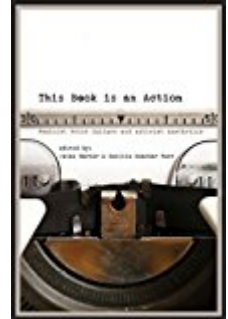


Jaime Harker, Cecilia Konchar Farr, eds.. *This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015. x + 250 pp. \$28.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08134-7.



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In *This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics*, editors Jaime Harker of the University of Mississippi and Cecilia Konchar Farr of St. Catherine University present an impressive selection of essays on the feminist print culture of the second wave, the period of feminist activism between the early 1960s and the 1980s. Indeed, taking its title from feminist Robin Morgan's landmark anthology *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970), *This Book Is an Action* explores the ways in which, as Morgan argued, writing becomes a form of activism as powerful as protests, sit-ins, and marches. Print culture, in other words, can be revolutionary—an argument that Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the most prominent names in the first wave of the women's rights movement in the nineteenth century, made when they founded their own newspaper, *The Revolution* (1868-72), a century before Morgan's work.

The editors and most of the contributors in this volume share a background in women and gender studies, feminist theory, queer studies, and

lesbian-feminist print culture; many, too, have research interests in literary studies. Together these essays bring alive a vibrant, contentious, controversial period in the history of the women's movement, providing useful background to the publishing industry of the period, fresh insights into important texts, useful lists of works cited, and a variety of theoretical perspectives.

Struck by the wide range of feminist texts that appeared in this period—everything from poetry and plays to consciousness-raising novels and science fiction and detective works—Harker and Farr argue for the emergence of a “distinctive feminist culture of letters” in the second wave. Too often dismissed as being aesthetically inferior to works in an established canon dominated by privileged white males, they argue, the activist literature of this period deserves to be reappraised. For Harker and Farr, texts like Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), Anne Roiphe's *Up the Sandbox!* (1970), and others are not just politically or culturally important documents in the history of the women's

movement; they are “the texts of an influential and inventive American literary renaissance” (p. 2).

To make that case, the editors ground their argument in earlier landmark studies of feminist print culture, including Lisa Hogeland’s work on the consciousness-raising novel, Janice Radway’s exploration of the feminine middlebrow, and Elaine Showalter’s idea of gynocriticism.[1] They also provide useful background information on the Women in Print Movement, an attempt to create a feminist communications network independent of the patriarchy and outside of capitalist control. To help drive that literary renaissance, women-owned presses took shape in this period, introducing the works of women writers that mainstream commercial publishers had rejected because of their controversial content. Feminist periodicals published literature that challenged mainstream norms and advertised feminist works to other women readers. A network of nearly two hundred women’s bookstores experimented with new methods of distribution as well (p. 6). As Harker and Farr note, publishers like Daughters, Inc., the Women’s Press Collective, Diana Press, and others helped build a powerful network of feminist readers, writers, editors, publishers, and distributors.

The collection is divided into two parts, the first of which, with its focus on the production and distribution of feminist texts, is likely to be of most interest to scholars of print culture and journalism historians. In “Feminist Publishing/Publishing Feminism: Experimentation in Second-Wave Book Publishing,” Jennifer Gilley examines the publishing histories of two of the period’s ground-breaking feminist anthologies—Morgan’s *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970) and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *The Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). Drawing extensively on unpublished letters, publishing contracts, and other archival materials, Gilley explores the debate within second-wave

feminism over whether it was best to publish with a mainstream commercial publisher (thereby becoming part of the capitalistic system the movement was challenging) or to advance the women’s movement by publishing with the more ideologically pure feminist press. Morgan’s *Sisterhood Is Powerful* is an example of “publishing feminism,” that is, of a feminist book published by a mainstream commercial publisher with mass-market reach. As Gilley shows, Morgan had advantages other feminist activist did not. A media darling after a high-profile protest at the Miss America pageant, Morgan had worked in publishing herself and had a contact at Random House who expressed interest in the work. By choosing to publish with Random House, though, Morgan faced criticism for selling out to a capitalist commercial publisher who, critics said, had its eye on profit rather than advancing the movement. For her part, Morgan made her own feminist demands on Random House. She insisted, for example, on working only with women editors. And contrary to standard publishing practice, which paid royalties only to the editor of an anthology, Morgan contracted to share royalties with all the authors who had contributed to the work. Further, when that plan became too cumbersome to work, Morgan set up a nonprofit that distributed the money to feminist groups in need. In that way, the royalties for the anthology were reinvested in the women’s movement.

The same tension marks the publishing history of *The Bridge Called My Back*. Here, Gilley draws extensively on the Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers at the University of Texas-Austin to explore the different publishing philosophies of Moraga, who favored feminist presses, and Anzaldúa, who argued for a broader, mainstream publisher and the audience that publisher could offer. Ultimately, the anthology was published by a series of feminist publishers—the Persephone Press, Kitchen Table Press, and Third Woman Press—and, in the process, suffered significant periods of being out of print. Other essays in this section ex-

plore different theoretical approaches that can be used to examine the role feminist newspapers and newsletters played in the women's movement ("A Revolution in Ephemera: Feminist Newsletters and Newspapers of the 1970s") and discuss the history of Women in Distribution, a short-lived women-owned company organized along feminist principles and dedicated to the circulation of feminist texts (" 'What Made Us Think They'd Pay Us for Making a Revolution?' Women in Distribution (WinD), 1974-1979").

The essays in part 2 of *This Book Is an Action* turn to literary analysis to show the diversity and range of literary experimentation in the second wave. Using a range of critical approaches, these essays reexamine Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing* (1972), Jong's *Fear of Flying*, Roiphe's *Up the Sandbox!*, Jane Chamber's lesbi-dramas (1974-81), Bertha Harris's lesbian novel *Lover* (1976), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and Sarah Paretsky's crime novel *Indemnity Only* (1982). Arranged chronologically, the essays surface a host of issues central to the second wave and beyond, including female identity and agency, oppressive gender norms, female sexuality and sexual desire, and violence against women. Two essays of particular note in this section are Laura Christine Godfrey's "Creating a Nonpatriarchal Lineage in Bertha Harris's *Lover*" and Phillip Gordon's "*The Color Purple* and the Wine-Dark Kiss of Death: How a Second-Wave Feminist Wrote the First American AIDS Narrative." Godfrey offers a nuanced literary analysis of the ways in which Harris's experimental lesbian novel uses epigraphs about female saints to construct a female lineage outside of patriarchal norms. Gordon looks at Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel—"one of the most commercially successful and universally embraced literary products of second-wave feminism" (p. 205)—as an AIDS narrative. Gordon's reading of the novel emphasizes its appearance in the early months of the AIDS crisis and its focus on the experiences of rural black women in the Southeast and the sexu-

al economy of which many were a part. As Gordon writes: "I would 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. Her detailing what appears to be a sexually transmitted illness in a rural Southern population, her narrative of colonial dispossession and diaspora, and her inclusion of material relevant to colonial (in her case missionary) medical practices all accord with the most current data concerning AIDS in America and AIDS history in Africa as the disease began its spread to its current global proportions" (pp. 219-220).

This Book Is an Action would be an excellent addition to a women's studies course on the second wave or a history or literature course on the counterculture movement of the 1960s. And while strongly weighted in favor of literary analysis, the collection also could have a place in a course on the history of the alternative or radical press. At a time when names like Beyoncé and Emma Watson dominate popular feminist discourse, this book is a nuanced, provocative reminder of the women of the second wave.

Note

[1]. See Lisa Hogeland, *Feminism and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women's Liberation Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); and Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). For gynocriticism, see Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1979), 25-36. As Harker and Farr note, Showalter argues that the purpose of feminist criticism is not to find a way to include women in the existing literary canon but "to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature" (quoted, p. 11).

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