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Feminist bookshops, reading cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974-2000¹

Abstract: Historians of the Women's Liberation Movement have long stressed its decentralised form, with a deliberate refusal of the infrastructure of leaders and formal institutions. Instead, like other social movements of the 1970s and 80s, periodicals, networks of friends, and informal meeting places tended to provide the impetus for the development and diffusion of feminist ideas and strategies of protest. This article examines the significant role that bookshops played in this process, as politicised *and* commercial spaces. Feminist bookselling is situated within a longer tradition of bookselling, and understood as part of a wider process of attempting to bring social justice concerns to bear within capitalist settings. The feasibility and effect of women-only principles in bookshop settings is explored; bookshops emerge as contentious sites of activism in their own right.

Reading has long been a central activity for feminists. Beatrix Campbell, a women's liberation movement and communist activist, described the intensity of the relationship between women, reading and writing in the 1970s: 'We ate the literature that was pouring out of the Women's Liberation Movement, we ate it [...] it was an extraordinary relationship to the written word, [...] all of these tracts and texts and books, we consumed as soon as they came out. And, whether you were an intellectual or not, you just read everything, and it impacted massively on your life.' Her violent reaction to Anna Coedt's *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*, which she threw across the room on first reading, was testament to how challenging these texts could be, bringing up painful sentiments when they 'detonated' in women's lives.²

Print culture could also generate solidarities, both through the ideas it conveyed, and also through its comforting material presence. Stella Dadzie, a key Black British feminist activist, recalled the way in which Black American feminist novels and plays by writers such as Audre Lorde and Alice Walker were familiar to her from visits to other activist households; the books cemented her sense of community with women in the Organisation for Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD): 'when I go into their houses, our bookshelves are all the same, y'know, you'll always see the same books on them.'³ The relationship to books, pamphlets and periodicals was based not only on their provocative ideas, but also on their physical presence, conveyed sensorially through the deep green covers of Virago Classics or the smell of book bindings. As feminist bookseller Philippa Harrison described it, 'there was a mutual female pleasure in seeing those spinners of green books in a bookshop.'⁴

The centrality of books and other texts within feminism was shaped by the settings in which books were encountered. For many, this was through the bookshop with its distinctive smells and postures of browsing or reading.⁵ Sandie Wyles, for example, recalled that as a young teenager in Stirling in 1970, ‘Germaine Greer’s book had just come out and I remember standing in Holmes Bookshop, I couldn’t afford it, I think it was one of these books that, you know, pocket money didn’t stretch to [...] So headed off and kind of read it standing up in Holmes Bookshop and thinking, wow, this is amazing, this is amazing, this is incredible.’⁶ The proliferation of radical bookshops in Britain from the 1960s created distinctive, often undercapitalized, but politically important material sites, which helped to focus radical political commitments within their communities.

This article explores the ways in which bookshops contributed to the cultural transmission of feminist ideas. Booksellers constructed social worlds and physical spaces around political commitments. Where earlier accounts of feminist media have focused on publishing houses and periodicals,⁷ I foreground the retail settings in which feminist texts were sold, in order to offer some new perspectives. First, a focus on bookshops enables a tracing of the ways in which bookshops were spaces of activism in their own right, as feminists confronted the misogyny of the booktrade and bookshops customers. Second, it enables a focus on the overlap between social movement activism and commerce. Feminist bookselling incorporated social justice concerns into commercial ventures; this produced deep tensions as feminist ‘movement entrepreneurs’ attempted to reconcile their jobs and businesses with their often uncompromising politics. However, as Justin Bengry and others have argued, the marketplace and commercial products can offer rich, if sometimes ephemeral resources for alternative culture and movements for social change.⁸

Finally, an examination of feminist retail provides an opportunity to rethink the claims made about the fluid and ephemeral nature of Women’s Liberation. Charting bookshop development suggests that the women’s movement was more institutionally stable than earlier historiography has allowed.⁹ While some shops proved unviable, others provided longlived and widely recognised public spaces where feminist communities were formed and women-only strategies were experimented with. As Ann Enke has argued in her study of Mid-Western feminist activism, a focus on space and place can usefully supplement the predominant focus on identities and ideologies within the history of feminism. Enke points to less partisan spaces of ‘provisional coalescence’ such as bookshops, where the movement was not simply disseminated but was brought into being, as a feminism ‘always experienced

through place'.¹⁰ I explore the ways in which such a perspective might be extended to British feminism through a study of bookselling.

Feminist booksellers have left a rich archival base, in pamphlets, and in the pages of booktrade and political magazines. These contemporary sources are supplemented by memoirs and oral history interviews conducted amongst activist women and men who were both customers and booksellers. Some of these sources have a marked tendency to offer celebratory and nostalgic accounts of bookshops. This may be due to perceptions of the marginal place books have in contemporary digital culture; or motivated by retrospective knowledge of the subsequent decline of radical and feminist bookselling (there are currently no feminist bookshops in Britain). A critical history of feminist bookselling helps challenge this pervasive nostalgia. Feminist bookshops were significant, and at times, inspirational to activists. They provided relatively stable and public spaces that helped constitute the British women's movement. However, they were also sites of controversy, over commercial strategies, working conditions and feminist ideologies. Bookshops reveal emotional and political tensions within the wider women's movement, particularly over establishing and maintaining women-only spaces and management structures.¹¹

A bookshop of one's own

The British Women's Liberation Movement was deeply suspicious of the traditional 'male-stream' media, and committed to the development of alternative platforms for publishing and distributing women's writing. Onlywomen Press, founded in 1974 in London as a women-only printer and publisher of women's literature, captured this sentiment: 'in order to create a Women's Liberation Movement reality, we need discussion and the development of political analysis unhindered by patriarchal values. We need a means of establishing our own culture.'¹² Bookshops played a crucial role in publicising and spatially locating the women's movement, making available its texts, and facilitating its social networks and intellectual exchanges.

Feminist commitment to autonomy in print culture production and distribution went with a strong critique of the power of leaders and formal political structures within social movements. The resulting development of a distinctive feminist culture of cooperative decision making, collective position-taking and rotating responsibilities was innovative, time

consuming and sometimes fraught.¹³ Without spokespersons, chairpersons, executive bodies and formal records of meetings, the Women's Liberation Movement turned to less formal spaces in which political exchanges could occur. Bookshops, often organized through cooperative, leaderless structures, were sites that reflected feminist organisational values.

The focus here is on the bookshops that identified partially or wholly as 'women's', 'lesbian and gay' [LG]¹⁴ or 'feminist'. These formed a subset of a wider grouping of independently-owned or community-run bookshops that were identified as 'radical' or 'alternative'.

Following the surge in visibility for feminism as Women's Liberation emerged in the early 1970s in Britain, existing radical bookshops did begin to stock feminist texts. Nonetheless, feminists criticized booksellers' tendency to prioritize texts of more mainstream appeal, and their marginalisation of women employees. The later 70s and 1980s saw a flourishing of dedicated women's and feminist bookshops in Britain, as well as the repositioning of existing radical bookshops to prioritize feminism and feminist working practices; some projects survived into the twenty-first century.

The late twentieth-century British women's movement was alert to its early twentieth-century print cultural forebears. Supplied by the thriving women's presses of the British suffrage movement, bookshops had been important sites for the Edwardian women's movement.¹⁵ While few outlived the period of suffrage activism, feminism continued to feature at the politically affiliated bookshops which sustained the socialist, pacifist and anarchist movements in Britain. More recently, bookshops were important contributors to British avant-garde and radical subcultures. Better Books on Charing Cross Road, for example, drew its inspiration from the San Francisco City Lights bookstore, and offered performance spaces and literary readings; a similar venture was founded in Edinburgh under the same name. Indica bookshop and gallery provided a space for the production of the countercultural *International Times* in its basement and was key to the 'underground' scene in 1960s London.¹⁶ Punk squatting activist Mal Peachey recalled Compendium, a well-known Camden-based countercultural bookshop, and Foyles on Charing Cross Road, as 'the only place for getting lots of different magazines, from different places, [...] from different parts of the country and different countries.'¹⁷ Musicians were prominent within the 'bookshop communities' that were generated at these sites, and records were commonly sold alongside books. Other bookshops were founded through the wholefood movement, or flourished on or near university campuses as larger numbers of young people moved into higher education in the 1960s.

‘Radical bookshops’ was a recognizable term of the 1970s and 80s, widely used by activists and institutionalized in the Federation of Radical Booksellers [FRB] (established 1975-1981 as the Federation of Alternative Booksellers). Its members spanned anarchist, Left, Black and ‘third world’, gay and lesbian, Irish, feminist, women’s and green bookshops. Numbers of radical bookshops proliferated in the 1970s and 80s as a subset of the independently-owned bookshop sector, reaching a highpoint of around 150 in the mid-1980s, but dropping to 130 by 1990. Many of these shops shared distributors, and cooperated in book fairs or, when raided or attacked, in defence campaigns. Though not all were members, the FRB coordinated much of this activity through its conferences and bimonthly journal, *The Radical Bookseller*.

Crucial to the proliferation of radical bookshops in these decades was the funding assistance available from public sources. The Arts Council gave grants, often administered by the Regional Arts Associations, to help bookshops stock works of ‘serious contemporary literature’. The Arts Council ‘Literature Panel’ spent around £60,000 per annum on bookshop support in the early 1980s. There was also assistance to bookshops through Development Agencies and local government. The Greater London Council [GLC] was particularly active; its Industry and Employment Committee gave grants to support running costs, as a form of job creation, for bookshops such as Centerprise and the Greenwich Bookbus. Its Arts and Recreation Committee gave bookshops around £30,000 yearly, and supported women's bookshops such as Silver Moon, as well as the feminist presses such as Onlywomen. The GLC Women’s Committee funded the Feminist Library and Information Centre, a book-lending resource.¹⁸ Such funding was extremely important in sustaining stock levels and allowing for bookshops to run bookstalls at festivals and bookfairs.

Though most FRB members did not explicitly align themselves with feminist and LG politics, most were sympathetic to the Women’s Liberation Movement. Grapevine Books in Cambridge, for example, advertised its stock as encompassing ‘feminist fiction, women’s studies, social and political thought, gay and lesbian fiction and politics, environment, children’s books.’ Blackthorn Books in Leicester declared its interests as ‘feminism, gay writing, politics, race, psychology and counselling, social studies.’¹⁹ Radical bookshops trained women in bookselling, and their catalogues began to publicize the print cultural revolution in women’s publishing that Simone Murray has charted.²⁰ Tara Books in

Winchester, for example, produced a catalogue titled 'Women and Society' in the mid 1970s. Compendium Books termed their equivalent catalogue 'Sexual Politics'.²¹

This sympathy for feminism amongst radical bookshops contrasted with the typically conservative and male-dominated book trade, with its dislike of what George Orwell termed 'vague-minded women looking for birthday presents for their nephews.'²² A sense of the mores and politics of booksellers can be gained from the memoir of Ian Norrie, proprietor from 1957 to 1988 of High Hill Bookshop in Hampstead. Like many other independent booksellers, Norrie saw himself as supportive of culture and the arts, as well as radical causes such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament [CND]. But he was impatient with female customers, particularly those buying 'sidelines': 'it bored me to stand at the counter whilst a customer deliberated which nib she wanted with an Osmiroid pen, and then couldn't decide on a colour for the holder. I was a bookseller. Let them buy their pens and notepaper at King's up the street.' He was similarly unwilling to allow mothers to bring children into his shop, believing that they 'encouraged' them to 'run amok around the stock'.²³ His attitude was not uncommon; one bookshop in Reading responded to an unsolicited job application from a woman with the pompous comment: 'Even if we did have a vacancy, we would most likely award the post to a Miss or a Mrs, but not to a Ms.'²⁴

Even within the radical bookshops, the spaces into which women's periodicals and books were placed were sometimes both literally and symbolically marginal; catalogues were sometimes annotated by hand to guide readers to feminist texts. Radical feminist Amanda Sebestyen recalled that 'feminists were working in Compendium, particularly in the basement, which was where all the magazines were, so that was the main place.'²⁵ Those working there sometimes found that their political commitments did not translate into other areas of the shop. Feminist activist Lynn Alderson ran the women's/sexual politics section at Compendium, and noted that 'they stocked pornographic material in one part. And you know, at one point I had a big fight with them about that.'²⁶ The libertine culture within the underground and radical political scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s led many feminists to prefer autonomous means of distributing print cultural materials. Even by 1980, an attendee at the Minority Press Group conference on 'How can radical publishing survive the 80s' noted that in bookselling, 'even the most obvious revelations of the women's movement haven't been absorbed.'²⁷

Degrees of Autonomy: models of feminist bookselling

I: Autonomous trading

Individuals who had worked in bookshops such as *Compendium* were at the forefront of developing autonomous feminist bookshops. Many had also worked with the women-only presses and periodicals, and saw themselves as activists more than entrepreneurs. As Lynn Alderson recalled: ‘Because we were all so involved in the movement, we weren’t just booksellers, We were political as well.’²⁸ Alderson was a founding member of *Sisterwrite*, the most high profile of the British feminist bookshops. *Sisterwrite* opened in Islington, London, in 1978 on an initial investment of around £16,000 drawn from personal funds and donors. Friends helped build the bookshelves, and the workers did not pay themselves for the first year of operations. Squatting and social welfare benefits allowed them to sustain the venture until it had become economically viable. Lynn Alderson identified the transnational intellectual links sustained through bookshops as a key intellectual contribution, and a market niche: ‘We needed to import if we were going to be successful because very few places did then.’²⁹ She spent a week at *Woman Books* in New York, and copied much from their catalogue, as well as that of *Compendium*. *Sisterwrite* gradually expanded onto additional floors of the building they rented, and later purchased the entire property. The shop hosted international visiting feminist writers, sold tapes and records of women artists, and advertised gigs. Its sidelines included badges, jewellery and speculums.³⁰

The opening of the women-only ‘*Sisterbite*’, a cafe, was key to creating a more social space, where information could be exchanged: ‘that was at least half the purpose of [*Sisterwrite*]... We stocked any information leaflet or posters that were about feminist events or demonstrations. ... We set it up partly as a women’s centre in that sense.’³¹ Rather than seeking connections with a wide customer base, or the local community, *Sisterwrite* prioritized serving the social and intellectual needs of a distinct activist network. Yet as Ann Enke has argued, bookshops did not simply serve an existing political community; they also brought this community into being, often in ways that ‘exceeded their founders’ political visions.’³² *Sisterwrite* both made the Women’s Liberation Movement visible and available to wider circles of women, and made a powerful statement of feminism as a spatial practice, redefining existing retail space on a British high street.

This model of autonomous bookselling promoted distinctive social spaces and activist networks in a manner similar to the bookshops of the lesbian and gay [LG] movement. Gay's the Word, for example, was founded in 1979 and still serves the LG community from its Camden location. It provided a site where LG individuals, especially those new to London, could orient themselves and contact others. Nick Snow, a drama student based in Guildford, visited Gay's the Word and recalled the proprietor as 'totally sweet, you know, he had time for me, he talked to me. And that was an early conversation with a gay man.' For Snow, the bookshop 'became a kind of place of pilgrimage for years really. I always went there. They started doing teas and coffees, so I'd get, yeah, a cup of tea there.'³³ The freely available noticeboard was especially important. Staff member John Duncan foregrounded the spatial innovation of bookselling: 'Gay bookshops, perhaps even more than other radical bookshops, don't exist simply to sell books. They are a space for lesbians and gay men to meet, leave messages – and feel central, not marginal. Even the most well-stocked radical bookshop sells gay books largely as a sideline [...] In a society where we ourselves are a sideline, a space of our own where we can find a literature of our own is a good point for moving onto wider activities.'³⁴ The founders of Silver Moon Women's Bookshop, operating in London between 1984 and 2001, also stressed the link between their sexuality and need for spatial autonomy and control: 'as all three of us are lesbians, autonomy and control were especially important... Whenever or wherever a lesbian is employed there is always the underlying fear of discrimination.'³⁵ Lesbian history has begun to chart the importance of non-domestic spaces for community building;³⁶ feminist bookshops provided visible safe sites where lesbians reworked the meanings of urban and retail spaces.

The autonomous model of bookselling relied on a relatively narrow base of customers, and tied the fortunes of the bookshop to those of its associated political movement and social scene. The bookshops reflected the divisions within these movements. Despite prioritizing providing safe spaces, for example, the LG community was not always solidaristic. Gay's the Word courted controversy by refusing to stock the literature of the Gay Christian Movement. Lavender Menace, an Edinburgh LG bookshop, moved out of its first home in the Gay Centre because its operations had become 'a political football in the internal wrangling of the Gay Centre.'³⁷ Within the feminist movement, internal division also intruded into bookselling. Sisterwrite staff were sometimes interventionist and judgemental; Judith Skinner, a Sisterwrite collective member, recalled 'huge rows and arguments about, you know sadomasochistic practice and was it violence against women. It was difficult.'³⁸ Bea

Campbell had co-authored with Anna Coote an influential 1982 account of the Women's Liberation Movement, *Sweet Freedom*. The book was criticized for its defensive or hostile approach to lesbian feminism.³⁹ Campbell recalled that Sisterwrite 'stocked the book, but, we discovered that they'd inserted a little slip saying, I think something to the effect of, 'This book is crap,' and challenging some of the section on sexual politics.' She was affronted, and felt that no other 'bookshop would dream of doing such a thing... clearly they hated this book.'⁴⁰ An uncompromizing political stance risked alienating supporters. Nonetheless, these bookshops provided visible, public sites where those seeking information and support could access what could otherwise be invisible or closed feminist or LG activist networks.⁴¹

II: Women-only management

Not all booksellers sought the political separatism of feminist or LG bookselling. Others chose to transform the membership of the collectives that ran existing bookshops, and became managed by women-only bodies. Liverpool's News from Nowhere had been founded by Bob Dent and Maggie Wellings in 1974, and later became a mixed-sex cooperative. In this format, as staff member Mandy Vere recorded, 'friends' of the shop still refer to it as 'Fred's shop' or ask a woman behind the counter to 'get 'Fred' to order me a book'. Frustrated by such dynamics, Vere and other women opted for a women-only collective from 1981. She expanded News from Nowhere's links to the women's movement, provided bookstalls at meetings such as the national Women's Aid conference, and coordinated influential feminist book fairs. Women-only cooperatives, Vere argued, prompted bookselling women to become less defensive, and more able to recognize their own differences of class and race. It had previously been difficult to 'bring[ing] up conflicts between the women in a mixed group. It felt important for the women to stick together and not allow disagreement to split us.'⁴² The all-women management arrangements eventually prompted a commitment to hiring 'black and minority ethnic' (BME) women to take up vacancies in the collective. The aim was to achieve 50% BME membership, though this proved hard to realize in practice.⁴³ Oakleaf Books in Milton Keynes and Wordgames Community Bookshop in Bethesda, North Wales, also made the transition to all-woman collectives. Oakleaf was been founded by a heterosexual couple in 1979. Female staff member Ben Plumpton noted that the shift to a women-only cooperative challenged the staff to take on all the roles: 'When we were a mixed group, I felt we tended to collude with other people's sexist assumptions by having a man do the 'wheeler-dealing'.'⁴⁴ Women-only

management was a resourceful way to transform existing bookshop infrastructure, and present feminist texts to a broad audience. It also allowed for class and race exclusivity to be perceived and challenged, and gave autonomy without the compromises and tensions of full blown separatism.

III: Mixed sex community bookselling

Black bookshops in Britain offered a contrasting model for feminist bookselling, which was far more rooted in community activism. Mia Morris, a community worker, described the high profile bookshops had within the Black community, at a time when local libraries rarely stocked Black authors: ‘the black bookshops were prevalent round about that sort of period as well, so I [...] used to go on a Saturday to the Headstart bookshop which was on West Green Road [...] Anything to do with kind of books and culture and heritage, kind of an important bit of my life.’⁴⁵ Black feminist Jan McKenley noted that ‘There was a bookshop movement that parallels all of this [the Black movement], because you’re hungry for the literature and that was very much a part of liberation struggles.’⁴⁶

Black bookshops were founded in unconventional spaces, often ‘selling books from bags in meetings, then from rooms in their houses and only years later moving into proper shops.’⁴⁷ Organisers remained deeply committed to outreach beyond their premises. For Morris: ‘the importance of the black bookshops is critical here. So there was a series of book fairs which took place at the Camden Centre here and also at sort of Lambeth Town Hall, and there was a collation or consortium of black bookshop owners. [...] Bogle-L’Ouverture, the Race Today Collective and New Beacon Bookshop, and many other people would organise three or four days of activities, which was authors, writers, workshops, concerts.’⁴⁸ Jan McKenley enthusiastically recalled Sisterwrite, but found the Black bookshops much more central to her activism: ‘the books were very key, the bookshops were key and that came from some of the [United] States where the bookshops are political centres. And that concept came to London.’⁴⁹

Sabarr Bookshop was a Brixton-based, collectively run Black alternative bookshop in which activists such as Olive Morris and Jocelyn Wolfe were prominent. Starting out in squatted premises, Sabarr provided Black literature, but was also valued as a means of building connections with schools. The educational racism faced by Black children was a longstanding

theme of radical Black activism in Britain, and Black women's groups were committed to diversifying curriculum materials. The Brixton Black Women's Group reported in their journal, *Speak Out*, that 'Through the Sabarr Bookshop Collective we are able to keep in contact with schools and other institutions with whom we discuss educational material available in the bookshop for their use.'⁵⁰ Bookselling was perceived as a key support to Black women's activism; for Morris, 'The black bookshops was what, if you didn't have a black women's group and you had a black bookshop, then that's what held the community.'⁵¹ As Tracey Fisher and Natalie Thomlinson have argued, Black women were more likely to work in partnership with Black men, and some were reluctant to embrace a 'feminist' identity which they perceived as racist.⁵² Jocelyn Wolfe recalled that both women's and mixed sex groups helped organize Sabarr Books on a rota, 'because that was, that was a community project that we did together with men.'⁵³ Like record shops and beauty salons, Black bookshops proved central to the elaboration of Black community and resistance to police harassment. There was less of a perceived need for autonomy and separation in the activism of Black women, and Black bookshops like Sabarr reflected this.

Protest and separatism in the bookshops

Feminist women working in radical bookshops saw their workplaces as sites of activism. They challenged publishers who brought out books with sexist titles, such as the 1981 *Men and Work in Modern Britain*.⁵⁴ Mandy Vere recalled attaching stickers to the covers of books which used sexist imagery, a campaign coordinated by Kay Stirling of Sisterwrite. *The Radical Bookseller* reported in 1979 that coordinators had agreed 'a stepping up of the defacing of sexist books campaign, with a list of recommended titles to sticker.' [Image 1: sticker sheet c. 1979] This was supported by 'a telephone tree to contact bookshops throughout the country as soon as an offensive book hits the shelves.'⁵⁵ The cover of Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, published by Hamlyn in 1979, produced particular anger for depicting a female body which some feminists angrily associated with the dieting industry and normative body imagery.⁵⁶

Feminist and women's bookshops provided an environment of active intervention rather than a passive backdrop to the exchange of books. The texts of social movements were sometimes produced in ways that responded very directly to bookshop environment and sales. Misha Wolf commented to readers of the *Anti-Sexist Men's Newsletter* in 1981: 'Roughly four times

as many newsletters are sold through bookshops as go to individual subscribers. The bookshop sales are especially sensitive to the quality of production, the graphic content and the front cover. Bad bookshop sales of even one issue would make a very ugly dent in our newsletter's finances.'⁵⁷ Bookshop sales thus prompted the often amateur editorial and print collectives producing feminist, anti-sexist, and LG pamphlets and periodicals in this period to professionalize their presentation and incorporate visual material. The relationship between radical publishing and bookselling was reciprocal and active.

For feminist periodicals seeking a women-only audience, the usually mixed-sex bookshop environment produced dilemmas and sensitivities: 'WIRES, and other internal and local newsletters, state that they are for women-only, and it is very hurtful to discover occasionally that they have been shown to men, as this shows a fundamental disrespect for our politics.' The editors of *Catcall*, an 'internal feminist discussion paper' with a print run of around 800, noted that 'We have deliberately aimed to sell the paper within the WLM and for this reason have turned down offers to stock it in 'alternative' bookshops. We hoped that the deliberate limiting of availability would encourage women to express their ideas more freely. On the other hand, it means that in many parts of the country *Catcall* is hard to come by.'⁵⁸ The dilemma of women-only readerships was hard to square with efforts to gain wide circulation for feminist ideas. And despite the efforts to realise feminist principles in bookselling, feminist bookshops were not always regarded as safe spaces by the radical or revolutionary wings of the women's liberation movement.

The Federation of Radical Booksellers warned in its manual *Starting a Bookshop* that 'Some reps [publisher's salespeople] can be very sexist, for instance by always addressing the men in the shop, or asking for 'the manager'. This seems to be changing somewhat as the number of successful FRB and similar shops increases.'⁵⁹ Feminists in bookselling, however, were dissatisfied with this complacent response, and offered much sharper criticism, not only of the reps from mainstream publishers, but the men and customers of the radical booktrade itself. As visible and relatively enduring components of the women's movement, feminist and LG bookselling projects suffered casual abuse from passersby and customers. There were regular arson attacks on *News from Nowhere* after it became run by a women-only collective. Vere also noted the increase in overt resentment from passing members of the public: 'With no restraining influence of a man behind the desk, we have had a lot more direct abuse and intimidation to deal with, e.g. a group of men walking in and saying "where

are your dirty books?”” Like News from Nowhere, Oakleaf Books experienced broken windows, and threatening phonecalls; Black bookshops also experienced high levels of arson and vandalism.⁶⁰ Naive or nostalgic evocations of a ‘beloved community’ of supportive radical bookshop customers were rejected by many feminist booksellers who had dealt with such treatment. Vere insisted that women working in bookshops ‘suffer sexist and sexual abuse from customers daily.’⁶¹ The sense amongst booksellers that they were visibly and publically representing controversial and sometimes unpopular social movements and ideologies created tensions in their approach to those entering the shops, particularly when men entered feminist spaces.

There were deep conflicts within the feminist movement over men’s presence within feminist meetings and debates. There was no clear mapping of sexuality onto separatism, and many lesbians continued to insist on working closely with men. Radical and revolutionary feminists preferred a woman-centred approach.⁶² While many consciousness raising groups, pamphlets and workshops were declared women-only, attempts to provide genuinely women-only public spaces were rare. From 1973, the London based Women’s Information and Newsletter Service (later ‘A Woman’s Place’) provided a women-only bookshop as part of its work as a women’s centre, though many members were not in favour of the shift to exclude men.⁶³ Of the 150 or so radical bookshops in Britain, only two were listed by the FRB in 1984 as women-only: the Women’s Arts Alliance, and Kentish Town Women’s Workshop, both in North West London. Neither were traditional bookshops, but more diverse political projects where books were also sold. Sisterwrite had always been open to male customers, and sold some non-fiction books by men. Male customers were asked to refrain from looking at lesbian materials. Staff member Judith Skinner acknowledged, ‘The bookshop was a slightly intimidating place for men, and they would probably hesitate about even going in.’⁶⁴ Sisterwrite was frequently perceived as *de facto* women-only. Mal Peachey recalled planning a benefit gig in 1983 for Sisterwrite with punk bands such as Crass Collective and Rubella Ballet. However, the bookshop cooperative was reluctant to take money from an event in which men were involved. Peachey himself recalls visiting the bookshop with a male and female friend, and ‘the woman at the end going “You! You two! fuck off! You’re not allowed in, fuck off! She can stay!”’.⁶⁵ Whether Peachey has misremembered or not, the narrative he tells clearly indicates the discomfort men might feel at entering explicitly feminist bookshops.

Both Sisterwrite and Silver Moon had women-only cafes, whose existence was controversial. Jane Cholmeley of Silver Moon described trying to establish a women-only space as like a ‘red rag to a bull... we suffered frequent aggressive outbursts from men and even from women in the shop.’ The Silver Moon cafe opened in the basement of the bookshop in May 1984, but only lasted for the first 18 months of the bookshop’s life. It could not attract the ‘office trade’ in the area; customers were put off by ‘a not entirely unfounded suspicion that the Silver Moon cafe was a lesbian meeting place!’⁶⁶ Moreover, the dynamic between customers and staff in the women-only cafe was, ironically, less respectful and politically informed than that of the mixed-sex bookshop. Cholmeley recalled that in the cafe, customers treated staff as ‘wallpaper’ and complained that the women-produced food was too expensive. Customers displayed a ‘persistent undervaluing of our own efforts and those of our women suppliers’.⁶⁷ The prime location of Silver Moon in Charing Cross Road represented a deliberate political gesture of occupation, both of a central space of the booktrade, and of London’s prestigious West End. But in relation to retailing food and drink, this space proved resistant to feminist appropriation.

The Women’s Liberation Bookbus [WLB], initiated in 1977, was the feminist bookselling project most overtly hostile to men’s involvement. The WLB provided books, posters and badges at feminist events in rural or provincial settings; the collective running the WLB also trialled setting up their stall near nurseries, primary schools, and factories, independent of any feminist gathering. Despite ambitions to purchase a dedicated vehicle, this proved impossible. The collective relied instead on hired vans or borrowed cars. The distinctive feminist ‘space’ provided was mobile and experimental, constructed through brief occupations of existing public spaces. The ‘Bookbus’ remained an evocative imagined presence, presented through cartoons [image 2: Women’s Liberation Bookbus cartoons, 1980] and banners, rather than taking material form.

Unlike other feminist bookselling projects, the WLB did not operate on a commercial basis. Organizers recognized that travel costs and lack of a stable customer base would make the project costly: ‘we realised from the start that we would not be able to make the Bookbus pay for itself’. This meant that political ideals did not have to be sacrificed for commercial viability. Bookbus volunteers refused to engage in any kind of sales strategies: ‘Because making money was not important, we would not encourage or in any way appear to be putting pressure on women to buy.’ WLB policy instructed women staffing the stall only to talk to those browsing if the conversation was initiated by the customer. Ironically, this made

it hard to achieve their other goal, of reaching out to women in isolated areas; WLB volunteers' scrupulous unwillingness to initiate conversations meant that they frequently failed to make connections. A leaflet describing their work, published in 1980, commented with surprise on the absence of a 'feeling of sisterhood' with those visiting the stall.⁶⁸ The political stance taken against 'sales' meant that personal and emotional connections were compromised.

Unlike the static bookshops, the Women's Liberation Bookbus only stocked books by women. "The bookstalls which we as feminists organise, are a militant stand against male views on women's writings.... Many feminists do not want strategic feminist theory available to men, so books and pamphlets containing this cannot be sold publically.' Organizers had envisaged only selling books to women, but were forced to reconsider, both by the equal rights legislation which they interpreted as prohibiting women-only sales, but also by the response of the women on their first East Anglian tour, who 'felt alienated by our decision not to sell to men.' Having accepted that the WLB must sell to men, they ruefully noted, 'It's a lot easier selling to women only [...] The men who do come forward [...] can be difficult to deal with and, although we have never had a really nasty incident, the fact that they can be so intimidating says a lot about the need to spread feminism.'⁶⁹ For the most part, men stayed away from the WLB. However, the possibility of their presence meant that the stall could not display women-only literature. Women had to ask for this directly, or show sufficient interest that the material would be fetched. It was decided, though not publicized, that the lesbian literature and badges that were displayed were only to be sold to women; men were told that they were 'display only'. The pamphlet describing these strategies was also labelled (by hand) as women-only. These compromises were uncomfortable, and clearly not always understood or appreciated by potential customers.

None of the women-only spaces established by booksellers were easy to manage, and separatism was usually a partial or assumed practice, rather than a clearly bounded space. It is also clear that separatism was directly challenged by some women. While many welcomed the safety and woman-centred nature of the spaces, others rejected separatism or simply refused to acknowledge the politicized nature of the initiative, to the frustration of more activist women.

Shopping for Change

Trysha Travis has pointed to the ‘gap between separatist feminism’s utopian vision and the workaday routines of print practice’ in her study of feminist print culture in the United States.⁷⁰ The gap was just as problematic in British bookselling, as radical bookshops negotiated commercial and political imperatives. The Federation of Radical Booksellers’ handbook recommended that all bookshop collectives attempt to work in non-hierarchical, non-competitive ways, and that this was likely to require ‘a lot of consciousness raising and discussion.’ At the same time, they warned ‘Somewhere, however, you will have to draw a line before your collective becomes a counselling group rather than a business.’⁷¹ The anti-capitalist ethos of radical and feminist politics made analysis of solvency, staffing, capital and stock anathema to many, resulting in a deliberate anti-business ethos. Bookseller Kingsley Dawson recalled being ‘appalled’ by having to deploy business practices such as accounting when he co-founded a radical bookshop. Like many others, he feared that radical bookselling would undergo an ‘awful transformation’ when confronted by the ‘conflict, competition, survival’ tactics required by capitalism, and lose its ‘healthy hostility to capitalism, patriarchy, or whatever.’ Booksellers, he argued, should retain their connection to their political goals, and work cooperatively, to prevent ‘an inflated sense of [bookselling’s] importance’.⁷² Lorna Stevens of Virago Press similarly hoped that feminist publishing would provide a ‘vocational, communicative, sisterly environment of mutual support and trust.’⁷³ But neither Virago nor radical bookshops found this easy to enact in a market setting. As a founding member of Brixton’s Sabarr bookshop collective noted, the shop was ‘supposed to sell black literature, because no one else was doing it. Unfortunately, [...] we were laid back, we got into a terrible financial situation and in the end we had to pay [out of our own pockets].’⁷⁴

The very low or zero wages paid by many bookshops bred resentment, and made the bookshop collectives hard to sustain. Many booksellers ruefully labelled this ‘self-exploitation’. The Federation of Radical Booksellers noted: ‘would be booksellers should be aware that even the large and more successful shops in the FRB are often paying laughably low wages.’⁷⁵ Bookselling was summed up as ‘demanding and exhausting’, and it was no surprise that many hopeful community or radical projects became burnt out or bankrupt. The monthly wages paid by Oakleaf Books in Milton Keynes at its foundation in 1979, for example, were set at the same level as a student grant, at £133.50. Ben Plumpton commented that despite staff membership of the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs Union (ASTMS), ‘we were all aware that we were exploiting ourselves in the interests

of the shop's survival'. Committed to anti-racist and anti-sexist working practices, Oakleaf's founders did no market research, 'which was partly due to lack of business experience but also because the motivation for starting the shop was political rather than commercial.' Plumpton concluded 'I was glad to be working in an environment where I didn't have to 'dress up' or hide my sexuality or my politics', but noted that she was often cold at work, and felt 'permanently poor' on its wages.⁷⁶ The FRB was pessimistic about strategies for change, noting in 1981, 'grants appear to be necessary if the shops want to pay a reasonable wage.' Judith Skinner of Sisterwrite, and later the Hackney community bookshop Centerprise, recalled that 'Bookshops weren't a great place to grow old.'⁷⁷ While the FRB recommended union membership, the relevant unions did not have good records on empowering women.⁷⁸ Despite its ethical stance, the feminist bookshop movement did not prioritize union involvement amongst its staff because unions were widely believed to be disinterested in women's issues and dominated by an aggressive political style. This disengagement, however, led to a lack of concern by bookshop managing collectives with the conditions and wages of their work, which contributed to a lack of sustainability in feminist bookselling and its vision of ethical retail.⁷⁹

Given the personal sacrifices booksellers were often making, it was ironic that their work was often criticized by the radical communities they served. Plumpton noted that her activist peers would 'regard us as capitalistically inclined because we had to be efficient in our dealings with money in order to survive.'⁸⁰ Lynn Alderson felt similarly vulnerable to criticism from women encountered 'at the disco', because the imported books stocked by Sisterwrite were expensive. The shop was organized on a non-profit basis, but had to cover its costs. Moreover, Alderson was proud of her professionalism, and wanted to set high standards in Sisterwrite. This was sometimes challenged by collective working practices. Many bookshops attempted to rotate tasks throughout the organising cooperative, in the interests of equity and skill sharing; some also relied on volunteer labour.⁸¹ However, this sometimes resulted in amateurish behaviour or incoherence. The FRB handbook advised its members not to close during holidays, open later than the advertised time, or allow friends to crowd around the till, suggesting that all these may have been features of radical bookselling.⁸²

Silver Moon (1984-2001) represented a more commercially oriented vision of feminist bookselling, operating as a company limited by guarantee rather than a cooperative. Located in the symbolic centre of the book trade, London's Charing Cross Road, the bookshop deliberately aimed 'to be out of the margins and into the centre' in spatial terms. The project

received initial funding from the GLC, but then survived independently, partly through diversifying into its own publishing business. Silver Moon aimed to pay a living wage to its staff, but could only do so by making rigorous, commercially driven choices. Although its founders experimented with job rotation, they found that ‘perpetually succeeding to someone else’s workspace was deeply irritating’ and produced ‘dangerously sloppy’ customer service. Informal communications and staff shared meals gave way to ‘inter-staff memos and the pre-meeting circulation of agenda’. Many earlier features of feminist bookselling remained (noticeboard, connections to schools and libraries, resource centre) and all profits were re-invested in the bookshop. Jane Cholmeley felt that Silver Moon was able to ‘challenge the traditional hierarchies of capitalism as well as the dogma associated with collectives and consensus.’⁸³ This attempt to reconcile an ethical business was characteristic of the more competitive retail market of the 1980s. Cholmeley briskly summarised her stock control practices to the FRB conference in 1989, with talk of balancing political commitments with ‘rigorous sales per square feet targets for different parts of the shop’. Her business acumen allowed Silver Moon to outlast other feminist bookshops by many years. However, there was also a loss of direct connection to a feminist community. Cholmeley was clear that whatever its political merits ‘an important work of feminist theory’ would not be stocked if it would not sell more than four times a year. She was exasperated by authors who ‘because of a combined expectation of political solidarity and wilful economic ignorance’ sought to have non-commercial books featured in Silver Moon’s stock.⁸⁴

The attempts to create a retail environment that stressed social justice, both in the intellectual content of the products sold and in the organisation of the workplace, offered a vision of a modified capitalism which would fulfil some feminist political commitments: ‘to aid the spread of feminist ideas and to generate income for women writers [while retaining...] autonomous control of our own endeavours.’⁸⁵ Indeed, the creation of an explicitly retail space may have made feminist spaces more accessible to those who found the open political commitment of a women’s resources centre or consciousness raising group off-putting. Browsing a bookshop provided a tentative means of getting to know the movement, without having to declare an affiliation. It allowed larger numbers of women to feel part of the movement, through purchases and informal interactions with staff. And despite the weakness noted above in relation to pay and conditions, feminist bookselling offered a vision of how capitalism could work towards political and ethical goals, and how women might present themselves as ethical entrepreneurs. In many cases, however, this was only made possible by

generous initial funding from the GLC or other agencies. Local government support was key to many of the radical projects of the 1980s, and enabled the temporary reconciliation of political and commercial principles.

Transitions and challenges of the 1980s and 1990s

Despite the still growing number of radical and feminist bookshops, a more hostile environment was perceptible in the 1980s. *The Sunday Telegraph* reported in 1980 with outrage that an 'extreme Left-wing bookshop in Newcastle had received a £1000 grant last December' from the Arts Council, despite selling 'pro-IRA and Communist propaganda'.⁸⁶ Regular police raids looking for obscene books on behalf of Customs and Excise heightened the sense of threat. Most of the stock confiscated from radical bookshops related to drugs and homosexuality, but occasionally feminist texts were also taken. LG material was particularly under threat, since Customs and Excise continued to use a less stringent definition of indecency than that applied to material published in Britain: materials which the 'average person in the street would find disagreeable or 'in poor taste'' might be confiscated.⁸⁷ A 1983 raid on Gay's the Word saw the seizure of over 2000 books and periodicals, and created an atmosphere of beleaguement in the radical book trade. Lavender Menace, Silver Moon and the Feminist Book Fair also had books seized, and the mail order bookseller Essentially Gay was forced out of business by loss of stock through raids.

Public funding for bookshops provoked Parliamentary questions across the decade; Margaret Thatcher declared herself 'utterly revolted' by the materials on sale in 1988 in a Haringey radical bookshop which received grants from Haringey Council.⁸⁸ The sense of political hostility among governing elites took more tangible and direct effect through the enactment of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act, which banned the purchase of materials that would 'promote homosexuality' by local authorities. Though no prosecutions were brought under this legislation, its high profile presence limited the books that libraries and schools were willing to buy. In the face of raids and legislation, booksellers mounted strong and often successful defence campaigns. Nonetheless, their effectiveness was limited by their relative isolation. The Federation of Radical Booksellers had never been a very closely integrated group; of the roughly 150 radical British bookshops in 1986, only 35 were members.⁸⁹ Women's, LG and feminist bookshops were on the FRB margins. Despite the deep political commitments of those working in this sector, the pressures of long hours of

shopwork and low profits, as well as sometimes painful disputes, could lead to lethargy and disillusion.

Despite these setbacks, portraying the 1980s as a decade of anti-feminist backlash does little to convey the expansion and development of feminist bookselling in this period.⁹⁰ As feminist and LG concerns became more deeply entrenched in the academy, there was a concomitant rise in sales of academic books. This growth area allowed bookshops with close links to colleges and universities to thrive. Moreover, the effects of Thatcher's policies and 'pro-family' moral stance on feminist bookselling were complex. The conservative polemics evident in central government and parts of the media did not initially have a very direct effect on feminist, LG and other kinds of radical politics. There were, however, significant indirect effects that would come to transform the bookselling environment rapidly during the 1980s. Rather than a lack of interest or political opposition from the book-buying public, it was the spending cutbacks in frontline services such as Local Education Authorities and Library Services which affected bookshop solvency. Oakleaf Books closed in 1985, blaming book-buying cuts in education and library services, as well as a more mainstream competitor shop which 'began to stock more of the 'trendier' radical subjects (eg peace, feminism, vegetarian cookery and later black writing).'⁹¹ Feminist publishing had become less marginal and subversive, and now produced mainstream bookshop stock; this created a loss of a sense of the bookshop as a key site of feminist community, autonomy and activism.

Changes to the infrastructure of local government led to insolvency in the book trade. The grant-giving GLC was abolished in 1986; the Inner London Education Authority, which had strongly supported feminist initiatives and bookbuying under the leadership of Frances Morrell, was abolished in 1990. An FRB survey taken in 1990 was pessimistic: 'Only in London have shops been able to survive in significant numbers. The story in Wales, Scotland and the north of England is little short of disastrous.'⁹² The FRB was dissolved in 1992. London had become something of an enclave, where the relatively dense community of activists and radicals made possible politicized bookselling. Mandy Vere had complained in 1985: 'there are virtually no jobs for booksellers north of Watford.' It was only the cooperative relationship that News from Nowhere sustained with Liverpool's universities and colleges that kept it commercially viable.

Through the deregulation of planning and intense urban development in the 1980s, retail more generally became concentrated into city centres and malls; independent bookshops were less able to afford the rising rents. The Virago bookshop in Covent Garden closed in 1987, and Virago adopted pragmatic, mainstream market strategies in order to sustain itself.⁹³ In the early 1990s, independent bookselling was further transformed by the aggressive discounting of chain bookshops such as Dillons and Waterstones. From 1991, these companies led a determined campaign to bring down the Net Book Agreement, which had set a minimum price for British book sales since 1900. As major bookshops began to discount, publishers withdrew, and the agreement collapsed in 1997. Book retailing spread to new spaces, such as supermarkets. On the high streets, uniquely creative feminist bookselling and social spaces were challenged by the deliberate positioning of chain-owned bookshops in nearby sites. These strategies forced many bookshop closures, particularly when aggressive international firms such as the American chain, Borders, entered the UK market. When internet retail became a dominant force in bookselling from the late 1990s, even London radical bookshops faced closure. The last feminist bookshop, Silver Moon, was incorporated into Foyles (notorious for its hostility to union membership) in 2001.

Conclusions

Investigating feminism through material and symbolic spaces such as those provided by booksellers offers a historical narrative which helpfully develops beyond confining categories of feminist ideological affiliation, and foregrounds a broader range of actors. Many late twentieth century feminists sustained fluid and hard to categorise forms of political engagement. As recent work in queer history has suggested, activism, sexuality, sociability and commerce interacts to produce provisional spaces where politics becomes tangible.⁹⁴ Foregrounding the creation of and interaction between physical, commercial, political and symbolic spaces, as this study of bookshops has done, offers promising ways of historicising feminism and charting its moments of coalescence.

The bookshops of the British women's liberation movement were crucial to sustain a feminist movement that was powerfully critical of the mainstream media. Lacking access to, or faith in, the newspapers, broadcast media and journals of their day, bookshops served as distribution centres for the alternative print culture that was so central to the activist and intellectual development of the women's movement. Novels, pamphlets, polemics, and posters proliferated, alongside a material culture of badges and other 'sidelines'.

Noticeboards provided channels of communication and low cost ways of advertising events. Imports of European and American literature were hugely significant to the development of feminist ideas and practices in Britain. The thriving women's and lesbian music scene was also supported by bookshops and their social spaces. Bookshops provided a crucial means of integrating a movement that was opposed to formal political institution building, and operated in decentralised, informal ways. Despite the apparent consensus around the four, and later seven, demands of the British Women's Liberation movement, feminist groups were fluid, conflictual and often short lived. Bookshops provided stable, recognisable nodal points, as sites of exchange and recruitment, and spaces of physical encounters.

Public funding, particularly that channelled through progressive local government initiatives, was key to attaining institutional stability, despite the widespread feminist polemics that associated 'the state' with patriarchal power. While feminist booksellers jealously guarded their political autonomy, they nonetheless pragmatically saw 'the state' not as an ideological enemy, but as a frequent source of support, particularly in its local manifestations. Thatcher-era austerity and central attacks on local government in the mid to late 1980s caused significant damage to bookselling.

Feminist bookselling in the final quarter of the twentieth century belies accounts of Women's Liberation that have focused on the 1970s as a period of 'rise *and* fall'. Instead, as Sarah Browne has recently argued, a longer and more diffuse historical trajectory emerges for the Women's Liberation Movement.⁹⁵ In Britain, when feminist and women's bookshops did close, they often did so for reasons that had less to do with intellectual decline or ideological backlash against the women's movement, and more to do with public expenditure cuts in the later 1980s, and the intensification of market competition in the 1990s and 2000s. Feminist bookshops reveal more flourishing, diverse experiences of activism in the early to mid 1980s, as a period of growth and innovation for the women's movement.

In a similar fashion to the feminist publishing houses, feminist and LG bookshops found it extremely hard to resolve their uncertainties over orientation to the market. They were committed to an activist role that went beyond selling books, yet also recognized that without sales, they could not continue. The need to balance finances and political commitment produced irresolvable conflicts, which were sometimes temporarily papered over by (self-) exploitation and paying low wages. The relatively weak commitment to labour unions amongst feminist booksellers is suggestive of a larger failure to mesh late twentieth-century

feminism and labour politics. Complacency over wage levels was a major weakness in the attempt to establish 'feminist retail'; though many booksellers were committed to paying living wages, this was often hard to achieve in practice. The fragile nature of attempts to make ethical compromises with capitalism were brought home with intensity when feminist booksellers were faced with more intense commercial pressures in the 1980s and 1990s. The ending of the Net Book Agreement's price protection came as the final straw for surviving feminist bookshops. Nonetheless, the contribution of feminist booksellers was to attempt to find a 'middle way' of engagement with specific formations of capitalism *and* radical politics. Their 'movement entrepreneurialism' testifies to the potential for reciprocity between politicised feminist space and the marketplace.

¹ I'm hugely grateful to those who have generously shared their memories or suggested readings and new lines of enquiry for this article, in particular Mandy Vere, Debi Withers, Frankie Green, Judith Skinner, Lynn Alderson, Ross Bradshaw, Jane Cholmeley, Maria DiCenzo, Natalie Thomlinson, and Ellie Shermer. Kristina Schulz has been particularly influential in bringing feminist bookselling into focus, and I thank her for her insights and enthusiasm.

² Beatrix Campbell, interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After [SAA]*, British Library Sound Archive, 53

³ K. Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Stella Dadzie, Personal interview with Natalie Thomlinson, 24 February 2011, Thomlinson, "Race and ethnicity in the English women's movement after 1968" (University of Cambridge, 2013), 148.

⁴ Philippa Harrison, quoted in Sue Bradley, *The British book trade : an oral history* (London: British Library, 2008): 215.

⁵ On the sensory world of the bookshop see Stephen Brown, "Rattles from the Swill Bucket," in *Consuming Books: the marketing and consumption of literature*, ed. Stephen Brown (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 7.

⁶ Sandie Holmes, interviewed by Rachel Cohen, SAA, 38

⁷ See for example Bradley, *British book trade*; Simone Murray, *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); M. DiCenzo, L. Delap, and L. Ryan, *Feminist media history : suffrage, periodicals and the public sphere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). There is a small, often celebratory, literature on feminist bookstores in the United States: Kristen Amber Hogan, "Reading at Feminist Bookstores: Women's Literature, Women's Studies and the Feminist Bookstore Network" (University of Texas at Austin, 2006); Junko R. Onosaka, *Feminist Revolution in Literacy: Women's Bookstores in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Kathleen Liddle, "More Than a Bookstore: The Continuing Relevance of Feminist Bookstores for the Lesbian Community," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 9, no. 1/2 (2005).

⁸ Justin Bengry, 'Courting the Pink Pound: *Men Only* and the Queer Consumer, 1935-1939,' *History Workshop Journal* 68 (2009): 122-148; Chasin, A. *Selling out : the gay and lesbian movement goes to market*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000); Joshua Clark Davis, 'The business of getting high: head shops, countercultural capitalism, and the marijuana legalization movement' *The Sixties: A journal of history, politics and culture* (2015).

⁹ Setch for example stresses the perennial instability of the London Women's Liberation Workshop, Eve Setch, "The Face of Metropolitan Feminism: The London Women's Liberation Workshop 1969-1979," *Twentieth Century British History* 13(2002): 174.

¹⁰ Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). 63. 9. 11. 80

¹¹ There has as yet been little historical work on the significance and dynamics of late twentieth century women-only initiatives. Assessments from those personally involved in

British feminist separatism can be found in Carole Leathwood, "Doing difference in different times: Theory, politics, and women-only spaces in education," *Women's Studies International Forum* 27(2004); Sasha Roseneil, *Common Women, Uncommon Practices: the queer feminisms of Greenham* (London: Cassel, 2000); Janet Dixon, "Separatism: a look back at anger," in *Radical Records: Thirty Years of Gay and Lesbian History*, ed. Bob Cant and Susan Hemmings (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹² Gail Chester, Eileen Cadman, and Agnes Pivot, *Rolling Our Own; women as printers, publishers and distributors* vol. 4 (London: Minority Press Group 1981): 25, 29.

¹³ A critical contemporary description is provided by Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," (London: Dark Star, 1982). The dynamics of feminist activism are also discussed in Anna E Rogers, "Feminist consciousness-raising in the 1970s and 1980s: West Yorkshire women's groups and their impact on women's lives" (University of Leeds, 2010), 107-8.

¹⁴ Lesbian and Gay were recognised categories of this period, though subsequently visible sexual minorities such as bisexuals and transgender individuals were not yet widely recognised as part of the gay movement. Later abbreviations such as 'LGBTQ' are avoided, and the shorthand LG designates lesbian and gay bookselling projects.

¹⁵ Simone Murray, "'Deeds and Words': The Woman's Press and the Politics of Print," *Women: A Cultural Review* 11, no. 3 (2007).

¹⁶ Barry Miles, *London calling : a countercultural history of London since 1945* (London: Atlantic, 2010); Nigel Fountain, *Underground : the London alternative press 1966-74* (London: Routledge, 1988). 16.

¹⁷ Mal Peachey, interviewed by Lucy Delap, 6 July 2012, Unbecoming Men Collection (UMC), British Library Sound Archive

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- ¹⁸ Federation of Radical Booksellers newsletter 1981, org/radbook/4/2 box 5, Working Class Movement Library (WCML), Salford
- ¹⁹ Federation of Radical Booksellers directory (London: Radical Bookseller, 1992)
- ²⁰ Murray, *Mixed Media*.
- ²¹ Women in Society, no 11, 1975 Tara Books; Sexual Politics, June 1976, Compendium Books; both held in the Girton Archives, GCIP CWLA 3/21
- ²² George Orwell, "Bookshop memories (1936)," in *Collected Essays: journalism and letters* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), 242.
- ²³ Ian Norrie, *A Hampstead Memoir: High Hill Bookshop, 1957-1988* (London: High Hill Press, 1989). 13, 34. Simone Murray notes Norrie's unsympathetic stance towards the feminist presses in his contribution to a 1974 guide to bookselling; Murray, *Mixed Media*: 11.
- ²⁴ Reported in *Radical Bookseller*, Oct 1980, p. 5
- ²⁵ Amanda Sebestyen, interviewed by Lucy Delap, June 13 2012, UMC, British Library Sound Archive
- ²⁶ Lynn Alderson, interviewed by Lucy Delap, 18 April 2013
- ²⁷ Steve Beresford, 'How can I survive radical publishing?' April 2 1988 Minority Press Group report, org/Radbook/8/1 WCML
- ²⁸ Alderson interview
- ²⁹ Some British and American bookshops were 'twinned', through agreements to exchange direct packages of books, without invoice, to an agreed value. Federation of Radical Booksellers, *Starting a Bookshop: a handbook on radical and community bookselling* (Lancaster Federation of Radical Booksellers (Single Step Bookshop), 1984). 51.
- ³⁰ Silver Moon Radical Bookshops Guide Survey entry, c. 1981, org/radbook/5/1 Box 7, WCML
- ³¹ Alderson interview

³² Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). 63.

³³ Nick Snow [pseud.], interviewed by Lucy Delap, 27 May 2013, UMC British Library Sound Archive. On gay bookshops, see Paul R Deslandes, 'The cultural politics of gay pornography in 1970s Britain', in *British Queer History*, ed. Brian Lewis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

³⁴ John Duncan, 'Gay's the Word' *Radical Bookseller*, June 1982, no 15, p .14. The centrality of Gay's the Word to gay activism is captured in Diarmaid Kelliher, "Solidarity and Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners 1984-5," *History Workshop Journal* 77, no. 1 (2014).

³⁵ Jane Cholmeley, "A Feminist Business in a Capitalist World: Silver Moon Women's Bookshop," in *Working Women: international perspectives on labour and gender ideology*, ed. N. Redclift and M. T. Sinclair (London: Routledge, 1991), 216.

³⁶ Rebecca Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: Narrating the Lesbian in Postwar Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007)

³⁷ Anon, 'Lavender Menace', *Radical Bookseller*, June 1982, no 15, p. 15

³⁸ Judith Skinner, interview with Lucy Delap 21 April 2013

³⁹ Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet freedom : the struggle for women's liberation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982). Controversies over lesbianism are described in Jeska Rees, ""Taking your Politics Seriously" : Lesbian History and the Women's Liberation Movement in England," in *Sapphists and sexologists*, ed. Sonja Tiernan and Mary McAuliffe (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009).

⁴⁰ Beatrix Campbell, interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, SAA, 84. In this interview, Campbell confused the Upper Street-based Sisterwrite with the Silver Moon women's bookshop on Charing Cross Road; the events she described relate to Sisterwrite.

⁴¹ The 'cliqueish' and impenetrable nature of the Women's Liberation Movement is discussed in Thomlinson, "Race and ethnicity," 68-70.

⁴² Mandy Vere, with ideas from Madeleine Broderick, 'From One Man Show to Women's Collective', *Radical Bookseller*, July/Aug 1982, p. 12-13

⁴³ Mandy Vere, "The History of News from Nowhere, Liverpool's Radical and Community Bookshop," *North West Labour History* 36 (2011): 28.

⁴⁴ Ben Plumpton, "Oakleaf: The story of a radical bookshop, a case study," in *Occasional Paper*, ed. The Cooperatives Research Unit (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1988), 24, 7.

⁴⁵ Mia Morris, interviewed by Rachel Cohen, SAA, 31

⁴⁶ Jan McKenley, interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, SAA, 94

⁴⁷ Sarah White, 'Development of Black Publishing in Britain', *Radical Bookseller*, March/April 1982, 17

⁴⁸ Mia Morris, SAA, 46

⁴⁹ Jan McKenley, SAA, 94

⁵⁰ Editorial, *Speak Out* 1, pp. 2-3 (2), cited in Thomlinson, "Race and ethnicity," 117.

⁵¹ Mia Morris, SAA, 46

⁵² Tracy Fisher, *What's left of blackness : feminisms, transracial solidarities, and the politics of belonging in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). 83; Thomlinson, "Race and ethnicity."

⁵³ Jocelyn Wolfe, interviewed by Rachel Cohen, SAA, 152

⁵⁴ *Radical Bookseller*, Jan/Feb 1981, 3

⁵⁵ *Radical Bookseller*, Nov 2 1979. See also draft letter, Kay Stirling, 7 June 1978, org/radbook/8/1, box 10 WCML

⁵⁶ Campaign material reproduced in Chester, Cadman, and Pivot, *Rolling Our Own*, 4: 25.

⁵⁷ Misha Wolf, 'One response to issue 15', *MAN: Men's Anti-Sexist Newsletter* Winter 1981/2 issue 16, 7

⁵⁸ Cited in Chester, Cadman, and Pivot, *Rolling Our Own*, 4: 82.

⁵⁹ Booksellers, *Starting a Bookshop*: 31.

⁶⁰ 'Fascists and racists again attack Bogle L'Ouverture bookshop', c. 1979, org/radbooks/5/1 box 6, WCML

⁶¹ Mandy Vere 'Booksellers Reply' *Radical Bookseller* Dec 1985, no 43, 18

⁶² Nicholas Owen, "Men and the 1970s British Women's Liberation Movement," *Historical Journal* 56, no. 3 (2013); Lucy Delap, "Uneasy Solidarity: The British men's movement and feminism," in *Women's Liberation Movements in European Perspective*, ed. Kristina Schultz (Oxford: Berghahn, 2015).

⁶³ Setch, "The Face of Metropolitan Feminism," 188.

⁶⁴ Skinner interview.

⁶⁵ Peachey interview.

⁶⁶ Cholmeley, "Silver Moon," 225.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Women's Liberation Bookbus, "Women's Liberation Bookbus," (London: Onlywomen Press, 1980), 1, 2, 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁰ Trysh Travis, "The Women in Print Movement: History and Implications," *Book History* 11(2008): 283.

⁷¹ Booksellers, *Starting a Bookshop*: 73.

⁷² Kingsley Dawson, 'Socialist Business Practice: Where can it possibly be?', org/radbook/8/1 Box 10 WCML

⁷³ Lorna Stevens, "Telling tales of Virago Press," in *Consuming Books: the marketing and consumption of literature*, ed. Stephen Brown (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 164.

⁷⁴ 'Caroline', cited in Fisher, *What's left of blackness*: 83.

⁷⁵ Booksellers, *Starting a Bookshop*: 115.

⁷⁶ Plumpton, "Oakleaf," 13, 6, 22.

⁷⁷ FRB newsletter Oct 1981, no page numbers, org/radbook/4/2 box 5, WCML; Skinner interview

⁷⁸ Anna Coote noted the huge discrepancy between proportion of female members and elected or executive officials in both USDAW and ASTMS. Anna Coote and Peter Kellner, *Hear this, brother : women workers and union power* (London: New Statesman, 1980). 9.

⁷⁹ Thomas Jundt notes a similar disinterest in labour conditions in his study of the American ecological consumerism movement, Thomas Jundt, *Greening the red, white, and blue : the bomb, big business, and consumer resistance in postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 234-5.

⁸⁰ Plumpton, "Oakleaf," 22.

⁸¹ Similar working practices are discussed in Setch, "The Face of Metropolitan Feminism," 181-2.

⁸² Booksellers, *Starting a Bookshop*.

⁸³ Cholmeley, "Silver Moon," 216, 27, 29.

⁸⁴ Cholmeley, 'Keeping Stock Value Under Control', FRB Conference, May 1989, p. 7, 9, WMCL org/radbooks/5/1 box 7

⁸⁵ Cholmeley, "Silver Moon," 231.

⁸⁶ Catherine Steven, 'Arts Council aids 'pro-IRA play'', *Sunday Telegraph*, 16th March 1980, p. 1

⁸⁷ The 1876 Customs Consolidation Act governed the actions of Customs and Excise, but failed to provide a definition of indecency. Courts were thus able to interpret the law with relative freedom, and could judge homosexual material as obscene or indecent, despite the de-criminalisation of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act.

⁸⁸ Margaret Thatcher, HC Deb 01 March 1988 vol. 128 column 817

⁸⁹ *Radical Bookseller*, Nov/Dec 1986.

⁹⁰ Susan Faludi, *Backlash : the undeclared war against women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992). Frankie Ashton, "Feminist in the 80s: Fact or Fiction," in *Feminist Theory and Practical Policies*, ed. Frankie Ashton and Gill Whitting (Bristol: School for Advanced Urban Studies, 1993), 121-3.

⁹¹ Plumpton, "Oakleaf," 14.

⁹² 'Survey of the Radical Bookshops 1990,' *Radical Bookseller* Winter 1991 p. 11

⁹³ A description of the Virago bookshop and the conventional, profit-making structures of the publishing company is given in Stevens, "Telling tales of Virago Press."

⁹⁴ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Matt Cook, *Queer domesticities: homosexuality and home life in twentieth-century London*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

⁹⁵ Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014). 181-5.