

Binding Transnational Lesbian-Feminist Print Constellations: Exploring Feminist Print Cultures and Its Transnational Travels

Julie R. Enszer

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Explorer les dimensions transnationales de l'activisme dans la
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Exploring Transnational Dimensions of Activism in Contemporary
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Résumé de l'article

Une série d'interventions de lesbiennes féministes dans le domaine de l'édition documente les aspirations transnationales du mouvement de libération des femmes aux États-Unis dans les années 1970-1990. L'argumentaire se déroule en trois parties sur la façon dont les éditeurs lesbiens féministes ont contribué aux intérêts féministes transnationaux. Premièrement, j'examine comment les féministes ont construit des réseaux internationaux d'édition dans les années 1980 et 1990. Deuxièmement, j'examine comment trois périodiques lesbiens féministes, *Connexions*, *Sinister Wisdom* et *Ikon*, se sont engagés dans des pratiques transnationales d'édition et de lecture. Troisièmement, une constellation de cinq textes transnationaux publiés par des éditeurs lesbiens féministes indépendants révèle les littératies imaginées par les éditeurs féministes et la manière dont les éditeurs lesbiens féministes ont travaillé à remodeler les imaginaires féministes états-uniens pour les rendre plus transnationaux. Dans une dernière partie, j'émet des hypothèses sur la manière dont l'intérêt pour l'édition lesbienne-féministe du passé pourrait éclairer les études contemporaines sur l'édition et inspirer de nouvelles activistes de l'édition.

BINDING TRANSNATIONAL LESBIAN-FEMINIST PRINT CONSTELLATIONS: Exploring Feminist Print Cultures and Its Transnational Travels

Julie R. ENSZER

University of Mississippi

ABSTRACT

A series of publishing interventions by lesbian-feminists document the transnational aspirations of the U.S. women's liberation movement in the 1970s, 80, and 90s. The argument about how lesbian-feminist publishers contributed to transnational feminist attentions unfolds in three parts. First, I examine how feminists built international publishing networks in the 1980s and 1990s. Second, I examine how three lesbian-feminist periodicals, *Connexions*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *Ikon*, demonstrated commitments to transnational publishing and reading practices. Third, a constellation of five transnational texts published by independent lesbian-feminist publishers reveal the literacies imagined by feminist publishers and how lesbian-feminist publishers worked to reshape American feminist imaginaries to be more transnational. In a final section, I speculate about how focusing on lesbian-feminist publishing in the past might illuminate contemporary studies of publishing and inspire new publishing activists.

RÉSUMÉ

Une série d'interventions de lesbiennes féministes dans le domaine de l'édition documente les aspirations transnationales du mouvement de libération des femmes aux États-Unis dans les années 1970-1990. L'argumentaire se déroule en trois parties sur la façon dont les éditeurs lesbiens féministes ont contribué aux intérêts féministes transnationaux. Premièrement, j'examine comment les féministes ont construit des réseaux internationaux d'édition dans les années 1980 et 1990. Deuxièmement, j'examine comment trois périodiques lesbiens féministes, *Connexions*, *Sinister Wisdom* et *Ikon*, se sont engagés dans des pratiques transnationales

d'édition et de lecture. Troisièmement, une constellation de cinq textes transnationaux publiés par des éditeurs lesbiens féministes indépendants révèle les littératies imaginées par les éditeurs féministes et la manière dont les éditeurs lesbiens féministes ont travaillé à remodeler les imaginaires féministes états-uniens pour les rendre plus transnationaux. Dans une dernière partie, j'é mets des hypothèses sur la manière dont l'intérêt pour l'édition lesbienne-féministe du passé pourrait éclairer les études contemporaines sur l'édition et inspirer de nouvelles activistes de l'édition.

Keywords

Lesbian-feminist, feminist, transnational, U.S. book publishing, U.S. women in print movement

Mots-clés

Féminisme lesbien, féminisme, transnational, édition de livres aux États-Unis, femmes dans le mouvement de l'imprimé aux États-Unis

As the 1980s began, a hardy band of feminist publishers emerged from the American women's liberation movement. Along with writers, editors, booksellers, independent printers, and readers, these publishers coalesced as a women in print movement, self-titled by three Women in Print conferences held between 1976 and 1985 and later echoed by Trysh Travis in her article on the history of the movement.¹ The women in print movement expanded through the 1980s, as more women initiated influential book publishing ventures, bringing vital new books to lesbian-feminist readers with the support of a robust network of feminist booksellers. Kristen Hogan documents in *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* (2016) how these feminist publishers played a crucial role in bringing feminist books to the market, nurturing feminist writers and expanding feminist consciousness through books. Independent literary journals, national and regional newspapers and magazines, and other print ventures joined publishers and booksellers, creating a broad feminist communications network. Many of the women involved had experience in community organizing to build grassroots power; they applied these principles to their printing and publishing work.

This expansive and eclectic print activism stands in stark contrast to the bleak national politics in the United States during the 1980s. Stung by the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) when ratification had failed by March 1979, feminist political activism seemed stalled as the decade began.

The era of extraordinary feminist legislative gains of the 1970s had ended, though new battles continue to emerge in legislative rule-making and in the courts. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 as President heralded renewed, invidious racism characterized by vicious attacks on poor women of colour, as well as the erosion of social programs from the New Deal and President Johnson's war on poverty, continued attacks on reproductive rights, the arrival of the AIDS epidemic, and economic recessions. Despite these domestic challenges, feminisms and feminist activists in the United States flourished during the 1980s and 1990s. In *They Didn't See Us Coming*, Lisa Levenstein notes that "from 1982 to 1995, the number of national feminist groups nearly doubled, from 75 to 140."² Feminist books, feminist bookstores, growing women's studies programs, and activist movements shaped the thinking and work of these activists. Significant feminist attention was also focused on international issues, organizing ahead of events such as the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995). The activities of the women in print movement echo the overall contours of feminisms in the United States. With a robust feminist movement and various forms of institutional and philanthropic support, feminists had the space and time to think broadly about women's liberation and imagine new interventions to further feminist causes. And they did just that.

National boundaries have come to circumscribe narratives of feminist movements. Political campaigns to change national, state, or local laws often define feminist and lesbian histories in national terms, but even in non-reformist feminist formations, sociopolitical borders shape imaginaries of what is possible within feminism, as seen in work by George Chauncey, Anne Valk, Judith Ezekiel, Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, Heather Murray, Roey Thorpe, and others. What is missing from these narrative histories is a transnational context. Nationalism similarly circumscribes studies of print culture and book history, particularly in the "Gutenberg Syndrome" that Amadio Arboleda describes, where attention to Western principles and practices excludes other histories. However, during the years of the women's liberation movement in the United States, from the early 1960s at least until 1990, international concerns were an important element of feminist movements and their imaginaries—including for the women in print movement. While these feminist movements did not achieve

all their aspirations for internationalism or transnationalism, mapping their intentions and desires to challenge the nation-state is crucial.

In this article, I assemble a series of publishing interventions by lesbian-feminists to document these transnational aspirations. These intellectual gatherings align with the “liberation bibliography” that Derrick R. Spires identifies “as a conscious and intentional practice of identifying and repairing the harms of systemic racism, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and other oppressive structures in and through bibliography and bibliographic study.”³ One register of this assembly of lesbian-feminist texts is descriptive and recovered bibliography. I gather these publishing interventions—network building through feminist book fairs, three periodicals, and five books—together as constellations to demonstrate how feminist publishers worked transnationally to expand the imaginary of lesbian-feminism and animate the multiple political, intellectual, and cultural commitments of lesbian-feminists.

The intellectual training and attention to transnational concerns provided by lesbian-feminist publishers was a co-constitutive element of a broader transformation in U.S. feminisms from domestic affairs to transnational analyses. These publishers did not cause this trajectory; it was one element within a range of activities that feminists engaged to shape new understandings and insights about the world. My argument about how lesbian-feminist publishers contributed to transnational feminist attentions unfolds in three parts. First, I examine how feminists built international publishing networks in the 1980s and 1990s. Lesbian-feminist activists networked primarily through International Feminist Book Fairs and also through an array of publishing activities that strengthened the *habitus* of feminist publishing, bookselling, and community building (to use Bourdieu’s construction).⁴ Collectively, these activities enact how feminists resisted racism and colonialism in their activism and organizing. Second, I examine how lesbian-feminist periodicals demonstrated commitments to transnational publishing and reading practices. Three lesbian-feminist journals, *Connexions*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *Ikon*, published significant work that engaged an international imaginary and identified vital reader communities for international narratives. These periodicals provided a foundation for lesbian-feminist publishers. Third, a constellation of five transnational texts

published by independent lesbian-feminist publishers reveal the literacies imagined by feminist publishers and how lesbian-feminist publishers worked to reshape American feminist imaginaries to be more transnational. In a final section, I speculate about how focusing on lesbian-feminist publishing in the past might illuminate contemporary studies of publishing and inspire new publishing activists.

A note on the relationship between feminism and lesbianism and a comment on the central metaphor of this article. During the 1980s and the 1990s, feminism and lesbianism had a slippery relationship. Many women involved in feminist movements, organizations, businesses, and other social, political, and economic formations were lesbians; of these, many were out about their lesbianism while many were not. Women occupied every part of a continuum from openness to secrecy, a continuum that encompassed both personal and political identities. Women identified and described their socio-political formations as lesbian, feminist, and lesbian-feminist, often varying their frame according to particular audiences, emerging concerns, and individual preferences, creating an overlapping imprecision of the words lesbianism and feminism. Within publishing networks, the terms feminism, lesbian-feminism, and lesbian intermingled in ways that were variable, eclectic, and challenging to pin in place.⁵ Part of the reason for this reality was the excitement of the moment: revolutionary transformation was palpable for women involved in feminism and lesbian-feminism and parsing the meanings of their lives and loves and attentions, while important, was often unresolved. For some women and some publishers, the term feminist always, necessarily, included lesbian-feminist. These terms are a tightly wound ball of yarn and difficult to untangle. My goal in this article is not to untangle activists' terminology, but to explore the work of feminist publishers and lesbian-feminist publishers and their audiences. My primary focus is lesbian-feminist publishing, but I recognize the capaciousness of language at play and try in part to recreate the terminological slipperiness embraced by these activists for themselves.

I employ a central metaphor of constellations to conceptualize my argument because it highlights my methodology of gathering materials together to tell a story. Star constellations are human-made constructs that enable wonder and storytelling about the observed universe. The texts and activist practices I

gather are like stars, independent systems, yoked for the purpose of story. The metaphor invites a broad imagination of feminist publishers, a universe filled with many possibilities for stories. My intention with this metaphor is not to suggest a reading of lightness and darkness, particularly in ways that imply racialization. Rather, my figural goal is to foreground the work of storytelling and how it can discover meaning and wonder in the world.

Identifying Lesbian-Feminist Stars in a Night Sky

Three organizing activities for women in print in the 1980s built international networks in publishing and bookselling: *Feminist Bookstore News (FBN)*, a newsletter and the brainchild of activist and organizer Carol Seajay; the “feminist/lesbian/gay aisle” at the American Bookseller Association Conference; and the International Feminist Book Fairs. These eclectic organizing initiatives grew organically from activist work by lesbian-feminists, including the highly successful Women in Print conference in Nebraska in 1976, and provided a foundation for transnational travels of American lesbian-feminist books and ideas.

Feminist booksellers who attended the first Women in Print conference in Nebraska, held in 1976, wanted the information-sharing, connections, and skills-sharing that they experienced at the conference to continue. Collectively, they imagined an on-going newsletter. Carol Seajay, who was then working at Oakland, California’s ICI: A Woman’s Place bookstore and also planning to launch Old Wives Tales Bookstore, agreed to do it, but not alone. She was joined in the project by André, who worked at Rising Woman bookstore in Santa Rosa, California, and whose collective household had a printing press. They produced the first issue of *FBN* in six weeks, mailing it on October 14, 1976. André (who at the time used no last name) worked on *FBN* for three years; Seajay continued to edit and publish *FBN* until mid-summer 2000. *FBN*’s nearly twenty-five year run corresponds with the heyday of feminist bookstores.⁶

FBN operated as a networking vehicle, information sharing tool, organizing platform and more. Through its pages, Seajay, André, and many other bookstore owners and operators articulated cooperation and collaboration as core principles of the women in print movement, and crucial to the work of

booksellers, publishers, and writers.⁷ Cooperation and collaboration were the bywords of *FBN*, and within its pages lesbian-feminists define the work of the women in print movement not in terms of professionalization, but with the sentiments of trade unionism. Women booksellers banded together in solidarity to improve their lives and their communities, and *FBN* became an important platform for promoting financial transparency and shared economic success. Seajay modeled transparency, publishing the revenue and expenses of *FBN* each year, including her own salary.⁸ Subscribers, including booksellers, publishers, and advertisers, could review *FBN* revenue and expenses, and Seajay often reported various financial decisions that she made and the rationale behind them; for example, she wrote at length about what financially enabled her trips to international book fairs. Other crucial economic data shared in *FBN* included startup costs for opening a feminist bookstore and revenue models for sidelines (non-book items such as postcards, greeting cards, t-shirt, and posters). Publishers wrote articles that included sales data and print runs, information normally regarded in commercial publishing as proprietary and treated with great secrecy. *FBN* created and nurtured a collaborative environment among women in print that extended even to the most sensitive financial information.

The values of collaboration, cooperation, financial transparency, and shared economic success translated beyond the pages of *FBN* into the broader women in print movement. Beginning in 1984, feminist booksellers convened annually during the American Bookseller Association (ABA) convention. Booksellers rotated the organizing tasks for “Feminist Bookstore Day,” a day-long meeting held in advance of ABA, which fostered additional collaboration among the feminist bookstores and inspired feminist publishers to network more closely as well. Publishers established a “Gay, Feminist, and Lesbian Press Row” at the annual ABA convention, a row or aisle that congregated publishers of gay, feminist, and lesbian books together in the large convention halls to make it easier for them to network when traffic at their tables was light—and easier for booksellers to visit them all. *FBN* reported in 1989 that “general independent bookstores in both large cities and smaller towns have discovered that they all have a market for gay and lesbian books,” and their representatives came to pick up catalogs.⁹ That year publishers had a banner “marking the aisle clearly and better placement with renewed participation by many publishers.”¹⁰ Networking activities like this

increased the success of individual publishers and knit them together for mutual support and shared benefits.

Mutual support and networking were also happening internationally. Feminists organized the First International Feminist Book Fair in London in June 1984. Over 150 publishers attended, with about sixty-five from the U.K. and the balance from other locations in Europe, the United States, India, South Africa, and Australia, exhibiting to an enthusiastic audience of 4,500 people. *FBN* reports that the conveners of the first book fair envisioned it as an annual event moving from country to country, and feminist booksellers and publishers responded to that vision.¹¹ Between 1986 and 1994, ad hoc groups organized five more International Feminist Book Fairs in different locations: Oslo, Montreal, Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Melbourne. In her report on the Oslo Book Fair, Seajay reveals how instrumental these were for American booksellers and publishers in enabling transnational work.¹² In the September/October 1986 issue of *FBN*, Seajay includes “booklists of third world women’s books, Irish women’s books, lesbian books and feminist books not generally known or available here.” She also reports that future issues will include an interview with Flora Napa, “the woman who started the first (only?) women’s publishing house in Africa” and “a report on the African Writers Rights workshop. And maybe by the next issue there will be news about the women’s publishing house being organized in Egypt.”¹³ These book fairs represented an extraordinary international collaboration and provided a foundation for relationship building, information sharing, professional networking, and additional collaborative projects. Sadly, while there were plans for a seventh International Feminist Book Fair in Sao Paulo, Brazil, this conference never happened because of miscommunication within the network.¹⁴ Nevertheless, these six international feminist book fairs were enormously influential for lesbian-feminist readers, bringing new books and ideas into their communities.

Networking events and activities like *FBN*, the ABA aisle, and the international book fairs nurtured, inspired, and emboldened American lesbian-feminist publishers during the 1980s and 1990s. These networks both supported feminist bookstores and publishers economically and provided important communications channels that enabled sales of international rights among feminist publishers, supporting the movement of books across

national borders. The development of this lesbian-feminist habitus was augmented by an international focus in lesbian-feminist periodicals. If conference networking during the 1980s provided one foundation for transnational publishing, building relationships and distilling feminist publishers' commitments to voices outside of the United States, lesbian-feminist journals provided another.

Periodicals Illumine Night Skies

The 1970s and 1980s were a time of flourishing for lesbian-feminist journals, magazines, and periodical publications. In 1978, Polly Joan and Andrea Chesman listed seventy-three women's periodicals in their *Guide to Women's Publishing*; by the mid-1980s, the *Index/Directory of Women's Media* recorded more than four hundred women's [feminist and independent] newspapers and periodicals worldwide. As with mainstream, heterosexual, commercial publishing, lesbian-feminist publishers read journals to discover writers, editors, and ideas. During the 1980s, lesbian-feminist journals increasingly highlighted international politics, transnational themes, and writers not based in the United States. Without suggesting that my selections are comprehensive or exemplary of the publishing done by lesbian-feminist periodicals during the 1980s, this section focuses on issues published by three journals—*Connexions*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *IKON*—to illustrate how lesbian-feminist journals presented transnational issues and ideas to feminist readers during this decade.¹⁵

Connexions operated as a feminist journal dedicated to documenting and promoting “an international women’s movement” by translating feminist materials and articles and publishing relevant essays.¹⁶ In the third issue, published in Winter 1982, *Connexions* focused on “Global Lesbianism.” Stories in the issue featured Germany, Indonesia, India, Argentina, Japan, South Africa, New Zealand, Mexico, France, Holland, and the feminist *encuentro* (a conference) in Latin America, presenting lesbian issues as a vital component of the global women’s movement. In this issue, *Connexions* mapped how lesbian-feminists could connect with lesbians in other countries, documented international structures being built to network women, and provided reports on issues that were important to lesbians in various countries. While *Connexions* operated as a publication of a fiercely activist

global women's movement with contributors and readers around the world, *Sinister Wisdom* and *IKON* brought international concerns to U.S. literary audiences.

Sinister Wisdom is a literary and art journal founded in 1976 in North Carolina, and noted for the iconic cover photograph by Tee Corinne in the third issue and its early issue on Native American lesbian writing. *Sinister Wisdom* published two special issues in the mid-1980s which invited the journal's readers to grapple with the complexities of war in the middle East and intersectional Jewish lesbian identities: *To Go to Berbir: A Journey and a War* (vol. 26, 1984), written by Jill Drew and published by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, and *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology* (vol. 29/30, 1986), which Kaye/Kantrowitz edited with Irena Klepfisz.

Sinister Wisdom 26, *To Go to Berbir: A Journey and a War*, was a departure from the journal's usual format of publishing work by multiple lesbian authors. *To Go to Berbir*, written entirely by Jill Drew, is a journal "kept by an American nurse trained in trauma, compelled by her liberation politics as well as her sense of decency to leave her job, house her child, and go to Beirut."¹⁷ The introduction by Kaye/Kantrowitz and her co-editor (and lover) Michaele Uccella explains that the issue is "a powerful, deeply compassionate, angry book about her (Drew's) work in the American Hospital, life in a city seared by war, hours spent in the Palestinian refugee camps with people who became her beloved friends, and about her search for these friends after the massacres" (3). In their introduction, Uccella and Kaye/Kantrowitz acknowledge that the issue "breaks this pattern of collectivity, many voices, various form" (3) and explore why both found the book compelling. Drew's journal was urgent because of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, an action that profoundly affected American Jewry and that corresponded with a moment when lesbian Jews were speaking out and organizing collectively.¹⁸

Sinister Wisdom readers received *To Go to Berbir* with mixed reactions. In *Sinister Wisdom* 27, editor Kaye/Kantrowitz reflects that Drew's journal "perhaps creates a distorted picture" of Lebanon in 1982.¹⁹ She notes that in Drew's account "practically all Arab people are kind, generous, sustained by their faith" while "practically all Israelis are killers or crass materialists"; moreover, "the Israeli peace movement is not mentioned" (120). This analysis by

Kaye/Kantrowitz invites readers into a critical reading practice: examining how writers and publishers represent various subjectivities, particularly across national borders. Kaye/Kantrowitz wonders if she should have presented the issue with more context—and whether it was right to dedicate a full issue to Drew’s journal at the expense of publishing more lesbian writing. Her transparency with readers about editorial decisions echoes Seajay’s economic transparency in *FBN*.

Readers reacted in “Letters about *To Go to Berbir*,” published in *Sinister Wisdom* 28.²⁰ Reader responses to the issue and Kaye/Kantrowitz’s reflection are varied. Some readers praise the journal “for choosing to go straight into the thicket of controversy” (and frame that as vital for feminism).²¹ Others noted that they struggled reading the issue. Poet Linda Smukler (now Samuel Ace) wrote, “Not easy to read through as a Jew. Not easy to touch that war, which Jill forces me to do.”²² These varied responses highlight the intense engagements of lesbian-feminists with print culture during the early 1980s and the keen recognition of the significance of international issues. The pages of *Sinister Wisdom* offer a public forum for women to think, write, and speak about a controversial and polarizing issues within a lesbian-feminist framework.

The 1986 issue of *Sinister Wisdom*, *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women’s Anthology*, continued framing significant international dialogues in lesbian-feminism. An explicit vision in this issue is to “strengthen the ties between American Jewish and Israeli feminists.”²³ Editing the issue built relationships for Klepfisz and Kaye/Kantrowitz, who continued transnational solidarity work after publication.²⁴ This issue of *Sinister Wisdom* aligns with the identity elaboration work that feminist journals did during the 1970s and 1980s, defining new voices and racial ethnic formations in issues like *Conditions: Five/The Black Women’s Issue* and *Sinister Wisdom*’s earlier issue of Native American women’s writing.²⁵ Like these journal issues, *The Tribe of Dina* is more than an elaboration of Jewish lesbian identities. The issue enacts transnational coalition work between women and lesbians in the United States and Israel and has at its core an investment in a subversive diasporic politics that challenges Israeli colonialism.²⁶ *Sinister Wisdom* 29/30: *The Tribe of Dina* became a touchstone for many lesbian-feminists and enjoyed a long life as a trade book at Beacon Press.

Like *Sinister Wisdom*, *IKON* published to an engaged feminist audience from a New York City perch. *IKON* began in 1967 as an experimental literary journal linking the activist and the literary. Susan Sherman was one of the editors during the 1960s run, and, in 1982, she resurrected *IKON* as a feminist journal dedicated to “creativity and change,” the theme of its first issue in the “second series” of the journal.²⁷ The cover of this issue reads: “we can and must create a new world with new forms, techniques and ideas.”²⁸ Sherman published a number of notable lesbian-feminist writers in this 1982 issue including Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Jewelle Gomez, and Hettie Jones. She also published key transnational texts, such as Michelle Cliff’s “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire,” which is a foundational essay to Cliff’s book *The Land of Look Behind: Prose and Poetry*, published by Firebrand Books in 1985. In this essay, Cliff reflects on her life growing up in Jamaica and the intertwined relationships that women have there as a model for thinking about lesbianism outside hegemonic whiteness. Sherman also included in this issue of *IKON* a collection of photographs from Margaret Randall titled “Nicaraguan Portfolio.”²⁹ With this debut of the new *IKON*, Sherman thus signaled to readers that transnational issues had an important place among the myriad of activist concerns for feminist and lesbian-feminist audiences, and subsequent issues of *IKON* continued these intellectual and political attentions. *IKON* 5/6: *Art Against Apartheid* (1986) featured writers from South Africa and the United States working in solidarity with Black South Africans; *IKON* 9: *Without Ceremony* (1988), featured Asian American women writers. For a decade, Sherman curated a literary journal that brought readers into a politically engaged world with transnational concerns and that linked U.S. and global writers across common concerns.

The engagements of lesbian-feminist journals like *Connexions*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *IKON* during the 1980s were capacious and idiosyncratic. Lesbian-feminist writers, editors, and publishers networked with one another through mail, telephone, and subscription shares, reading each other’s work with great attention and care. Without suggesting a determinative path, their international engagements in widely discussed and circulated lesbian-feminist journals gesture to the engaged, political environment in which lesbian-feminist publishers existed. Lesbian-feminist readers were clearly interested in work beyond the borders of the U.S. Savvy lesbian-feminist publishers were poised to feed this growing interest.

Transnational Publishing Constellations

A constellation of books published by lesbian-feminist presses in the 1980s and early 1990s planted seeds for emerging transnational and international consciousnesses in lesbian-feminist communities in the 1990s and beyond. These books articulated transnational experiences through narratives and their publishing stories. While by some standards these books had modest circulations, along with other books published by feminist publishers at the time they collectively influenced lesbian-feminist and feminist activists to think differently, and nudged feminism toward a more international and transnational framework. In an argument akin to Kristen Hogan's argument in *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, I argue that lesbian-feminist publishers trained lesbian-feminist readers in the United States to think transnationally and internationally through their publishing work.

There are five texts in the constellation I trace in this section: Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*, published by The Crossing Press in 1984; Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman*, published by Aunt Lute Press in 1985; Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, first published in the United Kingdom by The Women's Press in 1988 and in the United States by Seal Press in 1988; Sara Levi Calderón's *The Two Mujeres*, published in English translation by Aunt Lute Books in 1991; and Marlen Haushofer's *The Wall*, published in English translation by Cleis Press in 1992. Of these five books, two are from Africa (Kuzwayo's autobiography and Dangarembga's novel), two are English translations of novels (Calderón's from Spanish and Haushofer's from German), and one is a Caribbean *bildungsroman* (Cliff's novel). Each of these five books met with success thanks to the vibrant U.S. feminist bookstore marketplace, and together they index the eclectic publishing scene of lesbian-feminism in the 1980s and 1990s.

The bookstore network established Marlen Haushofer's *The Wall* as a feminist bookstore bestseller, a key influence recognized by Cleis Press co-publisher Felice Newman in her account of the novel's success in *FBN* in May 1992.³⁰ *The Wall* was first published in Germany in 1963; Cleis Press's release of the English translation in 1991 came nearly thirty years after the book was a bestseller in Germany. Newman credits the success of the book, a feminist dystopia, to early conversations with booksellers who helped to hand-sell it as well as an enthusiastic blurb from Doris Lessing in advance of the 1992

ABA meeting. Sales benchmarks for Cleis Press in the early 1990s provide context for *The Wall*'s success: "A super-bestselling Cleis book will sell its first printing of 4,000 to 5,000 copies faster than you can say 'accounts payable.' A more earth-bound bestseller will sell out in three to five months. A midlist Cleis book will sell its first printing of 4,000 copies in 12 months and continue to sell as a backlist title" (47). About six months after the release of *The Wall*, Newman reported that "we have sold more than half the first printing and are well on our way to meeting the goal of a second printing before the anniversary of its October 1991 publication" (48).

U.S. audiences for international fiction had been historically modest, but during the late 1980s, following the success of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, there was a strong feminist audience for dystopian novels. *The Wall* appeared to attract these readers.³¹ It also is a good example of the effectiveness of the feminist bookselling ecosystem, which helped navigate transnational feminist publishing success for *The Wall* in its movement from Germany to the United States. The most prized texts for lesbian-feminist publishers, however, were transnational migrations of stories like Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Aunt Lute, 1987) that centered the voices of women of colour. The next four books all operate in this register.

A best seller in Mexico, *The Two Mujeres* (Aunt Lute, 1991) is a love story in which Valeria struggles "to choose between Genovesa, a beautiful, younger painter, and her family's narrow-minded expectations of her."³² *Library Journal* provided a full-throated endorsement of the book, noting "The novel will appeal to those familiar with Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah* or Jane Rule's *Desert of the Heart*. Like them, Calderon relates a wonderful romance and avoids a contrived, happily-ever-after conclusion."³³ Writing about the book for *Lambda Book Report*, Terri de la Peña notes that *The Two Mujeres* represents a Mexico "with which I am not familiar," primarily because the protagonist and all the characters are from an elite, upper-class family in Mexico. de la Peña still "applauds" the novel for showing "how ingrained sexism and homophobia are within Mexican society."³⁴ de la Peña's review embodies the intersectional method of reading that lesbian-feminists valued: she links sexism and homophobia while also naming class as a crucial category of analysis. Trained by journals, publishers, critics, and reading communities to desire stories not found in commercial publishing, lesbian-feminist readers

wanted texts that were politically engaged and challenged prevailing systems of oppression. As de la Peña's review indicates, *The Two Mujeres* delivered on some but not all these expectations.

Like *The Wall*, a lesbian-feminist publishing house played an active role in bringing the feminist story of *The Two Mujeres* to English-language readers. The co-founder of Aunt Lute, Joan Pinkvoss, reflected in an interview, "I have a deep, deep belief that fiction is the way to true understanding, and that it combines the emotional understanding with the lived experience in a way that the reader, if it's done well enough, walks away having *learned* not just something about something but has *felt* something."³⁵ Pinkvoss wanted to create change in the world through book publishing. She saw books like *The Two Mujeres* as "creating exciting ideas" and "creating information about what it was like to be a lesbian in Mexico."³⁶ Literature in translation introduced lesbian-feminist readers to other cultural, political, and aesthetic milieus through imagination and, as Pinkvoss emphasized, through empathy.

The role of story as a vital part of social change is evident in the next two works I discuss, both in their narrative and in their journey to publication. Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* (1984) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) are English-language novels both published in the United States by independent feminist presses. While on the whole "independent" describes The Crossing Press more accurately than "feminist," during the 1980s the press was home to a vibrant feminist series. *Abeng* was an early acquisition by Nancy Bereano, the savvy lesbian-feminist editor who grew the Crossing Press feminist series and then started Firebrand Books, one of the most influential publishers of U.S. lesbian-feminist literature in the late 1980s and 1990s. Cliff was well-known in lesbian-feminist communities: she had worked at W.W. Norton as a copyeditor and editor, then left Norton to move to Northampton with her lover Adrienne Rich, where the two took over the work of editing and publishing *Sinister Wisdom* from the journal's cofounders Catherine Nicholson and Harriett Desmoines. (Cliff and Rich passed on the role in turn in 1983, to Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Michael Uccella.) Persephone Press had published Cliff's first book, the essay collection *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (1980), which traces her consciousness about her racial identity. *Abeng* is a coming of age story that interrogates race, class, and colourism in Jamaican society. It was

well-received among lesbian-feminist readers, and Cliff became one of many feminist authors who moved from publishing in independent feminist presses to commercial publishing when, a decade later, mainstream publisher Penguin reissued *Abeng* as a prequel to Cliff's second novel *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987). *Abeng* and Cliff's career demonstrate some of the dynamic engagements that lesbian-feminist authors have moving from independent lesbian-feminist publishers to commercial publishers—and in Cliff's case ultimately to a university press.³⁷

The final two books in this constellation originated in Africa then came to the United States through the United Kingdom-based The Women's Press: Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. In many cases publishing houses simply buy and sell rights for different English-language editions, but the relationship of The Women's Press to U.S. feminist publishers is more complex, not quite a partnership but not simply a commercial transaction either. *Call Me Woman* and *Nervous Conditions* illustrate the cooperative and collaborative relationship among U.S. and U.K. publishers that contributed to make transatlantic feminist books successful.

Like *Abeng*, Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is a coming of age narrative, telling the stories of two women, Tambu and Nyasha, as they grow into adulthood in colonial Rhodesia. The novel artfully enacts the devastations of colonialism from a variety of standpoints while also gesturing to cross-cultural experiences of young women, including struggles with body image and eating disorders. Widely praised by readers and writers in the United States, *Nervous Conditions* helped feminist readers both to understand the specific effects of colonialism and to connect with narratives about the suppression of women and girls in different global locations. Kuzwayo's autobiography *Call Me Woman* narrated how apartheid arose in South Africa, providing historical context and understanding about its effects on Black women. Kuzwayo was the first Black writer to win South Africa's most prestigious literary prize, the CNA Literary Award, in 1986. Britain's *The Women's Review* described the audience as "stunned" when her win was announced and at the ceremony, Kuzwayo said that she was sharing it with "my family, my community, and above all, with the women of my community."³⁸ Published when solidarity work with Black South Africans in the United States was growing, *Call Me*

Woman helped to shape the contours of what that work might look like in feminist communities. Independent U.S. feminist publishers, through their transnational collaborations with The Women's Press in the U.K., recognized the relevance and resonance of both *Nervous Conditions* and *Call Me Woman* for feminist communities in the United States.

These five books demonstrate how texts (novels and memoir) traveled through translations and U.S. English-language editions. Their differences highlight the appetite of both publishers and readers for stories that helped all to understand the world, particularly the world of women, outside the borders of the United States. The publishing stories demonstrate how lesbian-feminist publishing played a role in articulating and distilling key ideas, particularly in highly networked, activist oriented communities. While not stated explicitly, lesbian-feminist presses had an implicit editorial mission to teach women to think like—and be!—feminists. These five books embody that mission. Much like how “antiracist bookshelves” at feminist bookstores nudged feminist communities to think about and embrace anti-racism, publishers nudged their readers to imagine feminist worlds beyond U.S. borders.³⁹ Collectively, these books demonstrate how publishers helped shape American readers' consciousnesses, providing opportunities to think outside of the borders of their nation and into a world of feminism that was transnational, multicultural, and multiracial.

Asking Questions with Constructed Constellations

By gathering these stories from lesbian-feminist publishing history together into a constellation and constructing a narrative, a sharper portrait of lesbian-feminist publishing as an activist formation emerges. Women involved in lesbian-feminist publishing imagined themselves doing transformative work to challenge the very structures of society, including nationalism and colonialism. Like all histories, my constellation is a human-made story with idiosyncrasies and foibles. Neither mindful determinism nor central coordination among publishers link the stories of these texts, which materialize from disparate authorial sources and publishing activities, but collectively they illustrate the importance of activist publishers for the lesbian-feminist storytellers of the 1980s and 1990s. This methodology of identifying constellations, discerning patterns, and recognizing linkages

from the past may be useful to a variety of activist formations today. Considering constellations invites new and important questions for narratives about publishing and its histories; as I consider the constellations assembled in this article, four additional questions emerge.

First, what can activists and book historians learn by examining feminist publishers in transnational contexts? Scholars recognize publishing as a vibrant part of multiple instantiations of feminist activism, but feminist publishing remains underexamined, even in the English-speaking world. Stories of feminist publishing are underexplored. The excellent work of Simone Murray in *Mixed Media*, Catherine Riley in *The Virago Story*, and Jennifer Sweatman on Editions de Femmes in *The Risky Business of French Feminism* has begun to elaborate feminist publishing history in the United Kingdom and France, but more work remains. Publishers not based in the United States or the United Kingdom have received scant attention for their significant work. What stories might Kali for Women/Women Unlimited in India, Spinifex Press in Australia, Modjaji Books in South Africa, FEMRITE in Uganda, and Gynergy Books and Press Gang Publishers in Canada tell us? How might telling the stories of feminist publishers more broadly provide a foundation for thinking more rigorously about transnational stories?

Second, what do these stories tell us about the structures of transnational commerce? In the United States, feminist organizers actively supported struggles in solidarity with labour to resist neoliberal policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); Mab Segrest notably spoke about NAFTA at the Creating Change conference of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 1993.⁴⁰ During the early years of the women in print movement, women seized the means of production and started their own print shops to address all aspects of the labour chain.⁴¹ Questions of transnational commerce have broader implications than labour, however. Border skirmishes in the 1980s over the movement of gay and lesbian books and sexually explicit feminist material between the United States and Canada highlighted broader U.S. cultural controversies about gay and lesbian inclusion in the body politic.⁴² Transnational book commerce illuminates what is regulated by the nation state, what is valued, and what is prioritized. Lesbian-feminist publishing and bookselling stories from the 1980s and 1990s can change the nature of those conversations.

Third, what alternate models might be offered from lesbian-feminist imaginaries for publishing? Leslie Feinberg's legacy through *Stone Butch Blues*, a book published by Firebrand Books in 1995, offers a glimmer of the kinds of revolutionary publishing initiatives that emanate from lesbian-feminism. Before her death, Feinberg ensured that her estate controlled the rights to the book and that it would be freely available for non-commercial uses in translation. Minnie Bruce Pratt, as Feinberg's literary executor, continues to ensure that the book is freely available and that it becomes accessible through new translations regularly.⁴³ This is a substantial contribution to new thinking about intellectual property, translation, and textual circulation. What changes in publishing today might illuminating this story precipitate?

Fourth, how can transnational publishing challenge existing structures within publishing? The cooperative approach of lesbian-feminist publishers, booksellers, and allied print workers during the 1980s and 1990s offers a different vision of how to address economic issues within publishing and media ventures. The nationally networked but still vibrantly local women in print community supported multiple workers and economic communities. Mapping their impact and influence further might suggest other cooperative and collaborative approaches to economic issues in publishing today.

As a final reflection, we should ask what enables lesbian-feminist (and independent) publishers to endure. When I began my research into lesbian-feminist publishers, I assumed that publishing a book meant that the book and its ideas would live forever in the world, available always to readers everywhere. This was an idealistic vision. Publishers' labours give books circulation for a limited time, after which they may continue to circulate through reader communities, libraries, teachers and educators, but all these modes of circulation reach an end. Most books, with the ideas and stories behind them, become at best an archival trace and at worst are completely forgotten. Happily, the five books in the final constellation each have on-going publishing stories. The two books published by Aunt Lute Press continue to be in print as Aunt Lute operates as one of the remaining feminist, multicultural publishing houses. Cliff's *Abeng* remains in print with the commercial publisher that bought her work. *Nervous Conditions* was published for many years by Seal Press even after a commercial house acquired Seal, and more recently Dangarembga consolidated her work at independent publisher

Greywolf. Cleis Press continued publishing *The Wall* for a time after it was acquired by another commercial publisher, and a new edition is being published in 2022 by independent publisher New Directions. The precarity of lesbian-feminist publishing as well as its resilience is evident in these stories. What interventions might foster more endurance?

While publishers may rise and fall, readers remain. Lesbian-feminist readers continue to embrace, challenge, and reimagine identities and the worlds that produce them. Like the cosmos ever growing and imploding, expanding and contracting, lesbian-feminist readers continue, absorbed in books, adrift in wild imaginations always under creation.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

Julie R. Enszer, PhD, is a scholar and a poet. Her scholarly work has appeared in *Southern Cultures*, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, *American Periodicals*, *WSQ*, and *Frontiers*. Her scholarly book manuscript, *A Fine Bind*, is a history of lesbian-feminist presses from 1969 until 2009. She is the author of four poetry collections and the co-editor of *OutWrite: The Speeches that Shaped LGBTQ Literary Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2022). She is the editor of *The Complete Works of Pat Parker* (Sinister Wisdom/A Midsummer Night’s Press, 2016), which won the 2017 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Poetry, *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974–1989* (Sinister Wisdom/A Midsummer Night’s Press, 2018), and *Milk & Honey: A Celebration of Jewish Lesbian Poetry* (A Midsummer Night’s Press, 2011), which was a finalist for the 2012 Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Poetry. More information at www.JulieREnszer.com.

Notes

¹ Trysh Travis, “The Women in Print Movement: History and Implications,” *Book History* 11 (2008): 275–300.

² Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 12.

³ Derrick R. Spires, “On Liberation Bibliography,” *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 116, no. 1 (2022): 5.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 170.

⁵ Katie King explores these slippery relationships in *Theory in Its Feminist Travels: Conversations in U.S. Women's Movements* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), particularly in her fourth chapter “Lesbianism as Feminism's Magical Sign.”

⁶ Personal email with Carol Seajay; Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 34–35.

⁷ Beginning with vol. 7, no. 1 (1983), and extending through the final issue, vol. 22, no. 6 (2000), digital copies of FBN are freely available online at JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/site/reveal-digital/independent-voices/feministbookstorenews-27953489/>. Early front matter describes FBN as a “communication vehicle for an information network of feminist bookstores” and solicits contributions from bookstores, publishers, and readers.

⁸ An early occurrence of this is in “Notes from the Computer Table,” *FBN* 7, no. 6 (1985). Seajay documents \$6,459 in revenue for 1984 and over \$11,000 in expenses; she explains how a part-time job driving for Federal Express subsidizes *FBN*. Multiple other examples exist.

⁹ Carol Seajay, “ABA 1989 Washington DC,” *FBN* 12, no. 2 (July/August 1989): 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, S-28.

¹¹ “The First International Feminist Bookfair,” *FBN* 7, no. 3 (September 1984): 13–15.

¹² Carol Seajay, “The Second Annual Feminist Bookfair—Oslo,” *FBN* 9, no. 1 (September/October 1986): 10–13.

¹³ Carol Seajay, “Notes from the Computer Table,” *FBN* 9, no. 1 (September/October 1986): 1.

¹⁴ “To the International Advisory Board of the International Feminist Book Fair,” *FBN* 18, no. 1 (May/June 1995): 6–7.

¹⁵ Lesbian-feminist journal *Conditions* and its transnational attentions are another star in this

constellation. See Julie R. Enszer and Agatha Beins, “Inter- and Trans-national Feminist Theory and Practice in *Triple Jeopardy and Conditions*,” *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 47, no. 1 (2018): 21–43.

¹⁶ *Connexions: An International Women’s Quarterly*, no. 3 (Winter 1982): front matter.

¹⁷ Michael Uccella and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, “Introduction,” in “To Go to Berbir,” special issue, *Sinister Wisdom* 26 (1984): 3.

¹⁸ Evelyn Torton Beck’s anthology *Nice Jewish Girls*, published initially by Persephone Press in 1982, provided one focus for conversations and organizing; in 1990, Faith Rogow explored the significance of this decade (“Why Is This Decade Different from All Other Decades?: A Look at the Rise of Jewish Lesbian Feminism,” *Bridges* 1, No. 1 [Spring 1990/5750]: 67–79), and Joyce Antler discusses this moment and the organizing of Di Vilde Chayes in chapter 7 of *Jewish Radical Feminism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

¹⁹ Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, “Editor’s Statement about *To Go To Berbir*,” *Sinister Wisdom* 26,” *Sinister Wisdom* 27 (Fall 1984): 120.

²⁰ “Letters about *To Go To Berbir*,” *Sinister Wisdom* 26,” *Sinister Wisdom* 28 (Winter 1985): 114–122. Not incidentally, Kaye/Kantrowitz dedicated this issue of *Sinister Wisdom* to international peace activist Barbara Deming, who died in 1984.

²¹ Letter from Carol Keyes, “Letters about *To Go To Berbir*,” 114.

²² Letter from Linda Smukler, “Letters about *To Go To Berbir*,” 118.

²³ Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz, “Introduction,” in “The Tribe of Dina / A Jewish Women’s Anthology,” special issue, *Sinister Wisdom* 29/30 (1986): 7.

²⁴ Kaye/Kantrowitz’s activism included co-chairing the New Jewish Agenda Task Force on Anti-Semitism and Racism and working as the first Executive Director of Jews For Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ). Klepfisz was active with the Jewish Committee to End the Occupation (JWCEO) and New Jewish Agenda.

²⁵ For more discussion on *Conditions*, see Julie R. Enszer, “‘Fighting to Create and Maintain Our Own Black Women’s Culture’: *Conditions* Magazine, 1977–1990,” *American Periodicals* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 160–176; and “Tribute to *Conditions*,” special issue, *Sinister Wisdom* 123 (Winter 2022).

²⁶ Kaye/Kantrowitz articulates diasporism more fully in her book *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Susan Sherman, “Creativity and Change: *IKON*, the Second Series,” <https://archives.worldlit.org/ikon-pdfs/IKON-OKLAHOMA-final-draft-2.pdf>. The full run of the second series is available at <https://archives.worldlit.org/ikon-archives.html>.

²⁸ *IKON: Creativity and Change*, Second Series 1 (Fall/Winter 1982-3): cover, <https://archives.worldlit.org/ikon-pdfs/IKON1.pdf>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 95–109.

³⁰ Felice Newman, "Feminist Publishing Column: Selling the Wall," *FBN* 15, no. 1 (May/June 1992): 47–48, 54.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 47. Newman notes in this article the success of Atwood, Lessing, and Piercy.

³² Faye A. Chadwell, "Word of Mouth," *Library Journal* 117, no. 11 (June 15, 1992): 128.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Terri de la Peña, "A Tale of Two Mexicos: Two Mujeres Comes to America," *Lambda Book Report* 3, no. 2 (January 1992): 22.

³⁵ Joan Pinkvoss, in person interview with the author, San Francisco, CA, June 26 and 27, 2013.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ University of Minnesota Press published Cliff's final two books, *Everything Is Now: New and Collected Stories* (2009) and *Into the Interior* (2010).

³⁸ "Announcements," *FBN* 9, no. 5 (March 1987): 7.

³⁹ Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, 156.

⁴⁰ This speech is included in Segrest's *Memoir of a Race Traitor* (Boston: South End Press, 1994).

⁴¹ Julie R. Enszer and Agatha Beins, "'We Couldn't Get Them Printed,' So We Learned to Print: Ain't I a Woman? and the Iowa City Women's Press," *Frontiers* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 186–221.

⁴² *FBN* covers the import and export challenges of feminist and gay and lesbian publishers and bookstores extensively in its pages.

⁴³ For more information see Leslie Feinberg's website, <https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/>.

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