

Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies

Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6129-9 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-8223-6110-7 (cloth)

In an era of instantaneous purchasing, one-day shipping, and impersonal book buying, it is difficult to envision a time when bookstores fostered robust intellectual and activist communities. In *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, literature and library studies scholar Kristen Hogan documents how feminist bookstores did just that for nearly 30 years. Her book examines the challenges, successes, and failures of feminist bookstores across North America from the late 1970s until the early 2000s. Hogan argues that feminist bookstores were not just places to purchase feminist literature or women-authored books, but also served as meeting grounds for implementing feminism, feminist accountability, and antiracism. Using archival research, interviews with former bookstore employees, owners, and publishers, and her own experience working in a Toronto feminist bookstore, Hogan explores the nuances and paradoxes of operating feminist bookstores according to feminist, antiracist, and anticapitalist politics.

Feminist bookstores arose out of the larger women's rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter 1 examines the origins of several prominent feminist bookstores across North America in the late 1970s and the formation of the *Feminist Bookstore News*, a prominent trade publication for feminist writings. Although significant strides had been made during the mid 20th century, women found that publishing and circulating their work was still challenging. Feminist bookstores eventually drove movements such as Women in Print (an effort to increase female

participation in all aspects of publishing) and fed the fire for the establishment of women's studies departments in universities. Establishing bookstores that focused solely on women's writings was a political action from which feminists could both consolidate and advance their objectives. Starting in urban centers, feminist-identifying women began establishing bookstores that met their needs both intellectually and in fostering a shared sense of community. As Chapters 2 and 3 detail, feminist bookstores attempted to operate on policies rooted in feminist, antiracist, and anticapitalist practices within a heteropatriarchal capitalist society. Eventually, it became clear to many involved that it was antithetical to sustain the bookstores and the communities they formed within this system. Furthermore, oftentimes bookstores replicated the same cisgender, white, female politics they sought to undermine. To address these challenges a transnational network of feminist booksellers emerged to support each other sustaining and communicating in large part through the publication of the *Feminist Bookstore News*. In this publication, feminist booksellers spread antiracist and feminist strategies for running their businesses, discovered new literature to offer, and strategized on how to exert pressures on traditional publishers to continue publishing feminist work.

While geographers will be pleasantly surprised to see our own Joni Seager appear in the book (for her contributions in mapping out the varied sections of the New Words Bookstore in Cambridge, MA), those who are looking for nuanced understandings of the role of space in the feminist bookstore movement will be disappointed. Hogan, who earned her PhD in English literature from the University of Texas-Austin, naturally does not call upon the extensive body of literature that has developed over the past decade around the role of social justice and space. While it is apparent that these places were important meeting grounds for implementing feminist and antiracist thought, the discussions of how these negotiations occurred are typically focused on their outcome in the larger historical context, i.e. how bookstores continued to function. However, geographers will be able to produce their own readings: for example, one can read into

the book about the critical importance of these spaces in fostering feminist accountability, promoting antiracist practices, and sustaining anticapitalist work in a capital-driven world. Throughout the text, several interviewees discussed the support systems that existed in feminist bookstores that personally benefited them: everything from providing basic employment and shelter, to providing spaces for community groups and activist meetings. Additionally, while Hogan discusses transnationalism as a key part of her thesis, few meaningful international connections beyond Toronto are made, in addition to few non-coastal urban areas beyond Austin, Texas.

Central to the development of the text and the production of feminist knowledge and community more broadly is the geography of the “feminist shelf”: a term coined by Hogan in Chapter 4 to explore how feminist booksellers promoted new works. While the *Feminist Bookstore News* helped to spread the word about new publications and coordinate unified action to push publishers to keep feminist books in print, the “feminist shelf” was a way in which booksellers influenced their customers’ selections. Which books were promoted, how the books were shelved, and how the books were priced enabled booksellers to spur conversation and action around specific topics important to them and their politics. This became especially important as feminist thought turned toward empowering the voices of marginalized women and women of color through printing and promoting their work. Here, as one bookseller argued, the feminist bookstores provided “the necessary ballast for feminist action” in willing their ideas into reality (p.122). Yet, as feminist bookstores grew in popularity, the idea of the feminist shelf made its way into the chain bookstores of the 1980s and 1990s. Ultimately, this feminist organizing tool was co-opted by profit-driven stores with a marginal commitment to social justice, undermining the work of feminist bookstores.

As a library studies scholar, much of Hogan’s analysis delves into the minutiae of the circulation of shared knowledge among feminist booksellers; geographers would take heed to

pursue similar methods about the production of space through various media and text. Her analysis in Chapter 5 (a personal favorite) shows how the political economy of the publishing industry exerted significant pressure on the running of the bookstores themselves. The emergence of chain bookstores just a few years after the establishment of the feminist bookstore movement taxed all independent booksellers. By the early 1990s, publishers began to illegally undercut independent booksellers by offering the chains better prices; combined with the consolidation of the publishing industry at the same time, these bookstores saw the writing on the wall. In the struggle for survival, feminist bookstores led the struggle against the chain stores and publishers to the detriment of their antiracist efforts. These actions, although well founded, could not compete with the emerging political economy of chain bookstores that emphasized order, suburban locations, and economies of scale. While much of Hogan's writing about the period after the mid-1990s focuses on her own experiences in these bookstores, it is clear that by this time much of the feminist bookstore movement was addled by the prospect of going out of business. At the same time, chain bookstores and mainstream publishers realized the appeal of major feminist writers, promoting select individuals into the mainstream consciousness, but critically driving business away from feminist bookstores.

Combined with a changing publishing environment, most feminist bookstores met their demise in the late 1990s and early 2000s – never without a struggle, however. In a particularly poignant section of the text, Hogan details the challenge that Amazon, a feminist bookstore based in Minnesota, faced when Amazon.com sued them for having the same name in the mid-1990s. Tying the bookstore up in court, Jeff Bezos' lawyers worked to undermine the work of the feminist bookstore, categorizing it as just another bookseller and not a place for community development and social justice-driven work. In the end, Amazon settled with Amazon.com, paving the way for the warped publishing and bookstore environment of today. At their height in

the 1980s, there were more than 130 feminist bookstores across North America. Today, only 12 remain.

In short, Hogan's work is an important contribution to the historicization of the larger feminist movement. Her questioning of how knowledge was constructed, circulated, and implemented is a significant contribution to how feminist thought developed and thrived from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. Coming from dissertation research, this book is appropriate for scholars working in gender and women's studies, English literature, and library studies. Theoretically speaking, Hogan's work employs queer theory in a "minor", yet pragmatically situated way; in the vein of Cindi Katz (1995) it animates what was previously only a partially documented history of the feminist bookstore movement. One might consider pairing this book with Cait McKinney's (2018) recent work on the role of the queer bibliography which addresses similar topics around the circulation of knowledge. For geographers, Hogan's work serves as an important text from which to base future studies on the geography of knowledge production and the development of queer emancipatory space.

References

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