

The Legacy of the *Feminist Bookstore Network*: Lesbianism's Indelible Bookstore Beginnings

By Hannah Quire

ABSTRACT. In the mid-to-late twentieth century, lesbian feminist bookstores exploded across the United States, facilitating the creation and spread of a network that would be fleeting but impactful for those involved. Through its brief vibrancy, the lesbian feminist bookstore network not only provided an outlet through which women could discover their own local communities, but also served as a catalyst through which lesbian feminist politics was expanded, enforced, and encouraged. The positivity of the movement, however, was branded with a distinct lack of intersectional politics, a move that would ultimately see the movement to its demise.

In the "Studying Sexuality" chapter of his book *Sex Cultures*, Amin Ghaziani (2017) writes:

A real shadows girl or an evening girl, someone who prefers the hour just after dusk, a gal with her own library card, who pays her own way, is well read, scholarly, and independent-minded, a woman who is standoffish, incurable, keeps her hands in her pockets, and stands up on a night train, a shirts-and-trousers female, or a real pal who carries her own purse – in classic films, all of these phrases characterized lesbians. (p. 129)

These allusions all share a core value: the idea that, simply put, lesbian women are women who read. Amidst this imagery stands the feminist bookstore movement, a lesbian-fronted effort to create communities where women could meet to discuss but also congregate and form activist groups with other lesbian feminists in the area. Although at one

point there existed over a hundred lesbian-feminist bookstores, an estimated thirteen total in the United States and Canada remain. In our modern “post-gay” period, with gayborhoods evaporating before our very eyes and the necessity of lesbian feminist meeting places seeming to diminish, we are forced to grapple with the aftermath of such a foundational element of the lesbian feminist movement – what it was, what it means, and where we go from here.

Amidst the proliferation of social movements throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, the lesbian feminist bookstore began to emerge. Although they served primarily as *feminist* bookstores and most took their names to that effect, “historically, the majority of such stores have been owned and operated by lesbians,” thus allowing feminist bookstores to serve as a predominantly lesbian space (Chestnut & Gable, 1997, p. 241). The bookstores themselves existed independently of one another for several years before the coalition took place, with the two earliest feminist bookstores – ICI: A Woman’s Place and Amazon – both opening in 1970. Feminist bookstores thus originally had a local purpose, functioning as meeting places, community centers, and information hubs, acting effectively as the epicenter of lesbian and feminist experience for a particular area. Hogan (2016) writes:

In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, women used feminist bookstores as resource centers to find out what was happening in each city, who had a place to stay to offer to travelers, and where to find a job when they found a city that felt like home. (p. 2-3)

Feminist bookstores operated with more emphasis on community than anything else. These bookstores of the early 1970s also “function[ed] as organizational structures within the feminist movement,” despite the lack of a concretized system at the time (Chestnut & Gable, 1997, p. 241), contributing textual and interpersonal support throughout a small, close-knit neighborhood.

In this manner, the lesbian feminist bookstore was founded in order to facilitate discourse and community amongst an ostracized group of people. Particularly in the 1970s, public opinion regarding LGBTQ+ people in the United States was abysmally low, forcing men and women underground and into bar culture as a means of finding a community. In the aftermath of the Stonewall Riots in 1969, however, the safety, security, and anonymity of the bar scene was destroyed, leaving LGBTQ+ men and women adrift while still trying to find their place in an unwilling society. Not only was bar culture not always an option for LGBTQ+ men and women in the wake of police exposure and brutality, for many it was not a comfortable place at all; thus, the feminist bookstore was developed as a means of consecrating the lesbian community externally to bar culture, presenting a place where patrons could visit in the daylight and find support, love, and validation. In regards to Carol Seajay's bookstore, *Old Wives Tales*:

Most people easily felt comfortable upon entering, because the vision behind the project was a women-owned store where the whole community was welcome. Over the next few years, Seajay watched it grow into an integral and bustling corner of the women's community on Valencia Street. (Sullivan, 1997)

By creating a safe space in the middle of the tumult surrounding the LGBTQ+ world at the time, the feminist bookstores of the early 1970s built a foundation for what was to come: the *Feminist Bookstore Network and Newsletter (FBN)*, and the proliferation of the women's movement. In 1976, the first-ever Women in Print Conference took place, bringing together bookwomen across the country, creating what was to become the watershed moment in feminist bookstores' history. As Kristen Hogan (2017) writes, "Someone had the idea to map out the movement, to take a picture of everyone at the Women in Print Conference standing where their city stood; this was a national network" (p. 29). This moment thus catapulted the bookwomen who

created these local organizations into the national sphere, connecting them across the country in order to facilitate a larger, stronger base. Historically, it was an essential moment; the coalescence of these lesbian feminists was able to bridge gaps that previously left lesbian feminists on the outskirts, rather than part of a cohesive, overarching movement towards social consciousness. By creating this unit, women began to find strength in numbers; just as the aftermath of World War II served to establish gayborhoods in major cities as a result of servicemen and women's dishonorable discharges for "their real or perceived homosexuality," the merging of feminist bookstores into an organized network facilitated a similar type of expansionary experience (Ghaziani, 2017, p. 31).

The movement continued to blossom when, in 1977, Carol Seajay founded the *Feminist Bookstore Newsletter* (the name of which was later changed to the *Feminist Bookstore Network*) as a means of connecting the women of the movement day-to-day. Hogan (2017) writes:

As the distribution and networking engine of the feminist bookstore movement, the FBN made it possible for bookwomen to build a vocabulary, to document and share important changes in publishing, and to wield influence in numbers to shape and sustain feminist information. (p. 34)

Seajay effectively spearheaded the consolidation of the movement, acting as the driving force; as Laura Tanenbaum (2016) notes, "She [Seajay] helped bookstores change the standard practice of returning books to the publishers if they didn't sell fast enough, which sent publishers the message that there was 'no audience' for feminist books." In reality, lesbian feminist culture merely lacked a firm communicative network between the women who were "out" and the women who were still struggling to come to terms with their reality; as Ghaziani (2017) notes in regard to urban sex cultures, "[T]he imagery of the closet doesn't mean an absence of queer life" (p. 30). This imagery is a strictly delimiting and isolating experience, leaving lesbian women

in particular shorted from the rather illuminating moment of group consciousness. A great deal of intersectional feminist theory highlights the necessity of such a consolidation – acknowledging the strengths of individual groups and being able to put those strengths together into a cohesive unit. As Audre Lorde (1980) beautifully notes, “It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we all flourish” (p. 112).

Isolating the lesbian feminist nature of these bookstores is essential, of course, to understanding the sociopolitical functions of such organizations, but even just as a facet of the gayborhood mentality, these bookstores perform important work. The culmination of lesbian feminist bookstores facilitates a conversation about lesbian feminism in that it exposes their existences; Ghaziani (2017) discusses the political importance of the creation of gayborhoods, notably “the success that activists achieved in convincing psychiatrists to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness in 1973, among other efforts at social change” (p. 39). Gayborhoods are also typically defined by institutions first and foremost: “The identity of an area as a gayborhood, therefore, emerges more apparently when it houses gay-owned and gay-friendly bookstores” amongst other businesses (Ghaziani, 2017, p. 35). Given the fact that the foundations of the feminist bookstore movement are rooted in lesbian space, lesbian feminist bookstores are equally embedded in this gayborhood identity. Gayborhoods also serve as critical sites of LGBTQ+ social, economic, and political power, echoing the sentiments of feminist bookstores as “movement spaces” (Hogan, 2016, p. 32). It is important to note the historical and social significance of these lesbian feminist bookstores within their individual communities because of the work being done on an individual, community-based level; while the broadening of lesbian feminist bookstores’ horizons and the national expansion of this association of bookwomen is essential for

entirely different reasons, the efforts being made on the local level are critical to the proliferation of positive LGBTQ+ space beyond.

However, despite the positivity of lesbian feminist bookstores and gayborhoods at large, problems lurk beneath the surface. Although Hogan's book attempts to target the ways women of color were incorporated into the lesbian feminist movement and their essential impact, the separatism of lesbians and feminists (both as individual entities and as a combined movement) participated in an extreme exclusion of women of color. As Chestnut and Gable (1997) mention,

In the 1970s, all of the feminist presses and most (if not all) of the journals were operated and edited by white, working- and middle-class feminists. Although women of color were published and most of the feminist presses and journals had an articulated antiracist stance, the defining presence in print was that of white feminists and lesbian feminists. (p. 249-250)

This is exemplified in a great deal of the contemporary research and reporting on the lesbian feminist movement of the 1970s and those involved in the process. Kit Quan, cited in the preface of Hogan's book, is nearly undetectable in modern conversations; articles written both in the late 1990s and in the 2000s neglect to mention her at all, despite the fact that she is a "bookwoman, activist, and author" by Hogan's (2017) account. Not only did she work in Seajay's Old Wives Tales, but she did so from the time she was just a teenager, thus indicating the important ways she contributed to one of the most famous lesbian feminist bookstores of the time.

Not only is Quan largely ignored in modern renderings of the lesbian feminist bookstore movement overall, but she is also neglected by Seajay herself. Hogan was the one who made the association between the two bookwomen, connecting their separate recollections:

I had asked, “How many women were in the collective?” Definitely a first interview kind of question. Seajay listed the women: “And then we also had this young woman who was the best friend of my foster daughter. Who, actually, from the first summer the store was open, came in and started volunteering, and then we started paying her... She was an immigrant from Hong Kong, and was having a hard time, wanted to get a job... What do you do with this fifteen-year-old little dykelet? Well, of course.” (Hogan, 2017, p. xiv)

Despite the fact that Quan was her foster daughter’s best friend, acted as a critical component to the continuation of *Old Wives’ Tales*, and is a notable contributor to the larger lesbian feminist movement as indicated by Hogan’s designation, Seajay elected to keep her name out of the discussion. Instead she chose to focus on her own generosity in Quan’s story, admittedly an important case of lesbian feminist community and the effects of Seajay’s collective; however, the act of leaving Quan out from her narrative illustrates the ways in which white lesbians and feminists effectively silenced women of color throughout their efforts. Furthermore, her depiction of her relationship with Quan in this particular instance is one of pity, using language that prompts the reader to devalue Quan’s contributions.

Understandably, it is rather difficult to extricate the feminist bookstore movement from this white-centered culture given its traditional history. Hogan (2017) attempts to complicate this account, writing, “In Oakland and New York, women of color participated in founding these early feminist bookstores, and lesbians of color or white lesbians participated in founding each bookstore. These founding narratives, then, contradict remembrances of 1970s feminism as straight and white” (p. 4). This is undoubtedly true, but the issues with the white-centric experiences of the lesbian feminist bookstore as an entity are not exclusively entrenched in *who* was doing the founding or participating. Many of the women involved in the early feminist movement, and in the LGBTQ+ movements of the 1960s-1980s, were people of color. There is a stark difference between recognizing people of color’s involvement in the systems at

work and their inclusion in the movement at large; for although it is quite possible, and probable, that lesbians of color were involved at the local level in the creation and proliferation of lesbian feminist bookstores, their narratives were heavily excluded or censored when it came to the *movement*, as indicated by Seajay's thoughtless omission of Kit Quan's name from her collective's history.

This is also not limited to the lesbian feminist bookstore, either, of course, but rather a facet of the complicated history lesbianism encounters with people of color in general. Intersectional feminist theory of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries emphasize the essential nature of a community of diversity and inclusion, where the differences are not merely tolerated but celebrated and *needed* to push the movement forward. As Lorde (1980) writes,

[O]ur future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change. Now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals... (p.122)

In this manner, we can understand the importance of inclusion within all elements of lesbian feminist discourse; although the intention of Carol Seajay's recollection of Kit Quan may have been the opposite of malicious, in fact rather harmless, the reality is not the case. Intentionality is not important when harm is still done, and this is a difficult lesson the lesbian feminist movement – and, in this instance, bookstore movement – has been forced to learn repeatedly, oftentimes to its detriment.

The breakdown of the lesbian feminist bookstore and its movement did not occur overnight, although dramatic changes did take place in rapid succession. In 1997, an interview with Carol Seajay was published following the close of *Old Wives Tales*, with its author writing:

Although San Francisco is poorer for the loss of our women's bookstore, today there are 120 feminist bookstores all over the United States and Canada (150 loosely counted). In April of 1997, Feminist Bookstore News will celebrate its twenty year anniversary of connecting bookstores across the country. (Sullivan, 1997)

These numbers seem staggering today, and they are; just three years after this publication, Seajay ended the *FBN*, and as the organization tethering independent feminist bookstores together fell apart, so did their broader connection. But the feminist bookstore movement was faltering even before the *FBN* officially sent out its last edition, due to attacks being waged on all sides and the aforementioned exclusions limiting women of color from being active participants. Amazon, one of the first feminist bookstores opened in Minnesota in 1970, was another unlucky casualty:

In 1999 the store sued the online giant [Amazon.com] for trademark infringement, claiming that confusion had led their customers to the online store and led vendors to offer and then pull discounts. Amazon.com lawyers grilled the bookwomen about their sexuality in court. (Amazon.com lawyer Paul Weller argued that "it's important for the jury to know whether people who work in the bookstore have a particular sexual orientation.") The costs of the suit forced the store into a largely unfavorable settlement. In 2008 new owners were forced to use a different name, and the store closed in 2012 (Tanenbaum, 2016).

Amazon fell into the trap of modernity; crippled not only by financial difficulties but more largely the Internet age, Amazon was just one victim of a society clinging to technology. Gayborhoods experienced a comparable decline in the wake of the Internet burst, with LGTBQ+ youth turning to online websites instead of in-person bars, clubs, or bookstores.

The lesbian feminist bookstore movement was, in the grand scope of history, a rather fleeting one. Spanning from the mid-1970s until the early 2000s, not only did the

sociopolitical elements of the movement and the greater connectivity of such bookstores fizzle, but the bookstores themselves did, as well. Today, there are only a handful of such institutions left, but the meager thirteen that remain is stark in comparison to the over 120 the country boasted circa 1997. Given that a meager twenty years has elapsed, it is a bit staggering to come to terms with the vast dismissal so many issued upon lesbian feminist bookstores in the wake of the *FBN*'s end. Seajay, in the article published around the twentieth anniversary of her publication, stated, "We had a vision that women could learn to do for ourselves, that we could make our own mistakes, and I still believe this passionately" (Sullivan, 1997). Although that sentiment is heartwarming, the reality is far grimmer – there is much more to maintaining a social movement than passionate belief alone. As Tanenbaum writes:

Activists often criticize these projects [of prefiguration] as a distraction from the real work of organizing. To some extent this is true: Women's bookstores alone could not fight the massive backlash against feminism of the 1980s from which we have not fully recovered. And yet their loss remains a powerful one. (Tanenbaum, 2016)

However, in spite of the great tragedy that remains at the desecration of such a powerful and necessary women-fronted movement, hope still remains: those thirteen lesbian feminist bookstores are still in operation today, which is certainly more than zero. As Seajay says, "But I do think that there being lesbian books changed even the lives of the women who didn't read. Because it changed the lives around them" (Hogan, 2017, p. 2).

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