PUBLISHING FEMINISM IN THE
FEMINIST PRESS MOVEMENT, 1969-1994

by

KAYANN SHORT

B.A., Colorado State University, 1981
M.A., Colorado State University, 1991

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
1994
This thesis for the Doctor of Philosophy degree by

Kayann Short

has been approved for the

Department of

English

by

Charles Squier

Jan Whitt

Date 7/14/94
Short, Kayann (Ph.D., English)
Thesis directed by Associate Professor Ann Kibbey

This dissertation engages major issues of late twentieth-century feminist theory through a cultural analysis of the twenty-five year history of U.S. feminist presses and their publication of groundbreaking works and argues that the feminist press movement is vital to the development of feminism as an inclusive social movement.

The opening chapter, “PressWork: The Print Evolution of Feminist Revolution,” examines the initial impetus behind the establishment of the print apparatus of feminist production. Chapter Two, “Pressing Issues: Separatist Politics and the 1970s Feminist Publishing Movement,” presents how the separatist debates involving Daughters, Inc. raised concerns about the material consequences of separatist practices for presses, writers, and readers in terms of economic survival, financial autonomy, and increased accessibility to movement ideas. Chapter Three, “True-to-Life Feminist Fictions,” focuses on how the experimental fiction published by early feminist presses pioneered stylistic and thematic innovations that constituted a practice of feminist literary criticism. Chapter Four, “Coming to the Table: The Differential Politics of This Bridge Called My Back,” engages theories of oppositional consciousness advanced by feminists of color to situate the publication of this important anthology within the context of U.S. feminism of the early 1980s. Finally, Chapter Five, “How Would We Market It?: Blood Ties in The Gilda Stories,” uses Jewelle Gomez’s Black lesbian vampire novel to contrast the feminist press’s expansive response to a lesbian audience with mainstream publishing’s narrow conception of a lesbian market.
This dissertation is for Ariane

For making it happen
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PREFACE

This dissertation is part of a larger project designed to assess the feminist press’s role in the development of U.S. feminism since the late 1960s. Like feminism itself, feminist publishing has undergone many changes since the first presses began to publish feminist books in 1969. My project, then, is two-fold: first, to research and record the twenty-five year history of the feminist press movement and, second, to analyze the events, debates, and texts that make up that history for what they reveal about feminism as a politicultural movement.

To accomplish these goals, I have conducted research at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York, the Shameless Hussy Collection at the University of California-Santa Cruz library, and the outstanding collection of feminist periodicals at Norlin library on my own University of Colorado-Boulder campus. Additionally, I have visited as many of the press sites as time and money have allowed and have interviewed several of the publishers themselves. A particularly enjoyable part of my research has been the scouring of used bookstores coast to coast for copies of out of print feminist press-published books. In this search I am indebted to Lunaria Bookstore of Northampton, Massachusetts for locating many of the books I have not been able to find myself. My bookshelves have become a mini-archive of these wonderful books, a collection I am very proud of.

My project is nowhere near complete. There are still many publishers to interview, books to read, issues to study, and theories to formulate. Future work will serve to further delineate what I have already learned and attempted to convey in each of the following chapters: how feminist press publishing in the United States has been an integral component of what I call the evolution
of feminist revolution. While corporate publishers have only desultorily observed the marketability of some feminist issues and authors, the feminist presses have remained at the cutting edge of feminist theory and practice. They have consistently published the writing of those feminist authors denied access to mainstream publishing, particularly the work of lesbians, working-class women, and women of color. Although many of the early presses have ceased publication, their legacy continues in the production of books that make a difference in women's lives by the outstanding presses in operation today. I cannot imagine a more exciting topic than the one explored in this dissertation and I dedicate this work to the books that remain to be published.
CHAPTER ONE
PressWork: The Print Evolution of Feminist Revolution

"More than any other movement in history," wrote Polly Joan and Andrea Chesman in 1978, "Feminism had been identified with publishing."\(^1\) Compiling a guide to women's publishing in the late 1970s, Joan and Chesman were assessing the role of feminist print culture during the first decade of "second-wave" feminist movement. "Feminist publishing is also feminist politics," they stated. "It is a political act as creative and diverse as the Women's Movement itself."\(^2\)

Reflecting on the history and current status of feminist publishing fifteen years later, I would go even further than Joan and Chesman by asserting that without feminist publishing, there would be no feminist movement. Of course, this claim is both highly debatable and dependent upon what one counts as "feminist movement." Yet it is clear that publishing and feminism have been integrally related since the late 1960s. This relationship is evident in descriptions of the development of the feminist press movement such as Andrea Fleck Clardy's: "In the beginning—in the late sixties—was the word: Women meeting in consciousness-raising groups wrote down the ideas they had generated and ran off copies. The ideas grew into pamphlets and articles that were circulated among friends, handed out at demonstrations, and sold at conferences. When the pamphlets and articles were bound into books, a feminist book publishing industry began."\(^3\)

I began thinking about the relationship between publishing and feminism by focusing on two questions: "Why feminist publishing?" and "Why feminist publishing?" In other words, why was feminist publishing important to feminism and what was particularly feminist about it? As I thought about
these questions, I began to see how feminist publishing and feminist movement were inextricably intertwined and interwoven through vast, intricate networks of words and stories, testimonies to what Joan and Chesman called the "I AM I AM" of women's lives.4 Feminism circulates through the print apparatus of feminist publishing, while feminist publishing is authorized and invested by the feminist movement. As Karen Brodine explains, "I see our writing as part of the wave of feminism, not just rising out of, coasting, but diving in, back, causing new currents—not simply a reflection, a result, but part of the moving, creating force."5 To examine this symbiotic relationship between feminist publishing and the women's liberation and feminist/lesbian movements, I begin with a circulatory tale, a feminist publishing Ur-story drawn from a series of interviews in Feminist Bookstore News between FBN editor Carol Seajay and Judy Grahn, writer and co-founder of the Women's Press Collective in California.

In 1969, poet Judy Grahn and artist Wendy Cadden moved to the West Coast from Ohio, bringing with them Grahn's play, "The Cell." They had hoped to interest the San Francisco Mime Troupe in producing it, but the group declined, offering instead the use of their mimeograph machine to reproduce it and other articles on what was then called "gay women's liberation." Grahn and Cadden borrowed $300 for the paper to print an anthology of women's poetry and graphics, the first all-woman anthology ever produced. Entitled Woman to Woman, the book had lavender pages, a red cover, and graphics printed on white onionskin which could only be run one sheet at a time because they stuck to the mimeograph drum. They published 1000 copies which sold for $1.00 each. Grahn and Anne Leonard took 200 copies to Boston to support themselves for two months while they apprenticed
with the socialist New England Free Press. They rode to Boston with Carol Wilson, a woman in the process of starting A Woman's Place bookstore in Oakland by distributing books, including *Woman to Woman*, cross-country from the back of her van. She traveled to Detroit, which is probably how Carol Seajay was able to buy a copy of *Woman to Woman* at the Michigan Woman's Liberation Retreat and take it home with her to Kalamazoo. In the meantime, at the urging of member Ruth Gottstein, the Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco donated $500 to Wendy Cadden for the purchase of an antiquated Gestetner printing press, and when Grahn and Leonard returned to San Francisco with their new printing skills, the Women's Press Collective was born. Their first book, published in 1971, was Grahn's *The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke*. Seajay moved to the West Coast in 1974 and with Paula Wallace, a former member of the Women's Press Collective, established San Francisco's first women's bookstore, Old Wives Tales, after the first Women in Print Conference in 1976. At the conference, Seajay volunteered to edit a new publication, the *Feminist Bookstore Newsletter*, now *Feminist Bookstore News*, which has become the major lifeline linking feminist bookstores and feminist publishers. Its first issues were printed on an old Gestetner press owned by Rising Woman Books in Santa Rosa, probably the same machine the Women's Press Collective had retired a few years earlier after purchasing more updated equipment.

The story does not end there, of course. The Women's Press Collective merged with Diana Press from Baltimore in 1977, was vandalized months later, and soon went out of business. At the same time, other feminist presses were coming and going across the country and many of their publishers passed through the Bay Area, leaving with books, information, and
encouragement. All of these presses have stories like the one just told, and I will turn to these later in detail. First, however, I want to consider what this particular story reveals about the nature of early feminist publishing.

I called this story a “circulatory tale” because it relies heavily upon a sense of mobility, of what Grahn and Seajay refer to as “getting women out into the world.” The first feminist bookstore in Oakland, A Woman’s Place Bookstore, even used this idea in their name and slogan, “A woman’s place is in the world.” This concept operates on both a metaphorical and literal level, for by “pulling each other out into the world” Grahn and Seajay meant both getting women’s ideas into circulation and getting women themselves out of the circumscribed spheres of home and community. Freedom to travel was particularly important in expanding opportunities for women in the 1960s and 70s. Grahn talks about how all the radical political movements created networks that allowed people to travel at very little expense by “crashing around” with other movement members. Traveling alone was also more possible for women than in previous eras. Seajay, for example, rode her motorcycle alone from Michigan to San Francisco via Canada, Minneapolis, and Denver.

As women traveled or re-located, they did not arrive empty-handed, but brought feminist ideas with them, usually in printed form. Carol Wilson’s “distribution company”—her van loaded with cartons of books—took this idea one step further by allowing her to make something of a living off of it. This type of circulation is how Seajay in Michigan could buy a copy of an anthology run off on mimeograph in San Francisco only a few months earlier, an event Grahn called “amazing” years later. Indeed, such mobility seems almost magical given how unorganized or rather, unformalized and unofficial, this network was. Later, distribution was one of the major arenas feminist presses
would have to negotiate, but in those early days it seemed enough to have books magically appear from publication points hundreds of miles away.

Informal as it may have been, the network that was established by getting women out into the world, both bodily and in printed form, allowed feminists to circulate the ideas that would later cohere into a diverse, but identifiable, movement. Feminist and lesbian conferences always included tables of books and newspapers. Feminist bookstores not only sold books but served as outposts for itinerant feminists and gathering ground for locals. Often bookstores were allied with coffee shops or resource centers. A Woman's Place bookstore in Oakland shared a space with the Women's Press Collective, a layout which allowed customers to witness the production of the books they would later buy. As Grahn remembers, publishing in such a location became a very public process:

Carol: So the bookstore opens and they rented this big space and on one end is the bookstore and at the other end is the printing press.
Judy: Yes, with enormous windows. We were very public.
Carol: So everyone could stand and watch these women run the press.
Judy: That's right, watch these grungy-looking women trying not to run their hair through the rollers and so on. We cut our hair and we became very skilled. By day we were on display and talking to people, by night we printed, which took great concentration.\(^8\)

Similarly, Seajay recalled the excitement in arriving at the bookstore in the morning to see what had been printed the night before. This shared sense of purpose enlarged the providence of the print collective beyond the Women's Press Collective, itself a multicultural group of about a dozen women, to the bookstore employees, volunteers, customers, and visitors. Such shared commitment to spreading the feminist word through a newly established network extended to other bookstores as well. According to Seajay, the bookstores were never competitive because
we knew that the more stores there were, the more books we could sell all together. And the more copies of each title we could sell, our [sic] stronger the publishers would be. And, as they sold more copies of each book, they'd be able to publish more books. And we'd--individually and collectively--have more titles to sell and that would strengthen us. There was such a hunger for the books that we were inventing in the women’s movement. Getting those books into women's hands was our work . . . .

Seajay’s concept of “inventing” books for the women’s movement reflects the sense of urgent, radical mission that served as the impetus behind the early women in print network. If books which accurately reflected women’s experiences did not exist, it was up to feminists to invent them. As Seajay asserts, “There was such a belief that we could do anything. We could teach ourselves and each other everything that we needed to know.”

Once a goal was imagined, accomplishing it would be easy. The challenge, then, was not material, but epistemological. How could women imagine their lives outside of patriarchy? What kind of world did feminists want to create? In Seajay’s words, “You can’t publish a women’s newspaper if you can’t imagine its existence [sic]. But once we had a newspaper--we could imagine many newspapers and suddenly we had newspapers [sic] spring up all over the country.”

The job of feminist presses, then, was to provide a space where feminism could be imagined.

However, a belief in the almost superhuman ability of women to accomplish whatever they put their minds to did not totally discount the intervention of material factors. Practical matters were still an undeniable consideration in the press movement, for even the most heady of feminist visions required paper, press, and ink before it could be circulated within a print network. According to Grahn, feminists had to “[go] through the entire industrial revolution”: “We first had to learn to get equipment or money (and spend it on equipment) and space and set up shops. Then we had to learn how to run the shops, fix the machines and so on. It was all step after step
after step after step, so that teaching women printing became just as important a part of what we were doing as selecting manuscripts.12 This do-it-yourself attitude resulted in part from the fact that “[t]here was no one to ask” about the nuts and bolts of publishing.13 The Women’s Press Collective bought the biggest, rather than the best, press they could for $500 because they did not know any better. When it constantly broke down and the male mechanic offered to repair it in exchange for sex, they learned how to fix the press themselves. In fact, they had to learn how to fix it before they could learn how to operate it.

Because acquiring these skills demanded hours and hours of unpaid labor, some feminist publishers turned these skills into extra income by operating as print shops. (Others, like the Iowa City Women’s Press, had begun as print shops.) Even if they took in outside work, however, the presses, like the bookstores and resource centers, were dependent upon volunteer labor. Paper and ink were relatively inexpensive, but without donated labor, the presses could never have survived. Later publishers would have to face the fact that women needed, and deserved, to be paid for their work, but the early presses ran on movement fervor, commitment to the feminist vision, and a constant turnover of enthusiastic volunteers.

At the beginning of her interview with Grahn, Seajay offered her own version of how feminist publishing and feminist consciousness enabled and sustained each other through the mutual acknowledgment of the importance of women’s words:

Then, in the spring of ’73 I came out to California for the West Coast Lesbian Conference in Los Angeles and there were these women on the steps with booktables and they had these books that they made and that was just amazing. I took some of them home with me and carried them around to people, saying, “Look, this is going to change everything!” and a few people vaguely understood and some people thought I was very strange, and they couldn’t see why something called Songs to a
Handsome Woman, for instance, was so important. And I kept saying, "Well, we've never had poetry that said women were wonderful like this. Sleazy stuff, yes, but nothing that said we were wonderful." And they still didn't understand so I moved to California where the people who understood seemed to be.14

In this story, Seajay includes all the elements of what I call, borrowing from feminist critic Katie King, the print apparatus of feminist production.15 These are: production ("these books that they made"); promotion ("on the steps with booktables"); distribution ("I took some of them home with me and carried them around to people"); message ("poetry that said women were wonderful"); and reception ("this is going to change everything"). I find the concept of an apparatus particularly useful in the context of feminist publishing. From the Latin "apparare," meaning "to prepare," an apparatus is defined as "1. a group or aggregate of instruments, machinery, tools, materials, etc., intended for a specific use. 2. any complex instrument or machine for a particular purpose. 3. any system of activities, function, etc., directed toward a specific goal."16 The critical emphasis unifying these definitions is the relationship between individual elements working together toward a common goal: in this case, feminism. Within the print apparatus of feminism production, none of the elements listed above stands as origin. Rather, all function as interconnected nodes within a feminist system of exchange in which books become vehicles for the transferral of feminist ideology while at the same time feminist ideology works to create the conditions under which new books can be manufactured. Here "manufacture" refers not only to the material processes of production, but to the processes of imagination discussed earlier which recognize a need or absence and then desire a book into existence. Within the early feminist print movement, the desire "to change everything" implicit in Seajay's story became the fuel which (em)powered the print apparatus of feminist production.
By implying that pulling women out into the world not only places women in a different geographical location but catalytically challenges and changes the politicultural dynamics of that location, Seajay's story exposes the basic premise behind the feminist print apparatus: putting women's words into print changes women's lives. Reading Diana Press's edition of Rita Mae Brown's *Songs to a Handsome Woman* made a difference in Seajay's life—she moved to California to become a part of the West Coast, and later national and international, feminist movements. It also made a difference in the way she perceived herself and other women by validating the idea that women were wonderful.

The power of words to create feminist consciousness both personally and politically is thematic in discussions of women's politics and women's publishing from the 1970s onward. For example, writing in support of "political" poetry which challenges the paradox "between what this society says—and what it is," Karen Brodine declared, "But we have to look at the function of words, how a word can carry in the single bead of a syllable the weight of an institution, how just as we must recapture the institutions for our own good, so we must reclaim the words." Poet Muriel Rukeyser's line, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?/ The world would split open," was echoed by Louise Bernikow in the title to her poetry anthology, *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and American, 1552-1950*, and quoted in Melanie Kaye's important essay, "Culture Making: Lesbian Classics in the Year 2000?," which appeared in the second special issue of *Sinister Wisdom* devoted to lesbian feminist writing and publishing. The transformative power of words as books was even acknowledged at a 1990 panel of the Modern Language Association organized by The Feminist Press editor Florence Howe when participants
were asked to address "the book or books that, twenty years ago, changed their lives."19

Because lesbianism and race are almost invisible in representations of women in the mainstream media, many women have testified to the importance that reading about such subjects has made to their individual lives. Cherrie Moraga's foreword to the second edition of This Bridge Called My Back, for example, includes a letter from a nineteen-year-old Puerto Rican woman that states, "The writings justified some of my thoughts telling me I had a right to feel as I did. It is remarkable to me that one book could have such an impact."20 Similarly, in the same issue of Sinister Wisdom which featured Kaye's essay, Ran Hall wrote of her "search for literature" that would reveal "the hidden world of women":

For years I read words that were not written for me, that ignored my very existence, blatantly and without apology; ... I look at my bookshelf and see Sarah Aldridge, Rita Mae Brown, Barbara Grier, Coletta Reid, Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly, Jane Rule, and Adrienne Rich. I read and with every word I feel a deepening gratitude for the women who have the courage, strength, and love to write these words for me. ... Every time I read the words of a lesbian I say a silent thank you.21

Like Clardy's "In the beginning ... was the word," Hall's testimony reveals the feminist privileging of discourse--the word, and particularly the written word--as ontologically transformative of women's personal lives. In fact, from the very beginning of the women's liberation movement, publishing functioned as one arena in which that most radical of feminist equations, the personal is the political, could be practiced. Although this idea has recently been criticized for overemphasizing the individual subject and eliding the political through a too-narrowly-defined identity politics interpreted as "only the personal is political," in the early movement the concept was genuinely revolutionary in that it allowed women to identify their "personal" lives--issues of home, family, health, marriage, sexuality, etc.--as subject to institutions
which maintained hegemonic male power and privilege. Writing about one's own life as a woman was viewed as a personal act of great political consequence because it "let women be the lens on the world."22

In the early movement, poetry was the genre most closely associated with speaking and writing in a personal voice and was particularly influential because of its ability to create powerful, visionary images that both described women's lives for themselves and challenged heterosexist and misogynist images of women produced by and for men. In the 1970s, according to Grahn, poetry "was leading with the ideas. The poets were mapmakers, going out first and laying down the dimensions of the terrain and what the landscape (and the future) could possibly look like."23 Poetry by writers such as Grahn, Pat Parker, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Alta, Susan Griffin, Nellie Wong, Mitsuye Yamada, and Rita Mae Brown was influential in shaping women's liberation through what Jan Clausen called "a movement of poets." According to Clausen, herself a poet, poetry "represented the clearest opportunity for the direct statement of women's experience: it was the literary counterpart of the C-R groups' attempts at breaking down the distinction between the personal and the political."24

However, early women's liberation was also a movement of poets because poetry was the most economical of writing. In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," Audre Lorde identified how literary form is a class issue and poetry the genre "which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper."25 Poetry could be circulated more quickly and easily than prose on "scraps of . . . paper" or through poetry readings. Given the material limitations of longer prose works, poetry was also the most economical of publishing as it
generally required not only less paper and ink than fiction or non-fiction, but less labor in the form of typing or typesetting, copy-editing, printing, and binding. It is no coincidence that the first books produced by early presses were volumes of poetry such as the Women’s Press Collective’s *Woman to Woman Anthology* or Diana Press’s edition of Rita Mae Brown’s *The Hand That Cradles the Rock* (with Brown donating the paper and Diana the labor). It was not until independently backed presses like Daughters and Persephone came along that novels or multi-genre anthologies could be published on a large scale.

In material terms, publishing was unquestionably more affordable than other forms of media. As longtime feminist activist Charlotte Bunch recognized, besides “convey[ing] ideas and information about feminism . . . not readily available in the mainstream media,” the written word “is also still the cheapest, most available form for all women to use, as both writers and readers.” This is still true today, for while many presses faced increased costs and tightened markets during the 1980s economic recession, the feminist press movement continues to survive, yet there are still no feminist television networks or broadcasting companies and only a handful of independent women filmmakers with broad distribution access.

With feminism’s relative accessibility to publishing technology behind the premise that putting women’s words into print changes women’s lives, the print apparatus of feminist production was created to spread the feminist word. Using words to create social change as “tools of revolution” has a longstanding tradition in political movements because it “helps us to figure out what we want to do and how things could be different.” Second-wave feminists were specifically borrowing lessons learned from their involvement in civil rights, socialist, and student movements. According to Carol Seajay,
the socialists and the leftists knew that if you want to change something, you start a newspaper and distribute it. You give the ideas to the people and they’ll take the ideas and run with them." And if mainstream publishers put up roadblocks to spreading the feminist word, feminist ingenuity created new avenues. As a working-class lesbian in the 1960s with no outlets for her writing, “I had no alternative,” determined Judy Grahn, “but to join with other women and start a press.”

Fortunately, it is no longer the case that a writer such as Grahn has “no alternative” but to start her own press. (In fact, Grahn published her last two books, Another Mother Tongue and Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World, with Beacon Press, a medium-sized, independent press with a history of publishing socially progressive books. While Beacon is not a part of what Celeste West labelled the “literary industrial complex,” it is a long way from mimeograph.) That alternatives now exist does not mean that there is no longer a need for feminist presses, for these presses are an alternative to starting one’s own press. It also does not mean that starting a press is no longer necessary or viable, for even the feminist presses cannot publish all of the important ideas generated within a movement as diverse as feminism. It does mean, however, that the trade, university, and non-feminist small presses have recognized the marketability of many feminist/lesbian books and will publish them if they believe that they will be commercially successful. Carol Seajay related how sales representatives from the trade presses would come to her bookstore, Old Wives Tales, in the late 1970s and tell her that women’s liberation was a fad that had come and gone, but at the 1990 American Booksellers Association convention, no one would deny the marketability of women’s books: “They all know there’s a market for women’s books, and they know that all they have to
do is publish good books and they sell."\textsuperscript{31} Yet many feminist publishers and
writers believe that it is only because the feminist and lesbian presses have
\textit{proven} and in many ways \textit{created} the market for feminist books that
mainstream publishers will even consider publishing them. Many feminist
publishers would agree with Felice Newman of Cleis Books that "[i]f there is a
market in commercial publishing for women's books it's because we created it
for them [by] show[ing] them that publishing feminist books doesn't have to be
an economic risk".\textsuperscript{32}

Despite increased access to mainstream publishing, however, the
reasons for maintaining a feminist publishing network are no different today
than they were two decades ago. First, unlike trade publishing, the print
apparatus of feminist production, as the term itself implies, is primarily
concerned with producing books-for-feminism, rather than books-for-profit.
This difference has become exacerbated by the trend in mainstream
publishing toward conglomeration—corporate mergers and takeovers of
publishing houses by each other and by non-publishing mega-companies like
RCA, ITT, and Gulf Western.\textsuperscript{33} Paramount Communications Company, for
example, owns Simon & Schuster, Prentice Hall, and Pocket Books, while
Random House, Inc., itself a huge conglomerate owning Alfred A. Knopf,
Vintage Books, and Crown Publishers, among others, is a subsidiary of an
even larger communications corporation, Advanced Publications, Inc. As
Celeste West accurately asserts, given their capitalist conglomerate
structures, it is obviously not in corporate publishers' best interests to provide
"ongoing resistance to the inherent abuses of the profit system, among which
women's exploitation is primary." \textsuperscript{34} Apart from any profit these "publishing
groups" might gain, multi-million dollar companies will never be committed to
producing "tools for the women's movement," to borrow Cleis Press's term for their feminist books.35

Furthermore, trade publishers are more interested in engineering consumer demand than in filling real social needs. Even if the best of intentions have gone into creating a book, once it is produced, it becomes simply a "better brand of corn flakes, something for the menfolk to tend to and profit from."36 Bestsellers are carefully selected to become just that: bestsellers. Usually the books which cost more to acquire in the first place, they are given the biggest advertisement budgets. According to West, such books have very high sales quotas, so "sales reps push these assigned high-quota books, armed with big, bold ads and lots of brouhaha. Thus, the golden 'bestseller' becomes its own self-fulfilling prophecy."37 Within this publishing "star" system, a feminist book is treated no differently than any other book. According to Janet Goldstein, an editor at Harper & Row, "Women's studies must have all the things that other books have—brand name authors with brand name subjects."38 "Brand name" feminist activist Gloria Steinem, for example, received $700,000 for her 1992 book, The Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem, from Little, Brown, Inc.

Such marketing techniques may benefit a few feminist writers and may increase a book's accessibility to readers who choose and acquire books through mainstream avenues such as reading reviews in the New York Times and browsing advantageously positioned displays in Waldenbooks or Barnes & Noble. However, these trade strategies are designed to convince an existing market that it needs a particular book, rather than to create books that people already need and then reach that particular audience. Furthermore, a trade book has only six weeks to prove its profitability. If it does not sell, it is eventually "remaindered" (discounted to bookstores) or
destroyed and allowed to go out of print. The demand for such an accelerated sales schedule would not promote the kind of reader outreach most feminist presses are dependent upon.

In contrast, the majority of feminist books are written and published because, as Fleck Clardy found in her 1985 survey of feminist publishers, "certain books need to exist."³⁹ In Gloria Anzaldúa's words, "[W]riting compensates for what the real world does not give me. . . . I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you."⁴⁰ Feminist publishing provides what Kirsten Grimstad calls a "total unity of purpose, where the publishing and marketing of a book are aimed at furthering the values and ideas expressed in that book."⁴¹ The goal of the feminist press movement is to "empower a broad-based constituency, rather than the few who profit from the present system of legalized greed."⁴² Committed to empowering feminist practice, they publish ideas that are absent, or censored, in the mainstream media, particularly ideas which challenge systems of domination or explore alternatives to heterosexist and racist society. Feminist presses publish what trade presses still refuse to publish: books which challenge compulsory heterosexuality, epistemic violence against women, and the enforced sexual, legal, and economic exploitation of women. When profit is the bottom line in publishing, claims that such books do not and will not sell become equivalent to censorship. By printing the "unprintable," feminist presses expose the faulty logic behind the corporate myth that "if it's good, we publish it; therefore, if we don't publish it, it's not any good."

Allied with grassroots and academic feminisms worldwide, feminist presses are on the cutting edge of feminist movement. Unlike corporate publishers, feminist publishers "are not passive receptacles for what is
already out there but are actively creating new directions for thought and action." Feminist presses "carry the forward edge of feminism;" they are the "research and development' garden” for feminism's dialogues and debates. They are willing to take the risks necessary to present new and radical ideas, even those which are critical of the feminist movement itself. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, the first book to critique white feminists' racism, for example, was published by a feminist press. Feminist presses were also the first to discuss important issues such as prostitution, AIDS and women, sexual abuse, and disability. They have created specialized books that, according to Seal Press editor Faith Conlon, fill the holes left open by the commercial blockbuster mentality: "As publishers become more monopolized they tend to ignore the kinds of books we're interested in, the kinds our readers want." Rather than narrow the scope of feminist publishing, however, this specialization refuses the categorization of feminism into "neat little boxes" by expanding the press movement as a whole and pushing the boundaries of feminist production.

Such cutting-edge innovation is an important aspect of feminist presses' continued survival. While early presses "were more concerned with getting the words into print than with distribution," feminist presses today recognize that they can no longer afford to ignore sound business practices. According to Barbara Wilson of Seal Press,

[Feminist] publishing is a business, a highly political, cultural, visionary business, but a business nonetheless. Twenty years ago it was enough just to get the pamphlets and poetry chapbooks printed and sold in women's bars and coffeehouses, but today, in order to be economically viable you have to interact with general bookstores, chain bookstores, wholesalers, distributors and libraries. . . . So I think more of us have tried to learn about professional publishing and to approach it as a complicated business with particular difficulties.
Presses such as Seal, Spinsters, Aunt Lute, Naiad, Firebrand, and Kitchen Table are successful today because they can negotiate between goals of feminist empowerment and successful management strategies such as marketing to both national and international feminist audiences through feminist, lesbian and gay, and mainstream bookstores; distribution through direct-mail and independent press distributors such as Inland, Bookpeople, and Consortium; maintenance of a strong backlist; reviews in both mainstream and feminist arenas; and, increasingly, fundraising through grant writing as not-for-profit entities.

At the first Women in Print conference, held in Omaha, Nebraska, in August, 1976, more than 100 feminist writers, journalists, editors, and publishers shared their experience in the print movement and their visions for a feminist future. It was here that Quest editor Charlotte Bunch realized that "we were not going to become the press instead of being alternative media." Faced with the economic limitations of the women's print movement, Bunch believed that if she were to continue in the movement, she "would have to do so because it was still satisfying and without any illusion that it would reach the masses or become the popular culture." The irony behind Bunch's statement is that while feminist presses themselves are still part of the "alternative media," many ideas which originated with feminism--a woman's right to a career, equal pay for equal work, the need for men to participate in childrearing, awareness of sexual abuse and violence--have moved into the mainstream via the popular culture media.

Similarly, evidence of feminist mainstreaming in the publishing industry can be witnessed while browsing the stacks of any bookstore, for many of the feminist books which used to be shelved in a bookstore's "women's section" are now integrated within their own topical area. A feminist-shelf staple like
Our Bodies, Ourselves, for example, may now be found in the health section instead. While such integration may lead a bookstore to believe that they are selling fewer feminist books, such mainstreaming is really evidence of increased sales, broadened reader interest, and, in Seajay’s words, the explosion of feminism “into everything being a part of everything.”

Mainstreaming can be a mixed blessing for feminist publishers, however, for they must now share this increased market with the commercial presses. Publishers such as Firebrand founder Nancy K. Bereano recognize that while trade presses increase feminism’s accessibility within mainstream culture, the economic rewards of that access once again favor a corporate, rather than a feminist, powerbase: “When [the cutting] edge moves over, and publishers start taking up your books, you do get satisfaction knowing you’ve helped created a certain consciousness, yet you’d like to share in the goodies, too.” Bereano experienced this situation firsthand when Firebrand author Dorothy Allison’s first novel, Bastard Out of Carolina, was published by Dutton and become an instant bestseller. While Allison has herself been a longtime supporter of the feminist press movement through her writing and editing with Conditions and other feminist/lesbian journals and anthologies, she chose to publish Bastard with a trade press because they offered the kind of large advance ($37,000) prohibitive within feminist publishing. According to Allison, “[W]riting is voluntary poverty.” A writer for twenty years, she realized that writers who publish with small presses must have alternative jobs to survive, and it was not until the publication of Bastard that she began to make a livable wage as a writer.

Yet the success of Bastard has clearly benefitted Firebrand Press as well through increased sales of Allison’s lesbian poetry in The Women Who Hate Me and her short story collection, Trash. According to Bereano, sales of
Allison's poetry and, to an ever greater extent, *Trash*, have "accelerated enormously" since the publication of *Bastard*. However, Bereano points out that this increase is not only due to *Bastard*'s financial and critical success (it was a National Book Award finalist), but to Allison's commitment to small press publishing in general, and Firebrand Press in particular. During her book tours, for example, Allison always publicizes and reads from all of her books, not just *Bastard*. Of course, Firebrand's reputation and prestige also benefits from the association with Allison. Another financial bonus was the opportunity to resell the rights to *Trash* to the British publisher of *Bastard* after the collection had gone out of print with a previous British press. Bereano believes that this type of maneuvering between trade and feminist publishers presents "interesting possibilities," particularly when an author is committed to maintaining ties with small presses. That this kind of alliance works for Allison is obvious: she will publish "Skin," a collection of essays about sex, class, and literature, with Firebrand in 1994 and a second novel with Dutton in 1995.

This type of mobile strategy allows both Allison and Firebrand to take advantage of the feminist press apparatus' border position within the larger publishing industry. Rather than polarize "alternative media" and "popular culture" as in Bunch's formulation, feminist presses are negotiating between them. Perhaps such tactics are possible today because feminist presses now realize that, in West's words, feminism "is ongoing--more evolution than revolution--and therefore more lasting." Because the feminist print movement exists not just to produce books, but to produce feminism--its ideologies and its practices--it can benefit from the current commercial market for women's books without being dependent upon it. By both retaining its autonomy from corporate marketing trends and maintaining its commitment to
women's political and economic empowerment, the print apparatus of feminist production can continue to operate as "a lifeline, our guarantee for the future that feminist work can never again be totally censored and submerged."55

Yet to sustain the print apparatus of feminist production, this lifeline must continually circulate from the presses to the movement and back again. While the feminist press movement is currently committed and able to function independently of corporate control, it is absolutely dependent upon the support of feminists for its existence. In the first decade of feminist publishing, feminists had begun to successfully establish a movement network and were optimistic about their ability to impact the world around them through printing feminist words. In 1977, Kirsten Grimstad wrote, "The initial goal of providing crucial writings to a community of politically aware women has enlarged into a determined effort to reach out beyond, to bring feminist ideas, values, consciousness to a broad, general audience."56 What feminists learned in the following decade and are facing today, however, is that although a "broad, general audience" may indeed be interested in feminism, it will not provide the kind of material support necessary to maintain a feminist print apparatus. If the feminist press network is to survive as an independent alternative to mainstream publishing, "politically aware women" who value its work must support its existence in whatever way they can.

In her essay “Lesbians Publish Lesbians: My Life and Times With Violet Press, “ which appeared in the Margins special issue devoted to lesbian publishing and writing in 1975, publisher/writer Fran Winant expressed her frustration at the lack of support she had received from other women in trying to establish her own press. Winant began writing for women’s movement open-poetry reading and decided to start a press which would publish her work as well as that of other women even though she “didn’t really know how
[she] was going to do this."57 She typed and drew the cover of her first book, *Looking at Women*, herself, then took it to a woman she knew in the printing business for help in printing it in pamphlet-style with a stapled binding. Because she wanted her book "to be in the price range of every woman who wanted it," she priced it at 50¢ a copy. Unfortunately, she had not calculated the costs of postage, stationery, her labor in distributing and publicizing it, nor the cost of advertising because she "naively thought the book could be sold through free mentions and reviews in women's and other movement newspapers and magazines." In the back of *Looking at Women*, she placed a call for other women's poetry to publish in an anthology, even though she had not yet figured out how she would pay for it. According to Winant, "This was my way of offering others, as best I could, the same opportunity to be published that I was taking for myself."58

To get Violet Press off the ground and established within the women's movement, Winant sent out free copies of *Looking at Women* for review in movement newspapers, wrote to bookstores and women's centers, sent books on consignment, and personally sold books at women's events. Yet according to Winant, the book was rarely reviewed, consignment orders were rarely paid or the books not returned, and she was treated with hostility at women's events for presumably making a living off her poetry. Working with other women, Winant published *We Are All Lesbians*, an anthology featuring the work of 35 poets and artists from across the United States. To pay the higher-than-expected printing bill, *Looking at Women*'s price was raised to $1 and the anthology sold for $2. Yet rather than acknowledge Violet Press's attempts despite its lack of resources, *We Are All Lesbians* was criticized in one review as "unprofessional" in format. Why wasn't it typeset and square
bound?, the reviewer wondered, as if the book’s content was affected by its binding.

Winant’s frustration deepened when she was asked to participate on a panel of lesbian writers but was later uninvited because she was not considered a real lesbian writer since she “had not been published by an establishment press.” Instead, Winant organized her own panel of small women’s presses, creating a slide show giving a retrospective of lesbian self-publishing from Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein to the present. According to Winant, the question most frequently asked in the discussion following the presentation was “How can I get my work published?” Ironically, the original writers’ panel from which she was excluded expressed the need for small presses and hoped that they would never have to publish with an establishment press again! Winant’s response? “But the irony of this is that they don’t have to do it again--once is enough to establish their legitimacy as writers in their sisters’ eyes.”

This woeful tale of Winant’s resentment against the feminist/lesbian community’s lack of support for Violet Press exposes the often problematic nature of the relationship between the feminist presses and the movement. In Winant’s view, by founding Violet Press she had merely “created another ‘movement freebee,’ like many other women’s ‘alternative institutions’ . . . who didn’t know how to insist that their sisters pay enough to insure the group’s survival.” She had not yet “learned to ask how much women who want to read Violet Press books or see a press like this continue are willing to contribute to its support.” Yet Winant herself had depended on “movement freebees” to support her press: free advertising, free reviews, and free access to movement events. By publishing her own poetry first, she had in effect created a “vanity press”--a press devoted only to publishing the work of its
publisher—which she then expected other women to support. Furthermore, Winant’s lack of knowledge and experience in publishing worked against her, first in her assumption that there was a market for her work within the movement, and second, in her failure to calculate the book’s real costs. Unfortunately for Winant, this lack of research and expertise created a situation in which Winant was bound to feel ripped-off by her “sisters.” If she had instead followed the example of a publisher like the Women’s Press Collective by organizing the anthology first and then collectively raising the money necessary to print, advertise, and distribute it, her legitimacy within the movement would have been strengthened. This is, in fact, what Winant recommends for other writers at the conclusion of her essay: “Women who want to get their work published should consider publishing themselves (but not starting a press!) or creating publishing coops . . . where writers bear the cost and labor of publishing their own books.”

On the other hand, Winant’s frustration is certainly understandable given her idealism and obvious commitment to a women’s movement which proclaimed sisterhood and the power of the feminist press. Her difficulties with the writers’ panel exposes the conflict many feminist writers and publishers experienced between supporting the feminist presses and desiring legitimation by the mainstream publishing houses. The feminist presses too created their own hierarchy of writers, particularly those whose work was known because they had published outside the movement. Similarly, certain topics, such as the lesbian coming-out story and what I call the feminist consciousness-raising novel, were favored by feminists and lesbians and therefore were more likely to sell. Still, the real problem was that none of the presses had the resources to publish everything they wanted to. What they
hoped was that by publishing books that were popular and sold well, they could fund what was new and innovative.

Like Winant’s essay, Michele Connelly’s poem, “Sorry,” published in the 1980 Sinister Wisdom special issue on lesbian publishing, expresses a frustration with feminist publishing, this time with the presses themselves.

SORRY

we cannot accept
inform you of our decision
sorry your poem/s
reason checked below

-we only liked 1 of the 5 poems you sent
but sorry kept the others for months
while we looked for our favorite
it was eaten by the copy machine

-love is not a political tool
does not sorry foster the revolution
(suggestion: send it to “gay romance”)

-we feel this would be a better poem
if you cut the first 2 and the last 3
sorry lines of each stanza and changed
the title to The Stripper

-it took a year for all the members of our collective
to read your story sorry oh so sorry we
wanted to publish it but by then only
2 pages were left open in the book and your story
was too sorry

-although we advertise for the not-so-perfect
writing that shows potential we only publish
marge, adrienne, olga, ellen, audre and joanna

-we do not accept poems that spell wimmin patriarchally
-we do not accept poems with non-standardized spellings
-we have an overabundance of lesbian shoveling snow poems

-because poetry is a losing
business we have changed our format to give
priority to the sorry booming
sport of lesbian ice hockey
I included the full text here not only because it documents a catalog of common complaints about feminist presses, particularly within the first decade, but because it also acknowledges some of the real limitations encountered by the presses themselves. It is undoubtedly true that the presses were often disorganized and unprofessional; they could be prescriptive and dogmatic, contradictory and mercenary; they sometimes held writers to different criteria than they did themselves; and while they asked for the new and original, they still published the old and predictable. Despite its bitter tone, however, the poem presents the drawbacks faced by the presses: never enough time, womanpower, money, or experience.

Due to these limitations, many of the brightest stars of early feminist publishing are no longer in operation. Shameless Hussy, Daughters, Inc., Women's Press Collective, Persephone, Diana Press, and others are no longer publishing. This does not mean that they no longer exist; as my bookshelf and others certainly can testify, the work started by these groundbreaking presses continues to affect and influence us today. Some of their books, like This Bridge Called My Back, June Arnold's Sister Gin, and Elana Nachmann/Dykewomon's Riverfinger Women, have been reprinted by other presses, a trend that seems to promise to continue in the 1990s. Other presses such as Seal Press, Spinsters Ink, and Aunt Lute, have managed to
survive by undergoing many metamorphoses. These survivors have a lot to share.

Like the times, feminist publishing too has changed. In 1983, Nancy K. Bereano, then editor of the Feminist Series with Crossing Press, now owner and publisher of Firebrand Books, stated:

Over the last five to ten years, feminist presses have learned what it takes both in personal/emotional terms and in business/finance terms to sustain a publishing effort. We know how to use the systems the boys have created to our best advantage whenever possible. We understand, for example, the importance of a review in Publishers Weekly for some of our titles. What is more significant is the development over the last ten years of networks which are themselves a source of new energy. There are several hundred feminist bookstores throughout the country and in other parts of the world which provide a ready market for the books that we publish. There are feminist media who do the reviewing, and there are writers who have been actively cultivating their skills for a decade or more because, increasingly, there are places for their work to get published. (my emphasis)

Bereano’s phrase “what is more significant” recognizes that, despite increased access to “the boys’” mainstream publishing venues, it is the feminist print network, with its bookstores, newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and journals, which will create the “new sources of energy” to sustain the feminist presses. While the current U.S. and global imbalance of resources and power creates an economy in which the print apparatus of feminist production can in fact encompass and benefit from interaction with the corporate publishing world, this interaction does not mitigate the necessity of all of the elements within the print apparatus of feminist production remaining mutually-sustaining in working toward the common goal of empowering women through print, or in Seajay and Grahn’s terms, “pulling each other out into the world.”

Ten years after Bereano’s optimistic assessment of the print network’s success, feminists can still not afford to take our print resources for granted.
The Fall 1993 newsletter of Judith's Room Bookstore in New York cautioned that they do not have enough customers to stay in business and questioned whether there continues to be a need for a women's bookstore in New York, especially given mainstream publishers' and bookstores' eagerness to capitalize on the trendiness of certain feminist, lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues, as well as the fact that 65% of all books in the U.S. are now bought by women. Judith's Room asked their customers to consider whether feminist bookstores will still be around "when those trends, which are our lives, are no longer chic, au courant?" They requested that newsletter recipients buy all of their books at Judith's Room; tell everyone they know to shop there; give gift certificates or books as gifts; subscribe to the newsletter; purchase a discount card ($25/year for a 10% discount); and contribute money. The bookstore realizes that this support takes extra effort since it is in an out of the way location and has limited hours and a small staff, but reminds customers that "[w]omen have always had the responsibility of struggling to keep what is theirs; but, if not you, then who?"

Does the success of women's publishing ironically mean the demise of feminist bookstores? Judith's Room is not alone in its struggles. Their newsletter also includes a letter from Old Wives Tales Bookstore in San Francisco, started by Carol Seajay and Paula Wallace, asking similar questions. In answering them, supporters of feminist and lesbian writing need to remind ourselves that feminist bookstores do more than stock books. They also promote news writers and works through literary readings, hire a staff knowledgable about and committed to feminist writing, furnish space devoted exclusively to women's empowerment, and, perhaps most importantly, provide the most supportive, integral, and critically necessary outlet for the work of the feminist presses.
In addition to buying feminist press-published books at feminist bookstores, those who teach can support the print movement by teaching books produced by feminist presses. Many of the presses are dependent on course-orders to finance their entire booklist. Kitchen Table's *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Home Girls* and Aunt Lute's *Making Face, Making Soul* and *Borderlands: The New Frontera*, for example, are all topselling books due to course adaptation. A Firebrand advertisement in the February 1992 *Women's Review of Books* stated that if just one Firebrand title was on the required reading list of just one women's studies course in every women's studies department, not only would Firebrand benefit from added exposure and sales, but “[their] greater visibility would help spread the words from independent women’s presses--book publishing coming out of, and giving back to, feminist political/cultural/intellectual work.”66 The feminist presses offer many new alternatives for literary and women’s studies classes in particular. A standard text like Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, for example, can be taught with a book like SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, published by Seal Press, Aunt Lute’s anthology, *Our Feet Walk the Sky*, edited by the Women of South Asian Descent Collective, or *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women’s Anthology*, edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly and published by Calyx Press. In fact, the feminist presses offer a diverse selection of anthologies valuable for classroom use because they introduce students to a wide range of ideas and writers. In addition to *Feminist Bookstore News*, useful places to start familiarizing oneself with the work of the feminist presses are Andrea Fleck Clardy's *Words to the Wise: A Writer’s Guide to Feminist and Lesbian Periodicals and Publishers*, published by Firebrand Press, and Jenny Wrenn’s *Guide to Women Book Publishers in the United States for 1991-1993*,
published by Clothespin Fever Press. Both contain a listing of the presses from which catalogs can be requested. This information can then be shared with colleagues and students. Furthermore, academic scholars can promote the reading and teaching of feminist press-published books by publishing essays and presenting papers on these texts.

Feminist press supporters who are writers, of course, can publish with the presses or, like Dorothy Allison and others, promote their feminist press-published books even while working with a trade publisher. They can also review feminist press-published books. An exemplary review can be found in *Sojourner*-reviewer Shane Snowdon's article, "Why Support Feminist Publishing?" Here Snowdon advocates reviewing feminist press-published books because "it's crystal-clear that the women's presses continue to be the source of almost all of the most exciting, important, and affirming feminist and (especially) lesbian writing being written today." While Snowdon reviews books by both feminist press and trade publishers, she emphasizes the positive portraits of women's lives found in work by the feminist presses, even in what she affectionately calls "amateurish" "Nymph-type tomes" (referring to the formulaic nature of some genre-based fiction), in contrast to the "fundamental heartlessness" and downright "stupidity" of some mainstream press-offered "feminist" and "lesbian" books. Snowdon also reiterates her commitment to "letting [readers] know what feminist publishers are doing" since she finds mainstream reviews sorely lacking in this area. "[C]all me hypercritical," she quips, "but I find the *Times Book Review* spotty in this regard." All of these suggestions can only strengthen the print apparatus of feminist production, a vital aspect of feminist movement of all sizes, shapes, and colors. According to Judy Grahn, the times have changed for feminist
publishing because "definitely, women do know to support each other's work and to spend money doing it now. Women were not out in the world then. And getting women out into the world was the task." \(^7^0\) Sales figures seem to support Grahn's theory: total 1991 sales for feminist presses were estimated at $8.5 million.\(^7^1\) By putting the words into print which have radically and irrevocably changed women's lives, the print apparatus of feminist production pulled women out into the world; once there, women enabled the continued production of feminist print.

Within the circulatory system of the feminist print apparatus, what goes around comes around. In a letter to the *Feminist Bookstore News* responding to Seajay's interview with Judy Grahn, Ruth Gottstein supplied one more piece of my feminist publishing Ur-story:

I was greatly amused and touched when reading your interview with Judy Grahn, and she referred to the $500 grant that I gave to *Woman to Woman* while I was with Glide Memorial Church.

I had completely forgotten the episode, and thinking back on it, I recall that I desperately wanted to publish the book at Glide but didn't have the courage to come right out and say so. And when that formidable, beautiful group of women filled my little office and told me they wanted to buy a printing press, I provided the grant. What they didn't know was that Glide Publications had a very little budget, and this was an unprecedented, one-time event.

Gottstein goes on to write that she is now the publisher of her own press, Volcano Press in California, and that she will soon be contacting Grahn for permission to reprint a couple of her poems: "After all these years," she writes, "we will be in touch again."\(^7^2\) Gottstein's letter may provide the perfect epilogue to my Ur-story, but it is only one ending. Within the history of the feminist print network, there are many, many stories like Seajay's, Grahn's, and Gottstein's. In conclusion, I want to expand my earlier circulatory tale
into an evolutionary narrative of the feminist press revolution's first twenty-five years, a herstory of the print apparatus of feminist production.


Feminist presses and feminist political movement in the United States have been integrally related since 1969. Given the suppression of women's words by traditional print and visual media, early women's rights activists eagerly gained access to whatever print technology was available, from mimeograph machines to letterpresses to offset printers. In fact, many early feminist presses, such as Diana Press, the Aunt Lute Book Company, and New Victoria Publishers, grew out of women's cooperative print shops. As KNOW, Inc., one of the first feminist presses in the United States, proclaimed: "Freedom of the Press Belongs to Those Who Own the Press!"

Despite a shared commitment to producing and distributing works which "make women's lives visible and excellent writing accessible," the early feminist presses chose diverse strategies to accomplish these goals. The first U.S. feminist publisher, Shameless Hussy Press, began in 1969 by printing the poems of its founder, Alta, as well as short stories by Susan Griffin and poetry by Pat Parker. Shameless Hussy published many important works in its twenty-year history, including *The Haunted Pool*, the first English translation of French writer George Sand to be published in the United States since the 1930s, and Ntozake Shange's poems, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, from which evolved her prizewinning Broadway play of the same name. Many of Shameless Hussy's books are still in print with other publishers, including *Camp Notes*, poems by Mitsuye Yamada, now published by Kitchen Table:

Established in the same year as Shameless Hussy, KNOW, INC. was founded as a non-profit corporation by nineteen Pittsburgh National Organization for Women members (NOW itself was then only three years old) who believed that "you can't have a revolution without a press and went out and bought one." The press originally published pamphlet reprints of essays, articles, and research studies which sold for 10¢ to $1.00 at movement meetings. The group later became a collective, publishing one or two nonfiction books a year, as well as five poetry volumes in 1974. Anne Pride, one of KNOW's original members, established Motheroot Publications in 1977 as a collaborative which published Adrienne Rich's *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying* and the women's quarterly review journal, *The Motheroot Journal*. In a 1981 letter "to the network of women's presses," Pride wrote, "Through Motheroot Publications we are working to reclaim and redefine our women's culture; we are working to strengthen our communication network and to control and build a women's media. That is our way of fighting back."75

Like KNOW, INC., The Feminist Press, was founded in 1970 as a non-profit organization. The oldest feminist press still publishing in the United States today, the press is devoted to publishing texts for classroom use, including reprints of important nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction such as Charlotte Perkin Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (with 237,000 copies in print), Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*, and Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*. The Feminist Press has also published non-sexist children's books, the *Women's Studies Quarterly*, educational curricula, biographies, and, most recently, anthologies of works by international women
writers. The Feminist Press's not-for-profit status has allowed them to benefit from numerous institutional and foundation grants, including a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Literary Publishers Marketing Development Program grant for $85,000 and a Ford Foundation challenge grant of $250,000. Editor and co-founder Florence Howe attributes the continuing success of the Feminist Press to their twenty-year commitment to multicultural scholarship with works such as the Black women's studies collection, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, and *Women of Color and the Multicultural Curriculum: Transforming the College Curriculum.*

The first book published by another early feminist press, the Women's Press Collective of Oakland, California, was produced on a mimeograph machine in 1970. *Woman to Woman*, a lavender-paged collection of poems and drawings by women, was sold out of shopping bags until a donor contributed $500 to buy an antiquated offset press on which they printed Judy Grahn's *Edward the Dyke* in 1971. Even with the purchase of more modern equipment, many of the jobs such as collating and stapling were still done by hand, volunteer work that demanded "lots of spaghetti and coffee." In 1977, they were joined by Diana Press, a Baltimore press which began as a print shop in 1972. Founded by a group of Baltimore working-class women, Diana began with a 25-year old Multilith 1250 and used profits to buy additional equipment. In late 1972, Rita Mae Brown approached Diana with $300 for paper if the press would invest the labor to print 2000 copies of her poems, *Songs for a Handsome Woman*. With women fronting their labor, the press continued to print several books a year, including *Women Remembered, Class and Feminism, and Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*, collections of essays written by the group, The Furies, a lesbian-
feminist collective in Washington, D.C., which published a newspaper of the same name.

On October 25, 1977, less than a year after Diana had moved to Oakland to work with the Women’s Press Collective, the press offices were vandalized. Paint, ink, and cleanser were poured into the presses, negatives and cover plates were ruined and typesetting was ripped up page by page. With both backlist and forthcoming books destroyed, including 5000 copies of Rita Mae Brown’s *A Plain Brown Rapper*, the press closed down its publishing program. After co-publishing the second volume of *True-to-Life Adventure Stories*, edited by Judy Grahn, with the Crossing Press, Diana established itself exclusively as a print shop in 1978 and ceased operations altogether in the early 1980s. While rumours circulated speculating that the vandalism had been perpetrated by the FBI, other women, or the press itself, the demise of Diana was felt as a tremendous blow throughout the feminist print network.  

Like Diana Press and the Women’s Press Collective, the Aunt Lute Book Company began in 1972 as the Iowa City Women’s Press, a lesbian press collective, and survives today as the non-profit educational foundation publisher of books such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s anthology of writing by women of color, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz’s *The Issue is Power*, and many other books dedicated to women’s multicultural experiences. The Iowa City Women’s Press was already publishing *The Greasy Thumb* and *Against the Grain*, manuals on automechanics and carpentry for women, when members Joan Pinkvoss and Barb Wieser established Aunt Lute as the press’s publishing branch in 1982, increasing their booklist with Dodici Azpadu’s *Saturday Night in the Prime of Life* and *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*, edited by Lisa Schoenfelder and Barb Wieser. Meanwhile, in 1978 Judith
McDaniel and Maureen Brady founded Spinsters Ink, in Argyle, New York, to provide women writers with an alternative to commercial publishers, beginning with their own works, Brady's novel *Give Me Your Good Ear* and McDaniel's critical essays on poet Adrienne Rich, *Reconstituting the World*. These were followed by Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, Lynn Strongin's novel of disability, *Bones and Kim*, and Kitty Tsui's collection, *The Words of a Woman Who Breaths Fire*. In 1983, Spinsters moved to San Francisco with a new editor, Sherry Thomas, and in 1986, merged with Aunt Lute, bringing together 28 feminist books which, according to an early mailing, were "so ahead of their times they will never sell out at Crown Books, or reach the New York Times bestseller list." In 1990, the presses diverged into the Aunt Lute Foundation and Spinsters Book Company, separate not-for-profit and for-profit entities, respectively, which enabled them to diversify their fund-raising abilities without vulnerability to government censorship. In 1992, Sherry Thomas sold Spinsters to Joan Drury, who moved the press to Minneapolis. Both presses maintain their tradition of publishing successful and innovative feminist books: in 1993, Aunt Lute received a $53,000 NEA Advancement grant and in 1994 Spinsters Ink will reprint Brady's *Give Me Your Good Ear*.

Daughters, Inc. was an influential feminist press established by June Arnold and Parke Bowman in 1972 to publish feminist-lesbian novels. In a controversial move, Daughters achieved commercial success by licensing mass-market paperback rights for one of their first novels, *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown, to Bantam Books for $250,000 after it had already sold 70,000 copies without mass distribution or mainstream media attention. By allowing the male literary establishment to make money from women's writing, many feminists felt that Daughters was breaking its commitment to work only with and for women. Daughters also published other groundbreaking novels,
including Arnold's *the cook and the carpenter* and *Sister Gin*, Bertha Harris's *Lover*, Elana Nachman's *Riverfinger Women*, Blanche McCrery Boyd's *Nerves*, and a reprint of Penelope Mortimer's 1962 *The Pumpkin Eaters*, works that, according to Arnold, "are trying to shape a new tool for new uses, to reclaim language for ourselves with a very strong sense that we have been divided from it."79

Throughout the 1970s, feminist and lesbian presses were established to publish books for women that the mainstream presses would not consider. Some of these, such as Out and Out Books of Brooklyn; Metis Press, Shire Press, and Womanpress in Chicago; Wollstonecraft of Los Angeles; Northwest Matrix Press in Eugene, Oregon; Moon Books in Berkeley; and Persephone Press of Watertown, Massachusetts, are no longer in operation, yet all published works that were important to the establishment of feminist movements. Persephone Press, founded in 1976, was particularly legendary, not only for publishing best-sellers such as *This Bridge Called My Back*, *The Coming Out Stories*, and *Nice Jewish Girls*, but also for its above-industry royalties and lavish receptions. Like Diana Press's demise, Persephone's sudden closing in 1983 sent shockwaves throughout feminist and lesbian communities as many women questioned whether Persephone had been realistic in their dreams of competing with industry publishers.

However, other presses established in the 1970s continue to thrive. Naiad Press, formed in 1973, is the largest lesbian press today with nearly 200 titles in print. Alicejames books in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Eighth Mountain Press in Portland, Oregon, and Kelsey St. Press in Berkeley, California, continue to publish quality poetry and prose by women. Seal Press, founded in Seattle in 1976 as a regional press for Northwestern women, is today recognized as an international leader in feminist books with
its imprint, Women in Translation, now established as a separate, non-profit press. Seal continues to publish groundbreaking works such as Getting Free, a domestic violence self-help book, and The Black Women's Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves, as well as innovative fiction and poetry, including the Pam Nilsen crime novels written by one of Seal's founding editors, Barbara Wilson.

Despite increased access for feminists to mainstream and academic publishing during the 1980s, the development of feminist presses continued throughout the decade as more and more readers supported their work. These presses expanded the groundwork laid by earlier presses by printing the words of women who were still denied a voice in both mainstream and alternative presses.

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, collectively formed in 1981, is devoted to publishing work that "is committed to producing and distributing the work of Third World women of all racial/cultural heritages, sexualities, and classes that will further the cause of Third World women's personal and political freedom." In addition to publishing poetry and fiction by individual writers, Kitchen Table publishes the anthologies This Bridge Called My Back, with 86,000 copies now in print; Cuentos: Stories by Latinas; and Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology. They also publish the Freedom Organizing Pamphlet Series, including the classic articulation of Black feminist theory, "The Combahee River Collective Statement" and, most recently, "Our Lives in the Balance: Women of Color and AIDS." According to publisher Barbara Smith, a Kitchen Table publication is chosen "not simply because it is by a woman of color, but because it consciously examines, from a positive and original perspective, the specific situation and issues that women of color face." Following Anita Hill's testimony at the Clarence Thomas confirmation
hearings in October 1991, Kitchen Table published a poster commemorating
the protesting voices of 1,603 African American women which appeared in the
New York Times and six Black newspapers. In 1992, the press presented a
new edition of Mitsuye Yamada's Camp Notes and Other Poems, originally
published by Shameless Hussy, in observance of the 50th anniversary of the
Japanese American internment.

Cleis Press, founded in 1980 and run bicoastally by Felice Newman in
Pittsburgh and Frédérique Delacoste in San Francisco, has proven its
dedication to "documenting women's resistance to oppression" by publishing
books such as AIDS: The Women, You Can't Drown the Fire: Latin American
Women Writing in Exile, and The Power of Each Breath: A Disabled Women's
Anthology. The Cleis-initiated book, Sex Work: Writings by Women in the
Sex Industry, received wide media attention, prompting the appearance of co-
editor Delacoste on the talk show circuit, and sales of portions of the book to
Forum magazine enabled two other Cleis titles to be reprinted.

Firebrand Press in Ithaca, New York, was founded in 1984 by Nancy K.
Bereano, former Feminist Series editor at The Crossing Press. "I view
Firebrand as part of a larger, progressive movement that is learning how to
work in coalition with one another to get the changes in the world we need in
order to survive," says Bereano. With its entire list of more than 60 books
still in print, Firebrand publishes books for a truly diverse community of
women, including poetry by Janice Gould, Kate Rushin, Vickie Sears, Cheryl
Clarke, Pat Parker, and Minnie Bruce Pratt; essays by Michelle Cliff, Jewelle
Gomez, Joan Nestle, Audre Lorde and Judith McDaniel; fiction by Leslie
Feinberg, Dorothy Allison, Shay Youngblood, Lesléa Newman, Ruthann
Robson, Beth Brant, and Anna Lee Walters; and cartoons by the irrepressible
Alison Bechdel.
Calyx Books in Corvalis, Oregon, began publishing in 1986 and follows the distinguished literary and artistic work begun by the journal Calyx in 1976. In addition to the journal anthologies Florilegia: A Retrospective of Calyx, 1976-1986; The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women’s Anthology; and Women and Aging, Calyx publishes many fine books which exemplify their commitment “to publishing the work of women of color, lesbians, old women, working class women, and others whose voices are no longer silent.” Editorial decisions are made by a collective of women from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, assuring “diversity within the overriding criteria of artistic excellence.” As a non-profit organization, Calyx became the first feminist press to receive an NEA Advancement grant in 1988 and in 1993 received a Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Marketing grant of $73,315.

As feminist publishing progresses into the 1990s, these presses are joined by numerous others, including Astarte Shell (Portland, ME), Bergamot (Minneapolis, MN), Biblio (New York, NY), Black Angels (Oakland, CA), Caillech (St. Paul, MN), Chicory Blue (Goshen, CT), Clothespin Fever (San Diego, CA), Crone’s Own (Durham, NC), Down There/Yes (San Francisco, CA), Frog in the Well (San Francisco, CA), Herbooks (Santa Cruz, CA), Hot Flash (San Jose, CA), ism (San Francisco, CA), Knowledge, Ideas, and Trends/KIT (Manchester, CT), Madwoman (Northboro, MA), Maple Street (Boston, MA), Mother Courage (Racine, WI), Motheroot (Pittsburgh, PA), New Seed (Berkeley, CA), Our Power (Denver, CO), Papier-Mache (Watsonville, CA), Paradigm Publishing (San Diego, CA), Plain View (Austin, TX), Profile Productions (Brookline, MA), Rising Tide (Huntington Station, NY), Rose Shell (Cranford, NJ), Sidewalk Revolution (Pittsburgh, PA), Silverleaf (Seattle, WA), Third Side (Chicago, IL), Third Woman (Berkeley, CA), Timely Books (Chattanooga, TN), Violet Ink (Ithaca, NY), Volcano (Volcano, CA), Women in
the Moon/WIM (Cupertino, CA), and the Womyn's Braille Press (Minneapolis, MN), in continuing the commitment to feminist politics initiated a quarter of a century ago. Given the capital-intensive nature of publishing, where production costs must be paid months before any sales revenue is received, a major challenge faced by all feminist presses today is finding the money to keep their backlists in print, for, unlike mainstream presses, feminist presses have a commitment to inventing books that are timely rather than trendy, books that will serve the ongoing needs of feminist and lesbian communities.

Feminist presses today have learned that they must integrate their political goals with astute business practices. To meet their cash flow problems, feminist presses have employed a variety of strategies, from non-profit status and volunteer work to bank loans and private fundraising, to obtain the money necessary to thrive in difficult political and economic climates. In 1992, eighteen feminist presses joined forces to create the "Library Project" to address the exclusion of feminist presses by library distributors. One of the most exciting ventures is the selling of reprint rights between U.S. and international feminist publishers such as Kali for Women in India; Virago, Scarlet, Sheba, Women's Press, and OnlyWomen in England; Attic Press in Ireland; Sister Vision, Second Story, Press Gang, and Gynergy in Canada; Tammi in Finland; Frauenoffensive in Germany; Estro in Italy; and Spinifex in Australia. This tactic not only provides revenue for the individual presses, but strengthens the feminist press movement worldwide. In July 1994, an anticipated 20,000 feminist writers, booksellers, and publishers will converge in Melbourne, Australia, for the 6th International Feminist Book Fair, the first time the biennial event will be held in the southern hemisphere. More than any other source, however, the survival of feminist presses depends
upon the support of a network of feminist readers buying, reviewing, and
teaching their books.


2Ibid., 2.


4Joan and Chesman, 2.


7Ibid., Part II, 54.

8Ibid., Part I, 25.

9Ibid., Part II, 61.

10Ibid., Part II, 55.

11Ibid., Part II, 56.

12Ibid., Part II, 54.

13Ibid., Part I, 21.


17Karen Brodine, 11.


29 Ibid., I, 20.


33 As a glance at any recent Publishers Weekly proves, the publishing industry today is as much a matter of who-owns-whom as it is a matter of who’s-publishing-what. It is almost impossible to track ownership of these corporations because this information is not compiled anywhere. (The Department of Commerce ceased publication of its quarterly, Printing and Publishing, in 1982). For a now-outdated but still interesting exposé on the corporate publishing world, see West, “The Literary-Industrial Complex.”


35 Little, “Pressing Women’s Issues,” 24.
Laura Furman, "A House Is Not A Home': Women in Publishing," in *Sisterhood is Powerful*, edited by Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage Books, 1970): 68. Morgan's unease at publishing this bestseller with a trade press is seen in her acknowledgement: "Some mention, albeit brief, should also go to three men: Kenneth Pitchford, Blake Jamal Pitchford, and John J. Simon [someone's assistant]. Without such men, 'this book would not have been possible.' On the other hand, it would not have been necessary."


Lynn Rose, "Women's Books Profitable," *New Directions for Women* 17 (July/August 1988), 18.

Clardy, 65.


West, "Foreword: Closing the Media Gap," 7.

Bunch, "Reading and Writing for a Feminist Future," 220.


Polly Joan, "The Feminist Small Press Publishing," *Guide to Women's Publishing*, 108. Joan specifically refers here to the problematic distinction between "lesbian" and "women's" publishing: "While a woman's art is obviously affected by her sexuality, it is not limited to it."


Little, "Pressing Women's Issues," 27.

Remarks made at the "Expression/Repression: Censorship in the Arts" conference at the University of Colorado-Boulder, April 2, 1993.

From a telephone conversation with Nancy K. Bereano, December 13, 1993. Tellingly, although the previous appearance of parts of *Bastard* in *Trash* is acknowledged on the novel's publication page, Bereano was never contacted by Dutton (a division of Penguin USA)and the acknowledgment does not name Firebrand as *Trash* 's publisher. Such an omission is not only legally questionable, but probably indicative of Dutton's disregard for small press and feminist publishing.

Grimstad, et. al., 102.

Ibid., 101.


Ibid., 62.

Ibid., 64.

Ibid., 64.

Ibid., 62.

Ibid., 66.


Judith's Room Newsletter 4.1 (Fall 1993). To order books from Judith's Room call 212-727-7330 or stop by the store at 681 Washington Street in New York. (But call first for their hours.) Judith's Room holds weekly readings which are advertised in *The Women's Review of Books* and the *Voice Literary Supplement*.

The *Women's Review of Books* advertising supplement, A7. This statement, entitled "A Modest Proposal," was also included with a July 15, 1992 mailing with the Spring 1992 catalog.


Ibid., 40.

Seajay, Part II, 54.

*Feminist Bookstore News* 16 (October 1993): 21. This figure was based on a survey at the 1992 Feminist Publishers' Conference to which 10 out of 50 presses (20%) responded. Unfortunately, even fewer responded to a 1993 survey and so no figures are available for 1992.


From a July 1971 KNOW, Inc. catalog, Shameless Hussy Archives, Santa Cruz University Library, Santa Cruz, California.


77 "Women's Press Collective," *Sinister Wisdom* 1.2 (Fall 1976): 120.

78 For Diana Press's statements about the vandalism, see *Big Mama Rag* 5.9 (November-December 1977): 4; *Feminist Bookstore Newsletter* 1.9/10 (December 1977): 4-5; and *Big Mama Rag* 7.5 (June 1979): 25-26.


81 From the Spring 1985 Cleis Press catalog.


83 From the Calyx editorial statement as published in their catalogs.

CHAPTER TWO
Pressing Issues: Separatist Politics and the 1970s Feminist Publishing Movement

*Women have to learn they can afford to say no.*

June Arnold

In the January 2, 1977, issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, four women from Daughters, Inc.—June Arnold, Patty Bowman, Charlotte Bunch, and Bertha Harris—discuss feminist publishing with novelist Lois Gould. Under the title “Creating a Women’s World,” a caption reads: “The feminists behind Daughters, Inc., a special kind of publishing house, are struggling with questions of money and power. Can such an enterprise succeed and remain ‘woman-identified’?”

Uncannily, this caption anticipates the terms of the controversy within which Daughters will find itself embroiled in the coming year, both for discussing separatism within the mainstream media and for selling paperback rights to an establishment publisher. Or perhaps the terms are not so uncanny, but expedient, for the interview itself seems carefully calculated to exploit the separatist rift within the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM), perhaps to ridicule separatism as a utopian impossibility or to expose feminists and lesbians as irrational man-hating extremists. In the 1970s, money, power, and politics formed an uneasy triangle whose boundaries feminists were warily negotiating. In U.S. society at large, women, power, and money were viewed as an incongruous trio, but threatening nevertheless. Separatism was suspicious precisely because it attempted to create a system wherein money, power, and politics could operate for the benefit of women.
I am not concerned here with defending or criticizing separatism as a political ideology or practice. Rather, I am interested in how the varying ways the separatist debates were discursively constructed and interpreted affected the development of the feminist press movement. Beginning with a broad examination of the term "separatism" as it was theorized during the 1970s by feminists and lesbians, I will then lay out the specific debates around separatism involving Daughters, Inc., a feminist press which published novels by women, including Rita Mae Brown's groundbreaking *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Finally, I will conclude with an discussion of how this debate helped shape early feminist publishing as its reverberations were felt throughout the feminist print media.

**Separation Anxiety**

The separatist debates revolved around both the ideologies and the practices of separatism. In its simplest definition, separatism refers to women living their lives autonomously from men. Yet separatism, as many feminists have found, is not as easy to do as it is to talk about. In fact, it is the perpetual slippage between constantly shifting theories and praxes which fueled the debates. Thus, as a press which originally stressed the political necessity of interaction only within the feminist/lesbian print network, Daughters found themselves charged with hypocrisy and betrayal, if not outright lying, for their involvement with the non-feminist/lesbian publishing industry.

Since separatism, as Bonnie Zimmerman points out in *The Safe Sea of Women*, "was never one monolithic theory," it is useful to broadly categorize the different types of separatism advocated within the WLM.² With the establishment of the WLM in the late 1960s, some women's groups argued
that withdrawal from all involvement with men was the only way to escape male domination. However, this did not necessarily imply that women must develop sexual relationships with other women, for many feminists viewed sex of any kind as a male-defined activity. For some women, separatism was conditional upon celibacy, freeing them from sexual objectification and domination.

Alternately, for other women, lesbianism itself constitutes separatism. In the classic statement by the New York group Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” which appeared in Notes from the Third Year in 1970, the neologism “woman identified” is used synonymously with “lesbian” to define “the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.” According to the group, a “woman identified” position must be “develop[ed] with reference to ourselves and not in relation to men.” Lesbianism by implication requires separatism because “[o]ur energies must flow toward our sisters, not backward toward our oppressors.” The Radicalesbians recognized that sexism could only be understood as what Adrienne Rich later labeled “compulsory heterosexuality” because heterosexuality was in fact a tool of patriarchy: “As long as woman’s liberation tries to free women without facing the basic heterosexual structure that binds us in one-to-one relationship with our oppressors, tremendous energies will continue to flow into trying to straighten up each particular relationship with a man, into finding how to get better sex, how to turn his head around--into trying to make the ‘new man’ out of him, in the delusion that this will allow us to be the ‘new woman.’”

While “The Woman Identified Woman” never explicity advocates separatism or calls for breaking all ties with men and male systems as the necessary next step in liberation, the seeds of this philosophy are clearly manifest in the statement’s rhetoric: “It is the primacy of women relating to
women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation, and is the basis for the cultural revolution."9 As the Radicalesbians learned, however, defining lesbianism is problematic within a society which uses the label "lesbian" to denigrate any woman who challenges heterosexist male privilege. Thus the term "woman identified" may be preferable to "lesbian" because lesbian "is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives (including that of all women as part of the exchange medium among men), who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs."10

The Radicalesbians also recognized that many heterosexual women were frightened by lesbianism. According to Jennifer Woodul, one of the group members, "woman identified" was specifically coined to avoid the issue of sexual preference:

"We were trying to figure out how to tell women about lesbianism without using the word, lesbian, because we found that at these conferences we kept freaking people out all the time. And I believe it was Cynthia [Funk] who came up with this term, "women-identified." At least, that was the first time I had ever heard it. So what we were trying to do was make women realizethat lesbians were not different from other women in any sort of strange way.11

By redefining lesbianism as a political rather than a sexual choice, the Radicalesbians attempted to legitimize lesbianism as "the quintessential act of political solidarity with other women."12

Predictably, the manifesta itself vacillates between a sexual and a non-sexual definition of lesbianism. On the one hand, the Radicalesbians asserted that lesbianism "is a category of behavior possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles and dominated by male supremacy."13 On the other hand, they believed that "[u]ntil women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be
denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men” (my emphasis). Such equivocation left the statement open to a later charge by radical feminist Anne Koedt that women were once again being defined by whom they slept with, a charge that is not entirely accurate given the Radicalesbian’s concern with theorizing lesbianism outside of “the male classification system of defining all females on sexual relation to some other category of people.”

Despite the Radicalesbian’s attempts to de-emphasize lesbianism as a sexual identity, however, the sticky issue of sexuality remained: “And yet, in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation—which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a ‘woman’ is to get fucked by men.” The eruption of such purposefully shocking and phallocentric language as “get fucked” in the text forcefully connects women’s powerlessness with heterosexuality for, of course, to “get fucked” means both to have sex (in this context, certainly, with a man) and to be exploited.

Six years after the publication of “The Woman Identified Woman,” feminist activist Charlotte Bunch published an important essay on separatism in Ms. magazine which both drew upon and went beyond the Radicalesbian’s earlier manifesta. Like “The Woman Identified Woman,” Bunch’s essay serves as a historical document, a reflexive and reflective view of separatism from an ex-separatist and respected feminist intellectual. Bunch agrees with the Radicalesbian’s assertion that the label “lesbian” is used to disempower all women: “In our society, heterosexuality goes hand in hand with the sexist assumption that each woman exists for a man—her body, her children, and her services are his property. If a woman does not accept that definition of
heterosexuality and of herself, she is queer—no matter who she sleeps with."17 Yet Bunch is more specific about how heterosexuality as an institution privileges heterosexual women to their own detriment: “Unless a woman, no matter what her personal connection to men, realizes that her own survival is tied more to that of all women than it is to one man, the ‘privileges’ she receives are not lasting benefits but links in the chain of oppression.” 18

An important difference between Bunch’s essay and the Radicalesbians’ is that Bunch not only defines separatism as autonomy from men, but as separation from heterosexual women in the WLM as well. According to Bunch, separatism from all but other lesbian-feminist separatists challenges heterosexuality as the basis of male supremacy and exposes heterosexism as “sex-power,” rather than just “sex-roles.”19 Thus to be “woman-identified” (now hyphenated) meant more than lesbian-feminism; rather, it implied a challenge to masculinist and heterosexist ideologies within the WLM as well as in society at large: “For the first time in our lives, our reality was the dominant one, and we were able to begin to understand how it differed from the heterosexual reality that dominated everywhere else.”20

In discussing the importance of separatism for the development of feminist movements, Bunch draws a distinction between “separatism” and “woman-identification” by describing separatism as a political practice, rather than as a belief or identity. For Bunch, separatism can never be permanent. Instead, it is a temporary tactic employed to provide women a time and space to develop political consciousness: “Separatism is a dynamic strategy to be moved in and out of whenever a minority feels that its interests are being overlooked by the majority, or that its insights need more space to be developed.”21 By framing the article as an historical narrative (for example, the essay opens, “it was December, when I first slept with a woman”), Bunch
can refer to "this time of separatism," and "our time as lesbian-feminist separatists." Separatism thus becomes a practice which allows lesbian feminists "to develop both political insights and concrete projects that now aid women's survival and strength."23

Unlike the Radicalesbians, Bunch outlines the material consequences of separatism and emphasizes the importance of creating "new institutions for survival": "When lesbians come out and actively pursue the meaning of woman-identification, survival questions must immediately be faced."24 Once separatists divorced themselves from the economic privileges of heterosexual relationships, it became absolutely necessary for them to create alternative structures of support. Bunch lists several women's businesses as projects which grew out of the New York lesbian-feminist separatist group The Furies, including the magazine Quest, Diana Press, Moonforce Media film company, Olivia Records, and Women in Distribution.

At the end of the article, Bunch declares that she is no longer a separatist, that she had "learned, changed, and grown during those years as a separatist," but felt that she "was becoming too isolated. With the development of a lesbian-feminist politics and community came the need to "become involved with other feminist projects and analytical developments."25 Undoubtedly, the political theories and practices developed during "separatist times" influenced the feminist movement in general. What Bunch does not mention is that separatist projects such as evolved from The Furies were expanding beyond a separatist community; indeed, such expansion may have become absolutely necessary for their survival. As I will discuss later, this economic component of separatism became integral to feminist enterprises like Daughters, Inc.
Throughout the 1970s, separatist ideologies were linked to changes within the feminist movement at large. In "The Politics of Separatism and Lesbian Utopian Fiction," Sonya Andermahr draws a useful distinction between what she sees as two different forms of lesbian separatism: the "political" model, which views separatism as a "tactical weapon" designed to bring about the end of male dominance, and the "utopian" model, which advocates permanent withdrawal from male-dominated society. While political separatism works toward the ultimate overthrow of male supremacy through political struggle, utopian separatism emphasizes the creation of an all-female world based upon women's superior moral values of cooperation, nurturance, and respect for nature through maternal connection. As Andermahr points out, both models view heterosexuality as the fundamental institution of oppression against women. It is important to note that while both of these models are predicated on lesbianism, they do not necessarily demand or preclude separatism from heterosexual women as discussed by Bunch.

Not coincidentally, given U.S. feminism's historical development, Andermahr's models parallel Alice Echol's analysis of a schism within feminism itself which she categorizes as "radical feminism" vs. "cultural feminism." According to Echol's schematic, radical feminism grew out of the Civil Rights and New Left movements through opposition to the position of women within these movements:

Radical feminism rejected both the politico position that socialist revolution would bring about women's liberation and the liberal feminist solution of integrating women into the public sphere. Radical feminists argued that women constituted a sex-class, that relations between women and men needed to be recast in political terms, and that gender rather than class was the primary contradiction.
However, by 1975 radical feminism was eclipsed by cultural feminism. A "countercultural movement aimed at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and the devaluation of the female." Cultural feminism grew out of theoretical problems of difference within the radical movement itself, particularly around issues of sexuality. Unlike radical feminism, which attempted to eliminate what was viewed as socially constructed differences between men and women, cultural feminism promoted "women's essential sameness to each other and their fundamental difference from men." This ideology seemed to promise an end to the gay-straight split which had continually polarized the radical feminist movement: "Cultural feminism modified lesbian-feminism so that male values rather than men were vilified and female bonding rather than lesbianism was valorized, thus making it acceptable to heterosexual feminists." As we shall see, however, this belief in an essential female unity created tenuous alliances which would be challenged in the 1980s by lesbians and women of color such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Barbara Smith who argued that inequalities between women were as problematic for feminism as inequalities between women and men.

For purposes of this essay, I would like to expand upon Andermahr’s and Echol’s models by offering a four-part typology of separatist politics. Borrowing from both of these authors, the first two types of separatism I propose are revolutionary and cultural separatism. As in Andermahr’s political model, revolutionary separatism identifies the end of male domination as its goal and is concerned with institutional, rather than individual, solutions to women’s oppression, including the elimination of marriage and the family. Thus relationships with men are antithetical to the ultimate overthrow of patriarchy. The early women’s liberation group, The Feminists, for example,
wrote that "The identification of each woman's interests with those of a man prevents her from uniting with other women and seeing herself as a member of the class of women." However, unlike Andermahr's political separatism, revolutionary separatism is not contingent upon lesbianism, although it certainly does not preclude it.

The second type of separatism, cultural separatism, combines characteristics of Andermahr's utopian separatism and Echof's cultural feminism. In cultural separatism, women create "woman-only" spaces as a permanent withdrawal from male-dominated society. Cultural separatists reclaim maternal nurturance, non-violence, connection to nature, and feminine spirituality as essential female values which are superior to biologically determined male characteristics such as aggression and violence. Like revolutionary separatism, this type of separatism is not necessarily lesbian, but instead attempts to elide the issue of sexual preference onto female bonding or sisterhood.

Lesbian-only separatism, as exemplified in Charlotte Bunch's analysis, comprises a third type of separatism. Many lesbian separatists were suspicious of heterosexual separatists' allegiances to the WLM. Furies member and writer Rita Mae Brown, for example, proclaimed "You can't build a strong movement if your sisters are out there fucking with the oppressor." Lesbian-only separatists viewed heterosexuality as being as equally detrimental to women as sexual objectification and institutionalized sexism. In fact, heterosexuality and sexism were seen as coterminous systems of oppression which could only be addressed through lesbian-feminism separatism, including separation from heterosexual women.

A fourth model of separatism, which I label material separatism, was concerned with the economic and practical aspects of building an alternate
society which would ultimately supercede the male-dominated structure currently in power. Bunch alludes to this type of separatism in her call for “structural innovations” which “must challenge [heterosexist] structures to change or create alternatives.” It is this type of separatism which, I suggest, feminist enterprises such as Daughters, Inc. advocated through the establishment of feminist bookstores, coffeehouses, print media, women's centers, and many other political, financial, and cultural projects developed to empower women's autonomy from heterosexist institutions.

The problem with any typology, of course, is that it attempts to reify categories which are never mutually exclusive. In the above typology, for instance, lesbian-only separatism comprises various groups who subscribe to revolutionary, cultural and/or material separatism, by themselves or in combination, while revolutionary, cultural, and material separatism all contain both lesbian-only and mixed sexual preference contingents. Material separatism inherited much of its radical political analysis from revolutionary separatism, yet also borrowed its emphasis on women-only spaces from cultural feminism. Furthermore, polarizations exist within each of the four types of separatism. For example, should separatism be temporary or permanent, individual or communal, spiritual or strategic? Given these overlapping and often conflicting notions of separatism, as well as the strength of the convictions behind them, it is not surprising that debates surrounding separatist politics were offset across the pages of the 1970s feminist publishing movement.

Just Say No

"Are you building an alternate society?" I ask the women at the table. "Of course not!" June Arnold exclaims, with
an infectious grin. "We are building the real society. Theirs is the alternate."

Lois Gould, "Creating a Woman's World"

Gould's article in the January 2, 1977, New York Times Magazine narratively recounts her visit with June Arnold, Patty Bowman, Charlotte Bunch, and Bertha Harris of Daughters, Inc. Like any good story, it starts with a description of the setting, here a "huge farmhouse kitchen table" in Plainfield, Vermont, the soon-to-be-former location of Daughters, who are in the process of moving to New York City where they will be closer to the women-owned and operated print shop which produces their books. Sitting around the table sharing "warm gin" and "cold coffee," Gould nevertheless discursively places herself outside the circle as a woman and feminist who is not "clearly woman-identified," defined by Gould as "a woman whose primary working relationships are with and for other women--with and for feminism" (my emphasis). Thus, although Gould is quick to indicate that she "lives with a husband and two adolescent sons," she bases her difference not in terms of her sexuality, but through her connection to the literary establishment. While Gould's writing is published and supported by men, Daughters' goal is to function outside of male-dominated structures, to be, in the terms set up by the article, "woman identified."

This shifting outside/inside relationship both imitates and enacts the voyeuristic curiosity which fuels the article itself. The insider now outsider looking in, Gould has been sent into the Daughters' circle to report on their activities for the outside world:

The ironic fact is that I would not even be here were it not for an "establishment" newspaper--one of the many that do not review the books these women publish, or report on their activities. Still, the mass media,
and their audience, are intrigued by the phenomenon of women like these retreating—advancing?—into brave new feminist worlds of literature, health, sexuality and politics. I am here to ask what they are up to, and if it is really a significant trend, or merely another passing strangeness in a "movement" some say is already tearing apart over strangenesses of one kind or another (my emphasis).  

In fact, the irony is not Gould's presence in the Vermont farmhouse, but the false pretences which have admitted her, for the article is not about feminist publishing at all. Instead, Gould's story is really an exposé of separatism written with the requisite sensationalism: What do women do without men?

The article's focus on separatism rather than feminist publishing is made even more overt by an insert labeled "A sampling of separatist sentiments" on the last page. Yet among the seven quotations on topics such as work, religion, health care, and technology listed there, only one of the statements explicitly advocates separatism, and even then only because feminists "have no choice." The others instead propose that revolutionary change will only be possible if women can gain the political and practical skills necessary to overthrow the current patriarchal system. Coletta Reid, of Diana Press, for example, is quoted as stating, "So far women have not come close to owning and operating durable-goods factories, or making machinery, or owning natural resources. Women need to farm, to mine, to sail, to build buildings, to be machinists," while Frances Hornstein of the Los Angeles Feminist Women's Health Center claims, "We do not want to co-exist with the medical establishment. We want to take it over." Such sentiments belong to radical feminism, not separatism per se, but the quotes are certainly designed to identify separatism as a feminist threat to male domination.

It is in the pages of the article itself that truly separatist sentiments are debated. While Gould is concerned with the reputed presence of separatist "extremists at large in the feminist press and elsewhere," Arnold attempts to
modify such an alarmist view with a more liberal stance: “We think each woman has the right to decide how separate she wants to be, and from whom—and for how long.” Gould emphasizes that Daughters is “not necessarily typical” in its separatism since they practice temporary, rather than permanent, withdrawal “to gather their strength and find their individual and collective voices.” Such strategic separatism is integral to the Daughters’ goal of “full independence from the control and influence of ‘male-dominated’ institutions—the news media, the health, education and legal systems, the art, theater and literary world, the banks.”

Woven throughout the interview are the pressing issues of money and power around which material separatism revolves. For Daughters, these issues are not just ideological problems but translate into material questions such as how to finance the publishing of experimental novels without grants from male-dominated foundations or whether to publish non-mainstream books by feminist writers who also publish with commercial presses. At the time of the interview, the most pressing issue for Daughters concerns whether selling movie and paperback rights to male-run conglomerates for one of their own bestsellers constitutes “selling out” or exploitation by allowing men to make money off of feminist labor. While Gould insists that such collaboration will ultimately benefit feminist endeavors by providing much-needed capital, Arnold and the others reply that women must take control of their lives in their own ways:

“I still don’t see,” [says Gould], “how you can afford to say no to so many—and what seem such easy—ways to grow bigger and stronger.” June shrugs. “I can afford to say no to anything,” she says, lightly, and then laughs. “Women have to learn they can afford to say no.”

This interview was not the first time that Arnold had strongly voiced her theories about the dangers of feminists selling out to mainstream publishers,
which Arnold wittily labelled the “finishing” or “impermanent” press. In a 1976 article entitled “Feminist Presses & Feminist Politics” which appeared in the radical feminist journal *Quest* (founded in 1974 by Charlotte Bunch and other Washington, D.C., feminists), Arnold argued that feminists should only publish with feminist presses because feminist publishing constituted the “press of the future,” not merely an alternative to trade publishing.42 According to Arnold, feminist publishing is part of a national communications network which has “created a circle of media control with every link covered: a woman writes an article or book, a woman typesets it, a woman illustrates and lays it out, a woman prints it, a woman’s journal reviews it, a woman’s bookstore sells it, and women read it—from Canada to Mexico and coast to coast.”43

Even though the feminist movement has enjoyed some success in pressuring the mainstream media to publish women’s writing, that success is always contingent on the publisher’s perception of what is popular and, hence, marketable. Trade presses have no interest in feminist politics, except as a profitable commodity: “They will publish some of us—the least threatening, the most saleable, the most easily controlled or a few who cannot be ignored—until they cease publishing us because to be a woman is no longer in style.”44 Arnold cites several cases of mainstream presses failing to promote or reprint feminist work. For example, she contrasts the low sales (650 copies) of Rita Mae Brown’s *The Hand That Cradles the Rock*, published by New York University Press, with the 5000 Diana Press copies sold of Brown’s *Songs to a Handsome Woman*.

By producing figures which counter claims that trade presses publish feminist work in greater volume or at greater profit for authors, Arnold contends that status and male validation, not money, are the real reasons women choose to publish with mainstream presses, “as if we had switched
our self-identity from the patriarchy who-our-father/husband/son is to the equally patriarchal who-our-publisher/reviewer/reader is." The desire for such status is a temptation which must be resisted because it only constitutes exploitation of women's work. Favorable reviews in mainstream newspapers and magazines, for example, are only "flattery" designed to "confuse and divide us." Arnold is particularly critical of women authors and presses which allow the "finishing presses" to reprint their work because this allows men to make easy money off of women's time and efforts by "buying up the energy of genuine movements because they have none of their own." 

Arnold's final call to action clearly articulates a separatist stance for the feminist print movement: "It is time to stop giving any favorable attention to the books or journals put out by the finishing press. It is time to recycle our money and refuse to let any male corporation make profit off of us. It is time to understand what male status really means and withdraw support from any woman who is still trying to make her name by selling out our movement." "What male status really means," for Arnold, is a weakening of the feminist communication network which, as her earlier description illustrates, is dependent upon every link, from writer to reader, for its continued existence. To "recycle our money" means to circulate feminist capital (currency and labor) only within that network. Such material separatism is essential to the creation of "feminist institutions that women will gain from both in money and skills." 

Less than a year after Arnold's article appeared in Quest, and three months after the New York Times Magazine interview with Gould, Daughters licensed the paperback rights for Rita Mae Brown's Rubyfruit Jungle to Bantam Books for an advance of $250,000. The news came as a shock to many in the feminist community. Carol Seajay, editor of the newly-formed
Feminist Bookstore Newsletter, an important resource of the feminist print network, wrote of her surprise at reading of the sale in Publishers Weekly, rather than from Daughters itself: “How bizarre to read this first in PW. I know a lot of thought went into this decision. Daughters, if you want to share some of it, FBN would be glad to print it.”

In late 1977, Daughters did circulate “an open letter to the feminist media” among women’s print sources such as Big Mama Rag. Apparently concerned with questions and accusations of “selling out,” Daughters wrote “to set the facts straight.” They emphasized that they had not sold Rita Mae Brown’s Rubyfruit Jungle, but merely licensed the mass-market (supermarket size) paperback rights to Bantam for ten years, with Brown retaining the copyright and Daughters holding jacket cover approval and all other rights and permissions. Furthermore, they would keep their own edition in print.

This arrangement, they state, allows them to offer “at least every advantage the boys can” by allowing feminist authors to achieve mass audience sales while still retaining control over their work. They also defend Rita Mae Brown by claiming that she “sold in” to the feminist print movement by publishing 70,000 copies of Rubyfruit Jungle with Daughters. These sales in turn provided the capital for them to publish another 18 books. (Brown had similarly helped Diana Press through publication of her poetry.) Feminist presses would be much stronger, Daughters declared, if more “famous” feminist authors engaged in such “mutual self-help.”

Although Daughters emphatically insists in the letter that there has been “no compromise” by themselves or Brown through the licensing agreement, in fact the entire arrangement represents an economic compromise which negotiates between separatist idealism and financial
empowerment, and the acknowledgement of this compromise is manifest in
the language of the letter itself:

A basic question for feminist publishers is how to expand and in what
directions. We now understand that unless we can reach a wide and
diversified market and give a woman as many chances as possible to
realize money from her work (besides the money earned through [sic]
Daughters), we would still be asking that women “sacrifice” something to
publish with us. . . . We believe that there has not only been no
“compromise” on either our or Rita Mae’s part but that on the contrary we
have seized another level in the control of our own words (my emphasis).

The emphasized words here illustrate how the press has revised
earlier notions of the relationship between feminist and mainstream presses.
Specifically, while Daughters’ basic goal of creating new institutions that allow
women control over their own lives remains the same, what they “now
understand” is the difficulty of maintaining complete separatism given the
economic realities of what they admit are “limited feminist markets.” In a
1980 interview in Sinister Wisdom magazine, Charlotte Bunch discusses this
realization as having its roots in the first Women in Print conference,
organized by June Arnold and held at a Campfire Girls’ campsite outside of
Omaha, Nebraska, in August 1976:

A turning point for me was facing the limitations of the small press world
much more squarely than I had been willing to before. I realized that we
were not going to become the press instead of being alternative media.
Some of the exciting, idealistic theory we had put forward was simply not
working. If I was going to continue to work in that press, I would have to
do so because it was still satisfying and without any illusion that it would
read the masses or become the popular culture. If I wanted to reach the
popular culture in that way, I would have to be more willing to deal with
some of the mainstream presses and publications—not necessarily to the
exclusion of women’s presses but in addition to them.52

The idea of “seiz[ing] another level of control of our own words” echoes
Arnold’s previous statement in the Quest article that “the first thing any
revolutionary group does when taking over a government is to seize control of
communication, and we have already set up our own.”53 Yet the later
statement revises the earlier by recognizing that institutional change is a process constituted by individual actions which take place on diverse and intersecting political, economic, and social planes. For Daughters, the compromise seems not one of feminist values, but of feminist methods, particularly those which demand strict separatism. What Arnold and the others realized was that by licensing the reprint rights for a book with enormous popular appeal, feminist presses could share in the profits corporate publishers stood to make off of feminist work. Any compromise that took place was transacted between Daughters, Bantam, and Brown, with each negotiating in their own best interest, rather than between Daughters and a feminist community with differing allegiances to a multiply-defined and practiced political ideology.

Affording Separatism

Since its inception in the 1960s, women’s liberation, feminist, and lesbian groups in the United States have engaged in intensely articulated debates about the nature of women’s oppression, the possibilities for liberation, and the strategies necessary to enact feminist transformation. Many important debates have taken place within the pages of the feminist print media. The periodical *Quest: a feminist quarterly*, for example, described itself as “a process leading to new directions for the women’s movement” which published “long-term, in-depth feminist political analysis and ideological development.” Although often hotly contested, most debates have been conducted in the spirit of a complicated but compassionate sisterhood, rather than mean-spirited attack. During the 1970s in particular, while confrontation and controversy were not unfamiliar to women activists who had participated in the earlier student and civil rights
movements, responsible critique was encouraged within the practice of consciousness-raising. Given Daughters' leading role as advocates of an independent and self-sustaining feminist print network, any interaction they had with the mainstream, male-dominated media was bound to be controversial, and the ensuing dialogue, pitched at various frequencies, resonated throughout the pages of feminism's print culture.

In April and May of 1978, Big Mama Rag, a nationally circulated women's newspaper headquartered in Denver, Colorado, printed a two-part letter by a reader named Marina Franchild as a "struggle column" titled "Just What Can Feminists Afford?" The letter was a belated response to the Gould interview and charged Daughters with exposing the WLM to "establishment scrutiny," misrepresenting lesbianism and lesbian separatism within the movement, and "play[ing] themselves off against what they considered the 'extremist' element within the WLM while pandering to establishment values" (1, 5). In other words, Daughters was not only at fault for what they said during the interview, but for permitting it in the first place. According to Franchild, the interview constituted a feminist "breach of principle" because it allowed "media co-optation" and patriarchal marketing of the women's movement. While addressed primarily to June Arnold, Patty Bowman, Charlotte Bunch, and Bertha Harris, Franchild also hoped to "catalyze further discussion of these pressing issues within the WLM so that political resolution eventually may be achieved" (1, 5). Although Daughters themselves apparently never responded directly to Franchild's letter, the article's success at raising such "pressing issues" is evident in the responses it generated from both the BMR staff and their readers.

Franchild's letter is unusually lengthy--seven and a half typed, single-spaced, double-columned 11 x 17 pages--and her critique encompasses
many different complaints. She starts with an analysis of the WLM within patriarchy and states the necessity for absolute self-determination and unity within the movement, including functioning independently of "establishment sanction." Failure to adhere to these goals constitutes "self-aggrandizement and opportunism" and "a loss of radical perspective."

The rhetoric is familiar. On the surface, it echoes the same kind of separatist stance advocated by Arnold herself in *Quest* and the *New York Times Magazine* interview: complete independence from men and male-run institutions. However, within the debate as framed by Franchild's response to the Daughters interview, we can locate conflicts between divergent ideologies of separatism. While Franchild insists on a cultural separatism which advocates the creation of a lesbian-based society completely removed from men, Daughters views material separatism as a temporary strategy toward the goal of women's empowerment and, ultimately, the political, economic, and cultural transformation of male-dominated society.

For Franchild, Daughters' participation in the *NYT Magazine* article was "politically irresponsible" and symptomatic of their political naiveté: they should have assumed that their words would be distorted and safeguarded against it by refusing the interview. In fact, according to Franchild, movement politics should *never* be discussed with anyone outside of the movement. If Daughters had political disagreements with lesbian separatists, the *NYT Magazine* was not the place to air them. Rather, "[i]ntra-movement controversies must be dealt with internally--through movement channels should they exist, and if not, they must be created" (1, 5). Additionally, Franchild chastises the press for discussing lesbian separatism when none of the women interviewed identified herself as a lesbian separatist, nor even as a lesbian (1, 6) (except for Bunch, whom Gould had described as having
"been to extreme separatism and back") and objects to Patty Bowman's analogy between a heterosexual woman calling herself a "lesbian" as a political stand and non-Jewish persons declaring themselves Jewish because such a comparison denies the historicity of Jewish oppression and resistance (I, 7).

Franchild's argument proceeds by drawing an analogy between Daughters' position in the movement and that of academic women who depend upon the WLM for their status within the academy but have no accountability to or affiliation with the movement itself. By implication, Franchild accuses Daughters of opportunism, and asks what money or privileges the press may have gained from participating in the interview. Addressing the possibility that the press was paid for the article, she quotes June Arnold--"Women have to learn they can afford to say no"--and questions why they didn't take their own advice.

According to Franchild, as a feminist business which benefits financially from the WLM, Daughters must be held accountable to the movement. At the same time, she refutes the entire notion of "feminist" business: "Since feminism is expressly dedicated to the interests of women, and since all businesses are, at the very least dedicated to the interests of those who are hostile to women, it is politically false to merge these opposing ideologies in any one concept-i.e., feminist-business" (I, 8). Instead, Franchild identifies Daughters as a "woman-owned" business but argues that since only economically privileged women can own their own businesses, such enterprises falsely promote "individual answers" as "political strategy" (I, 12). While Franchild believes that women have a right to economic security, for feminist businesses to be truly revolutionary they would need to "more effectively pose a threat to patriarchal institutions including our patriarchal
economy--capitalism--which has a hierarchical structure that provides the channels for minority control of not only the methods of production within the economy and the profits that result, but the social relationships among the workers as well” (I, 12). Such relationships would need to be anti-racist, anti-classist and non-hierarchical in structure.

What remains unclear in Franchchild's analysis, however, is the exact nature of the “threat” that feminist businesses should pose to patriarchy in order to be considered “feminist.” Instead, in the second part of her letter, she proposes an alternative to feminist businesses which she calls “reclaiming our money”. This involves feminists who have access to “male” money “getting that money,” “pumping it into the movement,” and “redistributing it to women in a politically responsible way” (II, 6). Such a method is preferable to feminist businesses because it distributes wealth—and decisions about that wealth—throughout the WLM, rather than place them in the hands of a few women “executives” who may succumb to opportunism. Unfortunately, Franchchild never specifies how a feminist goes about “getting that money.” However, licensing paperback rights to a trade press is clearly not an acceptable method of reclaiming feminist money: Franchchild severely criticizes Daughters for licensing *Rubyfruit Jungle* to an establishment press and claims that such an action constitutes political trade-off, co-optation, and a patronage which equals political inference.

Franchchild also questions the political effectiveness of publishing novels, an activity which, in her view, incorrectly equates “art” with political action (II, 6). Concerns about literary form, style or artistic quality are matters of cultural opinion and should be considered secondary to political message (II, 7). For Franchchild, while publishing fiction, or “culturalism,” can bring about political consciousness, it can never tangibly contribute to political resistance or
revolution. Acknowledging that the movement does need Daughters, as well as other feminist presses, to serve as "vehicles for political communication," Franchild suggests that feminist presses "reflect more of a political (as opposed to cultural) commitment," "stop engaging in trade with the establishment," and "reorganize under a non-business structure whenever possible," particularly one that is funded with reclaimed money (II, 6).

While Franchild's rhetoric throughout the letter is revolutionary in that she calls for "nothing short of a comprehensive political transformation of the established order" (I, 5), her adherence to cultural separatism and its focus on intra-movement dynamics rather than external relations often cause her to back away from a politics of institutional transformation, especially if it involves any direct confrontation or interaction with mainstream society. The difference between Franchild's cultural separatism and Daughters' material separatism is particularly evident in their evaluations of the purpose of the feminist print network itself. Quoting from Gould's discussion of the first women-in-print conference in which the "ultimate goal" of the network is identified as "actually to lead a feminist takeover of the nation's media" rather than to create a "unified underground women's press," Franchild questions why the former, rather than the latter, is the movement's goal.56 By arguing that an ultimate overthrow is unrealistic and its promotion harmful to the WLM, Franchild unintentionally implies that cultural separatism is more realistic and attainable, and therefore more politically desirable or correct, than radical or material separatism.

Such concerns with political viability and expediency are also reflected in Franchild's differentiation between what she terms "segregation" and separatism. In response to Gould's description of Charlotte Bunch's belief that "women must now begin to commute, in ever-shortening cycles, between
separatism and the country's political and social centers," Franchild suggests that Bunch is confusing separatism with segregation.\textsuperscript{57} According to Franchild, while separatism is "a politic of activism" which by nature involves political struggle, segregation is merely a form of "escapism" available only to white, economically privileged women: "Do you think that it is possible for any lesbian separatists other than a few very privileged women, to not be involved in the commuting process that you describe? Are you aware that your statement makes invisible the Third World and lower-class women who have always been forced to commute between the real world and the preferred world of women?" (1, 8).

Clearly, in Franchild's view any "commuting" between a separatist space and mainstream society is undesirable, while for Bunch and the other Daughters women, "commuting" describes the process by which "another level" is "seized." This disagreement is both paramount and irresolvable within the diverse articulations of the separatist debates. However, Franchild's objections to the Daughters interview and licensing of paperback rights, as well as the responses and editorials which followed her letter, reveal how charges of political incorrectness, selling out, and feminist betrayal were symptomatic of important concerns with privilege, power, and choice within the WLM and its print network.

\textbf{Seizing Another Level}

\begin{quote}
I think we should seize whatever opportunities are available to us.

If a door opens to one of us, I think she should walk on through it!
\end{quote}

Julia Stanley, "The Politics of Publishing"
The last section of Franchild's analysis is titled "Is 'Daughters' A Feminist Structure?" (II, 7). In this segment she asks some pointed questions about how race and class consciousness operate within Daughters' publishing processes:

What percentage of poor, working class, Third World or ethnic women are on the Daughters collective/employed by Daughters? ... Is preferential treatment shown less-privileged women? If not, why not? ... [H]ow is [an understanding of race and class] shown in the selection of manuscripts? Who makes the selections? What are the standards? For example, are there Third World women, poor women, ethnic women, working class women to judge the respective manuscripts of same? ... Books written by Third World women are noticeably absent from those that Daughters has published. What is the reason for this? What are your criteria for publication? How does daughters [sic] discover new women writers? (II, 7)

Franchild particularly objects to June Arnold's assertion in the interview that she can afford to say no to anything, that "[w]omen have to learn they can afford to say no." Franchild calls such a statement "insensitive to the majority of women, a denial of "the economic reality of most women's lives, " and "a classist flaunting of [Arnold's] ease of choice" (II, 7). She reminds Arnold that most women do not have the choice to "say no." This criticism does not mean that Franchild believes Arnold should take male-establishment money, but rather that Arnold should examine the economic and social conditions which offer her the privilege of saying no. Furthermore, Arnold and Daughters should use such freedom of choice to further movement, rather than business or personal, goals: "If you can afford to do it your way, then you can afford to do it in a feminist way" (II, 7).

While Franchild's questions are clearly intended to provide a means by which to judge Daughters' commitment to feminist practices, at the same time these questions articulate exactly what Franchild herself means by "feminism." Franchild's feminism is one which redistributes wealth, utilizes
cooperative principles such as skills sharing, provides access to jobs and resources for women of color, working-class women, and lesbians, and emphasizes strategies of mutual empowerment and collective action for all women.

Such an inclusive, privilege-conscious definition of feminism is probably the reason that Franchild's letter generally received such a favorable response. While some feminists objected to the tone of the article, characterizing it variously as "venomous," "strange," "ludicrous," "trashy," "destructive," "irresponsible," and a "personal attack," even her detractors agreed that "issues such as racism, classism and heterosexual privilege, etc., need to be raised and need to be discussed and confronted in our movement." 58 The members of Big Mama Rag themselves ran an editorial response in July which, while decrying the style of Franchild's letter as "irresponsible criticism" and blaming themselves for printing it without sufficient research and discussion, still agreed with Franchild that the NYTMagazine interview was "infuriating," that Daughters should have been more careful about their comments during the interview, and that the press should have "explained and defended [separatism] as a vital strategy for women." 59

Other responses congratulated Franchild's courage in attacking movement "names," and in holding movement "spokeswomen" accountable for their statements in the mainstream media. 60 One letter, signed by "Latina/NYC," wrote that lesbian separatists in New York, Boston, and elsewhere had received no response from Daughters despite attempts to establish a dialogue about the interview, which they viewed as an "insulting rip-off." She thanked Franchild for bringing the issue of Third World women's invisibility and Jewish oppression to the forefront of the white feminist
movement and wondered if articles such as Franchild's indicated "the beginning of a new phase of movement housecleaning."61

In fact, toward the end of the 1970s many women of color, including lesbians of color, were questioning the way feminism as a political movement was predominantly centered around the concerns and experiences of white middle and professional class women. This does not mean that some women of color and working-class women had not been involved in the WLM from the beginning, but that their issues had been ignored or marginalized within movement organizing. In particular, the movement had failed both to acknowledge white, middle-class, heterosexual privilege and to theorize what Audre Lorde called "the many varied tools of patriarchy."62 Such racist and classist exclusions denied how women/lesbians of color experienced multiple oppressions exponentially, not as women, nor as lesbians, nor as people of color, nor as poor people, but as poor women/lesbians of color.

One of the earliest analyses of the dynamics of "manifold and simultaneous oppressions" was written in April 1977 by the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist group organized in Boston in 1974. First published in 1978, "The Combahee River Collective Statement" defined the collective's purpose as "the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."63 Because the collective's politics were based on coalition, the group rejected separatism as a viable political stance for Black feminists. According to the statement, separatism was untenable because it identified "maleness," rather than race or class power, as the root of women's oppression by men. The group also implied that separatism was inherently a racist and class-biased practice, even for white women or white lesbians who, unlike women of color, need not be concerned with racial solidarity, "since it so completely denies
any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race."\textsuperscript{64}

This concern with separatism's inherent racism is reiterated in a later interview with two Combahee members, Barbara and Beverly Smith.\textsuperscript{65} In this article, a response to questions written by Cherré Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, the sisters label separatism "the politics without a practice" because it cannot affect social institutions in any direct way.\textsuperscript{66} Its viability as a political practice is particularly limited for women of color since most do not possess the same social privileges or economic resources as white women and therefore "can't go to a harbor of many acres of land, and farm, and invite the goddess."\textsuperscript{67} In their view, feminist or lesbian separatism enables only white women to separate from their direct oppressors--white men--but does not hold them accountable for their own racism. While the Smiths acknowledge that separatism does allow members of marginalized groups to forge political identities centered around their particular oppressions, they nevertheless believe that any separatism, whether it be based on gender, race, or sexual preference, is ultimately a "dead end." Instead, they favor a broad-based coalition politics that "deal[s] with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time." According to Barbara, such a politics "is really radical because it has never been done before."\textsuperscript{68}

In the same Fall 1981 issue of \textit{Sinister Wisdom} as the Smith interview, poet Adrienne Rich, at that time one of the journal's editors, published an article entitled "Notes for a Magazine: What Does Separatism Mean?"\textsuperscript{69} Here Rich comments upon the "discussions, dialogues, [and] confrontations in which the lack of agreed-on meaning of \textit{separatist} or \textit{separatism} leads to needless confusion and gaps in understanding, therefore needless and wasteful failures to connect, at a time when we feel all our connections
threatened."\textsuperscript{70} By attempting to provide a historical view of separatism, beginning with the separation of activist women from the male left in the 1960s, Rich's essay is important in that it identifies many of the different articulations of separatism that circulated within the feminist movement throughout the 1960s and 70s.

Rich is also concerned with understanding the racial dynamics of a feminist/lesbian separatism which advocates an all-female world: "If the white lesbian/feminist chooses not to work in coalitions with men, does she also become unable to grasp the different choices of the woman of color, under white racism, to maintain survival connections with her racial community of origin--males included? Can the complexity and courage of each position be honored, its radicalism understood?"\textsuperscript{71} While Rich describes the publication of works written by women of color such as Conditions 5: The Black Women's Issue and This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color as "a necessary act of separation" from both "the struggles of Third World men and women together" and "the white-Anglo-European feminist movement," as a white woman she declines to label such projects as separatist because "there is an on-going problem with white women's definitions of the lives and actions of women of color--the problem of our own racism and that of the white mind in the patriarchal world."\textsuperscript{72}

While Rich began the essay concerned with the meaning of separatism, Rich's conclusion suggests that problems with separatism are found not in theory, but in practice, where its possibilities are prescribed by the same set of rules which limit women's lives in a non-separatist world: "I find myself wondering if perhaps the real question at issue is not separatism itself but how and when and with what kinds of conscious identity it is practiced, and to what degree any act of separation is more than an act of
withdrawing from difference with those whose pain we can choose not to engage” (my emphasis).\(^7\)3

Although Rich’s focus on women’s access to choice appears to echo Barbara and Beverly Smith’s concerns with white separatist privilege and the luxury of “invit[ing] the goddess,” in a response published in a subsequent issue of *Sinister Wisdom* Barbara Smith criticized Rich for appearing to racially polarize the debate by identifying separatism with white women and non-separatism with women of color and for ignoring the different historical conditions and motivations between feminist/lesbian and racial separatisms.\(^7\)4

According to Smith, activist groups formed by women of color in the 1960s and 70s did not have to exclude white women as an ideological stance: white women’s racism and racial segregation already did that. Furthermore, as an editor of *Conditions 5* and a contributor to *This Bridge Called My Back* Smith explains that while such writings were published primarily to reach Third World women, they were also intended for as diverse an audience as possible. Both Rich and Smith acknowledge the complexity of theorizing and practicing separatism within a racist society and both attempt to expose an explicit link between separatist practices and social/economic privilege.

Smith’s response serves as an important addendum to Rich’s analysis, as well as an example of the kind of compelling dialogue around racism, anti-racism, and other biases that continues to challenge the women’s movement’s most established premises today. Like Marina Franchild, both Rich and Smith recognize that many women can not choose separatism as an alternative lifestyle or political strategy because they lack the career, resources, family support, safety, or community to achieve and maintain it. However, unlike Franchild, both Rich and Smith question the desirability of attaining a separatist stance. Franchild’s protest that Third World and lower-
class women are "forced to commute between the real world and the preferred world of women" suggests that these women would choose separatism if they could. Yet Smith and Rich, like Bunch before them, are, if not strongly opposed, at least sceptical of separatism, particularly of a cultural separatism which promotes the idea that permanent separation from men will simultaneously eliminate all other oppressions. Furthermore, Franchild's rhetoric ("preferred world of women") implies not just that separatism is something all women would choose if they could, but that it is something they should choose. For Rich and Smith, on the other hand, separatism itself forces women to choose, not between the "real world [of men]" and "the preferred world of women," but between expansive political alliances and narrowly prescriptive isolation.

Thus, the coalition politics which grew out of organizing by women of color in the 1980s directly challenges the viability of any but a temporary separatism. As Bernice Johnson Reagon so eloquently declared at the West Coast Women's Music Festival in 1981:

We've pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that is "yours only"--just for the people you want to be there. Even when we have our "women-only" festivals, there is no such thing. The fault is not necessarily with the organizers of the gathering. To a large extent it's because we have just finished with that kind of isolating. There is no hiding place. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. It's over. Give it up.75

As we shall see in Chapter Four, even the type of material separatism as practiced by early presses such as Daughters would be revised by lesbian and Third World women's presses such as Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press who were more concerned with addressing the absence of "Third World women of all racial/cultural heritages, sexualities, and classes" in both mainstream and feminist publishing than they were with segregating themselves from white women or men.76
Even before the movement-wide challenge to race- and class-biased feminism was effectively mounted by women and lesbians of color, however, women writers who were frustrated by the limited choices they were encountering within the movement's print culture were expressing dissatisfaction with stringent "woman-only" or "lesbian-only" publishing practices. Many were concerned that admonitions to publish only in the feminist/lesbian press provided them fewer, rather than greater, choices about the audiences they wanted to reach, the writing they wanted to produce, and the money they wanted--or needed--to make. Jan Clausen's essay, "The Politics of Publishing and the Lesbian Community," included in the much-welcomed 1976 special issue of Sinister Wisdom devoted to lesbian literature, documents the 20 responses she received from lesbian writers, editors, and publishers to a questionnaire entitled "Publishing as a Political Act." Clausen admits that her motivation in writing the article was political, that her analysis is "avowedly subjective, one voice among many," and that her basic assumption is "a writer's decisions about how to make her work available to an audience are in some measure political decisions." Perceptively, Clausen draws an inherent connection between writing, publishing, and reading as personally and politically material acts: "For it is not only the content of art but its context which determines its value and impact." Not surprisingly, while many of Clausen's respondents shared this ideology, they differed as to "how to proceed from there," for as we have seen, even though they comprise a fairly circumscribed movement, feminists' politics are as diverse as their writings.

Clausen writes that the impetus for the article came from three separate controversies surrounding publishing decisions in the lesbian community. The first concerned the refusal of several lesbian writers to be
included in a sequel to the 1975 lesbian special issue of the small press review magazine *Margins*. The second incident involved a conflict between contributors to *The Lesbian Reader*, originally published by Amazon Press in 1975, and Harper and Row over fees and copyrights which led to the project's ultimate demise. The third controversy arose from a panel discussion on lesbian publishing held at the May 1976 New York City Lesbian Conference. Panel members included June Arnold and Parke Bowman from Daughters, Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin of Out & Out Books, Fran Winant of Violet Press and writer Bertha Harris. According to Clausen, what was intended as a discussion of the practical aspects of publishing turned into "an acrimonious debate over the validity of publishing with 'the man'" in which Arnold, Bowman, and Harris were so outspoken against mainstream publishing that many audience members, including Clausen, were reluctant to openly disagree.

While the respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of the need for women's presses, the women's answers to Clausen's questions regarding publishing preferences, relationship between writing content and press choice, variety of publishing options, and responsibility to the lesbian community almost unexceptionally agreed that 1) women should take advantage of all the options available to them and 2) women need more options. Although many women said they would prefer to publish with a feminist press, practical considerations such as money, desire for greater distribution, need for mainstream recognition, or inability to publish with feminist presses (particularly for fiction writers) were cited as reasons to publish with the trade press.

While many women admitted that for them commercial publishing was the only option that provided the financial compensation they needed to be
able to write, author Susan Griffin drew an insightful connection between an author's social position and diversity in feminist publishing:

I believe that in fact those who are critical of Feminist writers publishing with trade houses must face the consequences of their criticism: that the only women who can write without support are the wealthy and those who are not responsible for the care of children. And if those are the only women who can devote full time to writing the content of Feminist writing will not reflect the lives of most women.80

Several women also expressed concern that the feminist press remain a true alternative press rather than try to compete directly with establishment presses. Beth Hodges, editor of the Margins lesbian special issue, for example, voiced concern that if lesbian publishers were "busy publishing what others would be willing to publish . . . there's lesbian work that is not being published."81 Maureen Brady, novelist and founder of Spinsters, Ink, did not want to see "lesbian publishers attempt to compete with major publishers in the sense that high volume sales become a goal."82

According to Clausen, a "recurrent theme" throughout the responses was that "choices have to be made according to each individual's situation and needs, and cannot be judged categorically."83 Additionally, many recognized that interaction between feminist and trade presses could increase the potential for the success of feminist writers and presses by enlarging their market through increased attention to their works and by providing capital directly through the sale or leasing of rights (as with Rubyfruit Jungle) or indirectly through spillover demand for feminist-published books by authors of mainstream bestsellers.84

Predictably, one of the most tendentious proponents of non-separatist publishing policies was Rita Mae Brown. In response to Clausen's invitation for additional comments, Brown provided the following reprimand:

Polarization is the sign of a weak mind. Once you think establishment presses vs. feminist presses you already blew it. The point is to be
imaginative. To try and find ways to use the establishment press for the benefit of feminist presses and to try and help the feminist presses become more professional. As it now stands feminist presses are generally run on the whim of the owner. If they don’t like you, no deal. That’s no way to run a business or a revolution.85

While Brown’s comments were no doubt influenced by her own difficulties publishing within the feminist movement, writer and editor Julia Stanley reminded readers that there is more at stake in feminist publishing than individual reputations or careers and urged them to “seize whatever opportunities are available”: “Looking backward, lesbians face an existential void of thousands of years. If we should fail now to make ourselves heard, we will fail future generations of lesbians who will wonder where we were, just as we wonder about our foremothers.”86

Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of feminist presses to the movement, Melanie Kaye (now Kaye/Kantrowitz) provided an alternative perspective on the place of feminist publishing in the movement as a whole. Like Franchild, she questions the ability of “alternative institutions” such as feminist presses to “revolutionize society.” However, unlike Franchild, she is critical of separatist structures and calls for “more discussion of how we can use art in service of social change . . . and less of how to build women’s or lesbian enclaves.”87

Clausen agrees with Kaye and others that feminist presses are but one segment of a political movement and counterculture which in turn “exists in reluctant symbiosis with the dominant culture.”88 As feminist businesses, they provide an alternative to mainstream publishing, yet they reluctantly participate in the same patriarchal capitalist system which they seek to overthrow. For Clausen, this paradoxical position illustrates “why the women’s presses cannot be our final goal, our ultimate solution--and why they are absolutely necessary to us.”89 The anti-separatist rhetoric of Clausen’s
conclusion dismisses the possibility of “remain[ing] aloof” from a patriarchal world: “We live in occupied territory. I am determined not to lose sight of that reality, no matter what opportunities may become available to me or to other individual women.”90

Clausen’s metaphor of feminist politics as an “occupied territory” provides a useful counterpoint to Gould’s title, “Creating a Woman’s World,” for one of the key concepts within separatism was certainly the idea of constructing a space where women could be liberated from the legal, economic, and social control of men, a safe haven where women could live free from fear of male violence and power. Yet in contrast to the utopian ring of Gould’s “woman’s world,” Clausen’s distopic “occupied territory,” like Franchil’s “real world,” acknowledges the heterosexist battlefield that most women must negotiate every day.

Clausen’s metaphor thus rewrites Gould’s caption. Rather than ask whether “such an enterprise” as Daughters can “succeed and remain ‘woman-identified,’” feminists like Clausen, Arnold, Bunch, Rich, and Smith have attempted to reconstitute the question in their own terms by articulating the interconnected dynamics of feminist praxis, institutionalized heterosexism, and the capital-intensive, market-dependent nature of publishing. The “questions of money and power” which Daughters was “struggling with” involved much more than selling books. Feminist presses by definition have an ideological and material commitment to supporting feminist politics in some form or another, while establishment presses have a commitment only to profit and furthering the status quo. By positing a dichotomy between (presumably) financial success and political vision, Gould’s question remains entrenched within a hegemonic definition of publishing in which “success” is measured in books sold and profits made, rather than equated with
coherence to political ideology, as in cultural separatism, ultimate overthrow of the “literary-industrial complex,” as in radical separatism, or creation of alternative practices which provide economic opportunities for women while challenging the basic assumptions of publishing business-as-usual, as in material separatism.

By industry standards, Daughters, Inc. would probably not be considered a successful press. Of its 21 books published over seven years, only Rubyfruit Jungle would be considered an authentic “bestseller.” By WLM standards, however, Daughters’ success was unprecedented. As one of the first presses to publish novels by women, particularly those of an experimental nature, Daughters’ work continues to influence both mainstream and feminist/lesbian publishing today. Rubyfruit Jungle is perenially cited as a classic of both feminist and lesbian and gay literature, and has been reprinted innumerable times, including as part of the Quality Paperback Club’s Triangle Classics series. Other reprinted Daughters novels include June Arnold’s Sister Gin (Feminist Press), Elana Nachmann/Dykewomon’s Riverfinger Women (Naiad Press), and, most recently, Bertha Harris’ lover as part of New York University Press’s “The Cutting Edge” lesbian series.

Although June Arnold once claimed that every feminist book was read by at least five women, there are no figures available which testify to the number of women’s lives touched in some way by Daughters’ publishing efforts. However, the volume of printed material alone devoted to feminist publishing in general and the separatist debates in particular bears witness to the value given to feminist print culture within the early WLM. As a vocal and respected proponent of the feminist movement, Daughters changed the face of feminist publishing by forcing separatists to confront the limitations of publishing exclusively within separatist circles.


6Ibid., 245.


8Radicalesbians, 245.

9Radicalesbians, 245.


12Ibid., 217.

13Ibid., 241.

14Ibid., 243.

15Ibid., 242. For Koedt's critique, see her essay "Lesbianism and Feminism" in *Radical Feminism*, 246-258.

16Ibid., 242.


18Ibid., 100.

19Ibid., 61.

20Ibid., 61.

21Ibid., 100.

22Ibid., 60, 61, 102. Marilyn Frye also discusses the economic consequences of lesbian separatism in "Some Reflections on Separatism and Power," collected in Frye's *The

23 Ibid., 102.
24 Ibid., 100, 102.
25 Ibid., 100.


27 Daring to Be Bad, especially 3-11.
28 Ibid., 3.
30 Ibid., 244.

31 "The Feminists: A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles," in Radical Feminism, 375.

33 Bunch, 102.
34 Gould, 10.
36 Ibid., 38.
37 Ibid., 38.
38 Ibid., 11.
39 Ibid., 11.
40 Ibid., 11.
41 Ibid., 36.


44 Ibid., 19.
However, even Daughters had difficulty resisting such status: in a Daughters’ advertisement immediately following Arnold’s article, each book is listed with a line from reviews by such establishment media as The New York Times, The Times Literary Supplement, and Library Journal.


Reprinted in Bunch’s Passionate Politics; see page 224.


From the statement of purpose printed in each issue.

Marina Franchild, “Just What Can Feminists Afford?” in Big Mama Rag, 6.4 (April 1978), 5-8, 12; and 6.5 (May 1978), 6-7, 10. Further references will appear in the text as parts I and II.

Gould, 36.

Ibid., 34.

Kay Whitlock, Big Mama Rag 6.6 (June 1978): 2.

“Editorial,” Big Mama Rag 6.7 (July 1978): 4. Also see “bmr: where we’re at” in the May issue, page 4. The newspaper’s self-criticism was subsequently attacked by readers as censorship because it implied that “controversial” articles should receive a more stringent treatment than others. See the letters by Ann Leffler and the women from Bloodroot restaurant/bookstore in Bridgeport, Connecticut in the July 1978 issue, pages 2-3. Franchild also responded to this editorial in September 1978, protesting the characterization of her critique as a personal attack and objecting to the deletion of her letter’s acknowledgments, which BMR immediately included on the same page directly following her letter.

See the letters by Ann Leffler and Emma Goldfields in the July issue, page 6.

BMR 6.8 (September 1978): 12.

Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” in Sister Outsider (Ithaca, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), 66-71. The quotation appears on page 67: “To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy.”

The statement first appeared in Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism, edited by Zillah Eisenstein (Monthly Review Press, 1978) and has been reprinted in All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982).

64ibid., 277.


66ibid., 70.

67ibid., 69.

68ibid., 74.


70ibid., 83.

71ibid., 87.

72ibid., 88-89.

73ibid., 90.


76Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was formed in 1981 by Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Hattie Gosset and Myrna Bain. The quotation is from their 1991 catalogue.


78ibid., 95.

79ibid., 95.

80ibid., 99.

81ibid., 101, Clausen's elipses.

82ibid., 102.

83ibid., 103.

84Dorothy Allison's recent bestseller *Bastard Out of Carolina* (Dutton, 1992), for example, will undoubtedly benefit Firebrand Press, the publisher of her other works, *Trash* and *The Women Who Hate Me*.

85ibid., 110.
86Ibid., 104.
87Ibid., 110.
88Ibid., 113.
89Ibid., 113.
90Ibid., 115.


CHAPTER THREE
True-to-Life Feminist Fictions

The real question is, how much reality can anyone stand to read about especially about women.
Judy Grahn, “Murdering the King’s English”

To approach any feminist literary work today seems a daunting endeavor given the sheer twenty-five-year weight of feminist literary criticism. At this point in what may be accurately labeled a feminist literary critical tradition, it may be impossible to discuss even one literary text written by a woman without reference to the history of feminist criticism that provides an interpretive context for it. Yet in this chapter I want to attempt to do just that. Because the three books that I will examine here—Give Me Your Good Ear by Maureen Brady and True to Life Adventure Stories, volumes I and II, edited by Judy Grahn—were written concurrent with the beginnings of feminist literary criticism as practiced in most U.S. English departments today, I am interested in how these texts themselves functioned as feminist literary criticism at the time they were published by feminist presses during the 1970s. Furthermore, because for these books the writer, in the case of Brady, and writer/editor, in the case of Grahn, was in effect the same person as the publisher, I will investigate how the production of feminist fiction by two important feminist presses, Spinsters Ink and Diana Press, constituted a practice of feminist literary criticism.

Realizing that any attempt to bracket these books is undoubtedly compromised by my own training as a feminist scholar in the practice of feminist critical study, I will nevertheless undertake to locate them
predominantly within a precise moment of both feminist and literary history. My pretense, then, is to imagine them as read by a woman for whom the concept of "women's literature" was associated with the new and radical ideas of women's liberation. That is, I am interested in reading these works on their own terms, rather than through the lens of any established feminist literary concepts such as *l'écriture féminine* or the female avant-garde. This imaginative reading may not be so pretentious, in fact, for with the exception of Grahn, who was known as both a publisher and poet within feminist circles, the other authors had no or limited literary reputation or experience and wrote for women like themselves, readers they conceived of as *real* women leading *real* lives, rather than for critics or members of a literary establishment.

It is to the concept of women's reality that the writers and publishers I examine here turned in their project to produce literature about themselves and other women which was as truthful as it could possibly be. However, for these writers the question of the real was never one of metaphysics, but rather based on politics and aesthetics, power and narrative. To be "true-to-life," literature need not be "based on a true story," but instead must reflect the reality of some woman somewhere. In this way, these writers sidestepped the distinction between a story which is made up and one which really happened: such a distinction no longer mattered. What did matter instead was that the stories "provoke, teach, reveal women to other women, arouse strong emotions, redefine--because they are true." Yet even Grahn refused to differentiate between lived reality and fiction in her definition of a true story as something "based on information which is close to, or is, the original source of the story." Alternatively, in her introduction to a 1981 collection of lesbian fiction, writer Elly Bulkin proposed that the definition of fiction be enlarged to reflect "a continuum that ranges from what is 'made up' (though
drawing on the author's experience) to what is based on the author's direct experience, though screened through her consciousness, worked on by her imagination, deviating as she wishes from an objective rendering. Once the distinction between truth and fiction is set aside, whether the authenticity of a story is manifest in the act of writing or in the act of living becomes less important than that it provide a contrast to the lies about women found in writing by men with their cultural investment in sexism and misogyny, an idea suggested by Kate Millett's analysis of male authors in her 1970 bestseller, *Sexual Politics*. In a testimonial on the back of the second volume of *True to Life Adventure Stories*, for example, writer Susan Griffin refers to the works inside as "lived stories" in which "[e]very word, scene, gesture speaks authentically of the real lives we live as women. No false images intrude to try to convince us we are what we are not."

For feminists writing in the 1970s, the challenge to break away from male-defined literary concepts led to an interrogation of every aspect of literature for ways in which women's experiences had been ignored, censored, and falsified by male writers in the past and could now be expressed faithfully and truthfully by women writers in the present. Speaking as part of a 1971 Modern Language Association panel on "The Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century," poet Adrienne Rich described the task of the woman writer as one of "re-vision":

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh.

According to Rich, women need to know about the writing of the past in order "not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us."

This breaking away
from a male literary tradition demands “an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive.” Feminist writing not only comes directly out of a writer’s experience as a woman, but also questions traditional assumptions about that experience. “Imaginative transformation,” then, is never simply a matter of recording the day-to-day moments in a woman’s life, but requires a feminist consciousness about the act of recording itself. Feminist politics are integrally connected with feminist aesthetics within the struggle “to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into,” for feminist writers were concerned not only with documenting social inequalities, but with transcending them.

To see and to name and to live afresh sounds deceptively simple, reflecting an idealistic rhetoric finally tempered by Rich’s concluding admonishment, “As women, we have our work cut out for us.” Writing the truth about women is hard work, a fact inherent in novelist and publisher June Arnold’s statement that “we’ve worked our asses off to get down our sense of reality.” Such a statement implies that a feminist sense of reality is something that is never self-evident, but instead carefully crafted, a function of both form and content. Grahn delineates the integral relationship between the two in her introduction to True to Life Adventure Stories when she declares that “[h]ow a thing is said has everything to do with what is said.” For Grahn and other writers, fiction, or, more accurately, narrative discourse, provided the perfect vehicle through which feminist consciousness could render women’s “lived stories” as “true-to-life.” The feminist writer is more than just a scribe, a word which evokes women’s traditional roles as secretaries and recorders, but is instead an active “shaper of the raw material of her stories [which are] a mix of her imagination and her experience.” The writer’s art is found in her ability to write precisely, for “in real precision the
content and form are the same." Precision transcends the categories of realism and experimentalism because "even those [texts] which are clearly-marked fantasies are more actual than not, and illustrate . . . frequent female imaginings."¹²

Despite its association with mimetic representation, realism as a literary mode was often perceived as problematic to the task of portraying women's realities. In a 1973 essay entitled "Humanbecoming: Form & Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel," Ellen Morgan declared that a realistic novel in which "a heroine shows what it is like to live as a free and fully human female being in a patriarchal society" had yet to be written.¹³ According to Morgan, "It is next to impossible for a realistic novel to be written which defies the sex-role system, for society everywhere upholds this system, and social realities are staples of the realistic novel."¹⁴ Citing the "internal form" of what she labels "neo-feminist" novels as "controlled by the dynamics of struggle," Morgan proposed Alix Kate Shulman's Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, published in 1972 by Bantam Books, as a model of neo-feminist realism which portrays "the actual possibilities for struggling to achieve authentic selfhood," although the novel ends with only the promise, rather than the portrayal, of self-actualization.¹⁵ For Morgan, the problem of realism seems to lie within society itself, rather than in literary technique. Novelists would be able to provide artistic alternatives to patriarchal society only once real women transcended the sex-role system.

Throughout the late 1960s and 70s, however, realism continued to be a dominant mode within feminist fiction, particularly those novels of the "mad housewife" variety.¹⁶ Responding to the charge that there are no postmodern women writers, Bonnie Zimmerman countered that feminist writers have had a different political, and therefore different aesthetic agenda, from male
writers. Zimmerman differentiates between male-authored "self-conscious and artificial" metafiction and women's experimentation which "usually serves the ultimate end of realism." Serving the "ultimate end of realism," however, refers not to any loyalty to realism as a distinct literary style, particularly in its conventional privileging of an omniscient and judgmental authorial voice, nor does it regard postmodernism as a more artistic, and hence superior, literary style. Rather, it asserts the right to place a feminist consciousness of women's lives at the center of a literary text. In other words, feminist fiction could never be concerned with "how a thing is said" to the exclusion of "what is said." According to Zimmerman, "it is women's real lives that defy the laws of the text," laws which have always been created by men, for men.

What is especially salient, yet unremarked, in Zimmerman's discussion of feminist writing is the association of experimentalism with feminist press-published books and realism with trade-published books. While Zimmerman acknowledges that many of the experimental novels she discusses were published by Daughters, Inc., the most successful feminist/lesbian press to publish fiction during the 1970s, she locates those novels within the specific context of lesbian, rather than feminist, literature. Such categorization fails to note that while the novels she calls "unrelentingly realistic" were published predominantly by the corporate presses for a mass market audience, the majority of the self-reflexive, anti-mimetic works she examines were published either by the feminist presses or written by authors initially promoted by those presses. Rather than begging the question of whether or not "the lesbian public likes postmodern fiction no more than the public in general," this difference implies that feminist presses were more interested than mainstream presses in publishing books which challenged literary
conventions such as realism and in turn attempted to innovate literary forms for new feminist and lesbian contents.19

Given many feminist writers' lack of allegiance to any literary mode or tradition, the real question was not whether one particular literary style or another was adequate for portraying women's reality; rather, the real question, returning to the quotation from Judy Grahn with which I opened this chapter, was "[h]ow much reality can anyone stand to read about especially about women."20 By asking "how much," Grahn's question seems to call for a quantitative, rather than a qualitative, answer. Such a question has implications for a feminist literary market and, as an editor and writer, Grahn is undoubtedly concerned with selling books, yet certainly must realize the implausibility of measuring reality, or even the reading of reality, in quantifiable amounts, as if reality could ever correspond to x number of pages or x number of stories. Grahn's question, then, must be considered rhetorically, and in fact the wording of the question itself invokes an answer directly related to the kind of fiction published by the feminist presses. First, the lack of a comma between the words "about" and "especially" creates a run-on syntax which obviates the distinction or separation usually signified by the word "especially." Thus the subject of women's reality becomes the subject of the whole question, rather than a specialized case. In other words, Grahn is not really concerned here with reading about just anyone's reality, but with reading about women's reality as, to borrow a term from linguistics, the unmarked, unspecialized category through which all other subcategories are represented and interpreted. This focus is, in fact, definitive for feminist texts in that they derive their meaning from the centering, rather than the marginalization, of a feminist interpretation of women's experiences.21
Grahn's comma omission is also significant in that it anticipates and models the kind of writing found in both of the *True to Life* collections she edited. Part of being true to life is being true to the life of the writer, including her socioeconomic and educational background. As a working-class author, Grahn was concerned with unconsciously imposing literary standards upon a text which would distort its meaning. Non-standard English use was another strategy by which women writers could center a story's meaning—and a reader's identification—around women's experiences. For Grahn and others, "'[m]urdering the King's English can be a crime only if you identify with the King.'"22 By refusing to participate in standard punctuation practice, Grahn's question exemplifies the relationship between political content and aesthetic form which informed many texts published by the feminist presses of the 1970s. In a sense, then, Grahn's question can be answered in terms of a feminist literary market, if not quantitatively, at least qualitatively by the kind of literature feminist presses produced, as well as the way they produced it.

Given the many compelling stories written and published by feminist writers since the 1970s, it would be easy for feminist literary critics to focus exclusively on content in these works since it is topically that they depart most radically from literary standards. Topics which revealed the brutal circumstances of rape, incest, poverty, battering, and prostitution in many women's lives were not common literary fare in the 1970s, especially when told from a feminist perspective. Also absent from mainstream literature were stories which celebrated women's love for each other as expressed through lesbianism, female bonding, and feminist resistance to patriarchy. Such topics represented, to borrow Ellen Friedman's phrase, the "not yet presented"—the painfully honest truths of women's lives.23 In fact, while the feminist presses have always striven to present such truths, many of these
topics are still the “not yet presented” of mainstream publishing, an absence which speaks a truth of its own. Such speaking can carry a heavy price, yet for many women writers the alternative—silence—is weightier. Addressing a Modern Language Association audience in 1977, Audre Lorde’s words become chillingly prescient as they reveal the price of silence:

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences.24

At the same MLA panel, lesbian writer and editor Julia Penelope Stanley expressed the importance of language in portraying the truths Lorde spoke of seeking: “Naming ourselves; naming our lives; naming our actions. Without language, I am nameless, I am invisible, I am silent. If I refuse language, I refuse myself.”25 Writers such as Lorde and Stanley believed that the truth of women’s lives could be articulated through precise language once it was freed from patriarchal constraints. Language was not inherently one of what Lorde refers to as the “master’s tools,” although it had certainly been used by the master against women and to his own benefit.26 It was up to women writers to utilize language’s liberatory possibilities for their own empowerment. Lorde’s words regarding Black women and men apply to feminist writers as well: “it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment.”27

While not all feminist writers identified themselves as part of any particular literary tradition, some did place themselves in relation to Modernist women such as Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, H.D. and Renée Vivien in their attempts to “phrase what has never been.”28 In particular, the writers associated with Daughters, Inc., including June Arnold,
Bertha Harris, Monique Wittig, and Elana Nachmann, were outspoken proponents of the kind of experimentalism practiced by “pre-women’s movement” writers. Speaking as part of a 1975 MLA panel on lesbian literature, novelist and Daughters founder June Arnold outlined how language was being used in a new way by what she labeled “lesbian-feminist” or “feminist-lesbian” novels:

One of the things we have noticed in reading women’s press writings is a change in language. We’ve gotten rid of harsh expressions like screw and spread your legs (women as property/objects), we’ve reclaimed fat and wrinkled as adjectives of beauty, we’ve experimented with unpatriarchal spelling and neuter pronouns. I think we’ve changed our sentence structure, and paragraphs no longer contain one subject since the inclusiveness of many complex things is striven for. We write to express feelings not appearances... It’s clear to me that lesbian feminist writers are trying to shape a new tool for new uses, to reclaim our language for ourselves with a very strong sense that we have been divided from it.29

According to Arnold, these writers, including herself, were following Stein’s project of “exploring the infinite complexity of the present” because as lesbian feminists, they have no past.30

While Arnold’s criteria certainly applied to the novels published by Daughters, other feminist and lesbian writers like Judy Grahn were less concerned with following their Modernist foremothers than with having access to writing at all, particularly if they lacked the standard language skills associated with formal education or speaking English as a primary language. As Grahn points out, non-standard or working-class vocabulary, punctuation, and syntax is acceptable in literature only when it is spoken by a character—“an object to be quoted and described, and in effect, looked down upon from a class distance”—but never when it comes from an author herself.31 Such an author would be considered illiterate, meaning “not-literate, not able to read and write” and therefore “not able to think.”32 Women writers of color face
racist assumptions about language use as well. In her 1972 essay, "White English/ Black English: The Politics of Translation," poet June Jordan decried the hypocrisy of a system that forces schoolchildren to struggle through Shakespeare but outlaws Black English as "substandard" and "injurious to young readers." Despite different relationships to language, however, feminist writers were allied in their belief that language could reflect the complexity of women's experiences. Because it wielded the power to both "trap" and "liberate" us, language mattered both aesthetically and politically. Just as Arnold spoke of being united with a language women had previously been divided from, Grahn wrote that for feminists, "our language, like our lives, should belong to us."

In conjunction with liberating women's writing from standard language practices, feminist writers experimented with narrative forms which were "neither altered for the sake of drama, nor obscured [the subject] for the sake of safety." This interest in narrative form was not simply formalistic, but ideological in that the relationship between women and narrative was central to every text. Form must both relate and relate to content. That is, narrative structure carries the responsibility of not only telling the story in a way that is meaningful to the reader, but also of telling the story in a way that is commensurate with its feminist imperative to tell the truth of women's lives. For example, choosing marriage or death as the dramatic resolution of the plot was no longer compatible with a feminism which advocated alternative options for women. Nor was it necessary to subversively write "beyond the endings" through ambiguity or irony, as Rachel DuPlessis has suggested of earlier women's texts. Instead, many feminist writers chose to resolve their stories through the realization of lesbian identity (the coming out story has
become a staple genre of lesbian literature), divorce or separation, and/or the discovery and acquisition of meaningful work.

However, many feminist writers resisted the idea of narrative closure altogether. This resistance is directly related to the predominance of what I call a "sense of becoming" in feminist fiction. June Arnold alluded to this sense in her discussion of feminist lesbian fiction when she stated that "[n]o one is born a lesbian feminist—we ourselves are in process and the process will be revealed in the novel too." Similarly, Ellen Morgan wrote of "Woman as neo-feminism conceives of her [as] a creature in the process of becoming." For Morgan, this new woman's story is "the story of an education, of a coming to consciousness and a subsequent development of self and search for authenticity, of rebellion and resolution." According to Morgan, neo-feminist writers tell these stories by recasting the traditional forms of the *bildungsroman*, the historical novel, and the propaganda novel.

Although many feminist novels, particularly those published by corporate presses, undoubtedly do fit within Morgan's paradigm, I am less interested in how women have revised old forms than in how they invented new ones. Feminist innovation in narrative comes from the realization that conventional plot forms are incompatible with feminist desires. In her book *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis discusses the narrative positions available to women within traditional structural analyses of narrative which have come to form the basis of narratology today. Although early works, such as Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, focused more on narrative's components and their relations than on its works and effects, these theories are useful in understanding the limitations placed not only on female characters, but on female desire in narrative texts, limitations which are still operative in fiction (and film) today. According to de Lauretis, the basis of all narrative
movement for centuries has been "that of a passage, a transformation
predicated on the figure of a hero [which] rests on a specific assumption
about sexual difference." In *Morphology of the Folktale*, for example, Propp
proposes that the hero's quest for a princess "derives from her historical key
role in dynastic succession, the transfer of power from one ruler to another
and from one form of succession, in a matriarchal system, to another in the
patriarchal state." Soviet semiotician Jurij Lotman broke down plot function
even further by suggesting that all plots are based simply on "entry into a
closed space, and emergence from it." Within this plot function, characters
are either mobile or immobile and gendered accordingly: the mobile hero
must be male and the immobile obstacle must be female. Furthermore, the
female role represents "what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or
death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and
matter."

It was in liberation from such limitations that early feminist writers tried
not only to create new subject positions for women, but to re-imagine the
narrative processes by which these subject positions could be inscribed. Like
de Lauretis, these writers were interested in answering the question "it seldom
occurs to anyone to ask": how does it feel to assume the subject position in
one's own story, rather than function as a figure or marker "through which the
hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning"?

De Lauretis goes on to discuss, via Freud and Lacan (and I am greatly
simplifying her argument here), how classic cinema attempts to seduce the
female spectator not simply into assuming the fixed and immobile object
position (the obstacle to be overcome), but into representing narrative closure
itself (the prize or reward promised to the hero for overcoming the obstacle),
thus ascertaining a double identification (and here de Lauretis departs from
Laura Mulvey’s classic work on visual pleasure) with both the figure of movement and the figure of closure, with both the subject and the space of narrative. Like other feminist film theorists such as Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Tania Modleski, B. Ruby Rich and Judith Mayne, de Lauretis attempts to theorize alternative subject/spectator positions for women in cinema, yet she finally concedes that “[i]t may well be, however, that the story has to be told differently.”

This is exactly the project with which early feminist press-published writers were engaged: how to tell a different story differently. The simplest way for women to tell a different story differently would seem to be a reversal of the male and female subject/object positions within the narrative (i.e., female hero, male obstacle) and this is indeed the narrative logic of many of the women’s novels published by mainstream presses. However, this reversal may tell a different story, but it does not really tell it differently, for the narrative is still centered around heterosexual relations and closure is often indistinguishable from the traditional, heterosexist model in which men and women marry and live happily ever after. Lesbian fiction provides one alternative to this model in that the absenting or moving of male characters to the periphery of a story creates a space in which the question of lesbian desire can be entertained. Yet lesbian content is not synonymous with lesbian form. As the many lesbian romance novels published by lesbian presses such as Naiad attest, telling a different story in the same way only produces the same story with a difference: after all, someone still gets the girl.

While lesbian romances are fun to read and fill a definite audience need, again, I am more interested here in difference with a difference.

True-to-life stories do not follow a simple realist unfolding of plot or lead to a climactic moment of struggle and final resolution of conflict. Rather,
as in true life itself, the verdict is infinitely delayed and the question of what will happen next always remains. Stories of becoming are stories of potential, not resolution or closure. They break the realist imperative by resisting any ultimate disclosure of truth and instead revel in the process of discovery itself. According to Elly Bulkin, "For the most part, the stories end at a place where more of the same is promised—or with endings that are certainly not conclusive: tensions remain—around monogamy, class, race and age differences, the needs and expectations of individual women."47 For Arnold, they are "inclusive . . . not ending in final victory/defeat but ending with the sense that the community continues." Although they may "satisf[y] in some different way than the male resolution-of-conflict" and "lose a little bit of the old adrenalin-raising intensity by doing this," feminist writers and readers are learning "to express the intensity differently and . . . to hear it differently, in different ways." 48

By including feminist readers, Arnold's description locates feminist fiction within the feminist and lesbian communities through which it circulates. This was the audience Grahn had in mind when she wrote that feminist writing "must be useful to women, must work in our interest. . . . must not give false information which would fall apart when people try to make use of it."49 The consummate editor, Grahn never forgot her audience. While in her introduction to Volume I of True to Life Adventure Stories she wrote that "[h]ow a thing is said has everything to do with what is said," she revised this in her Volume II introduction to the more reader-oriented "the way in which a thing is told affects what it means to others."50

In their theories of integrative form and content, Grahn and others anticipated feminist theory's critique of phallocentric, heterosexist knowledge systems and advanced the feminist inquiry into situated knowledges. "It is not
an accident," wrote Grahn, "that workingclass women produced the material
substance of this book, and that the stories say what they do" for "the way the
truth is told has everything to do with how true it is, how material it is, how
much material substance it has." As feminist theorists have shown, truth-
telling reflects a reality that "has everything to do" with the material conditions
of its production. In 1978, Grahn wrote:

The reclamation of ideas, political directions, culture—in which we are
involved with the independent women's presses and other institutions
supported by women make it possible for women to begin to speak
honestly, and in a whole voice. . . . The more we do this, the more
concrete information we will all have to realistically appraise our situations,
our relationships to each other and to the world."52

These ideas were echoed eight years later by Teresa de Lauretis in her
introduction to Feminist Studies/Critical Studies when she wrote that
"feminism defines itself as a political instance, not merely a sexual politics but
a politics of experience, of everyday life, which later then in turn enters the
public sphere of expression and creative practice, displacing aesthetic
hierarchies and generic categories, and which thus establishes the semiotic
ground for a different production of reference and meaning."53 The
vocabulary is different, but the sentiment is the same: the more truth we tell,
the more truth we know. Through true-to-life feminist fiction, feminist
publishers, presses, and writers initiated the dialogue about what de Lauretis
would later call "the relation of experience to discourse . . . at issue in the
definition of feminism."54 Like feminists publishing fiction in the 1970s,
feminists today are still asking "how much reality can anyone stand to read
about especially about women?"

The 1970s proved a prolific time for the production of feminist fiction by
feminist presses. Although there are many interesting novels and short
stories that could be discussed in this chapter, I have chosen to focus on
Maureen Brady's *Give Me Your Good Ear* and the two volumes of *True to Life Adventure Stories* edited by Judy Grahn because they provide a contrapuntal perspective on feminist fiction. One a novel, the other two collections of short stories by various writers (which I will treat ostensibly as one work). they contrast styles, characters, and plots, yet both contain stories which are interested in narrative movement which expresses the particular rhythms and tempos of individual women's lives. Both also provide a self-reflexive commentary (Brady through an afterword, Grahn through introductions) on the processes of their own production. Both were written between 1974 and 1978 and published between 1979 and 1981. Finally, both were reviewed in similar feminist arenas, with reviews even appearing together in the same issues of *Conditions* and *Chrysalis*.


All you women are the same.

Jack Kelly in *Give Me Your Good Ear*

Any published story has a story of its own to tell. These stories can take many forms: reviews, forewords, afterwords, prefaces, advertising, jacket covers, recommendations, etc. Even word of mouth commentary—a simple re-telling of the plot or statement of the theme—tells its own story: "It's a story about . . ." is just another version of the story.

In the afterword to Maureen Brady's *Give Me Your Good Ear*, Jacqueline St. Joan wrote that "there is another story behind this book and that is the story I want to tell." St. Joan recounts the difficulties Brady encountered in publishing her novel with both feminist and mainstream
presses and tells how Brady and Judith McDaniel, with the support of the feminist community, established their own press, Spinsters, Ink, and finally published the novel themselves. While St. Joan’s story is about publishing, and Brady’s novel is not, in many ways they tell the same story, for both write of the stakes involved in suppressing the true stories of women’s lives.

According to St. Joan, Brady spent almost five years writing her novel and another two trying to find a publisher for it. When she shared her frustration with St. Joan and other women at a weekend retreat, they urged her to publish the book herself. It was from this encouragement that Brady and Judith McDaniel founded Spinsters, Ink in 1978, publishing the novel and McDaniel’s *Reconstituting the World: The Poetry and Vision of Adrienne Rich* at the beginning of 1979. They chose the name Spinsters, Ink because for them a spinster was no longer “a pathetic old maid,” but “an enchanter who spun with words.” According to McDaniel, to spin means “to whirl and twirl, to revert, to spin on one’s heel, to turn everything upside down” and they “liked a name that insisted on turning everything upside down.”

The following year they published Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* and Lynn Strongin’s autobiographical novel of a mother caring for a daughter with polio, *Bones and Kim*, works which had received no interest from commercial presses. Although the press has undergone many incarnations since then, they celebrated their 15th anniversary in 1993 and in 1994 reissued Brady’s novel.

However, in 1978 this part of the story had yet to be written and, as St. Joan cautioned, “the celebration of the establishment of another of the welcome but too few feminist publishing houses should not overshadow the story of the debilitating reality with which women writers are faced in trying to be heard.”

Drawing on Brady’s rejection letters, St. Joan analyzed the patterns of repression operating behind this “debilitating reality.”
Unfortunately, *Give Me Your Good Ear* had been rejected by the few feminist presses that operated in the 1970s either because of their limited resources or because it did not fit their thematic or conceptual guidelines, particularly since it was not an explicitly lesbian novel. As one feminist publisher commented, "I think you might be wise to incorporate some coming out experience into it. After the boldness expressed in lesbian novels of late [Rita Mae Brown's bestselling *Rubyfruit Jungle*, for example, had been published in 1973 and reprinted as a mass-market paperback in 1977], it might have a hard time finding a publisher without a franker approach."58

Turning to the letters from commercial presses and literary agents, St. Joan examines the heterosexist assumptions implicit in their rejections and reveals how the predominant reason behind an establishment lack of interest in the novel was that it was not written in white male terms. For example, they found the character of Ben, the protagonist Francie's neurotic boyfriend, not "sympathetic" enough, and judged the scenes between them "too emotionally repetitive." By focusing on Ben's characterization, rather than on Francie's development, this reading predictably misses how the repetition of such scenes constructs the novel's feminist critique of male domination within heterosexual relationships. As St. Joan points out, "wouldn't life itself be more absorbing without so many emotionally repetitive scenes between women and men."59 Furthermore, patriarchal criteria in publishing also assumes that for a book to be "commercial," it must not only contain sex and violence, but a particular kind of sex and violence. In *Give Me Your Good Ear*, the sex is implicitly lesbian and the violence is justifiable homicide by a wife against the husband who has abused her. The novel is centered around Francie's memory of the night her mother stabbed her father, the repression of the events leading up to the murder, and the significance of that repression
in women's lives. Unlike the kind of gratuitous violence that fills mainstream novels, this murder is, in St. Joan's words, "clearly not the kind of violence that the male presses find marketable."

The equation of commercial success with heterosexist criteria leads to parallel assumptions that all women's books are the same and that the market for them is already crowded. "I like your writing enormously," one agent wrote Brady, "but in the last two years or so I have found the market enormously resistant to novels of women's growth and development, of the theme of learning to express anger, of making peace with one's mother, and past." Another agent claimed that although "the insights pointed out through Francie's situation [were] valid and important, [they] were not enough to set the novel apart in an ever more crowded market of women's novels. If you should decide to apply your considerable talents to a commercial novel, I would be pleased to see it" (my emphasis). The formula here is clear: since women's novels are "only" about women, they lack the universal (i.e., commercial) appeal of men's novels and thus will attract only a limited share of the literary market. The logic behind the rejection of novels like *Give Me Your Good Ear* is thus both circular and self-serving. The literary apparatus that prescribes exactly what a "woman's novel" should be is the same apparatus that declares that they are all the same and if you've read one, you've read them all.

What is lost in this repression of difference, of course, is the true-to-life stories that make up women's lives. This repression is evident in the disjunction between the following plot summaries of *Give Me Your Good Ear*. The first is from a 1978 local newspaper article on the founding of Spinsters, Ink in Argyle, New York, while the second is from the March 1994 *Lunarian*,
the newsletter of the lesbian feminist bookstore Lunaria in Northampton, Massachusetts, on the re-release of the novel.

Maureen Brady’s first novel, Give Me Your Good Ear, is the story of three generations of women in a family in Upstate New York. It describes the mother-daughter relationship in terms of how their attitudes affect each other and how the daughter perceives a major dramatic event in their lives.63

This is Francie’s story. Francie learns to weave a new life for herself by untangling the knots that have kept her in bondage: a tragic childhood terrorized by an alcoholic father, and an adulthood chained to a dependent, hypochondriacal man. She finds the key to freedom by stitching together a new understanding and acceptance of her mother. The tapestry of Francie’s woman-centered community strengthens her, and hints at her future as a lesbian.64

The difference between these reviews is significant not only because the second exposes the male domination that the first effaces, but because what is missing from the first review is exactly what Francie struggles to articulate throughout the entire novel. In fact, the novel is structured around the disclosure of “the major dramatic event” alluded to in the first review. The significance of the event, however, is not so much dramatic as it is discursive and interpretive. That is, the narrative movement is not towards the manifestation of the event itself, but rather comprises the protagonist’s ability to first interpret that event and then act on the basis of that interpretation. Furthermore, the novel provides a model of feminist critique that can be simultaneously performed by the reader.

The novel opens with the line “Do you remember playing crack the whip?”65 Although this sentence is the only one to directly address the reader anywhere in the novel, it establishes a relationship between the protagonist and the reader that will be shared throughout. The protagonist goes on to introduce herself to the reader by name and then identities herself as an “expert” at cracking the whip, the children’s game that becomes the
predominant metaphor of the novel. Cracking the whip signifies the chain of oppressive gender roles women hand down from generation to generation, a game at which both Francie's mother and grandmother have become skilled. Francie, however, wants out of the game altogether. Despite her fear that the thrust of letting go of the chain will spin her off into unknown and dangerous territory, even worse for Francie is "to imagine giving in, becoming a slave to the chain, letting the whip crack me" (9-10).

The violence of this metaphor inheres in the name itself, exposing it as anything but child's play. It provides an ironic metaphor for Francie's childhood, which is not idyllic, but instead fractured by both explosive violence and, perhaps even worse, the constant fear of violence, for Francie's father, Jack Kelly, is an alcoholic. Verbally, rather than physically, aggressive, Jack Kelly is a "good man" by his community's standards, but his family knows another side of him. When he comes home late for dinner drunk, he becomes the father who terrorizes his family, the man who "could turn a good day into a bad day on the basis of just about nothing" (22). As a child, Francie never knew which side was the real one, for when her father was not drinking, she "never could quite believe he was the same father who was liable in the next moment to be spitting harsh commands and pounding his fist on the table" (22).

The first three chapters of Give Me Your Good Ear are structured around the representation of this kind of male domination as Brady juxtaposes Francie's self-abnegating adult relationship with Ben to her childhood memories of her father. As Francie's narrative moves back and forth between the two, she joins her mother in the chain of women who have learned to protect themselves by "kneeling down . . . silent on the sidelines" (23). When Ben picks a fight for no apparent reason, Francie assumes her mother's role
of passive endurance, just as she had learned as a child: “I’d feel that same disastrous churning in my stomach and I’d step right into Mom’s shoes, silent sneakers, and pull my extremities in close, hoping to be small and unobtrusive enough to be considered absent” (23). This silent submission provides a kind of control in which the subjugated woman becomes, in Francie’s words, a “spectator”: “Once I had myself balled up, small as I could be, out of his range, I could live out his wrath as a spectator. I might have been at the zoo watching a restless baboon” (23). Silence, however, leaves Francie feeling angry and powerless as she lies beside the sleeping Ben with her “sweaty hands fisted”: she could “always work up a brave and righteous speech then, as long as he was unconscious” (29).

The potentially devastating effects of passive female spectatorship are tragically manifested in chapter four within Francie’s first account of the murder and her witnessing of the events leading up to it. Except for the rain pouring down and the lightning which threatens to strike any moment, it is a night like many others: Jack Kelly has not come home for supper and the children finally go to bed after their distracted mother lets them stay up past their bedtimes. However, unlike other nights, Laura, Francie’s mother, goes into the living room, usually reserved for company, to play the piano. She is an accomplished pianist who teaches the neighborhood children but “didn’t play the piano often because she thought nobody had any real appreciation of it” (41). As her mother plays, Francie listens through her bedroom floor register directly above the living room. While Laura is absorbed in her music, Francie hears the kitchen door slam. Her father is home, drunk and in an ugly mood, and as he yells at his wife to quit playing, Francie slides out of bed to see him through the register, opening the slats all the way so that the living room is “exposed like a stage” (44). Watching from above, she sees
“something horrible” that she does not understand, something that she knows is not sex because it is different from the explanation her older sister has given her:

I didn't know what he was doing, only that he made her come over to the side of his chair and stand there like an obedient child and then he pulled her skirt up at the sides and tucked it into her waist band so that it hung scalloped and then he pulled her panties down until they were around her ankles. Somehow he had a hold of her because every time she tried to move away, he pulled her back and hollered at her—"Stand still." (44)

Francie is unsure about what she is witnessing, unsure even about whether she has witnessed the whole thing or not: “Maybe I closed my eyes after that. I don't know. I just wanted her to get away from him, and finally I saw her run into the dining room” (44).

Minutes later, she hears her mother scream. She and her sister and brother run downstairs to find her father lying on the floor, blood spurting from his chest, while her mother holds him and tries to stop the bleeding. The neighbors arrive, call the ambulance, and take the children next door. In the following days, Francie wants to tell someone about what she saw her father do to her mother, but she can’t because “it seemed such a private thing” and she does not want to betray her (53). She keeps the incident to herself, still not understanding what she had witnessed, wondering if she “had gotten all mixed up about what [she] had seen, . . . if that could be a normal thing for a man to do to his wife” (57).

It is not until she is an adult that Francie understands exactly what took place that night. Before this realization takes place, however, she leaves Ben because, as she tells her consciousness-raising group, she has “developed an aversion to him” (64). Leaving him is a relief and she begins to do all the things he never wanted her to do, including treating herself to a European vacation. It is in Dublin that her memory of that evening returns, brought back
by the sound of her landlord's voice talking to his wife in the room below, echoing the same tone of distrust she had always heard in her father's. Listening, she remembers her mother's face "sick with obedience" as Laura stands next to her husband with her skirt pulled up. Witnessing the scene again in her mind, Francie realizes that her father had his fingers inside her mother, and she hears the cruelty in his voice as he says, "Oh, come on now, Laura, enjoy it. You like it, don't you? I can tell. You're getting wet. You're not any better than anyone else, just because you play that thing. You're the same. All you women are the same" (117).

*All you women are the same.* Kelly's accusation implies a class distinction between himself and his wife which he negates by defining her solely as a sexual object. Laura's musical ability does not distinguish her from other women because for Jack Kelly, all women exist only for the fulfillment of male desires, rather than their own. Ironically, however, Laura Kelly refutes the heterosexist logic of her husband's allegation by murdering him, thereby changing the phallic terms of his assertion. Certainly, not all women kill their husbands. Therefore, not all woman are the same. By stabbing Jack Kelly with a butcher knife, Laura Kelly proves an exception to her husband's rule, an irony that Jack Kelly undoubtedly failed to recognize as he lay bleeding to death on the kitchen floor.

Yet if Laura Kelly is not the same as all women, what is the meaning of her difference? The community interprets the murder as an unfortunate accident in which a drunken man slips on a grate in the floor and falls on the butcher knife in his wife's hands. This reading does not refute the indisputable fact that she killed him, but does elide the question of motive, and for this her sentence is reduced from first-degree murder to manslaughter, a crime for which she receives a suspended sentence. In the
community’s eyes, what motive could a wife possibly have for killing her husband, the man who provides for her and her children, particularly a wife who, as the local newspaper declared, was “a past president of the Otic Central School P.T.A. [and] had never been known to have malicious intent toward anyone”(56)? That she was “in a state of fear of her drunken husband,” as the same article reported, was never considered a motive, but was instead symptomatic of the traumatic state precipitating the “unfortunate” turn of events. Later, Francie wonders, “If Mother had known I was a witness, would she still have bought the accident theory? I would never know. I suspect the neighbors would have pushed it on her whether she wanted it or not. . . . No one could wait to clean up the blood” (92).

What exactly is at stake in suppressing the truth of Jack Kelly’s murder? For the community, telling the truth about the murder would expose the inhumanity of Jack Kelly’s treatment of his wife and family, and, in turn, the inhumanity of men’s treatment of women in society as a whole. As Paula Bennett wrote in her 1979 review of Give Me Your Good Ear, everyone refuses to see the murder for what it really is: “the desperate, savage response of a woman to the domination of a man who can claim total control over her body and life merely by virtue of the fact that he is her husband.”67

Jack Kelly is not really a bad man, or even a particularly violent one; he was only doing “what society told him he could do when it gave him this sort of power over her in the first place.” According to Bennett, women’s failure to admit their rage is “the keystone which makes patriarchy possible.”68

While Laura Kelly’s rage and fear provoke her to desperately strike out regardless of the consequences, Francie refuses her family’s tradition of silence, dishonesty and denial by confronting the truth before it is too late. “No, no we’re not,” she tells herself after remembering her father’s words
This epiphany is one of four in the book in which italics are used to signify an articulated resistance to male domination which leads to a new stage of becoming. After refusing her father's misogynist lie, Francie vomits, then falls asleep exhausted, to awaken the next morning and realize that she has changed: "Pangs of appetite for Mrs. Carberry's breakfast brought me downstairs looking like the same person she had rented a room to just the day before. Only I wasn't" (118).

These two italicized sentences parallel two earlier passages from the first chapter where Francie begins to acknowledge the self-destructive nature of her relationship to Ben. Waiting for Ben to return from the restroom at a restaurant she knows he finds unacceptable, she wonders whether "it too was out of toilet paper, if he'd taken a shit before he realized it, if maybe [she] should go knock on the door and offer to pass through a Kleenex" (11).

Suddenly, as if recognizing how ludicrous she must sound, she interrupts her own train of thought to chastise herself with "For God's sake, why do I think I have to take care of this man?" Similarly, driving home with him she reminds herself how easy it is to forget the lessons she has learned from her miserable experiences with Ben: "Is this an adequate excuse for the fact that I was stuck to Ben and needed help to get away?" (13). Although Brady's use of language throughout Give Me Your Good Ear is far from innovative, these few italicized passages function as narrative intrusions which provide a feminist critique of male domination leading toward a self-reflexive moment of transformation. By following this narrative model, the reader, like Francie, can move from a passive spectatorial role to an actively interpretive stance. "Did you ever play crack the whip?" the novel asks. "If you did," it urges, "let go."

For Francie, letting go means facing her mother with what she witnessed the night of the murder. Watching her re-live her humiliation,
Francie at first feels like a spectator again, yet this time she can reach out to
her mother to comfort her. Now she not only understands, but shares, her
mother's pain: "First I felt like a spectator, making these observations; then I
saw the sorrow in her posture and I felt my throat tighten and ache with her. . .
. I couldn't go on being the voyeur. Finally I got my cold, trembling hand to
land on her shoulder. 'I'm sorry,' I said" (127-28).

The novel does not end with this reconciliation, however, but instead
with another death and another letting go. Francie is a physical therapist, a
job which fulfills her need for physical human contact in a positive, tactile way.
One of her patients is a young girl with a brain tumor growing at the base of
her skull. Kristin's courage in accepting her mortality teaches Francie to meet
her own problems head on and her death at the end of the novel relieves
Francie from some of the pain of her past: "Kristin gone, her teasing eyes
gone out, and gone with her, some of the bitterness of my life, because she
taught me, played me past my limits, showed me sorrow with a sweet taste"
(134).

The novel also suggests the possibility of a lesbian relationship with
Lisa, a woman from Francie's consciousness-raising group. However, as the
feminist publishers who rejected the novel remarked, Give Me Your Good Ear
is not a lesbian coming out story. Instead, a lesbian relationship with Lisa is
only one of the many possible connections Francie may form with women in
the future. Mother/daughter, lesbian lover, patient/therapist, friend, as well as
enjoyment in her own solitude, are all presented as configurations of female
desire which Francie is now free to experience. However, these are not
offered in naive celebration of some utopic vision of female abundancy, nor
do they merely present a multiplicity of feminist options, but rather represent
an alternative to conventional narrative resolutions. Like the novel's use of
flashback, narrative interruption, reader address, and parallel plots of male dominance, this resistance to a happily-ever-after ending suggests that the narrative encompasses more than a movement toward an ultimate resolution of plot.

Feminist reviewers alluded to this difference at the time of the novel's first publication. For example, Adrienne Rich wrote, "Violence; daily work: female connections: these are the warp and woof of Maureen Brady's novel. And all are perceived through a woman's eye, in ways largely unavailable to us in fiction." Mary Daly remarked that "Give Me Your Good Ear makes the reader experience one daughter's long and successful struggle to break the chain. She uncovers clues to female becoming and renders visible some of the most essential connections in all of our lives." And Linda Palumbo reflected, "Neither author nor character contents herself with piously affirming that one cannot, after all, really know the truth. Both keep looking."

As the italics I have added above demonstrate, all three reviews share an emphasis on interpretation as constitutive of the novel's narrative imperative. Of course, it could be argued that all narrative demands interpretation, or that all texts derive their meaning through interpretive acts. However, just as the reviews above link interpretation specifically to knowledge of women's experiences, *Give Me Your Good Ear* textualizes the interpretative act within the feminist service of female liberation. By integrating feminist politics and aesthetics, interpretation comprises not only the novel's narrative form, but its content as well. That is, while the novel thematically foregrounds the economic, legal, political, and social exigencies of accurately interpreting women's lives, the narrative movement models the type of feminist interpretive act which renders that interpretation possible.
While its first-person narration, straightforward language, consistent characterization, recognizable social world, and ostensibly linear plot appear to place the novel within the genre of women's realistic novels, this double interpretive gesture allies it more closely with the conceptual and formal project of other experimental feminist press-published works to tell a different story differently. In reviewing the novel for readers and booksellers in the Feminist Bookstore Newsletter, Carol Seajay's own enthusiastic version of the story revealed just how unique a book Give Me Your Good Ear was when it appeared in 1979.

Not a "lesbian" book, tho [sic] there are some fine lesbian subcharacters. Not a coming out story, tho [sic] maybe the heroine will in the next couple years, rather a novel of an earlier stage of coming to self-hood. A single woman's story (by the end.) . . This tiny book covers the ending of a heterosexual affair (in classic feminist experience), sexual abuse in her parents' marriage, alcoholism, Mom killing Pop in self-defense. . . . [sic] quite a book! Don't miss it.71

Neither a lesbian book nor a coming out story, the novel also went further in its critique of heterosexism than the classic feminist consciousness-raising tale by first including such controversial subjects as marital sexual abuse, alcoholism, and female violence against men within its literary scope and then by providing readers with a feminist interpretive method to critique them. Just as Give Me Your Good Ear insists that not all women are the same, its publication demonstrates that neither are all women's books. In fact, this one was different enough to initiate the establishment of a whole new feminist press, something Carol Seajay recognized in 1979 when she wrote that "the book itself remind [sic] a woman why we have to have a feminist press, anyway!" 72 For Spinsters or any other feminist press, no praise is more cogent. It is undoubtedly because they have continued to publish innovative and relevant feminist books like Brady's that Spinsters, Ink is still going strong today.

“Hello fine mumble mumble mumble bullshit bullshit bla bla bla.”

Linda Marie, “Straight Woman”

“The voices of these many writers speak from where they are standing, without tricks or larger than life amplifiers,” wrote Judy Grahn in her introduction to Volume I of *True to Life Adventure Stories.* The first story in the collection, “Twenty Days” by Sharon Isabell, uses the persona of a working-class lesbian narrator who has been sentenced to twenty days in the county jail for bad-checkwriting to emphasize how standpoints are grounded in the material conditions of social experience. When Isabell (as in many of the stories, the narrator/author distinction is collapsed here) is confronted and threatened by the jail captain for being a lesbian, she counters his homophobic, misogynist interpretation of the situation with her own: “I just sat there and looked at the creep and didn’t answer him. I knew I was going to hate this place. So I looked like a lesbian, hu, so what. He looked like a bastard” (I, 18). Raised without anyone “hold[ing] their hands over [her] ears” to shut out harsh truths, Isabell understands that how you look at a situation depends on where you are sitting: “All the parents wanted to look at the criminals their daughters were in jail with. Of course it was a mistake that their kids were in jail or a slip but those others, what did they do? . . . Understanding was easy when it was your own. But those others!” (I, 21). In “Twenty Days,” Isabell shows that because power is invested in those who control the law, rather than in the law itself, meaning—and justice—depend on
which side of the law you are on: "The people vs. Sharon Isabell. I wanted to call out to the people, I didn't hurt no poor people. I only wrote bad checks to the rich stores that use to make fun of my mother when she went in them to buy my school close" (I, 16-17).

Isabell's story captures how patriarchal institutions have used words to oppress the very people who have been systematically excluded from those institutions, particularly by language. In another story, she writes "The words that were arranged in perfect sentences were strange to me and confused me. I wondered how people could learn to use words so perfectly, they couldn't have spent all their lives in college" (II, 55). At the same time, however, she challenges the validity of institutionally enforced language by employing alternative standards of grammar, punctuation, and spelling toward the articulation of truth as her characters know and experience it. As a working-class lesbian writer, Isabell, like the other writers in the True to Life books, has her own investment to make in narrative which realistically portrays women's lives. This investment is nothing less than what is at stake in so many of the stories themselves: survival despite great odds, women coming together in love for each other and against those who would prevent that love, and, simply, telling the truth. More than plot, these stories are driven by the narrative desire to tell it like it really is.

Each of the 39 stories in these volumes, only two of which were previously published, explores the question of how to tell that truth in its own way. In Linda Marie's "Straight Woman," for example, the tediousness of a socially obligatory conversation between the married-with-children-but-coming-out lesbian narrator and "Mr. Somebody" at an anti-war group meeting is much more accurately represented by "Hello fine mumble mumble mumble bullshit bullshit bla bla bla" then it could be by quoting the actual
dialogue (II, 120). "Bullshit" captures Mr. Somebody's hypocrisy, while "bla bla bla" expresses the narrator's boredom. Furthermore, what is said makes little difference because there is little difference to it. Like so many conversations between people from antithetical social and political positions, only the most generic of small talk can avoid the risk of offending, or, even worse, acknowledging the other. Despite the narrator's assurance that she poses no threat to anyone—"don't worry, after all I'm straight and we never have anything to say anyway"—the reader knows better (II, 127). The story thus enacts two complementary narrative strategies, the first a feminist intervention into phallocentric discourse which exposes it as "bullshit bullshit bla bla bla," the second an ironic doublespeak which encodes a lesbian feminist standpoint.

Language is also used ironically in Chris Llewellyn's poem, "In Memoriam: Carolyn Johnson," to capture the hardship of Carolyn Johnson's life by employing words from the secretarial pool of office routine:

```
officebuildings and deliver us
from margins comma cleartabs
capitalize your periods don't rest
space bar lock shift index return
return
return
return:
Carolyn Johnson. (I, 101)
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But Carolyn Johnson is dead and will never return. The narrator has been sent to replace her, one woman duplicating another:

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Who says women
can't be drafted?
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Irony is also used in Pat Parker’s “Shoes” to reveal how language betrays women of color both sexually and racially. The story opens with a father whipping his young daughter, Frances, for not saying “yessir” to his boss on the phone. “That girl’s gonna cost me all my jobs,” he exclaims. “Mr. Clark said she was down right insolent to him on the phone. She’s got to understand that white folks don’t like being talked to like that. . . . It don’t hurt nobody to say yessir to nobody. That girl is just too smart for her own good” (I, 176). Standing later in front of the window of a new shoe store next to her bus stop, the white salesman invites her inside to look at the shoes, then forces her to perform fellatio on him. Afterwards, he gives her a quarter and asks her if she liked it. “Yessir,” she answers. She has learned her father’s lesson well.

Helle’s “It’s Hard to Stay Dry in the Ocean” not only borrows the language of the streets the narrator lives on, but manifests the material conditions as well. According to Grahn, she found the story in a box in Helle’s room with one page of the manuscript torn and “left it that way, since it is easy enough for a reader to fill in the blanks” (I, 12):

and this is my haven that i found after searching for
days carrying masika who had a bad and fever
and i was just in the middle of the tonsils and did not know why and pus on t and weak
and then chills and i thought i w

With two kids and not enough welfare to afford a decent place to live, the narrator works as a prostitute to survive. She knows, because she has been there, what life is like with no money and no one cares anyway:

there is nothing about life and men and
people i havent been through, i will not go through
it again, ive been loved raped lied to deserted wooed
beaten . . .
and on and on- what did you think a pimp, hustler, whore
money money life was like--------- (I, 175)

Like Helle's, most of the stories in the True to Life volumes are, in one way or another, about the psychic costs of survival. These are stories about women's lives which sometimes make it into the back pages of the newspaper, but rarely onto the pages of literature, stories of incarceration, abortion, child abuse, teen pregnancy, insanity, disease, sexual abuse and harassment, alcoholism, murder, prostitution, and women's work in restaurants, convenience stores, offices, the streets, and other women's homes. Far from the male adventure story tradition which Grahn describes as "tense dramas of men alone in the mountains with a lion, and only one long range rifle, six powerful shells and a quart of Seagram Seven to knock him over with," Grahn chose these stories for "their realistic grappling with real-life situations, for unsentimentality and clarity, for integrity. . . . [they] "are not escapist, not fantasies about winning, or leaving, or controlling the world" (I, 6-7). As one reviewer noted, these stories demand "a new way of thinking about 'adventure' for the women in them "survive hazardous experiences with
their sense of self intact. Their bodies are violated in rapes, botched abortions, beatings, but paradoxically they remain, in a larger sense, indomitable.”

But it is not just setting, or characters, or theme which distinguishes these stories from the male tradition, but narrative movement itself. While some adhere to traditional plot structures in which one event follows another in a causal relationship, others, to borrow reviewer Linda Palumbo’s words, “peel off in vivid, living scraps.” Because the stories are realistically based in a patriarchally-dominated world, conflict is omnipresent, rather than simply a development of character or plot, and most often goes unresolved. Isabel’s “Different Worlds,” for example, ends with the words “I was in a bad spot” (I, 62), while Paula Van Lydegraf’s “Rosie Do You Have My Liver” concludes with the wish that “there was not so much sadness in the world. Some day it will be better” (I, 76).

While some of the stories are less developed than others in terms of character or narrative standpoint and therefore may be less compelling or satisfying to some readers, all evidence an immediacy of action which “places the reader right in the middle of things.” The most commonly employed narrative device throughout the volumes is beginning a story in medias res. This technique lends a sense of urgency to the writing which attracts and holds the reader’s attention. “So there I was having breakfast with Kamie, my daughter, in a crowded little cafe in some out of the way place in Anchorage, Alaska,” begins Linda Marie’s “The Great Alaska Hustle,” and the story never slows down except to end when the narrator decides to leave town after the wild cat strike because “nothing exciting would ever happen again” (II, 224). Even when the stories are full of action, however, the narrative is propelled less by events than by standpoint, the precise revelation of experience in
which the character and the reader (for little distance is maintained between the two) impart meaning, or meanings, to a given situation. According to Grahn, these stories resist conventional plot structure because "[t]he meaning of these stories are multiple, too multiple to form around a single point or 'climax'" (II, 11).

Not surprisingly, Grahn's own "Boys at the Rodeo" in volume II perfectly exemplifies what she means by a true-to-life adventure story. In this story, six lesbians from a women's farm go to the rodeo and realize that because they wear jeans and have short hair, the men think they are boys and treat them accordingly. Grahn subverts rigid categories of gender and sexuality by exposing how they are based on false assumptions:

The man at the gate, who looks like a cousin of the sheriff, is certain we are trying to get in for free. It must have been something in the way we are walking. He stares into Susan's face. "I know you're at least fourteen," he says. He slaps her shoulder, in that comradely way men have with each other. That's when we know he thinks we are boys... He examines each of us closely, and sees only that we have been outdoors, are muscled, and look him directly in the eye. Since we are too short to be men, we must be boys. Everyone else at the rodeo are girls. (II, 128)

The women decide to "play it straight," slap each other's shoulders, and eat hot dogs since only men, who have money, and heterosexual women, who have men who have money, eat steak. Women do participate in rodeos, of course, as rodeo queens who are judged "30% on their horsemanship and 70% on the number of queen tickets which people bought on their behalf to 'elect' them" or in barrel racing, an event in which the "trick is to turn your horse as sharply as possibly without overthrowing the barrel" (II, 130-31). Girls can participate in goat tying, a "ludicrous, awkward" event designed "to show how badly girls do in the rodeo" (II, 132). That night, however, one girl downs the goat "in a beautiful flying tackle." "That's the dyke," the narrator
whispers. The narrator knows that lesbians have always been part of rodeos, roping and riding and bronco-busting in men’s and all-women’s rodeos.

Disguised as boys, the women are free to wander around the pens of wild horses and “thousands of pounds of angry animalflesh,” never once warned to be careful or stay away (I, 132). They observe two young cowboys declaring their desire for each other by invoking a third as a “queer,” “flirting with each other, using Henry to bring up the dangerous subject of themselves. . . . They don’t wear those beautiful pearl button shirts and tight levis for nothing” (I, 134). They witness a young woman calf-roped by her date, hopping along weakly behind him. The narrator understands “that this little scene is a re-enactment of the true meaning of the rodeo, and of the conquest of the west” and is thankful not to be her: “And oh how much I do not want to be her; I do not want to be the conquest of the west” (I, 135). As they leave, they must step out of the way of a tall white man on his horse and realize that the rodeo “must certainly be for him,” and not for “the mythical rest of us who are too female or dark, not straight, or much too native to the earth to now be trusted as more than witnesses, flags, cheerleaders and unwilling stock” (I, 136). Despite all its show of competition and masculine prowess, the rodeo is “not a contest, just a play,” and these women have “run off with the goat [themselves] to try another way of life” (I, 136).

It is not hard to imagine how this story could have followed a conventional plot line. For example, as with any tale incorporating a disguise motif, the narrative tension could have been manufactured through intrigue and fear of discovery with the climactic moment of disclosure occurring, perhaps, during a fistfight in which the women’s “true” identity is revealed: (“Hey, you’re not boys—you’re . . . WOMEN!!”). But this story is about a different kind of exposure. What Grahn has done, brilliantly, I think, is turn
Lotman’s plot-script on its ear. “Boys at the Rodeo” is paradigmatically structured as “entry into a closed space and emergence from it.” In fact, the story even follows a spatial teleology by beginning with the women’s arrival at the rodeo and ending with their exit. However, unlike phallocentric narratives of entry into and emergence from dangerous terrain in which something female must be subdued or overcome, in “Boys at the Rodeo,” entry is into the dominant order, not to conquer it, but to expose and thus subvert it. “I came, I saw, I conquered” is replaced by “we came, we saw, we left.”

By revealing the system of privilege functioning beneath the spectacle, Grahn metonymically relates rodeo to the conquest of the American West, which in turn signifies the U.S. cultural history of colonialism, genocide, and expansionism. In documentary fashion, the story exposes how manifest destiny was never a matter of fate, but rather determined by institutions of heterosexist, racial, and socioeconomic privilege. The rodeo queen is the one with the “daddy [who] owns tracts and tracts of something—lumber, minerals, animals” and so can buy (off) the most queen tickets (II, 130). With its “competition, . . . supposed masculinity and pretty girls,” the rodeo is more than a cultural event; it is a “way of life” (II, 129). Narrative conflict, then, has nothing to do with the “great drama between man and nature,” but entails an ideological and political struggle between those who subjugate and those who are subjugated (II, 133). The internalization of this conflict is illustrated by the women’s own feelings of ambivalence about the power they covertly enjoy while disguised as boys. When slapped on the shoulder, the narrator says that it “didn’t feel bad to me at all.” Still, they laugh “uneasily, and the narrator “never decided if it is worse to be 31 years old and called a boy or to be 31 years old and called a girl” (II, 129). What does it mean to be a man? A woman? A lesbian? The narrator admits that she has always wanted to be
manly, which for her means "having that expression of courage, control, coordination, [and] ability . . . to provide." Still, echoing Gertrude Stein at the end of the story, she asks "what is the use of being a boy if you grow up to be a man?" (II, 136-37). Likewise, what is the use of telling a different story if you don't tell it differently? By subverting traditional plot structure, Grahn exposes how both rodeo and narrative are sites of contested power and resistance.

According to her preface in Volume I, Grahn planned to discuss plot in the introduction to a third volume of *True to Life Adventure Stories*. That book was never published. Although she began collecting the stories in 1974 as an editor with the Women's Press Collective, they were not published until 1978 and 1981. Their publication was delayed by two events. The first was the merging of the Women's Press Collective with Diana Press--an instant print shop founded in Baltimore in January 1972 by Colette Reid and Casey Czarnik--after Diana moved to Oakland in March 1977. The second event was the vandalism of Diana Press on October 25 of the same year. Before the move, Diana had published poetry by Rita Mae Brown and Elsa Gidlow; collections of essays by The Furies, the radical feminist lesbian collective and newspaper in Washington, D.C.; and anthologies of articles from the lesbian journal, *The Ladder*, which had been in publication from 1956 to 1972. They also had plans to publish several other books. After the move, they combined their works with the Women's Press Collective for a projected list of eleven new books which they hoped to publish in 1977 and 1978. However, while many of these books were still in production, the press offices were vandalized.

The account of the destruction is chilling. All of the equipment was systematically damaged. Gallons of chemicals were poured onto 5000 copies
of Rita Mae Brown's *A Plain Brown Rapper* and 4500 copies of *Lesbian Lives*. and paint, ink, solvent and Comet were poured into the presses themselves. Typesetting, paste-ups, negatives, and cover plates of previously-published books such as Brown's *Songs to a Handsome Woman* and Grahn's *She Who: A Graphic Book of Poems* were destroyed. The typesetting of three new books—Ruth Geller’s *Seed of a Woman*, Kathy Kozachenko’s *Woman at the Top of the Hill*, and the anthology *Lesbian Separatism: An Amazon Analysis*—were ripped up page by page. The destruction was methodically calculated to destroy both of Diana’s income sources. Damaging the equipment forced the press to suspend its commercial print work, while destroying the backlist materials, as well as the new books, cost them future profits. Although the FBI, which had admittedly vandalized the office of the feminist newspaper *Big Mama Rag* in 1975, was a lead suspect, the vandals were never caught. With the support of the feminist community both locally and nationally, the press rallied for several years before ceasing book publishing altogether in March 1979 to become a commercial print shop once again.81

Before they closed their publishing offices, however, Diana managed to produce several books, including the first and second volumes of *True to Life Adventure Stories*.82 According to a letter written by Diana publishers Kathy Tomyris and Coletta Reid in March 1979, volumes two and three were typeset, but the press did not have the $3,000 per book necessary to print them.83 While the second volume was co-published two years later with the Crossing Press in Trumansburg, New York, volume three was never printed. The loss of this book is inestimable, but the circumstances of its demise were, perhaps, predicated by the type of feminist publisher Diana Press was. In an interview just two months after the vandalism, Coletta Reid stated: "I think one of the things that has been crucial to Diana Press and has distinguished us
from other women publishers has been that we’ve felt this tremendous commitment to production, to women gaining control of production by actually learning to do the work themselves.”84 Like Grahn’s concept of true-to-life adventure stories, this commitment to women’s control of production emphasizes female self-empowerment. Just as for Grahn “the more closely coordinated” feminist literary form and content are, the “more accurate, useful, and whole” the feminist work (I, 13), for Reid and Czarnik, material practice and feminist ideology are integrally connected in the production of feminist books. While for Grahn “a ‘workingclass’ story which is not told in a workingclass manner is only half a story” (I, 12), for the Diana publishers, “when nothing is running, it’s like we have nothing to get a hold of in terms of satisfaction.”85

Unfortunately, Diana’s attempt to do it all rendered the entire press vulnerable when a problem developed in any single part of the system. When the equipment was damaged, they could neither operate as a print shop nor as a book publisher. Without presses, they could not print books. Without books to sell, they could not fix the presses. Eventually they had to decide between the two and chose the print shop because “[s]even years of investment in equipment bought off of working-class women’s labor should not be let go of easily.”86 They also believed that the mainstream market for feminist books was making publishing more accessible to women than ever before and felt they could not compete with the corporate publishers: “We published Rita Mae Brown when no one else would. We published The Furies books and The Ladder anthologies when no one else would touch them. . . [but] we will only bring more grief to ourselves if we publish books that could be published by companies with the ability to pay larger royalties and sell more books than we can.”87
At the same time, however, Diana's publishers admitted that the corporate presses would never publish anything like *True to Life Adventure Stories*, first of all because "the male commercial press would have never been willing to finance such a time-consuming effort to find the true stories of our lives." It is also doubtful that mainstream publishers would be willing to publish, let alone typeset, the type of writing found in these volumes: stories written by unknown working-class women in non-standard English and common everyday language with little conventional plot structure or development, stories in which form and content work together towards "women's defining themselves" for themselves. In 1982, reviewer Sue Dove Gambill wrote, "So not only do the authors speak to us of women's lives, but the way the material is written challenges the very notions of literature maintained by the white, middle-class, male literary establishment. Can the true voices of women be written without this challenge?" We might also ask, "Can the true voices of women be published without this challenge?" While there is no doubt that more women are publishing than ever before and many important works by women have been published by trade publishers since Diana's demise, it is still hard to imagine Random House or Knopf or Macmillan or Simon and Schuster publishing stories of such amazing diversity and immediacy as these true-to-life adventures. For corporate publishers, as well as for feminist readers, it seems Grahn's question still remains, "[H]ow much reality can anyone stand to read about especially about women?"

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5 Ibid., 35.

6 Ibid., 44.

7 Ibid., 35.

8 Ibid., 49.


11 Bulkin, xxvii.


14 Ibid., 190.

15 Ibid., 180, 204.

16 Some of these were Sue Kaufman's The Diary of a Mad Housewife, Fay Weldon's The Fat Woman's Joke (1967), Margaret Laurence's The Fire-Dwellers (1969), Margaret Drabble's The Waterfall (1969), Alix Kate Shulman's Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen (1969), Anne Richardson Roiphe's Up the Sandbox (1970), Dorothy Bryant's Ella Price's Journal (1972), Johanna Davis' Life Signs (1972), Barbara Raskin's Loose Ends (1972), and Sheila Ballantyne's Norma Jean the Termite Queen (1975). Others fell within what I would call, borrowing from Betty Friedan, the "feminine mystique" tradition, such as Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar (1963; 1971), Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman (1969), Surfacing (1972), and Lady Oracle (1975), Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook (1973) and The Summer Before the Dark (1974), Erica Jong's Fear of Flying (1973), Marge Piercy's Small Changes (1973), and Marilyn French's The Women's Room (1977). Notably, all of these are concerned with the lives of white, middle or upper-class women. For further discussion see Gayle Green's Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), especially chapter III.


18 Ibid., 177.

19 Ibid., 183.

In her essay on feminist postmodernism, Zimmerman defines feminist texts as those works either written by authors "who have publicly identified themselves with an aspect of the movement" or as "those in which gender and sex roles are central, not marginal, to [their] meaning." The latter category is problematic in that it leaves open the question of male-authored texts which can also be said to center gender and sex roles, although from a heterosexist or misogynist perspective.

21 ibid., 10.


24 Julia Penelope Stanley, ibid., 4.


28 ibid., 28-29.

29 ibid., 28.

30 ibid., 28.

31 Grahn, "Murdering the King's English," 11.

32 ibid., 9.


34 Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 35.

35 Grahn, "Murdering the King's English," 14.

36 ibid., 8.


41 ibid., 113.
42Ibid., 113.
43Ibid., 118.
44Ibid., 119.
46Ibid., 156.
47Bulkin, xxxii.
49Grahn, "Murdering the King's English," 13.
50Grahn, "What A Character She Is," introduction to True to Life Adventure Stories, Volume II, 7.
51Grahn, "Murdering the King's English," 14.
52Ibid., 14.

54Ibid., 5.
56From the fall 1993 Spinsters Ink catalogue celebrating the press's 15th anniversary, 6.
57St. Joan, 136.
58Ibid., 137.
59Ibid., 140.
60Ibid., 139.
61Ibid., 138.
62Ibid., 138.
64The Lunarian, March 1994.
65Maureen Brady, Give Me Your Good Ear (Argyle, New York: Spinsters, Ink, 1979):
9. I am lucky to possess a first edition copy of the book, bought for 50¢ at a hospital thrift
store in Boulder, Colorado. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.

66 Just how far mainstream recognition of the devastating effects of domestic abuse have come since Brady's novel is evident in current Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala's labeling of it as "terrorism in the home" and the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject given to "Defending Our Lives," a film about the widespread effect of domestic violence. See Ellen Goodman's March 13, 1994 column for further analysis of current domestic abuse awareness.


68 Ibid., 26.

69 Rich and Daly's comments appear on the back of the 1979 edition.


72 Ibid.

73 Grahn, "Murdering the King's English," 14. Further references to volume I of True to Life Adventure Stories will be included in the text by volume and page number.

74 Sharon Isabell, "Different Worlds," in True to Life Adventure Stories, Volume II, 55. Further references to volume II will be included in the text by volume and page number.


78 I'm borrowing here from Audre Lorde's definition of poetry as "the revelatory distillation of experience." See her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" in Sister Outsider, 37.

79 When I teach this story, I use a video clip of barrel racing both so that students can see what it is and so they can hear the rodeo announcers' commentary, which focuses mostly on what the women are wearing and who their husbands and boyfriends are. Like the narrator of the story, I always wonder which rider is the dyke—the one with no boyfriend or husband, or the one who wears pink.

80 Diana Press books published in Baltimore before the merger were:

Rita Mae Brown, Songs to a Handsome Woman (1972; their first book; reprinted in Oakland, 1976); The Hand that Cradles the Rock (1974; reprinted in Oakland, 1976), and A Plain Brown Rapper (1977; a collection of essays)

Elsa Glidow, Sapphic Songs (1976)

Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron, eds. Class and Feminism (1974), Women Remembered (1974) and Lesbianism and the Women's Movement (1975) (These were collections from the Furies)

Jeannette Foster, Sex Variant Women in Literature (1975)
Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid, eds. Lesbian Lives (1976), The Lavender Herring (1976), and The Lesbian's Home Journal (1976) (Collections from The Ladder)


82 Other books published in 1978 after the vandalism were Rita Mae Brown’s A Plain Brown Rapper; Pat Parker’s Womanslaughter and Movement In Black: The Collected Work of Pat Parker 1961-1978 (reissued by Firebrand in 1990); Judy Grahn’s collected works, The Work of a Common Woman; and Grist and Reid’s Lesbian Lives and The Lesbian’s Home Journal.


84 Nicholson, 75.

85 Nicholson, 75-76.


87 Ibid., 3.

88 Ibid., 3.

89 Nicholson, 73.

90 Gambill, 6.
CHAPTER FOUR

Coming to the Table: The Differential Politics of
This Bridge Called My Back

As a text, This Bridge Called My Back has many beginnings. The second edition has not one but three forewords, two title pages, an acknowledgment in Spanish and English, a preface, and an introduction. Yet for me, Bridge really begins with its own history as recounted in two brief paragraphs that lie facing the collection’s first foreword. These words stand as testimony to the struggle behind and beyond the book’s existence as mere paper and ink:

When Persephone Press, Inc., a white women’s press of Watertown, Massachusetts and the original publishers of Bridge, ceased operation in the Spring of 1983, this book had already gone out of print. After many months of negotiations, the co-editors were finally able to retrieve control of their book, whereupon Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press of New York agreed to re-publish it.

The following, then, is the second edition of This Bridge Called My Back, conceived of and produced entirely by women of color.¹

It is no mistake that Bridge opens with this deceptively simple statement, its inherent challenge to hegemonic feminism so intentionally understated that allusions such as “a white women’s press,” “months of negotiations,” and “retrieve control” cannot help but leap off the page. There is a story here and, like all tales of struggle, it speaks of power, pain, and loss. Yet there is also pride in the words “conceived of and produced entirely by women of color,” and a final sense of restitution, celebration, and homecoming.

Intriguing in their brevity, these three sentences serve as my entry into Bridge, the circumstances of its publication(s), and its radical position vis-à-vis a feminist movement dominated by white, educated, economically privileged
women. Until its first publication in 1981, nothing like *Bridge* had ever existed. Its appearance marked a vital shift in feminist publishing by introducing feminist theory by women of color. In this chapter, I will trace the publishing trajectory of *This Bridge Called My Back* from its conception to its current status as the premiere multicultural text within academic and grassroots feminism. However, my methodology is neither precisely historical nor objectively journalistic: I do not have all the “facts.” Rather, I am interested in locating *Bridge* within the theoretical and material conditions of second wave feminist publishing and politics in the United States. To this end, I will conclude with a discussion of *Bridge* as exemplary of U.S. Third World feminist politics, an ideology and practice that Chicana theorist Chela Sandoval has labeled “differential consciousness.”

**A White Women’s Press**

*This Bridge Called My Back* was conceived in February 1979 by Gloria Anzaldúa at a women’s retreat outside of San Francisco for which she had received a $150 scholarship to attend as the only woman of color. Made to feel like “a non-entity” who “wasn’t worth listening to” because of her skin color and last name, Anzaldúa confronted the pain of that experience by deciding to create a book examining the racism of the U.S. women’s movement. When the national feminist writers organization of which she and Cherrie Moraga were the only two Chicana members refused to address its racist and elitist practices, they quit the group and began work on the anthology. According to the original letter circulated in April 1979 to solicit contributions from Third World women in the United States, *Bridge* was intended to confront the very circumstances out of which it originated: “We want to express to all women—especially to white middle-class women—the
experiences which divide us as feminists; we want to examine incidents of intolerance, prejudice and denial of differences within the feminist movement. . . . We want to create a definition that expands what ‘feminist’ means to us.”

In July of 1980, Moraga traveled to Massachusetts to find a publisher. While in Boston, she and Barbara Smith attended a New England Women’s Studies Association organizational meeting. According to Moraga, it was one more meeting at which the issue of racism “lay like a thick immovable paste above all our shoulders, white and colored, alike.” Yet from this meeting the title of the anthology, originally something like Smashing the Myth, was born:

And there it was again; you had to explain everything like from step one. You were meeting a mass of ignorant women, white women, and there were some Third world women there who were very patiently, again, trying to explain. So, I came out of there feeling so totally exhausted, like somebody had walked over me. And Barbara said to me, “It’s so hard to be a bridge: that’s the thing, a bridge gets walked over.”

Returning to San Francisco, Moraga suggested to Anzaldúa that they call the book This Bridge Called My Back, using the idea of political and cultural bridging but making it physical by adding “my back” because “it acknowledges the fact that Third world women do lay their bodies down to make a connection.” At the same time, the self-declaration “I am a bridge” empowers a woman of color to be not only the bridge from “the white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks / To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists” etc., but to be “the bridge to nowhere / But [her] own true self.”

South End Press in Boston, Persephone Press in Watertown, Massachusetts, and another press were all interested in the anthology. As Moraga writes in the preface, a collection like Bridge was “in high demands” both by the Left who hoped to counter “its shaky and shabby record of commitment to women,” and by feminists who hoped to ease “the boredom.
setting in among [its] white sector." Ultimately the feminist publisher Persephone Press was selected and the book was published in June of 1981, in time for the National Women's Studies Association annual conference. In the space of two short years, Anzaldúa and Moraga had created a book that "was already long overdue," that "should already have been in our hands," a book that could serve as a "catalyst" and a "revolutionary tool," a book intended "to reflect an uncompromised definition of feminism by women of color in the U.S."

To celebrate its publication (and, of course, to promote sales), Persephone sponsored a catered "Evening of Readings, Music, Art, and Food by Radical Women of Color" at the Arlington Street Church in Boston on June 5. Readers included Aurora Levins Morales, Barbara Cameron, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, hattie goseett, Kate Rushin, Nellie Wong, Rosario Morales, editors Moraga and Anzaldúa and illustrator Johnetta Tinker. Five hundred people attended and Persephone later received many appreciative letters from women whose lives had been affirmed by the event.

This Bridge was Persephone's eighth book and, according to one press release, was marketed as "the classic consciousness-raising/organizing tool for both women of color and non-colored women committed to eradicating racism within the feminist movement and society in general." While it was the first anthology collectively devoted to writings by Black, Asian American, Latina, and Native American women published by any press, it was not the first anthology, nor the first book written by a woman of color, to be published by Persephone. More than previous books, however, This Bridge fully met the press's stated intention of "confronting and challenging heterosexism, racism, and conglomerate control/seizure of publishing."
Persephone Press was founded in April 1978 as a branch of the collective Pomegranate Productions, organizers of women's cultural events in the Boston area. Involved in women's studies research, Pomegranate had discovered many examples of radical writing by nineteenth-century feminists that had been suppressed and were now virtually unknown and inaccessible. This discovery led to a realization of the vital connection between feminist publishing and feminist activism. Like predecessors such as Daughters, Inc., Diana Press, and the Women's Press Collective, Persephone's goal was "to build an autonomous lesbian-feminist publishing network to encourage and ensure global communication among women, without patriarchal censorship."

"We are using publishing as a strategy for the building of a women's revolution," declared co-owners Gloria Greenfield and Pat McGloin in 1980. "We publish the innovative and the provocative. . . . [W]e see gaps and want to bring books to the public on those subjects."

According to Persephone's sales figures for January 1981, the public—or at least its feminist/lesbian segment—was ready and waiting for some of those gaps to be filled. Their first book, A Feminist Tarot, by Sally Miller Gearhart and Susan Rennie, had sold eleven thousand copies by the beginning of 1981, while Gearhart's powerful and imaginative lesbian utopian novel, The Wanderground, had sold seven thousand copies since its release in February 1979. Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe's The Coming Out Stories, the groundbreaking anthology on lesbian life in the United States, sold ten thousand copies in its first ten months, Nancy Toder's novel Choices, released in Fall 1980, sold thirty-nine hundred copies in its first six weeks, while West Indian writer Michele Cliff's autobiographical essays on racism and heterosexism, Claiming An Identity They Taught Me To Despise, sold sixteen hundred copies in its first two weeks.
Unfortunately, this success was in large part responsible for the press's demise in the spring of 1983. Backlist books were selling more rapidly than Persephone could reprint them, while stores and distributors could not pay for the books as quickly as the reprint capital was needed. (Generally, production costs must be paid for up front, yet products are paid for only after they sell. Because bookstores and distributors are often slow in paying their bills, a book that sells out in six months may not bring in any income until months after it is out of print.) Because Persephone's vision was expansive—best-selling books, lavish promotional receptions, and higher-than-industry royalties—they were continually involved in raising capital by acquiring large bank loans, soliciting readers for contributions and loans, organizing promotional fundraisers, and even forming their own book club. To raise the money to publish This Bridge, Lesbian Poetry, and Lifetime Guarantee, for example, the press sent out a promotional packet that included budget estimates for these books' production costs. Breakdowns for This Bridge alone projected costs of $9,651.45 for a run of five thousand copies and $11,429.85 for seventy-five hundred. These figures were for production (typesetting, printing, binding, and illustrations) only; promotion and distribution costs were not even included. Persephone asked their supporters for loans of at least one thousand dollars for a minimum of one year and hoped to raise $40,433 to print the three new books and reprint two others.19 Ironically, their success required expansion, which in turn required capital, which in turn forced Persephone constantly to confront its lack of funding.

From the beginning, however, Persephone had been creative in its fundraising strategies. In fact, Persephone had gotten its start when Gearhart and Rennie gave Pomegranate Productions the manuscript for A Feminist Tarot to help defray the cost of a National Women's Spirituality conference in
Boston. The first three hundred pamphlets sold out in one day, followed by another one thousand in six months. The first printed edition of five thousand sold out rapidly and enabled the publication of *The Fourteenth Witch*, a book of poetry by Shelley Blue and photographs by Deborah Snow, and Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, whose second edition comprised a run of fifteen thousand. Originally working other jobs while investing their salaries and free time in Persephone, McGloin and Greenfield quit their jobs in September 1979 to run the press full time and immediately experienced an increase in productivity and sales.²⁰

With the editors devoting all their energies to the press, Persephone was able to publish some of the movement's most influential books of the early 1980s, including the 1981 anthologies *Lesbian Poetry*, edited by Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin, *Lesbian Fiction*, edited by Bulkin, and *This Bridge Called My Back*, followed in 1982 by *Nice Jewish Girls*, a collection on Jewish lesbians edited by Evelyn Torton Beck, and *Zami*, Audre Lorde's unprecedented biomythography. Plans for 1983 included the publication of the novels *Abeng* by Michele Cliff and *Law of Return* by Alice Bloch, as well as the anthology *Home Girls*, edited by Barbara Smith, a book that in fact was almost completed when Persephone went out of business in May of that year.

Like the closing of Diana Press and Daughters, Inc., Persephone's closing came as a shock to its community. Carol Seajay wrote in *Feminist Bookstore News*, "Part of the loss is the loss of what Persephone might have brought into publication in the future and now won't. What they did publish will continue to affect and influence our community for years to come."²¹ At the time they closed, the press had lost twenty-two thousand dollars each of the last two years of operation and Persephone's owners estimated that they would need investments of at least one hundred thousand dollars to stay in
business. In debt for back taxes, lacking capital to print their new list, and unable to find another publisher to buy them out, McGloin and Greenfield sold off what office equipment they could, distributed the remaining books to other publishers, and declared bankruptcy. Nice Jewish Girls, Zami, and Abeng went to Crossing Press, A Feminist Tarot, The Wanderground, Choices, Lifetime Guarantee, and Law of Return went to Alyson, and the newly established Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press agreed to publish Home Girls and This Bridge, which by the time of Persephone’s closing was already out of print.

Retrieving Control

In 1977, feminist lesbian activist Barbara Smith, one of the first literary critics to write about Black women’s studies, published an essay entitled "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." In it she spoke of the need for a book that could change her life and the lives of the women around her:

I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life. One book based in Black feminist and Black lesbian experience, fiction or nonfiction. Just one work to reflect the reality that I and the Black women I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream.

A few years later, Smith would have the opportunity to fulfill this quest in an even more expansive vision as a co-founder and then chief publisher of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

Kitchen Table Press was established in 1981 as the first press publishing works exclusively by women of color. Because the Kitchen Table Collective was composed of women who were already published, including Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and Barbara Smith, they never intended to publish the works of its own members. However, according to Smith, Kitchen
Table’s current publisher and only remaining collective member, Persephone’s closing “left a number of Third World Women without publishers for their books. So [we came] to realize that even those of us who’ve published before don’t always have access to being published in the future.”

It was from this realization that women of color had no options for getting published “except at the mercy or whim of others” that Kitchen Table evolved. In October 1980, Audre Lorde called Barbara Smith to say “We really need to do something about publishing.” Despite Lorde’s success as a published poet, she painfully recognized the difficulties women of color, and particularly lesbians of color, encountered within a publishing industry that afforded them little autonomy from mainstream control over acceptable subject matter and writing style. An organizational meeting was held a month later in Boston and the press was officially founded in October 1981 at the second Women in Print conference held in Washington, D.C. Like This Bridge, then, Kitchen Table Press was formed to fill a need felt by women of color for resources with which to confront the “geometric” oppression of their daily lives. The press’s name was chosen to emphasize that it is a grassroots operation, supported by women who do not have class privilege or access to corporate amenities. The name also honors traditional women’s work as a source of empowerment because “the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other.”

Kitchen Table’s first published book, Cuentos: Stories by Latinas, appeared in 1983 and was edited by Alma Gómez, Cherríe Moraga, and Mariana Romo-Carmona. However, Kitchen Table initially began by exclusively distributing Cheryl Clarke’s self-published poetry collection, Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women, which the press agreed
to reprint after the first edition sold out. They also distributed books from other alternative presses, including the Persephone edition of This Bridge. However, when Persephone closed in the summer of 1983, leaving This Bridge and Home Girls without a publisher, Kitchen Table suddenly found itself with a doubled booklist. Although the “extreme trauma” of having Home Girls dropped by Persephone just weeks before its publication date was “incredibly wrenching,” according to Smith, the move of both books to Kitchen Table was fortuitous for the authors, editors, and publisher. Home Girls and This Bridge remain Kitchen Table’s two top sellers, with twenty-seven thousand copies and eighty-six thousand copies in print respectively as of Fall 1993.

This success is no coincidence, however. The concurrence between these anthologies and their press is evident from the original statement of Kitchen Table’s mission: “Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is the only publisher in North America committed to publishing and distributing the writing of Third World women of all racial/cultural heritages, sexualities, and classes.” According to Smith, a work published by Kitchen Table is “not simply [written] by a woman of color” but also “consciously examines, from a positive and original perspective, the specific situations and issues that women of color face.” However, although Kitchen Table was founded as a press to publish the writings of women of color, and well-educated women of color are their biggest customers, the press views their primary audience as people of color. According to Smith, “Other women’s presses can more logically define women as their priority constituency, since white, Christian, middle-class women do not share an oppressed identity and status with their white male counterparts.”
However, because women of color both share oppressions with men of color and experience sexism and heterosexism in relation to men of their own cultures, as well as in relation to white men, Kitchen Table books are intended to "shake up the total communities that [women of color] live in." Therefore, marketing is never viewed simply as a matter of sales strategies but is redefined as the ability to reach as many people of color as possible. Ensuring that their target audience has access to books has always been an important part of Kitchen Table's work. Since its inception, the press has placed priority on bringing its books physically to conferences, book fairs, concerts, and readings held by people of color such as the Asian/Pacific American Heritage Festival and the Latin American Book Fair. Kitchen Table's attendance at events such as these is designed "not simply to sell books, but to spread the word about our work among individuals who do not necessarily get their information through the women's movement." Such participation is also consistent with Kitchen Table's view of its publishing work as inherently political. Smith admits that as a lifelong activist she initially was hesitant "to view the cultural work of the press as identical to the grueling work of directly taking on the power structure around such issues as economics, housing, education, jobs, racial violence, violence against women, and reproductive rights." Yet after the press was established, she began "to experience the difference it makes for women of color to control a significant means of communication, a way to shape ideology into a foundation for practical social and political change." She now emphatically asserts that "[b]y our publishing choices, we're acknowledging that our political situation is indeed crucial." In fact, in 1984 Kitchen Table added the following statement to its original statement of purpose: "Our work is both cultural and political, connected to the struggles for freedom of all of our communities.
people. We hope to serve as a communication network for women of color in the U.S. and around the world.\textsuperscript{38}

One of Kitchen Table's "publishing choices" grew directly out of the press's commitment to reaching people of color outside of the United States. The Freedom Organizing Pamphlet series includes articles that address women of color's political resistance to oppressions encountered in their daily lives. The series includes Audre Lorde's essays "Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices," "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities," and "Apartheid U.S.A.," the latter co-published with Merle Woo's "Our Common Enemy, Our Common Cause: Freedom Organizing in the Eighties;" Barbara Omolade's "It's a Family Affair: The Real Lives of Black Single Mothers;" Angela Davis's "Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism;" and the classic articulation of Black feminist theory, "The Combahee River Collective Statement."\textsuperscript{39} The series was conceptualized by Barbara Smith in response to a need to share information about Black feminism with participants at a conference in the summer of 1984.\textsuperscript{40} She realized that the Combahee River Collective statement was ideal for the situation so she wrote an introduction and distributed five hundred copies from \textit{Home Girls}. Later, it was printed as a pamphlet independent of the anthology and was soon joined by other essays. Each is packaged with a button such as "Fight Racism, Fight Rape" and contains a list of organizing resources. Quick and inexpensive to produce, these pamphlets follow the tradition of grassroots publishing and are ideal organizing and teaching tools for both movement and classroom use.

In a similar grassroots response, Kitchen Table printed a poster in protest against the U.S. Senate's disregard for Anita Hill's testimony at the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings in October 1991.
The poster commemorates an advertisement placed by African American Women in Defense of Ourselves in the New York Times and six Black newspapers that protested the hearing with the words “no one will speak for us but ourselves” and reproduced the signatures of 1603 supporters inside a woman’s silhouette.

Kitchen Table’s dedication to political outreach is also practiced through its distribution of books published by other presses, its service as a resource on Third World feminism, including a huge and often overwhelming volume of correspondence, and its filling of requests for free books to people in prisons and psychiatric institutions (both disproportionately women of color) and to people with AIDS.

Yet Kitchen Table’s political work is also performed in less obvious ways, and it is perhaps in the quiet performances of these publishing choices that Kitchen Table’s truly radical vision can be found. For example, unlike many other feminist presses, Kitchen Table does not publish such generally lucrative genre fiction as mysteries, romances, or sci-fi. Neither does it publish erotic writing, sex manuals, or love poetry. While Smith acknowledges the market for such writing, and hopes that someday there will be other women of color presses able to publish it, she strongly believes that Kitchen Table must publish books that “will help us,” books that challenge institutionalized oppression: “I really feel that literature, if it’s going to do its work, should be about changing the world and changing consciousness on an incredibly profound level. It’s not enough just to have a lot of writing available.” Smith would like to publish more “explicitly political writing” that addresses current issues, books like Kitchen Table’s A Comrade is as Precious as a Rice Seedling, written by Mila Aguilar, a Filipina dissident who was imprisoned during the Marcos dictatorship and was released by Corazon
Aquino in 1986 after her book drew attention to her plight. Books such as *Comrade* are more than "writing that is literary in style with good politics," for they also raise international awareness of political events.42

The anthology format of many of Kitchen Table's books is another political publishing choice in that it consciously attempts to promote the writings of as many women of color as possible. At the same time, the combination of multiple genres within a collection exhibits the complexity of these writers' styles, as well as the many ways in which they creatively employ language to reflect a diversity of lived experiences. For these reasons, anthologies are popular within movement politics, and they are also practical for classroom use. Kitchen Table stresses the pedagogical value of all of its books, and *This Bridge* and *Home Girls* in particular continue to be widely used as textbooks in women's studies and ethnic studies courses more than ten years after their initial publications.43

Text and cover design is an integral element of every Kitchen Table book. (Hisaye Yamamoto's *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* and Aguilar's *A Comrade is as Precious as a Rice Seedling* have even been redesigned.) In order for its books to visually represent the writing they contain, the press often uses traditional graphics from indigenous cultures in both the production and promotion of a work. Kitchen Table's logo represents a clay pot or woven basket decorated with concentric circles, both handmade items of practical use and simple beauty. Additionally, each book's cover makes explicit reference to the fact that it is written by a woman of color and that it critically reflects a race-, sex-, and class-conscious perspective.44 For example, the subtitle of *Home Girls* is "A Black Feminist Anthology." According to Smith, "There aren't many books that say 'Black Feminism' on the cover, unless the word 'debate'—or something is after it—or 'Black and
White Women and Feminism—or what have you . . . It’s important that we finally have something that says that Black feminism is a reality."45

Kitchen Table’s most radical undertaking, however, is its commitment to publishing works by all women of color—not just African American women, not just Native American women, not just Asian American women, and not just Latinas. Neither does it publish exclusively lesbian or heterosexual writers. This union of women from many different cultures, races, ethnicities, and sexualities presents a unique opportunity to practice the kind of coalition politics found at the heart of the press’s mission. Cherrie Moraga, who was Kitchen Table’s first non-Black member, identified the challenges posed by such a collaboration: “It’s difficult for anyone to admit ignorance of another person’s racial or ethnic group, yet those were the kinds of risks we all took—and are still taking . . . . The fact that we even attempt to work together is something we’re proud of.”46

Kitchen Table’s latest anthology, entitled *The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism*, is an impressive example of how women of color, joined in their struggles by white women, can organize around the issue of racism. Co-edited by three women of color and two white women, the book is the first published by Kitchen Table to include work written by white women since “you need to have white people address [racism]—because it is, after all, their baby.”47 Smith initiated the project herself in 1987 after talking to other feminist publishers and white women about the timely need to compile such an anthology, but found no one willing or able to edit it. Rather than wait for someone else to do it, Smith took on the work herself. Smith believes that the feminist movement, particularly in a lesbian context, “is one of the few places in this society that people of different racial and nationality backgrounds actually do interact with some commitment above and beyond window-
dressing or superficial things," and she wanted to document the collaborative efforts of women and lesbians of all races, cultures, and nationalities working to end oppression.\textsuperscript{48} The book’s strength lies in its explicitly political focus on anti-racist organizing. Featuring the writing of over fifty authors, the anthology embraces an international perspective and includes articles on economic neo-colonialism and resistance struggles in Third World countries, as well as in the ghettos, barrios, reservations, and ethnic “towns” of the United States.

Following the model set by \textit{This Bridge Called My Back} eleven years earlier, \textit{The Third Wave} fits Smith’s definition of feminist publishing as political activism and places Kitchen Table within the tradition of early feminist presses such as the Women’s Press Collective, Diana Press, and Daughters, Inc. For Smith, their books worked to change women’s lives:

\begin{quote}
I remember those books: those books were like lifelines for us because you couldn’t go into B. Dalton’s and find anything that reflected our reality. Now you have feminist publishing at both ends of the spectrum, and it’s very, very different. In those days, the women’s presses really performed a function that no one else was doing. See, I see Kitchen Table in that tradition. We’re like the old school, the old-fashioned kind of women’s presses.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

However, Smith believes that “that original political vision, that was very radical and encompassing . . . has gone by the by, and what we have now is people who are trying to make money.” This emphasis on the commercial rather than political nature of feminist publishing has alienated Smith from other feminist presses: “I don’t see the women’s presses, by and large, as being allies for Kitchen Table because I don’t think they publish books to really complement what it is we’re doing.”\textsuperscript{50} Instead, she aligns the press with other leftist presses such as South End Press in Boston and at the American Booksellers Association (ABA) conference exhibits the press in the independent political publishers aisle, a group of ten publishers and distributors “committed to progressive, radical, and revolutionary change.”\textsuperscript{51}
After the 1993 annual meeting of feminist publishers at the ABA convention, women representing three presses—Barbara Smith, Lillian Waller, and Mattie Richardson from Kitchen Table; Jamie Lee Evans of Aunt Lute Books in San Francisco; and Martha Ayim and Deborah Barretto of the Women’s Press in Toronto—discussed the meeting’s racism with *Sojourner* magazine. Smith expressed her disappointment and anger at the changes she has seen in many parts of the feminist publishing movement: “I think women come to these meetings now primarily as professional publishers, not as feminist activists who see publishing as a means to inspire other women and strengthen the movement.” Jamie Lee Evans of Aunt Lute, a press that is committed to employing women of color as well as to publishing more books by women of color such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s second anthology, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, commented on how this emphasis on money over message contributed to the racist marginalization and silencing of the women of color at the ABA meeting: “A white woman stood up, again with no self-consciousness, and said, ‘Well my consultant said to me, ‘Edit books, don’t pack cartons.’” And I just thought, How many of us have the luxury of making a statement like that? And how can this woman not see the obvious classism, racism, and elitism in her comment?” All three presses remarked on the lack of discussion of audience—the people who buy and read feminist books—at the meeting and how this is symptomatic of the way some feminist publishers, like their mainstream counterparts, are primarily concerned with money rather than political and social change. Publishing works by women of color, for example, is often viewed as only part of a “multicultural trend,” and now that the trend is supposedly over, “what they gonna do with all these books they can’t sell?”
Clearly, Kitchen Table is not concerned with being part of any “multicultural trend,” for its commitment to publishing women of color is ongoing. For Kitchen Table, publishing is “a revolutionary tool because it is one means of empowering society’s most dispossessed people, who also have the greatest potential for making change.”56 Likewise, unlike some other feminist publishers, Barbara Smith does not worry about the trade publishers competing with Kitchen Table for “their” authors: “I’m not worried about Random House taking my authors. Why should I worry? I don’t have to worry. And if they do take them, I’ll find some more. [She laughs.] I just can’t see someone beating down the door of Kitchen Table to get a lesbian feminist of color who’s a radical. They’re never going to publish that stuff.”57

Subject to Change

As This Bridge Called My Back is not written in stone, neither is our political vision. It is subject to change.

Cherrie Moraga, foreword to the second edition

In 1981, at the same National Women’s Studies Association conference at which This Bridge was introduced, Chicana cultural critic Chela Sandoval presented her work on the oppositional consciousness of U.S. women of color. Published ten years later in the interdisciplinary journal Genders, Sandoval’s essay circulated in five additional versions throughout the decade and has been highly influential in naming and theorizing the political and intellectual work of women of color, which she labels “U.S. Third World feminism.”58 Having just provided information about the two publishers of This Bridge, I want to introduce the work of Sandoval and other women of color as a theoretical framework within which to read This Bridge Called My
Back. In examining these theories, I am interested not only in providing a critical context for the anthology's essays and poems but also in conceptualizing how This Bridge circulates within and without the shifting parameters of a feminist "apparatus of literary production." 59

Sandoval’s article, “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” traces the practice of U.S. Third World feminism across a four-part typology constructed from histories of hegemonic feminist consciousness—“the official stories by which the white women’s movement understands itself”—including Elaine Showalter’s “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine’s The Future of Difference, and Allison Jaggar’s Feminist Politics and Human Nature. 60 Drawing upon a synthesis of these representative works, Sandoval schematizes a typology of the phases of hegemonic feminism in the following manner:

1) Liberal feminism: Women are the same as men
2) Marxist feminism: Women are different from men
3) Radical/cultural feminism: Women are superior to men
4) Socialist feminism: Women are a racially divided class

It is Sandoval’s contention that the reification of this typology “sets limits on how the history of feminist activity can be conceptualized” while simultaneously assimilating or making invisible a Third World feminism that exists “just outside the rationality” of this four-part structure (9-10).

In an attempt both to describe the limitations of this typology and to create a theoretical space for an alternative history of feminist consciousness, Sandoval proposes an alternate topography—comprising, but not exclusive to, feminism—in which “individuals and groups seeking to transform oppressive powers constitute themselves as resistant and oppositional subjects” (11).
Unlike the previous typology of hegemonic feminism, this topography is not historically organized, does not privilege one form of consciousness over another, does not insist that categories remain mutually exclusive, and recognizes the potential effectiveness of all methods of resistance. Furthermore, it reflects methods of oppositional consciousness that have been in operation in the United States throughout this century:

1) Equal rights: difference only exists in appearances; common humanity affirmed.
2) Revolutionary: difference necessitates social transformation.
3) Supremacism: difference provides moral and ethical superiority.
4) Separatism/utopianism: difference is protected and nurtured through complete separation from the dominant order.

Yet beyond its description of modern liberation movements, Sandoval's topography goes a step further by adding a fifth mode—differential consciousness—which has a "mobile, retroactive, and transformative effect" on the other four (12). Additionally, Sandoval's revised five-part schematic includes the categories of hegemonic feminism as conceptualized by white feminists but provides a space for the Third World feminism that has always functioned within dominant feminism—"but only as the unimaginable" (1). The theorization of this mode is necessitated by the geometric oppressions faced by women of color: "What U.S. third world feminism demands is a new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer, while instead positing a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted" (14).

However, this fifth mode represents not simply an additional ideological practice but a movement "between and among" the others (14). The difficulty of describing this "mobility of identity" is apparent from the metaphorical
language Sandoval employs to illustrate this theory (1). Differential consciousness, she writes, is "cinematographic," "a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates" (3); like the clutch of a car, it "permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power" (14). Yet the concrete nature of such analogies is instructive, for differential consciousness is, above all, a subjectivity born of practice, a "tactic," not a "strategy" or, to borrow from This Bridge, a "theory in the flesh." 61 Differential consciousness "depends upon the ability to read the current situation of power and of self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples" (15). It is not surprising, then, that Sandoval's theory is drawn in part from the writing of women of color, writing like This Bridge Called My Back which describes "a lived experience of difference" as well as from the political activism of women of color, including Sandoval herself. 62 Sandoval's essay stands in answer to both white feminist and mainstream academic theorists who claim that women of color have no theory, that their work is descriptive rather than analytical, or that it exists at the level of narrative rather than abstraction. Such a claim—or accusation—is inherently racist and sexist both because it ignores the social, educational, and economic oppression faced by women of color, which limits their access to intellectual or academic environments and because it discounts the actual accomplishments made by women of color despite such limitations.

Barbara Christian's frequently cited essay, "The Race for Theory," describes the negative effect an emphasis on "theory" has on the survival of writings by people, and particularly women, of color, as well as on those academics committed to reading, teaching, and promoting such literature. 63
Yet it is not theory per se that Christian protests, but rather the current privileging as a commodity within the academy of a particular kind of theory—"with its linguistic jargon; its emphasis on quoting its prophets; its tendency toward 'biblical' exegesis; its refusal even to mention specific works of creative writers, far less contemporary ones; its preoccupations with mechanical analyses of language, graphs, algebraic equations; its gross generalizations about culture."64 This emphasis denigrates and ignores the way in which people of color have always theorized through narrative forms, hieroglyphs, riddles, proverbs, and other types of language play. Such theorizing, of course, is not readily accessible to those scholars ignorant of nonhegemonic discourses and their cultural contexts.

For Christian, the purpose of reading, teaching, and interpreting the emerging literatures of women and men of color is to understand how "[their] theorizing, of necessity, is based on [their] multiplicity of experiences," as well as to ensure that future generations will have access to a literary tradition that "has always been in danger of extinction or co-optation, not because [people of color] do not theorize but because what we can even imagine . . . is constantly limited by societal structures."65 Like Sandoval, Christian rejects fixed categories of analysis and instead proposes a theoretical method in which "every work suggests a new approach."66 Rather than subsume all differences under one monolithic theory, such approaches necessitate attention to the specific historical, social, and political contexts in which any work is created and circulated. Sandoval's "differential consciousness" is exactly the kind of theory Christian advocates. "Rooted in practice," it both describes and provides the "necessary nourishment" by which people can "come to understand their lives better."67
Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins also examines the way theories of knowledge that challenge hegemonic interests are discredited and suppressed within the academy. She furthermore suggests that because any epistemology “reflects the interests and standpoints of its creators,” any attempt to validate alternative knowledge claims within the terms of the dominant paradigm can be counterproductive or even harmful to the political concerns of an oppressed group. According to Collins, “The goal [of Black feminist scholarship] is not one of integrating Black female ‘folk culture’ into the substantiated body of academic knowledge, for that substantiated knowledge is, in many ways, antithetical to the best interests of Black women. Rather, the process is one of rearticulating a preexisting Black women’s standpoint and recentering the language of existing academic discourse to accommodate these knowledge claims.”

Like Christian and Sandoval, Collins is concerned with creating theories based on “strategies of everyday resistance.” Collins’s work articulates a shared standpoint among Black women regarding the nature of their oppression and the possibilities for individual and collective resistance to it. This standpoint is characterized by Black women’s unique experiences of material reality and their interpretation of that reality counter to the dominant society’s. In other words, a Black feminist standpoint draws a connection between “what one does and how one thinks.” For example, the domestic worker who cooks the meal views it differently than the person who is served it. This connection is a common theme in literature by women of color. In “Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races,” Chicana poet Lorna Dee Cervantes writes,

I believe in revolution
because everywhere the crosses are burning,
sharp-shooting goose-steppers round every corner,
there are snipers in the schools . . .
(I know you don’t believe this.
You think this is nothing
but a faddish exaggeration. But they
are not shooting at you.)

However, the articulation of any alternative standpoint is always
difficult. In the same poem, Cervantes writes of her “stumbling mind,” her
“excuse me’ tongue,” and “this nagging preoccupation / with the feeling of not
being good enough.” Alternative standpoints are systematically suppressed
by the dominating culture precisely because they encourage resistance to
domination. Thinking about one’s oppression differently allows for the
development of different tactics to resist that oppression. Here we see how
the connection between thinking and doing moves in both directions: what
one thinks determines what one does.

The importance of articulating a standpoint for women of color lies in
the way it “calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth
and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth.” A good
example of this challenge was offered by the June 1989 airing of a Donahue
talk show that featured five Black feminists for the first time in the program’s
history. The panelists--Barbara Smith of Kitchen Table, Byllye Avery of the
National Black Women’s Health Project, Loretta Ross from Women of Color
for NOW, scholar Paula Giddings, and entrepreneur Dorothy Hughes--
articulated how Black women’s invisibility within both the women’s and Black
rights movements, as well as in the dominant society, threatens their ability to
cope with intersecting oppressions by denying the legitimacy of their problems
and their right to political agency. Rather than being understood as a function of a racist and sexist society, this invisibility is blamed on Black women themselves. Ironically, despite the talk show’s promise to provide space for the expression of Black feminism, in various ways Donahue himself systematically recreated the same oppressive dynamics he purportedly opposes.

First, Donahue’s initial question ignored the viability of Black feminism by asking why Black women have hesitated to join the “white women’s movement.” The panelists dually responded that there are Black women in mainstream women’s groups such as NOW and that a Black feminist movement has always existed as an integral part of the women’s movement as a whole. Furthermore, the panelists’ insistence on the need for an autonomous Black feminist movement reinterpreted a misperceived absence or separatism as potential coalition.

Second, because one purpose of the Donahue format is to reduce all experience to sociological trend, the individual differences between the panelists were continually elided. For example, Donahue’s questions were never directed to any particular panelist, and in the way he overlooked the diverse organizations represented on the panel. The panelists, however, insisted on reiterating their different identities and political strategies.

Finally, Donahue’s attempt to place himself outside a privileged position with statements such as “if I were a Black man” merely served the phallic privilege of misarticulating the voices of those for whom he thinks he speaks. Joined by women of color in the audience, the panelists consistently refused his posturing by reminding him that he is a white man and, further, that the white male definition of what people will do “only predicts what other white men will do.”
The panelists constantly reinterpreted the patriarchal, Eurocentric knowledge presented by Donahue and white audience members by offering new Black feminist paradigms for understanding experience that both confronted hegemonic definitions of Black women's lives and presented alternative epistemologies. In one of the most angry exchanges of the entire program, the panelists and Black audience members responded to a white man's inquiry as to why there were "no high-profile" Black women by listing names such as Shirley Chisholm, Whoopi Goldberg, and Alice Walker; by explaining how the media is a function of white men who "want you to know what they want you to know"; and by questioning what is meant by a "high-profile" Black woman.

This multiple response illustrates the kind of differential consciousness Sandoval theorizes. While the first and second answers refute the question on its own terms--"you want some high-profile women, we'll give you some high-profile women" and "there are high-profile Black women; you're just not allowed to see them"--the third answer challenges the terms of the question itself. Rather than contradict each other, the answers are, in fact, one answer, designed to expose the intersecting biases experienced by Black women within both the media and the society at large. There is no need for--indeed, there is no benefit in--insisting on the viability of one type of answer over another, for they are all correct. Instead, what is absolutely necessary is a flexible political consciousness open enough to recognize and resist what Audre Lorde calls "the many varied tools of patriarchy."75

Although articulated from differing methodological bases, the works of Christian, Collins, Sandoval, and other women of color are allied in their emphasis on the material basis of a political consciousness that operates "among and between" the interstices of hegemonic culture. This "survival
mode" discounts the stability of any singular political affiliation as a luxury and liability that few can afford. Furthermore, it recognizes that when adopted by political movements, ideologies often preclude the kind of "street tactics" adaptable to situations encountered in daily life. As Barbara Smith states so acutely, "I don't live in the women's movement; I live on the streets of North America." As with Lorde and her "many varied tools of patriarchy," Smith and other women of color recognize that "the identity of the oppressors we face in our day-to-day lives is fluid and constantly changes." Clearly, given oppression's invidious ability to mutate in cancerous proportions, any feminism not "subject to change" is wholly inadequate as an oppositional practice.

However, in its most inclusive impulse, feminism as defined by Smith and others can provide an alliance for women who have "no ground for unity as women except in the context of feminism in the United States." This desire for unity has always been feminism's most hopeful gesture, although one unfortunately distorted by disagreement over what constitutes women's oppression. While movement unity has often been "misnamed as . . . homogeneity," women of color and lesbians have insisted that "one becomes a woman' in ways that are much more complex than in a simple opposition to men." As Sandoval's essay on differential consciousness so lucidly illustrates, this insistence has provided a significant critique of identity politics within hegemonic feminism by exposing how "one's race, culture, or class often denies comfortable or easy access to either category, [and how] the interactions between social categories produce other genders within the social hierarchy" (4).

Identity politics-- that is, basing one's political consciousness and practice upon an aspect or aspects of one's self-identification, even if that
Identification has originally been externally imposed--has had a long history within U.S. Third World feminism. The Combahee River Collective statement, for example, claims identity politics as the most cogent factor motivating social change: "We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression."^80 However, while recognizing the benefit of identity politics for Third World feminism, Barbara Smith warns of its limited use when it is divorced from political activism:

The concept of identity politics has undoubtedly been most clarifying and catalytic when individuals do in fact have a combination of non-mainstream identities as a result of their race, class, ethnicity, sex, and sexuality; when these identities make them direct targets of oppression; and when they use their experiences of oppression as a spur for activist political work. Identity politics has been much less effective when primary emphasis has been placed upon exploring and celebrating a suppressed identity within a women's movement context, rather than upon developing practical political solutions for confronting oppression in the society itself.\(^81\)

Like the connection between thinking and doing/doing and thinking in Collins' Black feminist standpoint theory, Smith's caveat proposes a reciprocal relationship between the statement "I am a . . ." and the actions that enable and enlarge the "being" of that identity. In other words, the phrase "identity politics" itself indicates how the concepts are coterminous: neither "identity" nor "politics" can assume a stable position prior to the other but are instead mutually informing.

Within Third World feminism, identity politics has been most successful when aligned with the practice of coalition politics. The fundamental conjunction between the two are implicit, for example, in Smith's declaration "As a Black feminist I believe in our need for autonomy in determining where we stand on every issue. I also believe in the necessity for short and long term coalitions when it is viable for various groups to get together to achieve specific goals."^82 In fact, identity politics and coalition politics enable each
other by allowing people from particular identity groups to "come together to be validated by each other." As Byllye Avery explained during the Donahue program, "Once that validation happens and they start to break down the conspiracy of silence and the barriers that have kept them from talking, they then develop a prospective [sic] as to who we are which makes us go to the table in a different way. We are not coming to the table to sit at the foot of the table--of anybody's table. We are coming to the table to sit as peers."83

The most frequently cited essay on coalition politics in the context of Third World feminism is undoubtedly "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," by Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of the women's a capella musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock and curator of the Community Life division at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.84 Based on a talk given at the 1981 West Coast Women's Music Festival held in California's Yosemite National Forest, the essay was published in Home Girls in 1981.85 As the writer of the last essay in the book, Reagon gets to have the final word on a theory of coalition politics that, according to editor Barbara Smith, pervades the entire collection: "Everybody's basically talking about [coalition politics] in the book. Clearly those politics are going to make a real difference in how we decide to move and whether we have any hope, too."86

Reagon's essay, however, is characterized less by a sense of hope than by a sense of expediency. According to Reagon, coalition politics offers our last chance to change the kind of society we live in, and the sooner we face that fact, the better: "We've pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that is 'yours only'--just for the people you want to be there. Even when we have our 'women-only' festivals, there is no such thing. . . . There is no hiding place. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. It's over. Give it up."87
Throughout the speech/essay, Reagan sets up an opposition between the metaphors of “home” and “the streets”, between “a space that is ‘yours only’” and coalition. Yet Reagan’s essay subverts any nostalgic sense of security associated with either home or political movement: neither of these locations is safe. It coalition is the place where “you feel threatened to the core,” you are no less vulnerable at home in your “barred room” because “[t]he door of the room will just be painted red and when those who call the shots get ready to clean house, they have easy access to you.”

Reagan further aligns the metaphor of home with cultural nationalism, lesbian separatism, and other exclusionary practices. One cannot have a home without excluding others, yet Reagan points out the limitations of such actions. If women’s music festivals exclude men, what about male children? Must heterosexual women check their relationships at the gate? Can racism be checked too? What about homophobia? At the same time, home is absolutely necessary as a place of comfort and nurturance, “someplace for you to go to so that you will not become a martyr to the coalition.” Coalition politics, then, involves a movement between home and the street, between comfort and danger. Such movement creates an “our” that “must include everybody you have to include in order for you to survive,” even “somebody who could possibly kill you.”

Although never explicitly delineated within the terms of Sandoval’s theory of differential consciousness, coalition politics—between women of color from different racial or ethnic backgrounds, as well as between men of color and women of color, women of color and white women, lesbian and heterosexual women, lesbians and gay men, among other configurations—circulates within the essay as an ideal imperative that is not utopian, but is functioning within feminism at this precise historical moment. For example,
Sandoval writes, “U.S. third world feminism represents the political alliance made during the 1960s and 1970s between a generation of U.S. feminists of color who were separated by culture, race, class, or gender identifications but united through similar responses to the experience of race oppression” (17). As Sandoval illustrates, this political alliance has always interacted within the white women's feminist movement, “but rarely for long, and rarely adopting the kind of fervid belief systems and identity politics that tend to accompany their construction under hegemonic understanding” (13). Misinterpreted as “disloyalty, betrayal, absence, or lack” (13), women of color’s affiliative mobility advanced from the recognition that “[t]here is no way that one oppressed group is going to topple a system by itself,” while single-issue feminism, a political ideology constructed only in opposition to male gender privilege, stalled on its refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of coalition politics.92 Differential politics, then, departs from hegemonic feminism as a politics of both opposition and coalition.

That Sandoval’s theory of differential consciousness incorporates coalition politics is not surprising given her location in U.S. Third World feminism’s development during the 1980s. Indeed, traces of her theory are evident in her published account of the 1981 NWSA conference in Connecticut, where the political alliance of women of color in which Sandoval participated exemplified the practice of coalition politics.93 In a report that she wrote as secretary to the National Third World Women’s Alliance, Sandoval asserted that, despite the conference’s theme and title, “Women Respond to Racism,” the conference’s structure divided participants into the oppositional categories “Third World” and “white.” All participants were expected to attend morning consciousness-raising (CR) groups, but while the white women were offered a variety of choices such as “white/immigrant,” “white/working-class,”
"experienced in CR groups," and so on, all the three hundred women of color were placed in a single CR group. Additionally, the conference's "shopping mall" approach in scheduling an overabundance of workshops and panels made it difficult to identify or attend those presentations focused most effectively on racism. Finally, no time was allotted within the conference as a whole for women of color and white women to meet collectively in an effort to address the issue of racism within the women's movement in general or women's studies in particular. By the conference's end, many white women felt that they had "put in their time" dealing with racism, while women of color were frustrated at the lack of flexibility and commitment evidenced by the conference organizers and participants.

However, although the women of color were initially suspicious of being represented within a supposedly homogenous category, the Third World CR group ultimately constituted a "conference within a conference" through its exploration of a united Third World women's standpoint. Working together to confront their own internalized racism, the women in this group began to consider their differences "not as idiosyncratic and personal, but as a rich source of tactical and strategic responses to power." This examination of difference led to the formulation of a theory that Sandoval would later conceptualize as "differential consciousness," a theory that is clearly recognizable in rudimentary form throughout Sandoval's report.

Gloria Anzaldúa has written that writings by women of color "are not only about survival strategies, they are survival strategies--maps, blueprints, guidebooks that we need to exchange in order to feel sane, in order to make sense of our lives." This characterization is certainly fitting of Sandoval's work, for her writing goes beyond description (and by this I also mean it goes beyond theory). Indebted in the most collective sense to a concept of
coalition as practiced by women of color within and without the women's liberation movement, Sandoval's work is truly oppositional in that it both describes and exemplifies a method of differential politics.

I have been concerned in this section with tracing the genesis of this theory and connecting it to work by other women of color in order to provide an expansive framework within which to examine This Bridge Called My Back as both a product and a process of differential consciousness. As with Sandoval's essay, the writing and reading of This Bridge cannot be separated from the conditions of its publication. From those first two remarkable paragraphs, it is a text that can never forget the moment of its own making. In the following final section, I will use This Bridge to consider textual production as a liberatory tactic within the differential practice of U.S. Third World feminism.

Conceived of and Produced Entirely By Women of Color

¿Cara a cara con el enemigo de qué valen mis palabras?
Face to face with the enemy, what good are my words?

Cherrie Moraga, foreword to the second edition

Face to face with This Bridge Called My Back, I am haunted by Moraga's words, for they ask the question that informs this entire chapter. If words are worthless, what difference does the publication of This Bridge make to women's lives? Yet holding it in my hands, looking at the pictures, and reading the words, I am struck by its complexity and passion. Like Michelle Cliff, I find that "[s]o much is here in this book, for myself, for other readers, that it is difficult to begin--or at least, to know where." In an effort
to find that beginning, I return to the design and structure of the book as a physical object.

*This Bridge Called My Back* is 261 pages long, with an additional seven unnumbered pages at the beginning of the second edition. It features twenty-eight writers in forty-five essays, speeches, letters, and poems organized into six sections; biographical notes; and a bibliography of works by and about Third World women in the United States, including the addresses of periodicals and presses cited there. Each of the six sections is preceded by an illustration and introduced by either Anzaldúa or Moraga. Only six of the forty-five pieces are reprinted from previous sources.

The book’s cover features a sketched outline of a faceless, naked woman on her hands and knees. Resting on her shoulders and back are the words “This Bridge Called My Back.” However, this bridge formed by the woman’s body is not stationary, for her arms and legs are not closed together. Rather, one arm and one leg are ahead of their mate’s, in stride, in motion, going somewhere. Such movement is described by Anzaldúa in her foreword to the second edition: “Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar. (Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.)” This notion of creating a temporary bridge across culturally and historically specific divides could also be used to conceptualize differential consciousness. What better figure to represent differential consciousness than a mobile female body, a bridge that moves from crossing to crossing?

Embodied in this image, however, is the conflict faced by women of color between being a bridge that “gets walked over” and a bridge “to nowhere / But [one’s] own true self.” Women of color are always being asked to bear the weight of white women’s racism, of men of color’s sexism, of the world’s injustice. They are expected to be the bridge, the liaison, the
connection between groups of people too lazy or ignorant or scared to meet each other halfway. Yet this bridging can also be a source of empowerment as it creates new frameworks, perspectives, and possibilities for coalition.

The structure of *This Bridge* manifests this tension between danger and reward. As discussed earlier, Anzalduá initiated the book as a reaction against racism within the women's movement. However, Moraga envisioned the book as “erasing the walls between women of color, as well as between women of color and white women.” What emerged as the book evolved was the realization that complex differences existed among Third World women themselves. This realization led to attempts to “construct a politic out of those complexities.” In the process, the critique of white feminism became only one section of the book, “And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You.” As Toni Cade Bambara notes in her foreword (vi), by coming together to critique the “would-be alliance” with white feminists, women of color discovered “new tasks,”

- and a new connection: US
- a new set of recognitions: US
- a new site of accountability: US
- a new source of power: US

The emergence of this “US” marked a new kind of coalition between women of different races, ethnicities, and cultures. Third World feminists were wary of reproducing the same structures of invisibility enforced by a homogenization of “sisterhood” within the women's liberation movement that ignored “the divisions forged between women of color from varying backgrounds and heritages.” Instead, women of color struggled to “respect the history of these divisions while at the same time they moved to mend them.”
As women of color articulated their specific issues and understanding of power, they also began to “come to the table” with white women who were starting to confront their own internalized racism and naive assumptions of privilege. This kind of political alliance created a space where differences could be both respected and mended. It is not surprising that in the following description of this type of political work, Anzaldúa alludes to a method of differential consciousness:

The process you go through is you get very specific about differences. But when it comes right down to it, you don’t choose your friends or your allies by virtue of class, color, etc. You don’t build a movement that defines people by purely their class and their color. People are pissed at the white women, but I think that, in the long run, nobody will ever say that a white woman can never be an ally. So, it’s basically both those things: naming specific differences, but feeling like the real political movement has to do with being able to cross over those differences.”

This differential movement between “naming specific differences” (identity politics) and “crossing over” (coalition politics) forms the structure of This Bridge Called My Back. While the first two chapters articulate the connection between lived experience and political consciousness—“the roots of radicalism” and “theory in the flesh”—the middle two chapters focus on alliance struggles between feminists of color and white feminists, as well as among women of color themselves, and the final two chapters address writing and spirituality as processes of political transformation. This structure is not meant to enforce a politically linear teleology, however, for all the sections overlap thematically and can be read in any order. The essays engage in a dialogue with each other across their various sections in an attempt to “reflect an uncompromised definition of feminism by women of color in the U.S.” (xxiii). This is a feminism conceived not merely in opposition to male privilege and power, but feminism as a political alliance that offers “solutions to the
numerous paradoxes and contradictions that riddle the fabric of [all women's] lives."103

It is out of the paradoxes and contradictions faced by women of color that the differential consciousness of This Bridge arises. Moraga specifically addresses this mode of consciousness in the preface to both editions: “Our strategy is how we cope—how we measure and weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom and to whom and to whom, daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend (whatever that person’s skin, sex, or sexuality). We are women without a line. We are women who contradict each other“ (xviii-xix, my emphasis).

Again and again throughout the book, women from diverse cultural, racial, and sexual backgrounds and perspectives refuse an “easy explanation” of multiple oppressions and offer instead a “theory in the flesh.” Like the theory advocated by cultural critics such as Christian, Collins, and Sandoval, it is never abstract, but evolves from a space “where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longing—all fuse to create a politic of necessity” (23). Titles such as “For the Color of My Mother,” “I Am What I Am,” “Dreams of Violence,” “La Güera” (The Light-skinned Woman), “Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster,” and “It’s In My Blood, My Face—My Mother’s Voice, The Way I Sweat,” reflect the connection among identity, experience, and political consciousness and activism. Mitsuye Yamada, for example, writes of how her invisibility as an Asian American woman was conditioned by racism and sexism. When after eleven years she filed a grievance against the college for which she taught, the administration was shocked that she would feel discriminated against. Their reaction surprised her, for she had always believed herself to be perceived differently from the stereotypical “submissive, subservient, ready-
to-please, easy-to-get-along-with Asian woman" (37). Her sense of identity became politicized as she placed her life within the historical context of U.S. racism, Japanese American internment, and crosscultural sexism: “Because I was permitted to go to college, permitted to take a stab at a career or two along the way, given ‘free choice’ to marry and have a family, given a ‘choice’ to eventually do both, I had assumed I was more or less free, not realizing that those who are free make and take choices; they do not choose from options proffered by ‘those out there’” (37). 104

Essays like Yamada’s are valuable in that they articulate the specific historical conditions that have led to the oppression of women of color. Once articulated, this knowledge can be used to confront misconceptions or lack of information about Third World women’s lives. In “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” Audre Lorde offers a productive and compassionate model for such confrontation. Writing in response to Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*, Lorde questions why all the “goddess-images” in this book on female myth and ritual are “only white, western-european, [and] judea-christian,” why all the non-european women are portrayed as “victims and preyers-upon each other,” why non-european archetypal experience is “distorted and trivialized,” and why Lorde’s own words were used to “testify against [herself] as a woman of color?” (94-95). Lorde asks Daly to connect her own racism with violence against women of color in her own city, Boston, where twelve Black women were murdered in the spring of 1979, and reminds her that “[t]he oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries” (97). Finally, Lorde thanks Daly for what she has learned from her and offers her letter in repayment for that knowledge.

Lorde’s letter exemplifies on a literal level the “naming” and “crossing over” dynamic of differential consciousness practiced throughout the book. It
provides a missing historical and cultural context while challenging the inaccurate assumptions based on that lack. It criticizes a narrow and biased perspective while acknowledging the value of the impulse behind that perspective. It also attempts to communicate across pain and silence toward mutual recognition and understanding.

Like all of the essays in *This Bridge*, Lorde's letter reiterates the need for coalition within feminism, for the formation of a community without "a shedding of differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist" (99). In "Letter to Ma," for example, Merle Woo writes, "The outlines for us are time and blood, but today there is breadth possible through making connections with others involved in community struggle" (147). In "I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance," Martha Quintanales declares "It is pure folly to think that a small group of Latina or Black or Chinese American lesbians can, on its own, create a feminist revolution. It is pure folly to think that middle-class wasp feminists can do so . . ." (154). Similarly, in "Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance," Cheryl Clarke asserts, "So all of us would do well to stop fighting each other for our space at the bottom, because there ain't no more room. We have spent so much time hating ourselves. Time to love ourselves. And that, for all lesbians, as lovers, as comrades, as freedom fighters, is the final resistance" (137).

Yet as Moraga cautions in the unnumbered introduction to the second edition, coalition provides no "easy political framework," for it must be "built from the inside out." Women of color form no "natural" affinity group but instead "have come together out of political necessity." Three years after the initial publication of *This Bridge*, she writes that the "idea of Third World feminism has proved to be much easier between the covers of a book than between real live women." At first glance, this statement appears to set up an
opposition between writing and living, which then privileges lived experience
as the most appropriate arena for political activism. However, such a reading
would misleadingly refute Moraga’s own political work, as well as Bridge’s
emphasis on writing as an effective form of political activism.

In This Bridge, writing is not opposed to living, but is itself a lived
Anzaldúa describes writing as a physical, material action: “As I grope for
words and a voice to speak of writing, I stare at my brown hand clenching the
pen and think of you thousands of miles away clutching your pen. . . . I can
see Cherrye going about in her terry cloth wrap, barefoot, washing the dishes,
shaking out the tablecloth, vacuuming. . . . [W]atching her perform those
simple tasks, I am thinking they lied, there is no separation between life and
writing “ (169-70). Furthermore, writing expresses lived experiences from
which theoretical models can be developed. Just as Smith asked for “one
book . . . that would tell me something about my life,” Moraga expresses the
need to read “something that put what I don’t have a name for in some kind of
context and gave me room to live.”

It is exactly because the idea of Third World feminism is easier
between the pages of a book that writing becomes so necessary. The
publication and distribution of written language can transmit ideas to a wide-
ranging audience that can then implement those ideas toward personal and
social transformation. The importance of This Bridge in this regard is obvious
from the testimonials it received from its readers and reviewers. Moraga
begins her foreword to the second edition by stating “I have heard from
people that the book has helped change some minds (and hopefully some
hearts as well),” and she quotes a young Puerto Rican reader, Alma Ayala,
who wrote that the book “seemed to be speaking to me. . . telling me I had a
right to feel as I did.” Reviewer Deborah Aslan Jamieson writes, “This anthology’s existence is important for us to start to unravel the lies that have been told on each ethnic group. We must find our way to each other, strengthen each other and form a unified front so that we can accomplish what is important to us.”

While Ayala exclaims, “It is remarkable to me that one book could have such an impact,” Michelle Cliff states simply, “I want this book in the world.”

Technologies of print culture provide a material space where writing and publishing as lived activities can take place. Because access to such space has been severely limited for most women of color in the United States, writing for them is an “act of defiance” (163). Anzaldúa writes because “the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me” (169). One of the primary purposes of This Bridge, then, was to enlarge this space for U.S. Third World women. By publishing This Bridge, Moraga and Anzaldúa hoped that “the fact that our voices are in print [would be] a tool to encourage other third world women writers to take up the pen so that it’s not something exclusive to a certain class and race of people.” Their ideal was “not to make the thirty women in Bridge recognizable as third-world women writers, but for the Bridge to be a catalyst for more third-world women recognizing themselves as writers.”

For Bridge’s editors, the most difficult problem encountered in compiling the anthology came not in providing a material space for the voices of women of color, but in “the fact that Third World women are so new to believing that we have a right to be writers, period.” In the “reprinted” introduction to her then unpublished volume of poetry, hattie gossett poignantly expresses how internalized oppression creates a crisis of confidence for Third World women writers:
who the fuck do you think you are to be writing a book? i mean who do you think you are? and who cares what you think about anything enough to pay money for it during these days of inflation and cutbacks and firings and unemployment and books costing at least $15 in hardcover and $5 in paperback? plus there's a national literacy crisis and a major portion of your audience not only can't read but seems to think reading is a waste of time? plus books like this aren't sold in the ghetto bookshops or even in airports? on top of that you ain't nothing but a black woman! who told you anybody wanted to hear from you? (175)

Gossett's passage exposes the connection between writing as an individual intellectual/spiritual/psychological act and the material conditions necessary for its reception. People must have the money to buy the book, the literacy skills to read it, and access to it in the first place. But even the fulfillment of these criteria is not enough to provide an audience for writing by women of color. As Anzaldúa argues in her introduction to the *Bridge* section devoted specifically to writing as a radical act, women writers of color "must also actively engage in establishing the criteria and the standards by which our work can be viewed" (163). With its lack of capital letters, for example, Gossett's introduction obviously departs from standard writing practices.

Similarly, Rosario Morales's long poem, "I Am What I Am," consists of descriptive phrases unpunctuated except for an occasional exclamation mark and a period at the end ("Take it or leave me alone.") (15).

In addition to such stylistic deviations, the writings in *This Bridge* refuse generic categories; rather than being poems, essays, and stories, they are "cables, esoesses, conjurations and fusile missiles [sic]" (vi). This refusal of traditional genres and styles was part of the original selection process. For Moraga and Anzaldúa rejected academic prose in favor of writing "that's intellectual, but at the same time, heart-felt and experiential." Many of the entries selected came from women who wrote that they couldn't write, and "[w]hy they couldn't write an article ended up being the article." This
selection method defined previously unrecognized literary forms of writing for women of color and extended to language as well. When Anzaldúa writes of “speaking in tongues,” she refers not only to writing that is bilingual, but also to writing that challenges the assumption that there is only one way to write. In reviewing This Bridge, West Indian writer Michelle Cliff reminds us that “[o]ne of the consequences of being colonized is that you are told, in both overt and subtle ways, that you must speak in the language of your oppressor, or else your speech is not real—it is dialect, patois, pidgin English. Just as you are trained in the language, so are you trained in his ideas: a package deal.”

From its bilingual dedication on, This Bridge insists on the power of writers “reclaiming their tongue” to manifest social change.

Still, as Moraga’s disappointment three years after Bridge’s initial publication proves, “change don’t come easy.” Moraga’s discouragement is echoed by Chicana theorist Norma Alarcón in her 1990 essay in Making Face, Making Soul, “The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism.” This essay provides a densely provocative analysis of hegemonic feminism’s resistance to the work of This Bridge Called My Back. Alarcón’s critique is based on Anglo-American feminism’s substitution of “woman” for “man” as subject of knowledge, without a reconfiguration of consciousness as woman’s “relational position to a multiple of others, not just white men.”

By pursuing a “common denominator” approach to the constitution of a female subject, Anglo-American feminism overlooks the way female subjectivity is also “constructed in a crisis of meaning situation which includes racial and cultural divisions and conflict.” Part of this exclusion stems from a lack of awareness of how language is “reflective of material existence” that is apparent in the assumption of “a speaking subject who is an autonomous, self-conscious
individual woman," thus denying Bridge's theoretical construction of consciousness as "the site of multiple voicings."116

I agree with Alarcón's analysis of hegemonic feminism's commitment to an educationally and economically privileged subject of knowledge that, although gendered or, more accurately, because gendered, fails to account for both relations of domination between women and relations of multiple (Smith's "geometric") oppression. I also agree that white feminist theorists have often ignored or appropriated theory by women of color for their own politically correct ends. Yet I am not so pessimistic about either Bridge's influence upon mainstream feminism or the political viability of alliances within feminism as a coalitional movement. For Alarcón, the fact that This Bridge has "problematized many a version of Anglo-American feminism" and "helped open the way for alternate feminist discourse and theories" is not enough.117 In fact, she ends her essay by arguing that "to privilege the subject, even if multiple-voiced, is not enough."118 What I believe Alarcón is critiquing here is the privileging of "the subject" as an abstraction rather than as a flesh-and-blood person who struggles to survive within a complex network of historically specific power relations. Alarcón faults Anglo-American feminism for theorizing abstract notions of subjectivity rather than concrete relations of subjugation to the detriment of those who are "disenabled not only from grasping an 'identity,' but also from reclaiming it."119

What Alarcón seems to be calling for is an oppositional theory of the subject that can account for a "struggle of multiple antagonisms, almost always in relation to culturally different groups and not just genders." I suggest that Sandoval's theory of differential consciousness can serve Alarcón's purposes in that it resists privileging any one subject of knowledge in favor of enabling movement between standpoints (which are not
themselves subjects, but are created by subjects) and the concurrent practice of those standpoints (thinking and doing). I also believe that *Bridge*’s problematizing of hegemonic feminism and its creation of alternate political practices should not be underestimated. In fact, these tactics are exemplary of the differential politics from which *Bridge* was produced. That *This Bridge Called My Back* continues to be in demand thirteen years after its initial publication is testimony to the breadth of its vision and its unique position within feminist print culture. Even within the currently favorable university and trade press market for feminist writing, *This Bridge* is still only one of a handful of books “conceived of and produced entirely by women of color.” In conclusion, I would like to suggest how *This Bridge* employs differential politics to circulate within an apparatus of feminist production.

*This Bridge Called My Back* was originally published by “a white women’s press” because no women-of-color press existed prior to 1981. However, the same forces that made possible Persephone Press’s publication of *This Bridge* also enabled the establishment of Kitchen Table Press. That is, the simultaneous empowerment (“sisterhood”) and marginalization (racism/classism) of women of color within the feminist movement constructed a political and material basis from which a publication network for and by U.S. Third World women could emerge. By the time Persephone ceased operation, the future of Kitchen Table was secure enough to allow republication of *This Bridge* and first-time publication of *Home Girls*. In turn, these books helped solidify Kitchen Table’s reputation and financial foundation. As the only press devoted exclusively to writing by women of color, Kitchen Table was the obvious choice for publishing *This Bridge*, but it was not the only choice. Given only the book’s topic (“Writing by
Radical Women of Color), the Feminist Press, Crossing Press, and South End Press, among others, could reasonably have opted to republish it.

By locating This Bridge within the larger historical and political contexts of its publication narrative, however, we can conceptualize it not only as a book—a material object produced by feminist print culture—but also as a function of feminist ideology and movement. Published by Persephone, This Bridge problematized “sisterhood’s” erasure of difference; published by Kitchen Table, it also enables a material space for the articulation of alternate feminist discourses. As a function of U.S. Third World feminism, it seeks to impact the process by which feminism constitutes itself as an idea and a practice, to “create a definition that expands what ‘feminist’ means” (xxiii).

In fact, This Bridge was never regarded as only a “book.” From the beginning, it was conceived of as a “resource,” a “catalyst,” a “revolutionary tool,” a “consciousness-raiser,” an “educator and agitator” (xxvi). This personification of Bridge as an active agent is not accidental, for its editors, contributors, and publishers have always self-consciously presented it as autonomous of anyone’s individual agency. Instead, the promotion of This Bridge as a coalitional effort with the ability to move among and between even adverse material spaces reveals an awareness of the book’s transformative power. Over a decade after the initial publication of This Bridge Called My Back, feminists of color like Barbara Smith no longer have to ask for one book that would tell them how to live and how to dream. That book exists in Bridge.

However, Bridge’s power is not manifested solely in its discursive agency. While as a textual object This Bridge privileges writing, as a function it demands the recognition that the written word alone is not enough. Like a song by Sweet Honey in the Rock, “not enough” becomes a refrain in the lives of women of color. Just as Smith argues that “it’s not enough just to have a
lot of writing available," and Nellie Wong writes that "poems and stories will do some of the work... but poems and stories alone aren't enough" (180), we must admit that, viewed only as a singular object or event, the publication of This Bridge is not enough to change the world. Placed within a framework of differential politics, however, publication as a kind of "textual activism" becomes not just one tactic among many, but one tactic that exists only in relation to many. Coalition politics, reclaiming language, theory in the flesh, the politicization of writing, audience outreach, literacy, access to print technologies, even multiple beginnings are all differential tactics that This Bridge deploys "to make revolution irresistible" (viii). As Toni Cade Bambara writes in her introduction, "Quite frankly, This Bridge needs no Foreword. It is the Afterward that'll count" (viii).

1Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. The first edition was published by Persephone Press of Watertown, Massachusetts in 1981; the current edition has been published since 1983 by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, P.O. Box 908, Latham, New York, 12110.

2However, an anthology written entirely by Black women had previously been published as the periodical Conditions 5: The Black Women's Issue in November 1979 and was later reprinted in part in Home Girls, edited by Barbara Smith and published by Kitchen Table in 1983. Conditions 5 sold three-thousand copies in three weeks from an initial printing of five thousand and was followed by a second printing of another five thousand in December. Home Girls was to have been published by Persephone Press in 1983 but the press went out of business just weeks before its publication date. Only after hiring a lawyer and threatening to sue Persephone for the time she had invested in the book was Smith able to retrieve her already-typeset manuscript. Home Girls continues to be one of Kitchen Table's best sellers. For more information on publishing by Black women, see Smith's introduction.

3The term "second wave" refers to the current women's liberation and feminist movements which had their roots in the civil rights, anti-war and student movements of the 1960s. Some feminists of color use the term "the third wave" to identify a new feminism that is led by and has grown out of the challenge to white feminism posited by women of color. Kitchen Table recently published an anthology entitled The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism, which examines this challenge.


6Introduction to This Bridge, xxiii.
7Preface to This Bridge, xv.

8Williams, 14.

9Ibid., 14. Earlier works by people of color that used the bridge metaphor in their titles were Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature, ed. Roseann Bell, Bettye Parker, and Beverly Sheftall (New York: Doubleday, 1978) and the journal Bridges: An Asian American Perspective, which included two special issues on Asian American women (Winter 1978-1979 and Spring 1979).

10Donna Kate Rushin, "The Bridge Poem," This Bridge, xxi-xxii.

11Preface to This Bridge, xiii.

12Introduction to This Bridge, xxv, xxvi.

13Mary Florenza, "Persephone: Revolution in Process," Sojourner 6 (August 1981): 15, 26. In this interview, however, Greenfield and McGloin reported that one thousand people attended the reading for Lesbian Poetry and attributed the difference in audience size to racism. Flyers for the event were circulated in both English and Spanish. For more information on the reading, see Gay Community News June 27, 1981, 7-9.

14From a January 7, 1981 promotional fundraising packet sent to the Lesbian History Archives in New York. My deepest appreciation to the archives for their help in collecting and researching materials on feminist publications. For more information, write to them at LHEF, Inc., P.O. Box 1258, New York, N.Y., 10116 or call them at 718-768-DYKE.

15Ibid., no page numbers.

16Ibid.


18Promotional packet; see note 13 above.

19Ibid.


23The essay was originally published in Conditions 2 (October 1977) and then printed as a pamphlet by Out and Out Books and distributed by Crossing Press. It has since been reprinted many times, including in Smith's Black women's studies anthology, All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, co-edited with Gloria T. Hull and Patricia Bell Scott, (New York: Feminist Press, 1982): 157-75.

24Ibid., in But Some of Us Are Brave, 173.


27Ibid., 11.

28For more information on the conference itself, see *off our backs* 11 (December 1981): 2-3, 10-11, 27.

29I borrow the idea of "geometric" oppression from Barbara Smith's analysis of class, racial, and sexual oppression as "not merely arithmetic—one plus one plus one—but geometric." See "Notes for Yet Another Paper on Black Feminism, or Will the Real Enemy Please Stand Up?" *Conditions* 5 (1979): 123.


31Parkerson, 12.


33Ibid., 12.

34Parkerson, 10.


36Ibid., 13.


39For more information on ordering these pamphlets or other Kitchen Table publications, write to the press at the address above.

40Jewell, 22.


42Parkerson, 11.


45Parkerson, 12.

46Dong, 29.

48 Ibid., 20.

49 From my interview with Barbara Smith.

50 Ibid.

51 From the 1993 catalogue.


53 Ibid., 10.

54 Ibid., 10. Aunt Lute is currently composed of eight women of color, one Jewish woman, and one white woman, its founder, Joan Pinkvoss, and is consciously structuring its operations to promote power sharing and diverse publishing.

55 Ibid., 11. The comment was Mattie Richardson's paraphrase of some feminist presses' concerns.


57 From my interview with Barbara Smith.

58 For Sandoval's response to the racism of the 1981 NWSA conference, see her "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Conference" in Making Face, Making Soul/ Haciendo Caras, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation, 1990), 55-71. For an elliptical discussion of how Sandoval's work has both influenced and been appropriated by white feminists, see Katie King's "Producing Sex, Theory, and Culture: Gay/Straight Remappings in Contemporary Feminism," in Conflicts in Feminism, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 91. The identification of Sandoval as a cultural critic comes from her contributor's note in Genders. I was fortunate to have worked at Genders during the publishing of Sandoval's important essay and am deeply indebted to her insights.


60 Sandoval, 5. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

61 Sandoval writes that "[w]ithin the realm of differential consciousness, oppositional ideological positions, unlike their incarnations under hegemonic feminist comprehension, are tactics—not strategies." (15). "Theory in the Flesh" is one of the subheadings from This Bridge.
62ibid., 4. See Sandoval, 4-5, for a list of the authors whose work portrays such lived experience.


64ibid., 69.

65ibid., 76, 78.

66ibid., 78.

67ibid., 69.


69ibid., 745.

70ibid., 748.

71Loma Dee Cervantes, “Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races,” in Emplumada (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 35. This poem is reprinted in Making Face, Making Soul, 4-5.

72ibid., 36.

73Collins, 773.

74“Black Women and the Feminist Movement,” show #60989, aired on June 2, 1989. Quotations are from the transcripts of the program.


77Smith, “Notes for Yet Another Paper on Black Feminism,” 126.

78King, “Canons,” 55.

79Norma Alarcon, “The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism,” in Making Face, Making Soul, 360. The phrase “misnamed as . . . homogeneity” comes from Audre Lorde’s “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 119.

80The statement first appeared in Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism, ed. Zilliah Eisenstein (Monthly Review Press, 1978) and has been reprinted in All the Women Are White, 13-22; Home Girls, 272-282; and Ms., July/August 1991, 40-44. The above quotation is from page 275 of Home Girls.

81Smith, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place,” 84.
82Ibid., 83.

83Byllye Avery, "Black Women and the Feminist Movement," Donahue show #60989.
84 For more information on Sweet Honey in the Rock, see "Sweet Honey: A Cappella Activists," by Audreen Buffalo in Ms. March/April 1993, 24-29.


86Parkerson interview, 12.
87Reagon, 357.
88Ibid., 358.
89Ibid., 361.
90Ibid., 365, 357.

91Although I have used their work to different ends here, I am indebted to King's juxtaposition of Reagon and Sandoval in her "Canons," 34-37.

92Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, "Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue," in This Bridge Called My Back, 128.
93Sandoval, "Feminism and Racism."
94Ibid., 67.

95In fact, the following passage from "Feminism and Racism" appears in almost identical form in "U.S. Third World Feminism" as previously cited above: "What U.S. third world feminists are calling for is a new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one perspective as the only answer, but instead posits a shifting tactical and strategic subjectivity that has the capacity to re-center depending upon the forms of oppression to be confronted."

96Gloria Anzaldúa, "Haciendo caras, una entrada," in Making Face, Making Soul, xviii.
98Gloria Anzaldúa, foreword to the second edition of This Bridge, no page number. Further references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.
100Ibid., 6.
101Cliff, 28.
102Gaye Williams, 14.

Sonia Saldívar-Hull has written of Chicanas, "Autobiography for the new mestiza is the history of the colonization of indigenous southwestern peoples by Anglo-American imperialists intent on their manifest destiny." I believe this juncture of autobiography and repression is applicable in various ways to the understanding of all marginalized groups in the United States. See her essay "Feminism on the Border: From Gender Politics to Geopolitics" in Tradition and the Talents of Women, ed. Florence Howe (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 297.

Williams, 14.

Jamieson, 6.

Cliff, 31.


Williams, 14.

Sorrel, 4.

Ibid., 4.

Cliff, 28.

Alarcón, 356-69.

Ibid., 359.

Ibid., 359.

Ibid., 363.

Ibid., 357.

Ibid., 366.

Ibid., 364. I am indebted to Lorna Dee Cervantes for suggesting this distinction between subjectivity and subjugation.
CHAPTER FIVE

How Would We Market It?: Blood Ties in *The Gilda Stories*

*Nature abhors a vacuum and there is a distinct gap in the picture where the Black Lesbian should be. The Black Lesbian writer must recreate our home, unadulterated, unsanitized, specific and not isolated from the generations that have nurtured us.*

Jewelle Gomez, “A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women”

There has never been a novel like *The Gilda Stories*. Written by Jewelle Gomez and published by Firebrand Press in 1991, *The Gilda Stories* depicts the two hundred year saga of a young black girl who escapes from slavery in 1850, becomes a vampire, and lives on in the year 2050 as human society collapses around her. Although the word lesbian is never used in the novel, Gilda is also a lesbian who finds “her comfort with women.”¹ As a Black woman, a lesbian, and a vampire, Gilda struggles to re-create the blood ties lost at the death of her slave mother and escape from the Mississippi plantation where her sisters remained behind. Transcending traditional vampire lore, the family she ultimately fashions for herself is devoted not to destroying the world, but to saving it.

Just as Gilda must search for a family and a home where she can be safe from those who fear her or desire her powers, Jewelle Gomez had to search for a publisher who could understand her creative vision. Mainstream publishers failed to recognize the artistic possibilities encompassed within a character whose identity is multiply determined. “How would we market it?” their rejection letters asked. If Gomez were writing only about a Black
woman, only about a lesbian, or only about a vampire, they would know what
to do with the novel. But a Black lesbian vampire? In their minds, such a
novel would have a very limited audience. According to Gomez, "The
number of books published by black women has received great attention but
little of the critical discourse has successfully addressed the issue of the
politics of publishing for black women in general and black lesbians
specifically." Publishers believe that people of color do not read, lesbians
cannot afford books, and lesbians of color do not even exist. When white gay
and lesbian editors from major trade publishing houses appealed to the
audience at a writer's conference to supply them with the facts and figures
that would prove otherwise, Gomez raised her hand and said, "Fuck you!
What do you think the civil rights movement and the women's movement have
been doing for the past thirty years! And you get a goddamn salary. You
figure out the demographics!"

Obviously, this lack of vision by corporate publishers reflects in part the
invisibility of lesbians, particularly lesbians of color, in U.S. society. Despite
the recent celebration of Lesbian Chic, a media invention which, as Meg
Moritz has shown, reflects only the lifestyles of white, privileged lesbians
constructed within the parameters of the Hollywood star system, lesbian lives
are censored and repressed in discussions and decisions concerning legal
rights, healthcare, and economic opportunities. For lesbians of color, this
discrimination is compounded by issues of race, ethnicity, and class.
Because mainstream presses are anxious to publish only what they have pre-
determined will sell, the invisibility of lesbians of color within mainstream
society actually conditions their absence within literature in a self-fulfilling
cycle: there are few books reflecting the lives of women of color because their
lives are invisible; their lives are invisible because there are few books published which reflect them.

Yet mainstream publishers’ resistance to *The Gilda Stories*, I think, goes beyond a lack of creative vision or even racial prejudice, misogyny, or homophobia alone. At the root of their protests lies a fear of what the Black lesbian vampire represents: an overdetermined Other which can reproduce itself outside of what Sue-Ellen Case calls “the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being.” In this novel, each difference circulates as the embodiment of another: Blackness becomes femaleness, femaleness becomes queerness, queerness becomes vampireness, etc. Like the vampire, Blacks, lesbians, and women (identities which are not mutually exclusive) have been denied access to the category “human” and have thus been erased from history. By figuring a Black lesbian as an immortal being, Gomez fills in “the distinct gap in the picture where the Black Lesbian should be” by placing her within both a historical past and a projected future. Each section of *The Gilda Stories* is set within a different time and place as identified in the chapter titles as follows: Louisiana: 1850; Yerba Buena: 1890; Rosebud, Missouri: 1921; South End: 1955; Off-Broadway: 1971; Down by the Riverside: 1981; Hampton Falls, New Hampshire: 2020; and Land of Enchantment: 2050. This narrative structure allows Gomez to depict Blacks and lesbians and gays as what she calls “a natural presence” throughout American history. According to Gomez, “The whole idea of writing fantasy fiction is to get you to extrapolate a reality from certain kinds of advances: advances in time, or scientific advances, or metaphysical differences. To do that with a black person in another time period in this country was very much like that.” Changing settings also enables Gomez to develop a sense of “time that’s not
really time" (44), the length of Gilda's life, and the weight of her immortality. Lesbian vampirism provides Gilda an escape from her slave past and a future in which to experience freedom. She represents the continued survival and day-to-day lives of oppressed and marginalized people in ordinary human existence. In Gomez's words, by characterizing an escaped slave as a vampire, "the scorned of the scorned . . . also has the greatest gift: life." Thematically, Gomez's fantasy fiction provides "an inhabitable position" for Gilda through the construction of a family which exhibits the same kind of "family values" venerated within Christian family ideology today: unconditional love, acceptance, loyalty, and support. Gomez "wanted to recreate the sense of family that [she] experienced as a child and grew to understand as a feminist," a family in which "it is the caring and attention and affection that is valuable, and not that they fit a certain mold." However, the vampire family in The Gilda Stories is emphatically not like any other, and to suggest otherwise would deny the novel's rejection of both heterosexual monogamy and the patriarchal family. As a kinship system which can endlessly reproduce itself toward the fulfillment of its own desires, Gilda's vampire family is erotically constituted within the domain of all that is considered perverse, incestuous, and immoral, monstrously so, in fact, in that it is racially, as well as sexually, determined. This reconfiguration of the normative is undoubtedly implicated in the novel's rejection by mainstream publishers. Clearly, not everyone is ready for this family to move into their neighborhood: such integration would bring the overdetermined Other a little too close for comfort.

The association between vampirism and lesbianism is longstanding. According to Pam Kesey's introduction to Daughters of Darkness, a collection of lesbian vampire stories which includes the first chapter of The Gilda
Stories, this connection originated with the seventeenth-century account of the Hungarian Countess Elizabeth Bathroy’s torture and murder of young women. Allegedly a lesbian who dressed in male clothing, Bathory was rumoured to bathe in the blood of her victims in order to retain her youth and beauty. While Bram Stoker’s famous Dracula is a direct descendent (in the literary sense) of the fifteenth-century Romanian prince, Vlad Dracula, Stoker may have borrowed much of Bathroy’s story for his popular novel.

In nineteenth-century European vampire mythology, male misogyny and fear of female sexuality are evident in the portrayal of lesbian vampires as both transgressive and destructive. Coleridge’s 1817 poem, “Christabel,” and Irish writer J. Sheridan LeFanu’s 1871 novella, “Carmilla,” a prose version of Coleridge’s tale, figure the danger of erotic attraction between young women as the lesbian vampire who preys on her unwitting and innocent victims by seducing and then killing or abandoning them once their youthful beauty has been consumed. According to Kesey, the lesbian vampire manifested Victorian society’s fear of women’s excessive sexuality and social improprieties as “she who steps outside the realm of acceptable ‘feminine’ behavior.” Despite LeFanu’s negative representation of lesbianism, the story enjoys a following with lesbian readers who, in their eagerness for any story featuring a lesbian relationship, provide their own subversive interpretation of the novella. Writing in the lesbian publication The Ladder, for example, editor Gene Damon (Barbara Grier) called Carmilla “no more and no less than a very clever young woman determined to run off with the girl of her choice.”

Bonnie Zimmerman illustrates this feminist recuperation in her critical review of lesbian vampire films. While films produced before 1970 merely feature female vampires or obliquely allude to lesbianism, films of the early
seventies used lesbian vampire characters to capitalize on the pornography market because "the lesbian vampire genre can allow nudity, blood, and sexual titillation in a 'safe' fantasy structure." These films exploited many lesbian stereotypes by portraying lesbians as "rich, decadent women who seduce the young and powerless" and lesbian sexuality as "infantile and narcissistic" or "sterile and morbid." Zimmerman argues that in these films "lesbianism—love between women—must be vampirism" since in a heterosexist society it is inconceivable "that two women without coercion or morbidity might prefer one another to a man." A feminist reinterpretation of these films exposes the "fundamental male fear that woman-bonding will exclude men and threaten male supremacy," a reading that allows the myth to be radically transformed toward subversive ends: women's empowerment, creation of a female community, and an end to patriarchal dominance.

Like Zimmerman's critical response to vampire films, Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* revises vampire lore to meet her own political and artistic needs. "I was certain I could create a mythology to express who I am as a black feminist and what I want," she wrote in 1987 after several excerpts had appeared in various feminist and gay and lesbian anthologies and magazines. Gomez researched vampires in ancient societies, finding vampire-like myths such as the Chinese Kiang-si, which sleep during the day and can be driven from the victim's body by fire, and the African Adze, which have elephant-like trunks for sucking blood. Gomez associates vampires with life, rather than death, since "in the larger perspective, ecologically, all life is interdependent and death is a natural part of life—not necessarily a separate horror." The vampires in *The Gilda Stories* do not have to kill in order to get blood. As Gomez says, "If people can donate a pint of blood to the Red Cross and live, they can give it to Gilda." Gomez's vampires do not
take blood, but exchange something for it. As the first Gilda explains to her young initiate and namesake, “We draw life into ourselves, yet we give life as well. We give what’s needed—energy, dreams, ideas. It’s a fair exchange in a world full of cheaters. And when we feel it is right, when the need is great on both sides, we can re-create others like ourselves to share life with us” (45). Contrary to traditional vampirism, however, bringing another “into the life” requires their permission. Gomez was also determined to separate the mythology from its Christian dogma, so unlike Dracula-inspired vampires, Gomez’s characters can see themselves in mirrors and are not repelled by crosses. (One of Gilda’s few possessions is a cross given to her by her mother, but it holds a sentimental, rather than a religious, meaning for her.) Instead, they are affected by physical elements, such as running water or direct sunlight. To protect their preternatural strength, they sleep on pallets filled with the soil of their birthplace and have this same native earth sewn into their clothes.

Gomez’s innovations extend beyond these mythic details, however, to the gender and racial construction of the vampire. According to Gomez, in traditional vampire mythology “women are victims or objects of desire. Typical male fiction naturally continues the mythology: desire equals destruction; men can have desires, women cannot; men desire women; men destroy women.”24 In other words, men are predators and women are victims. In The Gilda Stories, however, Gomez emphatically refuses this characterization by creating a female protagonist who is determined not to be a victim. In fact, the novel begins with the main character, a young escaped slave who is initially referred to as “the Girl” but later takes the name of her benefactor, Gilda, killing the bounty hunter who attempts to capture and rape her.
While *The Gilda Stories* features several well-developed male characters, the novel is structured around Gilda and her relationships with other women. Gomez cites her viewing of Ntozake Shange’s play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, which foregrounds the voices of Black women speaking about their lives, as the pivotal moment in her literary career because it inspired her to realize that women’s lives were “a suitable topic” for her writing. *The Gilda Stories* is filled with strong women characters living within female-centered communities. In the opening chapter, the Girl is found by a white woman, the original Gilda, in the root cellar of the woman’s farmhouse. Although the Girl knows that white women “could be as dangerous as their men (12), she is soon calmed by the woman’s words, which are spoken without sound, “You needn’t be afraid. I’ll take care of you. The night hides many things” (13). She is puzzled by the woman, who is dressed in men’s breeches, and thinks perhaps she is “a little man” (16). But Gilda responds, “I am a woman, you know that. And you know I am a woman as no other you have known, nor has your mother known, in life or death. I am a woman as you are, and more” (16). Gilda’s “more” turns out to be a lot more. Not only is she an independent businesswoman who manages her own brothel, she is also a three hundred year old vampire who is ready for “the true death” but wants first to find a companion for her lover, the Native woman, Bird. The Girl finds a home within Gilda’s house, not as a prostitute, but as a daughter to Gilda and Bird, a blood tie that becomes literalized at the end of the chapter through an actual blood exchange between the three. Gilda is then set free from her long journey, while the Girl takes her name and is initiated by Bird into the ways of the vampire.
Throughout the rest of the novel, Gilda learns new lessons about the meaning of family. Although it is within her power to bring anyone she chooses into her family, she realizes that not every mortal is suited to the life she offers, and she struggles fearfully to make the right decisions. She is helped in this regard by Sorel and Anthony, vampires in San Francisco to whose establishment she travels in 1890. As father and brother, they greet her arrival with their best champagne and warmest hospitality. They teach her that choosing a family is a great responsibility and show by their own example what eternal love can mean. As Anthony cautions,

Many create new family members as if gathering an army around themselves. This is not what we mean by family... It must be done not simply out of your own need or desire but rather because of a mutual need. We must search ourselves and the other to know if it is really essential. To do otherwise is a grave error, the result of which can only be tragedy. You will meet those who’ve been brought into this life mistakenly. An impulsive moment of self-interest or vindictiveness... These are not the families that bring solace or that last in harmony. (69)

Gilda is afraid to love because of the grief she has suffered in losing so many she has loved—her birth family to slavery and her foremother Gilda to the true death. But Sorel reminds her that eternal life is different from life bound by mortality. She has “much time now to love again” and “to learn when it is safe to love” (101). While Gilda does love again, she resists bringing anyone into the life who has a strong connection to other humans or does not have the strength “to withstand the complete loss of those intangibles that make the past so alluring” (43). Although in the beginning of the novel she searches for one true partner to end her loneliness, in the end she realizes that “that’s not what her life is ever going to be about.”26 Instead, over the next century and a half she creates “the family she had hungered for as a child” (223), first by bringing in a brother, Julius, and then a sister, Ermis,
to join Bird, her “mother, father, sister, lover” (177), Sorel, her father, Anthony, her “brother and sister” (71), and Effie, her lover and “sister” (217).

As this proliferation of familial roles attests, Gilda’s family departs markedly from the Eurocentric, patriarchal model founded on a generational notion of kinship in which heterosexual monogamy protected inherited property by ensuring the purity of paternal bloodlines. Here blood ties not only indicated whom one was related to, but who one was: one’s status, what one owned, how one was to be treated in the world. *The Gilda Stories* subverts this blood logic with a vengeance by insisting on a biologics, rather than a symbolics, of blood in which blood determines what one is: an immortal or a human. Blood functions as the medium of exchange through which vampireness and family membership are ascertained. However, because blood exchange is merely the physical process through which one joins a particular vampire family, kinship is also based upon the concrete social and historical factors which lead to the selection of family members. That is, kinship both transcends blood ties and is constituted by them. For example, Gilda brings Julius into the family because he is “unequivocally alone” in the human world, because his involvement in the political movements of the 1960s “fueled [his] vision of the future,” and because as a Black man living in 1971, he understands how “the horror of slavery appeared to reap endless returns” (180). It is sharing Gilda’s history of racial oppression that makes Julius her blood brother, not just sharing her blood: this merely makes him a vampire.

This revised concept of kinship follows historically from the configuration of the Black family during slavery. According to Gomez, “For Africans held in bondage, loyalty based on skin color was a necessity of survival for several hundred years. It was/is this extended family loyalty (of
race as opposed to the strictly patriarchal model of family) that provided for economic and psychological survival in this country during slavery." Here skin color, like vampire blood, serves as a physical marker of kinship—belonging to a particular race—but it is shared experiences of oppression based upon skin color which reconfigure family relations beyond an immediate, biological family. Furthermore, part of the horror of slavery was the prohibition of familial relations based upon blood ties. Gilda's father was sold away from the plantation before she was born and, after the death of her mother from influenza, she escapes rather than face a similar fate. At her young age, she has already witnessed enough suffering to know what road she must take, for "seeing those you love pass from you either under a lash or simply of old age before their time is not something that keeps you young and innocent" (82).

As a Black woman whose skin color makes her part of what Gomez ironically labels "an identifiable community," Gilda feels most comfortable within Black communities because "her connection to the daylight world came from her blackness... the memories of her master's lash as well as her mother's face, legends of the Middle Passage, lynchings she had not been able to prevent, images of black women bent over scouring brushes" (180). Even though as a vampire she is an outsider within that community—"a part of them yet apart from them" (129)—she still "took comfort in the familiar smells and sounds and the rare sense of unity that sometimes crept into her" when she is with other Blacks (112). Her connection to Bird is also based upon a sense of "tribal unity" as they share "the ancient rhythms of the Lakota and Fulani peoples" (137). Yet Gilda also shares a sense of kinship with Sorel and Anthony as vampires and, though never explicitly stated within the novel, as homosexuals. Within the novel, then, the concept of family is not tied to
any particular racial, sexual, or ontological identity, but rather to a concept of family loyalty which provides the most important lesson Gilda can learn: "Betraying our shared life, our shared humanity makes one unworthy of sharing, unworthy of life" (62).

For Gilda, family membership represents feelings of safety and pleasure which are manifested within the novel by the figure of her mother. The novel begins with the evocation of these feelings in a dream:

The Girl slept restlessly, feeling the prickly straw as if it were teasing pinches from her mother. The stiff moldy odor transformed itself into her mother's starchy dough smell. The rustling of the Girl's body in the barn hay was sometimes like the sound of fatback frying in the cooking shed behind the plantation's main house. At other moments in her dream it was the crackling of the brush as her mother raked the bristles through the Girl's thicket of dark hair before beginning the intricate pattern of braided rows. (9)

Throughout the novel, Gilda returns to memories of mother-daughter intimacy such as this in her attempts to recreate a family like the one she has lost. The Girl's dream represents a moment of bliss in which the child experiences complete safety, love, and acceptance. This is the dream that Gomez elicits through the novel's epigraph taken from Audre Lorde's poem, "Prologue":

At night sleep locks me into an echoless coffin
sometimes at noon I dream
there is nothing to fear . . .

As in Lorde's poem, however, the state in which there is "nothing to fear" only exists in a dream. The Girl awakens to the nightmare of a bounty hunter's attempted rape, but the memory of her mother provides the courage she needs to fight back: "she was not ready to give in to those whom her mother had sworn were not fully human" (10). As he lays on top of her, she stabs him in the heart with a hidden knife. The blood draining from his body does not frighten or disgust her but rather reminds her of the first real bath her
mother had given her: “The intimacy of her mother's hands and the warmth of
the water lulled the Girl into a trance of sensuality she never forgot. Now the
blood washing slowly down her breastbone and soaking into the floor below
was like that bath—a cleansing... It was the blood signaling the death of a
beast and her continued life” (12).

Here Gomez emancipates “humanity” from its equation with
“whiteness” by exposing the inhumanity of white people during slavery. As
Barbara Smith has written, “The most racist definition of Black people has
been that we were not human.” Yet in this scene it is the white slavehunter
and the slave owners he represents who are beasts, so the Girl need feel no
sorrow or guilt at killing one of them. That whites are not really human is a
lesson she has learned from working in the cotton fields and from helping her
mother in the plantation kitchen. When she asks her mother why whites
cannot tell the difference between butter and fat on the top of their biscuits,
her mother replies that whites are “just barely human. Maybe not even. They
suck up the world, don't taste it” (11). This explanation of whites’ lack of
humanity foretells Gomez’s reconfiguration of the vampire as well. As the
following chapters will illustrate, it is not vampires who destroy by “suck[ing]
up the world,” but white people.

The sensuous nature of the murder introduces an erotics of blood
which will be expressed throughout the rest of the novel. Blood symbolizes
warmth, strength, intimacy, and love. Blood gives life and is essential for
survival. It also represents ties between mother and daughter which links
them even after death. As in the Girl’s dream, the erotic and sensual nature
of the mother/daughter relationship is emphasized repeatedly throughout the
novel through the evocation of the mother during Gilda’s intimate encounters.
The eroticization of blood ties, specifically those between mother and
daughter, obviates the predatory characterization of vampires in traditional mythology. As Gomez’s has written, “I don’t perpetually equate sex with violence against women, and I feel in exploring the sensual nature of vampires I could recast it in a less exploitative mode... A child suckling at its mother’s breast is not called a predator.”

This sensuality is revealed in the first chapter during the Girl’s initiation into vampire life. When Gilda takes the Girl into the life, their physical encounter is described in terms identical to a mother nursing a baby, except that here the child is nourished by blood, rather than mother’s milk:

[The Girl] curled her long body in Gilda’s lap like a child safe in her mother’s arms. She felt a sharpness at her neck and heard the soothing song. Gilda kissed her on the forehead and neck where the pain had been, catching her in a powerful undertow. She clung to Gilda, sinking deeper into a dream, barely hearing Gilda as she said, “Now you must drink.” She held the Girl’s head to her breast and in a quick gesture opened the skin of her chest. She pressed the Girl’s mouth to the red life that seeped from her. Soon the flow was a tide that left Gilda weak. She pulled the suckling girl away and closed the wound. (48)

The sensual nature of breastfeeding is a taboo subject in American culture. In fact, in 1991, a single mother lost custody of her child after her inquiries as to whether “it was normal to become aroused while nursing her infant” led to charges of sexual abuse. (Her daughter was returned a year later after the charges were dropped.) An erotics of blood in The Gilda Stories, however, goes beyond mere acknowledgement of this illicit pleasure by aligning it with both vampire hunger and lesbian sexual desire. When Bird and Gilda are reunited after a century of travel, their desire for each other is “not unlike their need for the blood,” “not unlike lust but less single-minded,” and almost “motherly affection, yet... more” (139). Their lovemaking is a sharing of blood as well as desire: “She pressed Gilda’s mouth to the red slash, letting the blood wash across Gilda’s face. Soon Gilda drank eagerly, filling herself, and as she did her hand massaged Bird’s breast, first touching
the nipple gently with curiosity, then roughly. She wanted to know this body that gave her life" (140). Although this encounter with Bird is more explicitly sexual than Gilda's initiation, it is similarly represented as a birth scene, including the attendant blood. The following description combines elements of birth, sex, and bloodsucking: “To an outsider the sight may have been one of horror: their faces red and shining, their eyes unfocused and black, the sound of their bodies slick with wetness, tight with life. Yet it was a birth. The mother finally able to bring her child into the world, to look at her.” (139)

These passages foreground the eroticization of blood ties at the center of The Gilda Stories. Gilda and Bird are both lovers and mother and daughter : they are eternally united as much by their lovemaking as by their blood exchange: “As the blood flowed from Gilda's body into Bird's they both understood the need—it was for completion. They had come together but had never taken each other in as fully as they could, cementing their family bond” (139). The eroticization of familial relations is made possible by the restructuring of kinship discussed earlier. Since families are constituted through blood, rather than sexual, relations, blood exchange replaces sexual intercourse in the mechanics of reproduction. Once sexual desire is freed from a heterosexist concept of reproduction, the erotic can circulate within familial relations as well as without and may even transcend sexual preference. Gilda brings Julius into the life as her brother even though she does not desire him sexually. He desires her, however, and her fulfillment of that desire is what she gives in exchange for his blood. Although she brings him to a climax with her hand, rather than through intercourse, in his dream-like state he believes they have made love: “Her hands were as hypnotic as her eyes. As the moment approached when his mind provided the gratification his body hungered for, she sliced across the flesh of his neck with
her fingernail and watched the blood ease slowly to the surface" (178). What he gives her in return is a memory of “the complete joy he had felt as a child” (192), something that Gilda, growing up in slavery, had never completely experienced. He becomes her brother, yet is also her son. As with Gilda’s own initiation, the blood exchange is described in terms of a birth, with “Julius feeling like a child in her arms, yet still a man” (192), and after the ritual has been completed, Gilda sends Bird a message: “We’ve finally delivered a brother for me” (194). The inclusion of Julius in Gilda’s vampire family provides a Black feminist critique of lesbian separatism and is no doubt representative of Gomez’s commitment to “solidarity around the fact of race” with Black men.33 As an escaped slave, Gilda knows that “although the institution of enslavement was no longer sanctioned, our world had not become a more hospitable place” for Black people (82).

The two women who join Gilda as sisters are also Black. The first, Effie (the namesake of Gomez’s great-aunt), is a vampire much older than Gilda, but their relationship is sororal rather than filial. Their lovemaking does not include a blood exchange, but still seems to satisfy their desire for both blood and sexual release: “Effie’s mouth and hands were tender, insistent—demanding Gilda’s pleasure be allowed its own way. . . . When she felt the welling of heat inside her she knew the release would be greater than any she had known before and she opened her eyes to catch Effie’s gaze. . . . At the final moment Gilda closed her eyes, drawing inside herself as the power of her desire erupted around them. . . . She looked again at Effie and marveled at the flecks of orange swirling in her eyes. They watched each other until the orange faded to brown” (213). As with Julius, this sexual encounter establishes their relationship as familial, rather than romantic. The second sister, Ermis, joins the family when Gilda saves her from death in the year
by bringing her into the life. While the cataclysmic events at the novel's conclusion prevent the representation of Ermis's initiation in as fully erotic terms as the others, the possibility of a future sexual relationship is intimated at the end of the novel.

These kinship relations are complex and structured toward the realization of individual and familial survival. Within these relations, the erotics of blood affirm what Audre Lorde describes as "those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings." Lorde identifies the erotic as a source of power which has been denied to women by male containment of female sexuality and woman-to-woman love and urges women to cultivate the erotic as a basis for social change: "Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama." Like Lorde, Gomez expands the definition of the erotic beyond sexual desire to incorporate desire for the safety and pleasure of family as well. She demonstrates the struggle Gilda and her family experience in using that erotic power by portraying the horror of other vampires who "live through the energy of fear" rather than love. Sorel teaches his children that "the source of power will tell in how long-lived that power is" and points all of them "toward an enduring power that did not feed on death". Gilda's family is "sustained by sharing the blood and by maintaining the vital connections to life" instead of death. This is the use of erotic power Lorde advocates when she writes that "when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon
the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense.  

_The Gilda Stories_ ends in a futuristic setting in which greed rules a North America almost destroyed by environmental poisons, economic collapse, and social desperation. The extremely wealthy hire hunters to stalk vampires for the blood that transfused will give them eternal life. For Gilda, "this horror was slavery once again" (235). The final chapter parallels the opening one as Gilda and her family travel to the southern hemisphere to escape capture and death, just as Gilda had escaped from slavery as a child:

Thoughts of the Hunters, armed with drugs and other weapons to ensnare her and her family, caused Gilda to shiver with the memory of her escape from the plantation. In unsuspecting moments she felt the bounty hunter's hand on her childishly thin ankle as he dragged her from beneath the hay. Those who came now were more silent, more expert, but essentially the same. Their approach filled her with a familiar terror" (234).

Although the ending of the novel presents a bleak vision for the future of human life, the final line leaves the reader with some hope: "Gilda was no longer fleeing for her life" (252). Gilda escapes, saves Ermis, and is reunited with her family. Despite the utter devastation of the world around them, they do not consider surrendering to the true death, but instead plan for their survival. When Gilda wonders whether they should "leave this world together," Bird responds: No, my girl, I think not. I have flown from nest to nest since Woodard's. And we've not had time enough to know this world together. . . . We remain because this [sic] our home. We both have lost land here. Should we leave it all to them? I will not" (250). Bird's determination to resist giving in to the horrors facing them parallels the steadfast commitment of African Americans to freedom two centuries earlier. Discussing slavery with Bernice, the Black cook at the brothel, for example, the young Gilda declares, "We gotta keep this place safe, Bernice, no matter how the war
goes. They'll be people needin’ to come here I ‘spect.” Bernice agrees and reminds Gilda that “it’s not the war, it’s the freedom we got to keep our eye on” (26).

By evoking slavery in the book’s concluding chapter, Gomez counters the novel’s final apocalyptic vision with an enactment of history as survival and continuance, rather than as distinct events or periods. As a Black person, a woman, a lesbian, and a vampire, Gilda understands herself to be not only an individual but to belong to “a long line of others who had become part of her as time passed” (223), just as she is a part of what Anthony calls “a living history” (177). The vampire becomes the perfect embodiment of this concept of a living history as an immortal being whose existence is perhaps best described by a passage Gilda reads from the Tao: “To die but not to perish is to be eternally present” (180). Yet Gilda finds that, like women, people of color, and lesbians and gays, vampires have been absent or misrepresented in history. As the first Gilda tells her, “There are only inadequate words to speak for who we are. The language is crude, the history false” (43). Recognizing the risk she takes in opening her life to someone outside her family, Gilda decides to write herself into history in a letter to a woman she loves but knows cannot join her in the life:

Gilda grasped her pen tightly, spilling the legends that become reality across the page. She opened up her past as far as she could remember it, back to the dark comfort of her mother’s Fulani face. She had never spoken or written these words for any but herself—words that said she was different from them all. She wanted to leave Aurelia with hope, an honest hope, born of who they really were. (129)

Because Aurelia is an African American woman living in Missouri in 1920, the hope Gilda speaks of here does not just refer to eternal life, but to a future of freedom and equality for all people. She wants Aurelia, and her daughters and granddaughters after her, to know the truth about their past and to find
their rightful place in the future, and her words do have an impact: like Jewelle Gomez, Aurelia's great-granddaughter, Nadine, is a social activist and a writer of "idealistic world[s] of utopian equality and mystical adventure" (222).

In *The Gilda Stories*, the act of writing is metonymically related to the recovery of a history which has been ignored, repressed, or denied by those whose ideologies and institutions it challenges. Gilda's letter, and later her novels, fill in the "distinct gap in the picture where the Black lesbian should be." As a child, Gilda "struggled to see a white world through words on a page" (21). As Bird teaches Gilda to read and write, she "wondered what creatures, as invisible as she and the Girl were, did with their pasts" (21). Were they to "slip it off of [their] shoulder and fold it into a chest to be locked away for some unknown future?" And "where would [they] look to see that future?" (21). Certainly not in the Bible or newspapers that Bird uses in her lessons, for "neither of them could see themselves reflected there" (21). The absence of their reflection as lesbians of color in the patriarchal world around them parallels traditional mythology in which vampires have no mirror reflection. Gomez's narrative decision to allow Gilda to see her own face in the mirror becomes more than a fanciful revision of vampire lore, but a powerful metaphor for what Gomez calls "visualiz[ing] the whole of what it can mean to be a Black woman."37 Similarly, the turn of the century photograph of Gomez's great-aunt Effie Johnson on the cover of the book and Gomez's own photograph on the back visually place Black women within a literary tradition that is being simultaneously recovered and constructed by writers and critics today. The inclusion of Black lesbians in this tradition has raised important issues about the nature of that tradition that is beyond the current scope of this chapter.38 In conclusion, however, I want to offer my own
reflection on writing by lesbians of color within both mainstream and feminist publishing.

In 1983, Jewelle Gomez wrote, “The inadequate representation of Black Lesbians among literary characters (and in the writing sorority itself) is a reflection of their social and cultural invisibility and their subsequent failure to be identified as a profitable market.” 39 According to Gomez, the invisibility of lesbians of color in the popular media conveys the message that they do “not even exist, let alone use soap, drive cars, drink Coke, go on vacations, or do much of anything else.” 40 Nearly a decade later, an article in Publishers Weekly proclaimed gay and lesbian publishing “a niche market” that had “come of age” and announced that “the demographics of gays and lesbians are attracting mainstream houses and book clubs while the booksellers and publishers who pioneered the movement continue to grow.” 41 The article heralded the front page New York Times Book Review attention given to Eric Marcus’s Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights 1945-1990, published by HarperCollins, and Lillian Faderman’s Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America, published by Columbia University Press, as evidence of the emergence of gay and lesbian publishing as “a healthy, diverse and growing sector” of the book market “for mainstream publishers and specialty houses alike.” 42 In August 1993, Publishers Weekly reported six-figure advances for a number of books on gay and lesbian topics including $267,000 for The Awakening, “a narrative history of the gay movement from the 1969 Stonewall riot to the present” written by Adam Nagourey and Dudley Clendinen, journalists from USA Today and the New York Times; a comparable amount for a history of American lesbianism entitled The Girls in the Band by Lindsy Van Gelder and Pamela Robin Brandt, journalists and co-authors of a gay and lesbian travel
guide; $217,000 for *Margin to Center: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* by former National Gay and Lesbian Task Force director Urvashi Vaid; and a figure in the “quarter-million range” for an “almanac of gay and lesbian life” by Sherry Thomas, former publisher of Spinster Book Company, and Eric Marcus, author of *Making History.* According to the article, these substantial advances were paid in the hope of duplicating the success of Randy Shilt’s bestselling *And the Band Played On,* a book which chronicled the failure of the medical and scientific communities under the Reagan administration to stop the spread of AIDS before it became a national epidemic. However, while the record-breaking sales of Shilt’s book has been attributed to a “crossover market” (e.g., appealing to both a homosexual and a heterosexual audience), Shilt’s editor Michael Denneny at St. Martin’s, the first mainstream house to develop a strong list of gay authors, disagreed with this assessment, explaining that even though the book “had an allied audience of people associated with AIDS,” “only about 10% of the sales went to the concerned non-gay community.”

This flurry of attention—and advances—paid to a few books indicates several things about gay and lesbian publishing today. First, there is an obvious trend to publish books which document the gay and lesbian movement from the Stonewall uprising in 1969 to the present. The movement is now twenty-five years old and readers are interested in books which both record and reassess that history. Second, this attention is due less to social acceptance of homosexuality than it is to a perception of the numbers and “buying power” of gay and lesbian readers, the so-called “dream market” of high incomes and no children, a label that fails to acknowledge single lesbian mothers or wage inequities for women, particularly women of color. Third, lesbians are receiving some of the attention, and benefits, from this interest,
although the majority of the big-advance books examine the movement as sharing a united history, rather than reflect its gender diversity and conflicts. Fourth, few of these books feature explicit lesbian sex. As Victoria Brownworth argues in "Desexing the Story," "the books which are being published, many of which are quite well-written, present a sanitized version of lesbianism that is palatable to the same people writing about the 'limits of tolerance' and the 'last taboo.'"\(^45\) What lesbians do in bed without men is "perceived as having not only a limited audience, but as limiting the audience."\(^46\)

Finally, issues of race, ethnicity, and class seem to be absent, or at best secondary, to those of sexual preference in the popular press. Vaid is a woman of color, but her book will undoubtedly focus on the NGLTF, rather than on lesbians of color specifically. Nowhere in the mainstream press do we see documented histories of Black, Asian, Native American, or Latina lesbians, singularly or together. Nor do we find many works by lesbians of color published there. While Audre Lorde's poetry has been published by Norton, *Zami*, her explicitly lesbian "biomythography," was originally accepted by Persephone Press, a feminist press, and is now published by Crossing Press, an independent publisher with a feminist series. Ann Allen Shockley's first novel, *Loving Her*, was published by a trade press in 1974, but is now only available from Naiad, which also publishes her novel, *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, and short story collection, *The Black and White of It*. Chicana lesbian writer Terri de la Peña has declared that she never even considered a mainstream press for her novel, *Margins*, published by Seal Press, and attests to the racism within mainstream lesbian publishing. "If my work is ever 'mainstreamed,'" she writes, "it will be because there are more Chicanas in this country than there are lesbians."\(^47\) Furthermore, trade publishers'
counting of books by straight women of color which feature a lesbian relationship, like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, or a character questioning her sexual identity, like April Sinclair's *Coffee Will Make You Black*, as lesbian books implements what Gomez calls the WHOA (We Have One Already) factor and limits access for lesbian writers of color.

To find books that fall outside mainstream categories of lesbian literature, we must turn to the feminist/lesbian presses. Presses such as Firebrand, *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, Third Woman, Spinsters Ink, Aunt Lute, Calyx, Eighth Mountain, Naiad, and Seal Press have published anthologies, poetry, essays, and novels by lesbians of color. This is a “market” they will continue to develop because they realize that their “markets” are composed of feminist readers who want books that are not available from corporate publishers. If Gomez is correct that lesbians of color will be invisible in popular media until they are identified as a profitable market, the inclusion of books by and about women of color in the feminist press movement is even more urgent. Firebrand’s acceptance of *The Gilda Stories* after the novel’s repeated rejections from trade publishers is indicative of the feminist press movement’s commitment to providing a forum for writing that may never “come of age,” at least not in the mainstream.

While the 1992 article in *Publishers Weekly* only obliquely acknowledged the crucial role feminist presses have played in creating lesbian literature, it did note Barbara Smith's and Sherry Thomas’s agreement that “trade publishers tend not to be on the cutting edge.”* With its erotic reconfiguration of blood ties, *The Gilda Stories* is clearly on the cutting (biting?) edge of literature today. Despite the book’s Lambda Literary Awards for lesbian fiction and best lesbian sci-fi/fantasy, however, it is doubtful that anyone would describe Gomez’s speculative novel as “a book gay people can
give to their families, and parents can buy to understand their children," as the agent for the Thomas/Marcus almanac mentioned above described her clients' work. While books like Thomas's and Marcus's are important, they assume a particular family model, perhaps something like the supportive, upper-middle class family enshrined in the film Philadelphia. Gomez's work, however, attempts to reach beyond this model to appeal to "those people struggling on a day-to-day basis with bottom-line issues like food, housing, racism, sexism." Gomez's insistence that as a Black woman and a lesbian "you can’t ignore me, because I do fit in here somewhere" has earned her a share of, if not a literary market, at least an audience who "respond[s] enthusiastically to Gilda as a hero, a survivor, a romantic." Gomez's pleas for Black lesbian writers to "recreate our home, unadulterated, unsanitized, specific and not isolated from the generations that have nurtured us" is not a nostalgic call for a return to the bosom, so to speak, of the patriarchal family, but rather a request for a feminist reconfiguration of blood ties, both literary and familial.


2 Audre Lorde encountered the same difficulties in publishing Zami. As Barbara Smith writes in "The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s," white mainstream publishers lamented the fact that Lorde's character was not just Black or just lesbian. Zami was originally to have been published by Persephone Press, a feminist/lesbian press, but was published instead by Crossing Press when Persephone folded. See Smith's article in Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Africana-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance, ed. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990): 214-245.


9. Thanks to Michael DuPlessis for pointing out that none of the chapter settings concur with the specific dates of significant historical events.


11. The phrase "an inhabitable position" is from Donna Haraway's brief discussion of *The Gilda Stories* during her keynote address to the National Graduate Women's Studies conference at the University of California-San Diego on April 16, 1994.


15. Ibid., 16.


17. Ibid., 23.

18. Ibid., 23.

19. Ibid., 23.


21. Ibid., 42.

22. Ibid., 60.

23. Ibid., 60.


31 Gomez, "Recasting," 60.


35 Ibid., 59.

36 Ibid., 58.


40 Ibid., 110.


42 Ibid., 36.


44 Ibid., 26.

46Ibid., 11.


48Summer, 39-40.

49Wendy Smith, 22.

50Gomez, "Recasting the Mythology," 42.

51Nelson, 39; Gomez, "Recasting the Mythology," 60.

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