
Reviewed by Lisa Maria Hogeland, University of Cincinnati

This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics is not an action, though it contains some very interesting provocations. The collection takes its title from the opening line of Robin Morgan’s 1970 anthology, Sisterhood is Powerful, and it aims to enlist that volume’s sense of urgency in its far more modest and double project of exploring the print culture of US feminism’s second wave and of tracing out some new parameters for activist aesthetics. The book has 11 chapters, divided between four essays on print culture, and seven essays that are, more or less, readings of novels and plays. The novels include some of the usual suspects—Fear of Flying, Surfacing and The Edible Woman, The Color Purple—as well as the less-studied Up the Sandbox, Lover, and Indemnity Only. The Introduction has the difficult task of linking the two sections of the book, under the rubric of “Writing the Women’s Movement.” Fully persuaded as I am, both from the Introduction and from the book’s first half, that feminist print culture is a necessary area of exploration, I still wish that the readings in the book’s second half were themselves influenced by such explorations. The work integrating print culture study with textual analysis remains to be done.

Two of the print culture essays in the first half of the book are studies of failures—that is, of experiments in feminist publishing and distributions that were economically unsustainable. Jennifer Gilley, in “Publishing Feminism/Feminist Publishing,” charts the publication history of two important feminist anthologies—Sisterhood is Powerful and Gloria AnzaldÚa and Cherrié Moraga’s This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. In both cases, the editors attempted to make unprecedented royalty agreements, and, in both cases, these efforts failed. Morgan’s arrangement with Random House actually did work for three years; the book’s royalties were paid to SIP, Inc., which funneled the money to women’s movement groups, including a number of feminist publishers.

Publishing feminism, in Gilley’s terms, thus funded feminist publishing. The experiment proved unsustainable, however, when Random House paid a legal settlement out of the book’s royalties and SIP, Inc. was forced to close its doors. AnzaldÚa and Moraga tried a different experiment: contracts with the three feminist publishers of three successive editions of This Bridge, who agreed to pay contributors royalties over the life of the book rather than just once upfront. But the publishers—Persephone, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, and Third Woman Press—were
undercapitalized feminist presses entirely unable to sustain such payment agreements. This Bridge was republished in 2015 by SUNY Press, the first time it has been published by a nonfeminist press. Widely regarded in feminist circles as one of the most significant works of second-wave feminism and a vital part of the movement’s canon, the book “had never been able to sustain its editors financially,” nor had it “reached beyond feminist circles with its message of bridging” (41), and had been unavailable for long stretches. How, then, might we chart success and failure in feminism?

Julie R. Enszer’s essay on Women in Distribution (WinD) traces the history and maps the legacy of a short-lived but important independent feminist distributor of “books, calendars, records, and posters” to women’s bookstores in the second half of the 1970s. The organization helped build “a market for creative, feminist work that more than doubled the number of feminist bookstores in the United States” (70). But WinD never made a profit, and the business proved unsustainable. Enszer reminds us that many small businesses went under in the late 1970s, and “economic viability both for individual women and for the feminist movement remains a crucial feminist issue” (79). Significantly, WinD was not a nonprofit and never intended to go that route; it wanted to “create a business that was not exploitative to workers and consumers, echoed the values of socialism, and embraced feminist principles with an absence of hierarchy and self-determination” (81). Feminist organizations with the goal of enabling women to make a living—feminist businesses as businesses—are part of the print culture of the movement that needs more study. Enszer is more interested, when she turns to WinD’s legacy, in valuing the experiment itself than in calling it a failure: “the legacies of WinD are in our continued search for an economic analysis and transformative economic strategies that embrace feminism and lesbianism” (82). Another reason WinD couldn’t keep going was that feminist books were increasingly being published by commercial houses (77), which further complicates notions of success: making feminist ideas significant enough to appeal to commercial publishers is a kind of success, surely? But so too was the practice of separatism—working to distribute the work of women for women—that was so important to WinD.

Perhaps the most interesting of the readings in the collection’s second half is Phillip Gordon’s “The Color Purple and the Wine-Dark Kiss of Death.” Gordon reads...

... The Color Purple as an AIDS narrative by reading into the surrounding details of publication to uncover what may have been an accidental narrative for Walker as she wrote her masterpiece but that proves nonetheless as important in our current moment as the novel was, in the moment of its publication, for second-wave feminism. (206)
He uses epidemiologist Jacques Pepin’s *The Origin of AIDS* (2011) to tell what he calls “the true history of AIDS,” to which he parallels the Africa-set portions of Walker’s novel: “The more devastating details of Walker’s novel in relation to HIV/AIDS come from Nettie’s letters from Africa,” in which “Nettie’s life among the Olinka roughly parallels the great colonial upheavals that led to the mass migrations that Pepin characterizes in his study” (217). These letters coincide with “the large-scale dissemination of the virus, so that, by the 1950s and 1960s, a large enough population was infected that a global pandemic was all but inevitable” (219). Meanwhile, back in Georgia, Walker depicts “a pervasive sexual economy in the black community . . . that links nearly every member of that community to each other in ways far more closely than a surface glance would reveal” (213).

Gordon does not “claim that Alice Walker intentionally meant to write an AIDS narrative. She did, however, succeed in laying the breadcrumbs to a larger global catastrophe than she may have ever imagined,” given the rates of HIV/AIDS infections in black communities in the American South and in Africa (219).

Walker’s history is more accurate than the history we currently ascribe to concerning HIV/AIDS. Viewed through the lens of what we now know about AIDS, how it spreads, and the lives it is impacting, we can finally see the signs that have been apparent all along and understand AIDS history better thanks to Walker’s efforts, however inadvertent.

Walker’s novel, he concludes, could be a useful heuristic in rethinking AIDS “in the rural South, in America, and in the rest of the world” (221).

This is a stunning act of reading, and I will never read *The Color Purple* the same way again. But I want more speculation about what it means to read historically in this way, since “accidental” and “inadvertent” seem thin to me, not least because Gordon notices that Walker wrote the novel in New York, San Francisco, and Georgia, the former two ground zero for the pandemic in the US, and the latter ground zero of the pandemic lately (220). “Walker was, in fact, *there* at the beginning” (220)—and? This is a provocation: setting the novel alongside a history to which the novelist had no access and showing them to tell the same story means . . . what? I can see the pedagogical value of using Walker’s novel to illuminate the “real” history of HIV/AIDS, of course, in the way that social scientists and historians often use literary texts to give a data point breath and flesh. Gordon’s reading seems to be that and more. Perhaps what I am looking for is provided by the part of the book’s subtitle, “Activist Aesthetics.” While Gordon’s essay does not directly attend to matters of the novel’s aesthetics, we might locate the activist part in the pedagogical value his reading creates. Aesthetics, then,
becomes less a matter of beauty, say, or style, or formal properties *in the text* than it is about activist reading strategies in us that can capture new, unexpected, and impossible not-quite histories for teaching “real” history.