilities” (Jasper 1997: 97).

The NCWO participated in many culture moves. One explicitly involved “making pests of ourselves,” as Martha Burk framed it, until the suffragists’ statue and also the statue of Sojourner Truth were elevated from the U.S. Capitol crypt to Statuary Hall. Many voices joined in these efforts. Moving the statues meant a lot to many of the activists I interacted with during the fifteen years of this study. The statue stories were frequently offered up as proud examples of sassy group accomplishments. Measuring the success or failure of social movements is tricky when the cultural and personal aspects of individual involvement is valued. Change agents and protesters “are more like poets than engineers” (Jasper 1997: 379; see also Finney 2011; Madden 2013, 2010; Preston 1995; Rankine 2014). In this instance, to move the two statues took pests, poets, spade work, tillers of change, and engineers.

Defend Communal Efforts

Large social movements are shifting and complex. The women’s movement is “a messy multiplicity of feminist activism across U.S. history and beyond its borders” (Hewitt 2010a: 7). Standard chronologies are often insufficient; a diverse array of activists are involved; coalitions are built and contested;
dynamic agendas include politics, culture, and economics; and admonitions for multicultural, multiracial, multisexual, and multieconomic positional-
ity while matrixes included in all of the above are part of the mix (Hewitt 2010a: 7; see also Cole 2008). At the core of a coalition is “how people draw
attention to and speak about their awareness of difference and multiple lived experiences through gender, race, class, ethnicity, religions, and other differences” (S. Gilmore 2008a: 5). Effectively representing the positions of more
than twelve million women in more than 180 separate member organizations
added to the complexity, the power but also the weakness, of the NCWO.

Many observers have noted the evaporation of politics, or common good
concerns, from many of our social interactions and expectations. People who
volunteer to make a difference one person at a time, as concerned individuals,
are valued and praised. People who request social policies to address systematically many of the hardships a person could experience in life are “out of bounds,” ideological, political, or partisan. Even individuals who volunteer to do good deeds often eschew politics. One scholar crystallized what she observed in community efforts, “At every meeting the vice-mayor passed the hat for a homeless women’s shelter. No one mentioned housing policy” (Eliasoph 1998: 53).

Deep political solidarity directed toward systematic social change re-
quires more than personal tolerance of diversity, charitable donations, or acts of public service (Hancock 2011: 63). Political solidarity means willingness to work and perhaps sacrifice for changes that will abide so that injustices and hardships are less likely to happen.

Ameliorative efforts are less controversial than working for social change. Fair housing activism is more likely to create a backlash than is volunteering at a homeless shelter. Backlash includes previously privileged groups who enter a kind of “oppression Olympics” by redefining victimhood to encompass any perceived collateral damage brought about by expanding social justice. One example is when people claim that heterosexual marriages are endangered by gay marriages (Hancock 2011: 14). The mindset here suggests that heterosexual marriage is a neutral given and gay marriage would be a social construction that subtracts from heterosexual institutional power; and the circle is unbroken with the claim that heterosexual marriage is not socially constructed. The zero-sum paradigm means that all you can achieve with an addition (of gay marriage) is actually a subtraction (from heterosexual marriages). Seeing through these logical fallacies requires the critical consciousness that theorist bell hooks asserted needs to be central to education. hooks explained that visionary, intersectional feminist politics is about “having a person of any gender who understands deeply and fully the need for there to be respect for the embodied presence of males and females, without subordination” (Alptraum 2017: 59).
People can make peace with a silence about silence, or a metasilence. People can walk over homeless people on sidewalks and then never talk about it and also never talk about never talking about it. “In other words, the very act of avoiding the elephant [in the room] is itself an elephant [in the room]! Not only do we avoid it, we do so without acknowledging that we are actually doing so, thereby denying our denial” (Zerubavel 2006: 53). Class, gender, race, and heteronormative privileges, for instance, can be systematically ignored and masked by willful blindness, ignorance, asset hoarding, and denial (Kruks 2012: 94; D. Thompson, forthcoming; Hancock 2011: 11). The behavior of some privileged people even extends to what is considered knowledge and truth, categorized as epistemic privilege (Kruks 2012: 98; Hancock 2011).

The social norm that talking about politics at the dinner table is impolite spills over into irritation at people who speak up about social policies and politics. If the person discussing politics is a woman, in many communities, the discomfort heightens. The resistant person threatens patriarchal givens. Hence, we hear and understand the trope “strident feminist.” “Indeed,” Gilligan and Richards argued, “the stability of patriarchy requires the suppression of any voice in women or men that might, on reasonable grounds, contest its terms, a suppression which itself relies on the power of gender by deeming the resisting voice in men unmanly or effeminate and in women unwomanly” (2009: 30).

So, when “mouthy” women speak their truth about incest, rape, domestic violence, discriminatory policies, pay inequity, sexual harassment, sex trafficking, to name a few, their “breaking the silence” is usually not greeted well. Often the speakers are pelted with ad hominem attacks. Women’s voices are often ignored and belittled (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Mendelberg, Karpowitz, and Oliphant 2014) or violently suppressed as threats to patriarchal natural order. One of the transformative roles that many women play in politics, then, is to tell women’s stories and set the context of what it is like to be a girl or woman in particular situations. Being secure in the political nature of feminism is important, especially after the 2016 elections. The intersectional theorist bell hooks reminded us, “The challenge to patriarchy is political, and not a lifestyle or identity” (Alptraum 2017: 59).

Nevertheless, in the face of blowback, many people resist, push back, speak out, dissent, advocate, and persist. Oftentimes it is women, including those organized into the NCWO, who defend communal efforts, acknowledge linked fates, and work to help people besides themselves have safety, security, and agency. Fighting movement backlash is hard, however, when zero-sum analysis perpetuates and interlaces with “compassion deficit disorder” and victim blaming (Hancock 2011: 14–17). Many times their efforts...
are unspectacular and unheralded even while they establish, defend, or ex-
pand bedrock social policies and political rights.

*Push Back, Move Forward* is about formal movement organizations com-
bining their efforts via the NCWO. It is important to remember that these
formal organizations are not the entire women’s movement. National organ-
izations are more visible and easier for researchers to study. The women’s
movement is mostly “a broad perspective on the world and women’s place
in it. Individuals internalize this perspective, and individuals, communities,
and social movement organizations put it into action” (Whittier 1995: 23).
Keep in mind that the core of the women’s movement is not the assortment
of formal organizations, which ebb and flow. The women’s movement is
cognitive, cultural, and politically persistent.

Chapter 2 foreshadows the NCWO with an overview of the context and
history of earlier coalitions of women’s activists. Chapter 3 focuses on the
formation of the COP and its growth into the NCWO and explains the
structure and workings of the NCWO. Collectively these feminists worked
to put their dreams and aspirations into action.