

# *THE* FEMINIST BOOKSTORE MOVEMENT

KRISTEN HOGAN

*LESBIAN ANTIRACISM AND  
FEMINIST ACCOUNTABILITY*



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FEMINIST ACCOUNTABILITY**

**KRISTEN HOGAN**

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To Mill, every moment.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book, and my research and writing of it, has been a practice of relationship building and feminist love. In these nearly ten years of research, conversations, and writing, I have been learning in dialogue with colleagues and loved ones how to read this work, these relationships, ethically, with feminist accountability and love. These interconnections have enacted this telling of how feminist bookwomen's histories do shape our feminist futures and provide a framework for understanding and creating ethical relationships today.

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Photographs of the bookwomen, bookstores, and movement moments make these histories more vivid. For photographing or archiving photographs of the movement, for digging through boxes in basements and closets, and for granting me permission to use the photographs in this book, I appreciate Anne Marie Menta at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Carol Seajay, Diana Carey at the Schlesinger Library, Donna Gottschalk, Gilda Bruckman, JEB (Joan E. Biren), Jonathan Sillin, Kay Keys, May Lui, Saskia Scheffer and the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and Susan Post. I am grateful to former Toronto Women's Bookstore bookfolks for generously, and with good wishes, granting me permission to include May Lui's photo

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I met Milly Gleckler at the BookWoman book group in 1999, and, my love, we've lived almost all of our sixteen years (of never enough but as many years as I can possibly have, please) with this book-in-process. Thank you for reading, rereading, talking past midnight, and telling the truth. You make everyday life extraordinary. Steele Barile, this book has grown up with you; I have been lucky to get to live these years with your generous kindness and humor. I'm grateful to be family together. Our animal family members have made this work possible, too; for much-needed walks, sitting, and mental health, thank you to Vamp and Cosmos.

# PREFACE

## READING THE MAP OF OUR BODIES

Warm in our Roxton Road flat, despite the snow outside, my partner and I lit candles, ate walnut cakes from Bloor Street, made collage visions of our futures, and tried to imagine how a faraway life could be possible. By that January of 2007, I had been comanager and book buyer at the Toronto Women's Bookstore for nine months. The previous manager of ten years, Anjula Gogia, had taken a fourteen-month leave of absence to consider a different life, so I had been preparing for the end of my contract by applying for faculty teaching positions. Jarring us out of our imaginings, my phone rang with an invitation for an on-site interview with the English Department of a state university in the US Deep South. My lover saw the danger in the southern city, in breathing in a geography so deeply steeped in systems of slavery and segregation that time folds in on itself in the grocery store, the hospital exam room, the classroom. Still, I agreed to deliver a job talk on my concept of the feminist shelf and how feminist bookstores had changed antiracist feminist alliance practices. I splashed feminist archival treasures onto the document camera: issues of the *Feminist Bookstore News*, Joni Seager's map of New Words book sections, and the typed script of Donna Fernandez's talk on behalf of Streelekha at the 1988 International Feminist Book Fair. To me, these moments wove together into a complex web of emotional-political alliances; this electric web wielded critical influence in both feminism and publishing. A faculty member's knitting clicked a soundtrack. As I ended the talk, one excited white woman professor in her fifties asked, "Would you consider starting a feminist bookstore here?" This is a question I have heard often during my years of writing this history. This woman, like the others who have asked, eager though she knew my

answer would be no, was nostalgic; she wanted a feminist bookstore in her own city. This question, are you going to start a feminist bookstore, is only possible without holding the history I have learned and share in *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability*. Bookwomen, primarily lesbians and including an important series of cohorts of women of color, in more than one hundred feminist bookstores in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s used the *Feminist Bookstore News* (FBN) to connect with each other locally and transnationally to attempt to hold each other accountable to lesbian antiracism as well as to ethical representation and relationships. Collective accountability on this scale is not possible within a single bookstore or even with a handful of feminist bookstores open in North America. With this book I hope to redefine feminist bookstores in public memory, to remember feminist bookwomen's difficult work grappling with and participating in defining lesbian antiracism and feminist accountability. This history offers us a legacy, vocabulary, and strategy for today's feminisms.

It had taken me years to get to an interview with bookwoman, activist, and author Kit Quan. In 2004 I read her memorial remembrance of Gloria Anzaldúa. She wrote, "I met Gloria in 1978. I was a sixteen-year-old runaway working at Old Wives' Tales Bookstore on Valencia at 16th Street in San Francisco. She was attending a Feminist Writer's Guild meeting in the back of the store and came up to the counter to thank me for keeping the store open."<sup>1</sup> Sitting in Old Wives' Tales and FBN founder Carol Seajay's kitchen in 2003 for my first interview with a bookwoman, I had asked, "How many women were in the collective?" Definitely a first-interview kind of question. Seajay listed the women, counted on her fingers Paula Wallace, Jill Limerick, then Sherry Thomas after Wallace left: "And then we also had this young woman who was the best friend of my foster daughter. Who, actually, from the first summer the store was open, came in and started volunteering, and then we started paying her. . . . She was an immigrant from Hong Kong, and was having a hard time, wanted to get a job. . . . What do you do with this fifteen-year-old little dykelet? Well, of course."<sup>2</sup> I didn't know then that the best friend was Kit Quan, and I hadn't asked. It was only when I showed up at an allgo: texas statewide queer people of color organization memorial for Gloria Anzaldúa and picked up the remembrance booklet that I recognized this story. If you count from the time I heard about her without asking for more in Seajay's interview, it took me three years to make it to that interview with Quan. The wait counts out a history of distance between white bookwomen and bookwomen of color, a history of distance among book-

women who each risked everything to imagine a nonhierarchical lesbian feminist antiracist organization and lived to tell the tale. The wait counts out my years of white privilege, even though my lesbian self identity offers (but does not guarantee) an understanding of oppression.<sup>3</sup> During the wait, I worked toward (and am still working toward) learning white antiracism. By respecting, listening to, and honoring the lives and stories of women of color, I learned different versions of this feminist bookstore history. The story in my dissertation was much more white. The four years it took me to write the dissertation were not enough for me to learn how to read for and with women of color in the movement, to build trust with women of color in the movement, to learn to ask good questions, to listen well. This book is an entirely new document, a new story from the bookwomen. The wait taught me, should teach us, that this story is still partial. And lives are at stake.

With 130 feminist bookstores at the height of their transnational movement, bookwomen were learning with and accountable to each other.<sup>4</sup> With over thirty years of a core of active feminist bookstores connected for most of those years through the *Feminist Bookstore News* (1976–2000), bookwomen attempted to sustain feminist dialogue during significant changes in capitalism and feminism. *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* is a history of feminist relational practices and how feminist movements develop new vocabularies; it contributes to contemporary activist and academic feminist thought and practice both by inviting readers to reconsider the role of lesbian antiracist thought and participation in 1970s through 2000s feminism and by sharing feminist bookwomen's vocabularies and histories for building lesbian antiracist feminist alliances. When bookwomen gathered in 1976 to record their vision for the movement, they included their intention to become both “revolutionaries . . . in a capitalist system” and “accountable to our communities and to each other.”<sup>5</sup> The title of this book identifies what I see as the key theoretical interventions of feminist bookwomen. Bookwomen's unique attention to and relationships with questions of representation, voice, and appropriation in literature, combined with their own heavily documented work at relationships among local collectives and bookwomen in a transnational network, generate a complex theory and history of lesbian antiracism and feminist accountability.

This book provides a vital historical thread that supports the work of today's feminists toward reading and relating with each other more ethically. Accountability remains at the core of feminist negotiations, from social



media conversations, including #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, which emphasizes the double standard of mainstream feminism with a focus on feminist media that reifies white women and scrutinizes women of color; to ongoing conversations among women of color and Indigenous women, including Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, on the relationships between diaspora and settler colonialism; to #BlackLivesMatter, created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, and consistent public erasure of the hashtag's foundation in Black queer feminism. Discussions of hashtag feminism focus on how feminists talk about and hold each other accountable to antiracism and queer justice. #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen author Mikki Kendall recognizes that ending these systems of oppression requires "true solidarity and community building." Her hashtag addresses "how White the narrative around feminism is, and how that Whiteness lends itself to the erasure of the problems specifically facing women of color." "True solidarity" would, she says, "make it impossible for these same conversations to be happening 10 years from now, much less 100. In order for feminism to truly represent all women, it has to expand to include the concerns of a global population."<sup>6</sup> Susana Loza, writing in the open access journal *ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology*, sees the work of social media feminists of color as drawing on a legacy from previous generations of activists of color working toward accountability: "Like their feminist predecessors of color, hashtag feminists have found common ground and are beginning to build coalitions across profound cultural, racial, class, sex, gender, and power differences. The work is not easy but they realize the only way to make feminism less toxic is to 'actually end white supremacy, settler colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy.'"<sup>7</sup> This work of feminism, to build toward "true solidarity" through sometimes painful accountability, has a vibrant history visible through the action and dialogue at feminist bookstores.

Today's feminist frameworks for antiracism include calls that resonate with discussions among feminist bookwomen, including calls to interrupt settler colonialism and to ethically build dialogue with each other by accurately naming and witnessing history and present oppressions and visions for justice. Feminist theorists Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua participate in this dialogue of feminist accountability as alliance building with attention to the exclusion of Indigenous people from antiracism.<sup>8</sup> Antiracist work that "ignores the ongoing colonization of Aboriginal peoples in the Americas," they argue, "participates in colonial agendas" by advocating for changes in the state without understanding Canada (Lawrence and Dua

speak specifically to Canada, and this also applies to the United States) as a “colonialist state.”<sup>9</sup> Addressing resistance to this argument, Ruthann Lee emphasizes the ethics of representation and dialogue when she points out that “struggles for Indigenous sovereignty must be recognized and respected as a practice of solidarity by antiracist scholars and activists.”<sup>10</sup> Kendall similarly argues for dialogue and alliance building (in place of appropriation) by pointing out that feminist media must advocate for funding for “WOC [women of color] writing about the issues that impact them.”<sup>11</sup> The movement-based reception of #BlackLivesMatter signals feminists’ ongoing difficulties listening with each other and recognizing our complex identities. Alicia Garza observes that movement artists and activists have homogenized her and her coauthors’ call to versions of “all lives matter.” Describing the pain of this erasure, Garza writes, “We completely expect those who benefit directly and improperly from White supremacy to try and erase our existence. We fight that every day. But when it happens amongst our allies, we are baffled, we are saddened, and we are enraged. And it’s time to have the political conversation about why that’s not okay.” The depth of #BlackLivesMatter calls for a recognition of its authorship by Black queer women and an articulation of the full reach of its meaning: “Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.”<sup>12</sup> These contemporary conversations among or with feminists signal the importance of continuing to reimagine what solidarity looks like for feminist futures; new understandings of feminist pasts support this reimagining. With this book I attempt to build dialogue with Lawrence and Dua, Lee, Kendall, and Garza along with works like M. Jacqui Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing* and Aimee Carillo Rowe’s *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances* to contribute to a vocabulary and history toward more nuanced feminist alliances acknowledging how differences of race, sexuality, and geopolitical as well as socioeconomic status affect how we talk with each other, how we think about our selves and our futures.<sup>13</sup>

This connected history of the feminist bookstores redefines them not simply as places to find books but as organizations in which bookwomen worked together to develop ethical feminist reading practices that, in turn, informed relational practices. In 1976, the first two issues of the *Feminist Bookstores Newsletter* (which became the *Feminist Bookstore News*) included

book lists of Spanish-language feminist books, books by and about Native American women, Black women, and young women.<sup>14</sup> By 1993, bookwomen were immersed in transnational discussions with Indigenous feminists about literary appropriation as cultural genocide. Along the way, feminist bookwomen circulated cassette tapes of Bernice Johnson Reagon's iconic talk about feminist coalition politics, shared books they were reading, and talked about incidents at their bookstore desks to raise difficult conversations within their collectives or staff and with their communities about how power operated within the bookstores and whether they could disrupt institutionalized oppressions including racism. Of course these conversations sometimes ended disastrously, painfully. Yet the process of having the conversations, sharing them through the *FBN*, and having them again was part of the commitment bookwomen had made to attempt feminist accountability to their communities and each other.

At the same time, feminist bookwomen faced a quickly changing book industry between 1970 through the late 1990s. Knowing the importance of feminist literacies to the movement, bookwomen strategized to get and keep feminist literature in print. In the United States, bookwomen led the national movement of independent bookstores to expose illegal and damaging practices of chain bookstores in connection with big publishing. The daily and movement-based conversations bookwomen had around feminist accountability prepared them for these interventions in the book and bookstore industries. Then in the 1990s, faced with economic pressures and independent bookstore closures, bookwomen changed how they talked about the bookstores: in what seemed a misplaced hope to save the bookstores, bookwomen began to frame the bookstores as feminist businesses more often than as movement-based sites of accountability. As remaining bookstores struggled for survival, the move from accountability to support gave rise to the Feminist Bookstore Network slogan "Support Your Local Feminist Bookstore, She Supports You."<sup>15</sup> The *Feminist Bookstore News* ceased publication in 2000; with the loss of this sustaining vehicle of accountability, and as the majority of feminist bookstores closed around that time, bookwomen continued to sound out this local call to support a bookstore, a feminist business. This image, frozen in time, seemed to erase from public memory the complex and necessary movement innovations of feminist bookwomen in their previous years.

Recent articles mourning the loss of feminist bookstores or encouraging readers to sustain the few remaining feminist bookstores rely on the once-

vital and now anachronistic lists of feminist bookstores generated by the *Feminist Bookstore News*. At the height of the movement, these lists served as vital tools to leverage the power of more than one hundred feminist bookstores for bargaining with publishers and other industry institutions. Recent articles, rather than updating the definition of a feminist bookstore (as *FBN* did over its nearly three decades in print), list bookstores that were on the last of the *FBN* lists and include new bookstores only when they identify solely with the feminist movement. For example, movement bookstores like Resistencia Bookstore in Austin, Texas, considered a feminist, LGBTQ, Chican@, and Indigenous space by its caretakers, are not on these lists.<sup>16</sup> These articles also prioritize the bookstore rather than the activism of feminist bookwomen. While article authors claim that Internet sales make it “easier to buy feminist materials elsewhere,” they remind readers that feminist bookstores stocked feminist literature and provided space for feminist organizing.<sup>17</sup> The real history of the work of the bookwomen, as feminist organizers in their own right, is much more radical. The *FBN* chronicles feminist bookwomen advocating for the publishing of feminist literature and working to keep books in print, not just carrying what publishers thought would sell but working to make feminist literature available. Feminist bookwomen did not stop there but worked together to build feminist literacy to make sense of feminist literature and of each other in conversation. Throughout all of this work, feminist bookstores have been not simply spaces to gather but sites of complex conversations among staff and collectives and, in turn, with readers, about feminist accountability. I offer a description of how the economic and movement pressures of the 1990s changed feminist bookwomen’s self-definition and obscured a more radical history of this movement. The authors of these recent articles are writing what they know and are working to pay homage to feminist bookstores; however, their limited access to feminist bookstore history leaves readers without a movement-based understanding of bookwomen’s work. Through this book I offer a glimpse of the complex history these intervening years have blurred or erased. The vital work of bookwomen mapping out practices of lesbian antiracism and feminist accountability sees a continued life in social media campaigns and other sites of coalitional dialogue. I identify bookwomen’s activism as part of a movement legacy and model we need.

Along the way, this book participates in the ongoing work of more accurately documenting the 1970s feminist movement, still too often described as a straight white movement. Maylei Blackwell’s *¡Chicana Power! Contested*

*Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* and Kimberly Springer's *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* both interrupt the feminist waves analogy to point out that feminists of color in the 1970s drew on and participated in movement histories not visible from the perspective of feminist waves (first wave, suffrage feminism; second wave, 1970s feminism; third wave, 1990s feminism). Instead, to fully describe feminism we must recognize feminist activism within the Abolitionist Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Chicano Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, Indigenous peoples' movements, and other identity-based and social justice movements.<sup>18</sup> Feminist bookstore histories also document the involvement of women of color across movements, women who came to feminist bookstores from and left feminist bookstores for work in other social justice movements. White-focused historians, Chela Sandoval has pointed out, often read this mobility of women of color between movements as absence.<sup>19</sup> In this book I look to the decades-long feminist bookstore movement as a significantly long-running case study in part to examine some of the motivations for women of color mobility and histories of attempted transracial alliances within feminism. This book also records the feminist bookstores as usually lesbian-run and lesbian-identified spaces. In conversation with works including Springer's *Living for the Revolution* and Lillian Faderman's *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America, A History*, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* documents 1970s feminism as already lesbian and multiracial.

In this book I enact a writing style that uses story as theory. Throughout the book, as in this preface, I share stories of my own research and learning process as well as stories of bookwomen's histories together. This storytelling maps out bookwomen's and my relational practices of lesbian antiracism and feminist accountability. Informed by Anzaldúa's recognition of multiple ways of theorizing, with her emphasis on theories by and for women of color, I look to story with attention to race, class, gender, and sexuality as a way of knowing, a pattern, a usable theoretical framework.<sup>20</sup> I write this way here for three reasons. First, bookwomen showed how knowledge creation happens in relationship. The work of feminist bookwomen was in large part to teach themselves, each other, and their communities to read feminist literature and each other differently. Through organizing books into sections in the bookstore, gathering transformative book lists in newsletters and in the *Feminist Bookstore News*, creating events, reflecting on this practice through collective meetings, and trying new formations,

bookwomen created a new reading and relational practice I call the feminist shelf. Story in this book demonstrates relationships in the making, including relationships that shaped my research. This book matters because it feeds our future vocabularies for relationship building and because I hope it will strengthen our feminist alliances across difference. Second, there is accountability in sharing some of my own story. This sharing requires me to describe how I as a lesbian feminist white antiracist ally shape and understand this work. I intend this sharing as another model for researching in alliance across difference. Aimee Carillo Rowe describes how narrative reflects and shapes relationships: "Ideas and experiences, values and interpretations always take place within the context of our relational lives. Whom we love becomes vital to the theory we produce and how it might be received. The text is neither produced nor received in isolation. Others are involved."<sup>21</sup> Through interviews, correspondence, and bookstore work I have been in dialogue with feminist bookwomen throughout the long writing of this book, and I share that dialogue here while making my research and reading process more visible by writing some of my own life along with the stories of bookwomen. Third, this accountability to the relational practice of story as theory making also depends on an ethic of feminist love. Through story I enact my own accountability while I describe bookwomen's successes and analyze their failures by their own standards. Through sharing my own story I also make myself vulnerable as my narrators have in sharing their stories. Only by including myself in dialogue can this accountability also read as love.

In *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, both a memoir and theory of memoir, Dorothy Allison reminds readers, "Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love."<sup>22</sup> Here I work to tell the story all the way through. One of the challenging joys of feminist writing is being in conversation with feminist theorists about how we practice accountability to each other in writing and analyzing history. This work is learning to love each other, and this is also the work of feminist bookwomen in dialogue with the literature they advocated to keep in print and with each other, the collective members to whom they answered. "There is nothing universal or timeless about this love business," Sydney, one of novelist Dionne Brand's characters, shares as the closing words of the novel *Love Enough*. "It is hard if you really want to do it right."<sup>23</sup> I offer story here not as simple truth but as an act of accountability and love because, as bookwomen knew in their practice of the feminist shelf,

we create the knowledge we need for feminist futures in relationship with each other.

The work of analyzing, organizing, and making literature available has been core to feminism in no small part because it involves an ethics of voice and relationships. We not only need “diverse books,” we need the tools to read them and put them in conversation.<sup>24</sup> Rooting this use of story in bookwomen’s practice of the feminist shelf, I am also in dialogue with feminist literary analysis as activist work. Feminist fiction has long been integral to and functioned as feminist theory; scholars including Matt Richardson and Katherine McKittrick have significantly used collections of Black lesbian and Black women’s literature, respectively, to theorize experience.<sup>25</sup> This collecting and redefining our understandings of history, present, and future is a project feminist bookwomen furthered and evolved together for decades. Looking to women who used literature in this way, I seek to place this book in conversation with Maylei Blackwell’s attention to the Chicana feminist publishing activists of *Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc* and with Elizabeth McHenry’s history of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Black women’s literary societies and their feminist literary activism.<sup>26</sup> Feminist bookwomen, and their transnational network, enacted a reflexive practice of creating, sharing, and rethinking new reading and relational practices for feminist accountability; in this reflexive practice, bookwomen created a theoretical framework useful to contemporary feminisms.

I enact this reflexive practice, learned from the bookstores, throughout the book in a series of creative narratives about my own research process. These narratives resist a disembodied telling by emphasizing my relationship with and my embodied understanding of these histories. I put my body, my story, in conversation with this history in order to model one way the reader might do so as well. The work of building lesbian antiracism and feminist accountability is embodied work both because our differences are located in stories about our bodies—stories about race, gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, dis/ability—and because this work lives in our bodies, energizes us, makes us tired, and requires physical self-care and attention. With the framework of “reading the map of our bodies,” I invite readers to recognize this history in our bodies and to use this history to embody antiracist and accountable feminist alliances.

Taken together, the chapters of *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* offer a history of how feminist bookwomen both documented and influenced femi-



nist thinking and relationship practices starting in 1970. Rather than wax nostalgic for a time when there were more feminist bookstores, I suggest attention to this history to understand how our current conversations have been informed by feminist bookwomen. Bookwomen sustained decades-long conversations about feminist accountability, and their advocacy for feminist literature provided a unique context for these conversations because discussions about who controlled feminist literature, publishing, and distribution required difficult conversations about voice and agency: who gets to write and publish their own stories, how we talk with rather than about each other, and how we read and move toward understanding each other's stories. Too often overlooked in feminist movement histories, feminist bookstores served as tools bookwomen used to develop feminist literacy and alliance practices, which required grappling with and, in turn, shaping some of the most complex conversations in feminism.

In chapter 1, "Dykes with a Vision, 1970–1976," I document feminist bookstore beginnings as movement spaces in major and dispersed cities: Oakland, New York, Toronto, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Austin (my own hometown), and San Francisco. These stories carry the energy building with the opening of each new bookstore toward what would become the Feminist Bookstore Network. The bookstores provided context for each other; none operated alone. These origin stories also describe how the specific identity of each bookstore brought new issues and vocabulary to deepen the sustained transnational conversation bookwomen shared for more than three decades. As bookwomen staked out their values in founding documents, they defined their bookstores in relationship to feminist issues that included collectivity, economic justice, racial justice, allyship, socioeconomic class, and academic feminisms. The resulting variety of ethical frameworks illustrates the differences between the cities as well as their bookstores and suggests how the collective force of the bookstores put these differences in conversation to generate movement, learning, and new feminist futures.

The second chapter begins where the first leaves off, at the gathering that formalizes these interwoven beginnings into a network. Chapter 2, "Revolutionaries in a Capitalist System, 1976–1980," sees the start of the *Feminist Bookstores Newsletter* at the first Women in Print gathering at a Girl Scout campground in Nevada. In these first years of the network created by the FBN, feminist bookwomen fulfilled their vow to be revolutionaries interrupting "a capitalist system." On a national scale, they taught each other



how to influence the publishing industry and their communities, in a practice informed by movement-based accountability to addressing racism in feminist movements. As the bookwomen began to recognize their substantial feminist literary activist skills, they got books onto publishers' lists, returned books to print, and actively distributed a feminist literature. The chain bookstores began their sweep in the late 1970s, and bookwomen defined their bookstores, against capitalism, as movement spaces sustaining feminist knowledge.

Dialogues in the *Feminist Bookstores Newsletter* defined key issues feminist bookwomen would take up, including their intention, one of several outlined in Nevada, to "develop ways of working together that make us more accountable to our communities and to each other."<sup>27</sup> Chapter 3, "Accountable to Each Other, 1980–1983," begins in the mountains of the West Coast Women's Music Festival, where feminist bookwomen are in the crowd at Bernice Johnson Reagon's pivotal speech about transracial alliance building. This talk became a tool for difficult conversations about white women giving up power and recognizing leadership of women of color in the bookstores. Such conversations generated what the chapter calls lesbian antiracism, antiracist practice with attention to heterosexism and sexism. Work toward lesbian antiracist feminism at two core bookstores, and reports about their processes in the widely read *Feminist Bookstores Newsletter*, emphasize bookwomen's contributions to feminist vocabularies and relationship-building practices. Lesbian antiracism was one ethic of the bookwomen's practice of feminist accountability, building feminist dialogue to define, grapple with, and evolve a shared set of ethics and ideas about how to live by those ethics.

In chapter 4, "The Feminist Shelf, A Transnational Project, 1984–1993," I name the practice of the feminist shelf, a new term to describe how bookwomen created new reading and relational practices through naming shelf sections, narrating book lists, contextualizing events, and using this reading practice to differently understand each other and hold each other accountable. In this chapter I trace conversations around shared documents that focused significant moments in this work, including a bookstore map of New Words in Cambridge and the *Women of Colour Bibliography* at the Toronto Women's Bookstore. The interconnections of this practice also demonstrate how bookwomen used transnational relationships and the newly renamed *Feminist Bookstore News* to hone their ethics for the feminist shelf around core issues that included relationships between feminists in the

global South and global North, as well as the cultural genocide at stake when white women authors appropriate Indigenous women's voices and stories. Literature was a staging ground for developing this vital antiracist feminist relational practice. New bibliographies and shelf sections created by women of color at major feminist bookstores generated transformations inside and outside the bookstores that demonstrate how significantly bookwomen shaped feminist reading and alliance practices to create an ethic of feminist love.

Chapter 5, "Economics and Antiracist Alliances, 1993–2003," focuses in on the US context to describe the culmination of tensions within both feminism and the book industry. In the mid- to late 1990s the Feminist Bookstore Network was a leading force in independent booksellers' advocacy to transform the American Booksellers Association. Faced with chain bookstores and big publishers making illegal deals that would put independent bookstores out of business, feminist bookwomen put their substantial feminist literary activist skills to work for independent bookstores at large. They effected an astounding, though temporary, success in the industry. Along the way, individual feminist bookstore staff continued to grapple with articulating lesbian antiracist feminist accountability. However, as the Feminist Bookstore Network turned toward the national conversation around independent bookselling and saving the bookstore structure, white bookwomen in leadership turned away from vocabularies of lesbian antiracist accountability. The devastating cost was a simplified public identity for feminist bookwomen and the loss of the vital difficult conversations about race and feminism that the transnational conversation among bookwomen had required over the previous two decades. I suggest that the bookstore narrative demonstrates that in the face of economic disaster, feminists must continue to prioritize antiracist alliances over traditional economic survival. I read a legacy of grappling with accountability and alliance building, rather than the continued life of a few feminist bookstores, as the success of the feminist bookstore movement.

My stories of researching and living with reverberations of these histories culminate in the epilogue: a reflection on why this book matters as a map of a still-necessary lesbian antiracist practice of feminist accountability. Through a telling of my own last days at the Toronto Women's Bookstore, I imagine what a feminist practice informed by feminist bookstore histories might look like. Throughout the book I have also used feminist bookwomen's ethics of feminist accountability as a guide for discussing

difficult breaks in and connections through the movement. In the epilogue I name this historical practice as one of feminist remembering, a practice that requires us to hold close both the painful breaks and the powerful connections of feminist bookwomen's history. This is the practice of the feminist shelf that feminist bookwomen created and pass on: using a context of feminist histories to understand the significance of these breaks and connections, to understand them in dialogue with each other, to use this history, this feminist work, to build toward a common language for queer antiracist feminist accountability.<sup>28</sup>

I accepted the faculty job in that southern city. In the midst of unpacking in a house on a street shaded by ominously historic gothic oaks, I sat in the echo of the empty living room and dialed Kit Quan's number. We had agreed that instead of me asking questions she would tell me a version of her story. "As part of a collective, even though I was younger, I was invested in the store because I was pouring my labor into the store. I was beginning to have a political vision of the role of a women's bookstore. I was probably pretty articulate at the time, even though now I would be able to say it much better." Quan remembered her teenaged self working in a movement in English while still often thinking in Chinese and eager for her feminist vision to be realized: "One of the ways that there was tension was that, for me, at my age, and at the place where I was in life, the bookstore was about politics. It was about wanting a women's movement or wanting a Women in Print Movement that would be very inclusive: race, class, age, etc. Where someone like me, who was actually having trouble reading, could actually be a part of it."<sup>29</sup> Feminist bookstores were sites of this struggle, different each time, toward a feminist present and future, and bookwomen shared these hopes in tension with each other at collective meetings and through writings, including Quan's important contribution to Gloria Anzaldúa's edited collection *Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo Caras*.<sup>30</sup>

Nearly a year after moving to the Deep South, in the thick humidity that seemed to make time stand still, I continued the search for a feminist future and felt frustrated navigating the city's too-hidden spaces for queer transracial organizing, in church pews dimmed by stained glass-filtered light. My partner and I had decided to head back to Austin, and we were boxing up our belongings for the third time in three years. Relieved that I still remembered where I had packed the phone recorder, I settled in with the echo in that empty living room one more time and called Pell. Pell is her last name

and the only one she uses. She worked at Old Wives' Tales, too, and Seajay connected me with her. As I continued this research, I was learning how to read with and connect with women of color in the movement. Pell, an African American woman from the Northeast, felt transformed "exchanging information" with Quan, she says, "because she came from a different background than I did."<sup>31</sup> Like Quan, Pell used the bookstore to imagine new realities, and she honed her visionary skills both in conversation with other bookwomen and in reading the bookstore shelves. She remembers "being awakened to the different writers, the styles, and discussing books more thoroughly. That was a change for me. Also, to listen to a lot of the discussions that went on, the political discussions, opened me up to a lot of the different branches of feminist thought, different women and feminists who were well-known, even in history, women that I hadn't heard of before. . . . It was a full education, practically, working there." Quan's and Pell's feminist visions, like those of so many bookwomen, happened not just through a local bookstore but were possible only as part of an interconnected movement. The transnational conversation of feminist bookwomen through the *Feminist Bookstore News* and the connections across and within bookstores among bookwomen made this full education possible. These bookwomen teach me, too, through these interviews and their archives.

Lifting a decorated box of interview tapes into the U-Haul, I wondered, how do we prepare ourselves to listen for the complex histories I did not know how to hear when I started this research? This history, redefining bookwomen's successes and failures on their own terms, offers an embodied feminist theory for our futures. Moving through these cities, this writing, I am learning how to read the map of my own body, of our bodies, and of a feminist accountability I can't live without.

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# ONE

## DYKES WITH A VISION

### 1970–1976

In the second-floor kitchen of Carol Seajay's rowhouse walkup, I set up the video camera as a backup for the tape recorder while she washed up from the day. Seajay, book industry maven and founder of the Feminist Bookstore Network, reemerged in shorts and a black ribbed tank top; an affectionate cling of cat fur matched the longhaired calico she let out the kitchen door. Seajay's gray-black hair fell almost to her waist. She sat down; I adjusted the camera. "Make sure *you're* in the frame," she reminded me, "that's more feminist than having me talking to some disembodied voice." At the time, I couldn't manage to tell a story with me in it. My interviews with Seajay and my work at the bookstores have taught me a thing or two since then. The video is of her and what seems like a view of all of San Francisco behind her through her window on the hill.

In the 1970s, Seajay was working as an abortion counselor and reading feminist newspapers like *The Furies* (Washington, DC) and *Ain't I a Woman* (Iowa City) that arrived on exchange subscription to her lover's publication, the *Kalamazoo Women's Newspaper*. In those pages she read about the feminist bookstores starting to open across the United States and about the West Coast Lesbian Conference coming up in 1973. Feeling the pull of the coast (*The Lesbian Tide*, after all, was published in Los Angeles), Seajay headed west to the conference. There, she immersed herself in an ethnically diverse and lesbian feminist movement connected by the transformative power of feminist books collected together.

Organized by a multiracial group of lesbians, including Jeanne Córdova, Latina founder and editor of *The Lesbian Tide* (1971–1980) and president of the LA Chapter of Daughters of Bilitis,<sup>1</sup> the West Coast Lesbian Conference

gathered the lesbian feminist communities along the Pacific. The conference was fraught with disagreements around the exclusion of trans folks and lesbian mothers, which simultaneously marked devastating limits to the early movement and the vital involvement of trans folks and lesbian mothers in it.<sup>2</sup> The event was part of attempts at justice flawed and learning, even while it generated new futures for a young lesbian like Seajay. From amid the buzzing conference of “almost 2,000 women from twenty-six states and several countries,”<sup>3</sup> Seajay returned to Kalamazoo with a book from Diana Press and *Sleeping Beauty: A Lesbian Fairy Tale* published by Sojourner Truth Press in Atlanta. She also returned with the memory of other books, like *Edward the Dyke* from the Oakland Women’s Press Collective, that she had seen but didn’t have the budget to buy. Seajay remembers the promise of change she read in these pages:

I brought those books back and said to friends of mine, “These are the lesbian books with *good endings*. These are going to change our lives.” And they all looked at me, like, “Yeah, yeah, Carol. All about books, Carol, again. Yeah, yeah, yeah.” “No, these are going to change our lives. No, you have to *read* this. *Songs to a Handsome Woman*, you have to read these!” They did read them. And it changed some of their lives and not some of them. But I do think that there being lesbian books changed even the lives of the women who didn’t read. Because it changed the lives around them.<sup>4</sup>

Seajay was keen to the transformative work that collections of texts created. Not only the existence of “lesbian books with *good endings*” but the collection of them together prompted Seajay’s promise that these books, books published by feminist presses, books by and about lesbians thriving, would “change our lives,” and that the conversations made possible by these books would change the lives of even those who didn’t read them.

Returning home to Kalamazoo for less than a year after the life-changing West Coast Lesbian Conference, Seajay headed back toward the Pacific with all her belongings, including not a few books published by lesbian feminist presses, stacked on her motorcycle. She wended her way through the Midwest to stop at Amazon Bookstore in Minneapolis; she had to see the feminist bookstores she had read about in the feminist papers. Social movements in the 1960s and 1970s staged multiple migrations and pilgrimages; Seajay was one of a sea of women who found wheels and set out to connect with feminist activism. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, women used feminist bookstores as resource centers for finding out what was happening in

each city, who had a place to stay to offer to travelers, and where to find a job when they found a city that felt like home.

Motoring into San Francisco, Seajay pulled off of I-80W and into the city; the breath that waited for her by the Bay might have smelled of fresh ink on paperback pages. A friend of hers named Forest (then known as Gretchen Milne) lived in San Francisco and had cofounded the Oakland feminist bookstore ICI: A Woman's Place. Forest brought Seajay on the long bus ride from the Bay to the Oakland bookstore, where Seajay soon began volunteering, and then working as a member of the collective. Thinking back to her first collective meetings, Seajay describes the collective as representative of its ethnically and socioeconomically diverse community: "There was my friend Forest who taught philosophy at State, and there were the women in high school . . . [and] several women that hadn't finished any kind of formal schooling. There were Asian, Filipina, Black, white [women], it was a real mix. The only thing that wasn't strongly represented were straight women; there were a few straight women and a few kind of asexual women, and mostly a bunch of dykes that had this vision and were going to make it happen."<sup>5</sup> Identity differences within the collective reflected the complex reality of 1970s feminism, and Seajay's rememberings document the origins of feminist institutions, including bookstores, in collaborative work across racialized difference. Seajay's demography also documents the spectacularly lesbian beginnings of feminist bookstores, often lesbian-run spaces.<sup>6</sup>

Seajay's iconic journey sketches a sense of the energy and excitement building around feminist bookstores as destinations on a lesbian feminist map, as places to reliably find the books that would "change our lives," and as what would become public sites of (often heated) feminist dialogue over thirty years of an active movement. Even in the early years of the feminist bookstore movement, with the large size of bookstore collectives and high staff turnover, the number of women moving through the bookstores as workers suggests that bookstores served as a training ground both for the women working in the bookstores and for those visiting them. Seajay would become a central voice in the feminist bookstore movement: by the late 1970s she had cofounded and was editor of the *Feminist Bookstores Newsletter* (later the *Feminist Bookstore News*), the journal that fostered a transnational network until 2000 and that widely circulated local conversations about becoming accountable to each other and to the ideal of lesbian antiracist feminist practice.

In these beginnings, I trace the common and different stakes of bookwomen in feminist bookstore projects in Oakland, New York, Toronto,



Cambridge, and Austin. In Oakland and New York, women of color participated in founding these early feminist bookstores, and lesbians of color or white lesbians participated in founding each bookstore. These founding narratives, then, contradict remembrances of 1970s feminism as straight and white. Instead, the work of these dykes with a vision adds to valuable narratives of a more vibrant movement history and establishes feminist bookstores as sites that, at their beginnings, drew together lesbians and their allies from across racialized difference to attempt to enact feminist futures. In the early and mid-1970s, bookwomen began conversations that became central to the growing feminist bookstore movement. In Oakland and Toronto the bookstores began as part of feminist and lesbian movement projects, mapping the bookstores as part of a larger feminist movement. Academic institutions in New York, Toronto, and Cambridge looked to their feminist bookstores as supporters and shapers of women's studies as an academic and community project. The Oakland bookwomen's influence on bookwomen in New York and Austin, as well as the New York bookwomen's support of the bookwomen in Toronto, suggests that the interrelationships between multiple bookstores make these spaces sites of a national movement as well as accountable to each other in conversation. Immigrant and diasporic communities and institutions in Oakland, New York, and Toronto allowed bookwomen in those cities to make the bookstores part of transnational conversations. Along the way, bookwomen staked out different approaches to what became the defining tension between a capitalist business format and movement accountability: while feminist bookwomen in Oakland, Cambridge, and Austin began their work with large collectives focused on movement and community support, smaller groups of bookwomen in New York and Toronto already articulated friction between a feminist business model and a grassroots organizing model. At every bookstore, feminist literature provided a basis for the theoretical practice the bookwomen began to develop. Bookwomen, steeped in contemporary movement conversations, used the bookstores as experimental sites of the movement.

**“When Action Grows Unprofitable, Gather Information”:**

**ICI: A Woman's Place, Oakland 1970**

Days after my interview with Carol Seajay, I landed in New York. A morning bus ride brought me early to the Park Slope brownstone where the brass plaque under the buzzer reads “Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation.”