

Engagement or Retreat On Women's Publishing and Making a Public

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates two publishing strategies employed by feminist publishing ventures and the publics they form. With the growing success of women in publishing, their work moves from being published primarily in feminist presses to being found in all possible formats of publishing. Nevertheless, said feminist presses and publishing outlets have always been and still are highly productive and relevant spaces for the feminist cause and movement. They offer options of intervention with or retreat from the market and a broader public and can create their own smaller (counter) public or enclave.

KEYWORDS: women's writing; publishing strategies; feminist presses; counterpublic; enclave; independent publishing; digital literary magazines

Introduction

In the US of the 1970s, women's print publishing was still a small, mainly activist undertaking. In the twenty-first century, it has developed a rich history and a large body of works. Women who write and are published are now as strong in numbers as their male counterparts, and this is in many ways the work of feminist publishing ventures and their upswing in the 1970s and 80s. Their work provided not only a space and entry point into the world of formalized trade publishing for many authors but also had a long-lasting impact on the larger publishing scene. Women suddenly had a place in publishing, though still small, and controlled their own interests in the presses they found and founded. Often driven by a general discontent with the larger houses and their disregard for women's writing, the women behind, for example, Kitchen Table Press, Daughters Inc., or Seal Press based their work and working principles on ideals of equality, community, and, at times, political activism. From their incentive to further the presence of women's writing in print, came forward cornerstones of intersectional feminist theory and fiction (e.g., Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* [1981, Persephone Press], or Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* [1973, Daughters Inc.]). This work furthered the larger vision of feminist activists, writers, and publishers of having a 'press of one's own' to publish anything from political writing, to poetry, to niche genre fiction for a large and general or a specific and small audience.

While many of the presses from the 1970s and 80s shut down within a few years, primarily due to financial pressures, the impact they had is still felt today. Women publish more than ever. Looking at numbers from the first half of the twentieth century up until 2020, Joel Waldfogel highlights how within "half a century, women went from producing one book for

every three produced by men to output parity” (1). They have found a multitude of outlets and channels to produce, publish, and distribute their writing. Reaching from the traditional Big Five publishers to (digital) self- and hybrid-publishing, all the way to small, specialized presses, women’s writing is growing to be more and more firmly established.¹ Yet, this strength in numbers comes with a catch. Despite this rapid development within less than a century, the devaluing and disregard for women’s writing persist. However, this continuation is becoming less visible and thus harder to prove, since it cannot be captured by numerical means, as the formerly low percentages of published women could. It turns the previously quantitatively visible disparage into a more nuanced problem of the gendered perception of value, where “[n]umbers tell part of a story but rarely all of it” (Hustvedt, “No Competition” 80). Nevertheless, the difference in value perception remains. Siri Hustvedt describes a repeated interaction at her readings as follows: “In my experience, the line that follows ‘I don’t read fiction but my wife does’ is: ‘Would you sign the book for her?’ In other words, a novel can taste bad before it is eaten simply because it has been written by a woman” (“One Story” 393). Hustvedt points towards a gendered perception of value and authorship and the assumption that “this novel is going to be about things of interest to women only” (Goodings 243). This anecdotal way of laying open bias can be paired with what Kwan Woo Kim & Phillipa K. Chong found in their study on the phenomenon of female writers receiving less attention from critics. By considering data on the gender of authors, genre and gender, as well as publishers, publishing formats, and reviews, they were able to identify what they describe as the *women’s fiction penalty* and the *woman writer’s penalty*, which they define as follows:

[T]he *women’s fiction penalty* is a form of *gendered genre-based exclusion*: it refers to the penalty paid by women’s fiction, as a feminized subgenre of fiction, because it is deemed too low-status to merit critical attention. The *woman writer’s penalty*, meanwhile, is a form of *gendered artist-based exclusion*: it refers to the penalty paid by women who write in frequently reviewed genres, but whose specific books are less likely to be reviewed because they are women. (3)

Taking these insights from numbers and anecdotes together proves women’s writing in the first two decades of the twenty-first century to be in a complex situation. Female writers have reached output parity and are thus present on the market in high numbers. This dominance in number prompts the question of whether, and if so why, women still need or want their own presses.

I approach this question by following Hustvedt, and Kim and Chong’s indicator of experiences of devaluing and dismissal as occurring less within the contexts of publishing opportunities and more within those of readership, review, and judgment of their work. Following these indicators can lead, on the one hand, to an in-depth exploration of the consistency of

¹ The Big Five of publishing in the Anglo-American sphere are Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Hachette, Simon & Schuster, and Macmillan.

gendered value ascription and, on the other, to turning towards the working mechanisms of the feminist presses themselves. Looking at their practices makes visible what renders them favorable spaces in which writers can work and publish, as well as the different kinds of publics they form. This latter approach will be taken in this paper. Specifically, I present and discuss two strategies that can be employed when engaging with the larger trade publishing market:² engagement or retreat. To illustrate these two strategies, *Linen Press* (engagement) and *Tangled Locks Journal* (retreat) will serve as case studies. These two case studies help to see that the approaches taken in publishing manifest in the creation and shaping of specific publics. More precisely, as I argue throughout this paper, this means that strategies of engagement can produce constellations of authors, publishers, and readers that can be seen as counterpublics, whereas retreat offers a way to create an enclave, a space that actively offers withdrawal from the large market and discourse of trade publishing. Looking at engagement and retreat then allows for a look at the ways in which women (as writers, readers, and publishers) face the devaluation of and gendered bias towards their work. More specifically, the case studies I present below illustrate those two productive ways of intersecting with or circumnavigating conglomerates and commercial publishing structures.

Of course, the entirety of trade publishing includes more than authors, publishers, and readers and offers a multitude of entry points, such as questions of materiality, work force, or questions of upkeep of online formats, that can shed light on other dimensions of the field, for example, the history and demographics of women in publishing who are not writers or editors.³ For this paper, however, the focus will remain on authors, publishers, and their readership. The reason for this focus is twofold and rather pragmatic: for one, the presses used as case studies grow out of a dissatisfaction and desire for a different mode of work for writers or publishers, and they are usually founded and run by those same individuals. They and their readership can stand as indicators of what traditional publishing fails to offer and whom it leaves behind. Second, most of the publishing undertakings that emerge in that way remain rather small, with slower publishing processes and lower numbers of publications (around 1–5 publications per year), thus leaving writers and publishers front and center.

Publishing as Making (a) Public:

Publishing a text, at the very base of the act, brings it into the world more broadly. It hands it over to a larger public, makes it readable, accessible and assessable, available to be picked up, reviewed, and critiqued. Depending on the scale of the publication, its marketing, the breadth of its circulation, the size of the public that can and does come in contact with the text surely varies. With the undeniable power and relevance the internet holds for publishing and its

² When I speak about the trade publishing market here, academic publishing is excluded. For a larger assessment of Anglo-American trade publishing in the twenty-first century, see Thompson.

³ For insight into the history of the labor movement “Women in Print,” see Travis.

formats, it is important to think through the difference between publishing in print and online. This includes not only e-books as digital versions of the print publication, but also primarily digital formats such as more open and pliant ways of digital, self-edited writing and social media posts (e.g., fanfiction or Instagram poetry), as well as digital literary journals and more formalized (hybrid) digital publishing.⁴ Paul Soulellis identifies a difference between the acts of posting and publishing, arguing that “publishing is making ‘a public’ by creating a space for the circulation of discourse” (qtd. in Kiesewetter). This emphasis on the creation of a public opens a perspective, in which publishing can be discussed as actively public-shaping. In addition, the creation of a space for the circulation of discourse is what makes publishing an act that inevitably engages with the public it creates.

When turning to the question of women’s writing, its circulation, and the discourse around it, publishing becomes an especially powerful lens to look through. As understood by feminist presses in the 1970s, in a world where women’s writing is neither published or read widely, nor fully respected, creating spaces and presses for said writing, its authors, and readers holds a powerful liberating potential. Under the “early slogan of the women in print movement [...] ‘freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press’” (Smith 11), the women behind presses like Aunt Lute, Persephone Press, or Daughters Inc. seized said potential. By their work and activism, they made women’s writing public as well as a public around women’s writing. With them, books came into print and circulation, which otherwise never would have been published. Marginalized authors could publish and disseminate their ideas, and readers could engage with ideas to which they did not have access before. Their work proved that there was a welcoming public for texts that mainstream publishers would have cast aside; that there was a market for these texts; that there was a need for these texts. One example for this success is Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), which “became an underground phenomenon and sold 70,000 copies after it was published in 1973 by a small Manhattan women’s collective, Daughters Inc. [founded by June Arnold and Parke Bowman]” (Klemsrud). While “[n]o major publisher would touch it at the time” (Klemsrud), its success led to it being published as mass paperback by Bantam Books in 1977. Today *Rubyfruit Jungle* stands as a landmark for lesbian fiction. In her *Passionate Politics: Feminist Politics in Action* (1987), Charlotte Bunch summarizes the ideals and success of earlier feminist publishing, stating that “feminist media exists not only because the boys won’t always publish us. In fact, today they

⁴ Where digital self-publishing can reach from forum-based formats, such as fan-fiction writing, to the larger process of writing, (copy) editing, printing, and disseminating or circulating, the last years have seen a surge of digital publishers or hybrid formats that offer a more professionalized, though often costly, way for writers to get their work into print (or no print) without large publishing conglomerates. An example of such publishers that are specifically aimed at women and their writing is She Writes Press, which sets itself apart from self-publishing by being “a curated press that works with authors to ensure that their books will be well-received in the marketplace” and from traditional publishing by “giv[ing] authors an experienced editorial and production team, while allowing them to retain full ownership of their project and earnings” (“About” *She Writes Press*). Jane Friedman has created “The Key Book Publishing Paths: 2025–2026,” a yearly-updated chart that concisely shows the different ways publishing paths work. For further insight into the cornerstones of hybrid publishing, refer to this overview by Friedman.

will print us more because we have proven our market, and that is something valuable, which we can use to our benefit” (220). From their work remained not only a change in the landscape of publishing at large, with presses like Virago Press, Feminist Press, or Persephone Books⁵ still standing, but also a continuous strand of presses, authors, and readerships that follows in their footsteps. It is these twenty-first century descendants of the presses from the 1970s and 80s that I want to turn to now, to see how they work in a publishing world where women’s writing is no longer a rarity but is still, especially if it is widely successful, continuously and systemically devalued, or pushed into genre-niches.⁶

With this double-edged reality of women’s position in publishing, it comes as no surprise that feminist publishing undertakings are still active, growing, and branching into several formats. The presses from the late twentieth century have created a market, a framework for work, organization, and a blueprint of what is possible in feminist publishing. They have also created a public that looks to and for these presses. They have created the space for discourse that Soulellis highlights with regard to publishing. Turning to my two case studies, I will first look at the strategies they employ and then the publics they constitute to show how one shapes the other.

Publishing Strategies

When thinking together presses and their publics, it proves insightful to consider the strategies that they employ or how they structure themselves. Looking at these strategies makes visible how the publishing undertakings and their strategies shape the public that they relate to. When I write about what I call *engagement* and/or *retreat*, which are not the only strategies that can be employed but the ones which are at the center of this paper, I present them as somewhat countering each other. While this holds true for the case studies at hand, it must be noted that they are less two options in a binary system and more to be seen as located on a spectrum, a scale, of relating to and engaging with the market. As is often the case with scalar or spectral forms, they tend to be interconnected, overlapping in some respects, and featuring soft margins in others. Accordingly, for this paper, engagement by way of interacting with trade publishing can be seen as the one end of the spectrum, whereas retreat by way of moving away from trade publishing as the other. In between them, as the case study on Linen Press will show, lies a vast number of options of strategies, positionings, and intentions that make up feminist publishing.

⁵ Where many of the presses had to close a few years after their founding, mainly due to their lack of funds, these three examples stand for a handful of the presses that have survived and generated profit. While Persephone and the Feminist Press (at CUNY) have not been incorporated by publishing conglomerates, Virago Press, often named as one of the most successful examples of feminist presses, became an imprint of Little, Brown, which now belongs to Hachette. For further insight into the founding of Virago, see Goodings and Riley.

⁶ For a contemporary assessment of the romance genre and its perception, see Cameron.

Engagement:*Shaping the market one print at a time*

Considering the spectrum of strategies in relation to the market and more traditional structures of trade publishing, engagement makes publishers more closely connected to and, today in many ways, woven into these structures than the strategy of retreat. Features of more traditional publishing structures include a more clearly defined hierarchy between publisher, editors, and authors: a broader dissemination of books, a tendency to purchase larger shares of book rights, and the general ability to offer advance payments. Especially the two latter features differ for independent feminist presses, where the distribution of rights and the financial means to offer advances can vary greatly depending on the policy and size of the publisher. I understand engagement as a strategy and mode of interaction with the market and the broader publishing scene that actively *wants* to be part of it and shape it with its own work. Engagement works towards intercepting, even interrupting, the market. Rebekka Kiesewetter argues that publishing “can be a method to establish agencies beyond officially acclaimed public spheres.” These officially acclaimed spheres include, for example, large publishing conglomerates and with them what is somewhat vaguely understood and referenced as ‘the mainstream market.’ Many of the feminist or women-centered publishing ventures that seek engagement in the way I define it above are driven by the assumption that there is a lack of serious consideration of women’s publications and the conviction that the market needs an addition to what it offers. Moreover, they act on a desire to have a space designed and designated for women and their writing that is not disconnected from already established spaces of literary production, circulation, and consumption. Their objectives are thus clearly tied to the ideals of feminist publishers from the late twentieth century. Many of the mission statements of women-focused or feminist presses, such as the ones I will discuss as case studies below, mention the desire for a press that is focused primarily on women and their work and having the power to decide on how the press operates, thus echoing the idea of ‘freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press.’ What has changed in some ways, however, is the way the presses engage with the market and business of trade publishing. Where feminist publishing in the 1970s and 80s was primarily, though not exclusively, an activist undertaking that rarely paid women’s bills, presses quickly started to professionalize their work.

The financial situation has always been a difficult one for these undertakings, since they face financial hurdles that all independent publishers face in the age of conglomerates. John B. Thompson describes the landscape of trade publishing as having “transformed profoundly” (101) since the 1960s due to the emergence of large publishing corporations. As “[d]evelopments have shown little sign of slowing since, it is clear that mergers such as that between Penguin and Random House in 2013, which created the world’s largest trade publisher, have concentrated a great deal of global business in a few hands” (Steiner 119). Despite the market conditions, many of the women working in feminist presses today stand

with independent publishing as a way of making a livelihood, pushing for women's authorship, editing, and publishing as full profession. That this is possible is partially due to the changing demographic in the field at large.⁷ Women and their presses are nothing new to the field anymore; their positioning, however, still stands as singular and needed.

One example of a press that helps to concretize engagement and its entailed public is Linen Press. Linen Press was founded in 2005 by Lynn Michell and is a press that focuses on the publication of women's writing primarily in (literary) fiction, and occasionally non-fiction. Their homepage reads: "[o]ur policy is to encourage and promote women writers and to give voice to a wide range of perspectives and themes that are relevant to women. We display and rejoice in the differences in female creative voices" ("Home"). Additionally, as many feminist presses do, Linen Press has formulated a mission statement:

At a time when female autonomy and rights are under threat, our books are important for the recognition and empowerment of the female experience. We rejoice in the strength and originality of female and non-binary creative voices and champion those who are underrepresented and marginalised. The collective background of our writers is a patchwork of cultures, countries, ages and writing styles as we share stories that speak to women across barriers and boundaries. ("About")

Their mission statement clearly positions them ideologically and politically within the feminist movement at large, and emphasizes the structuring principles of community, collectivity, and intersectionality in their feminism. While their website also gives insight into their development since 2005 and the ideal they set for their editing processes, I want to turn to their publications and where or how they are sold to show how distribution and availability connect to the public they constitute and for whom they are accessible.

Their website features a bookshop that allows purchases from the UK, US, EU, and the option to inquire about other shipping options. Additionally, some of their books can be bought through Amazon. While on a very simple level their sales options can be seen as a result of the fact that they want to sell the books they publish and ideally do so successfully, it is the option to sell on Amazon that turns their sales into an ambivalent and interesting site for investigation. As a sales option and strategy, selling through Amazon is very much in line with the strategies of publishing conglomerates and larger publishing ventures. At first, it seems that by using this platform for the dissemination of their publications, they merely spread their publications more widely, placing the writing in the reach of customers that might have otherwise never come across them. However, while this certainly holds true, the process as a whole comes with an economic disadvantage. Michell herself describes the financial loss that comes with sales over Amazon, saying that she "avoid[s] looking into the abyss of financial disaster. [She is] trying to remain upbeat" in hopes for one of their titles to break through, to

⁷ For a more extensive report on the demographic of US publishing at large, see Jiménez et al. "The Lee & Low Baseline Survey 3.0."

be picked up more widely. The financial loss referred to here is, as Michell explains, caused mainly by Amazon's policy of taking 60% of the recommended retail price (RRP), which, when combined with postage, makes her unable to cover the production costs of the books that are factored into the RRP. Selling through large sellers and a press-run webshop thus results in a potentially maximized reach, which could prove greater financial security for the press, though it carries a high financial risk.

Looking at the digital sales presence on their website as well as through an external seller from the perspective of publics, allows to see two things: first, the additional public that their books might make their way into when sold through widely frequented channels of mainstream publishing. This way of engaging with a larger public can then be seen in connection to Kieseewetter's idea of establishing agencies mentioned above. Kieseewetter's idea of agencies outside of established channels lies here in the grounding of the press in a work (their founding principles) and form of reselling (their own webshop) that is not anchored in mainstream market channels but can expand into them. Another aspect to consider is the more immediately intended public that is created through the press and its positioning. This public, though as diffuse as any, exists besides the idea to get women's writing into circulation and sell it well, and is anchored in the ideological base of the way presses like Linen Press work and set themselves up. To grasp this public more precisely, the concept of the counterpublic can be useful.

Drawing from Michael Warner,

[t]he cultural horizon against which [the counterpublic] marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public, or to the hierarchy among media. (424)

The dominant public from the perspective of feminist presses, is one that is connected and accessible through the mainstream market of trade publishing. Said market, through which mainly publications of the Big Five publishers circulate, reaches the widest audience and therefore contributes to the creation of the dominant public. This does not mean that the mainstream market *is* the dominant public but that they are deeply connected. An independent press,⁸ like Linen Press, is not a counterpublic in itself but is part of a counterpublic and contributes to the creation of it. Writers', publishers', and readers' decisions of working, reading, and writing with an independent, women-centered press are active decisions for an environment that is not economically driven by the desire to be wholly incorporated into the mainstream publishing market. Through this awareness of the different spheres, feminist presses can be understood as publics in their own right. It is specifically their desire for a *different* environment and their dissatisfaction with traditional channels that

⁸ When I write about independent presses, I refer to presses that are not imprints of or connected to larger publishing conglomerates.

makes them counterpublics. Their engagement with the larger market, for example through selling with established retailers, can be seen as a practice of the activism, dissent, and belief of self-efficiency that lies at the very heart of their existence. They place works that come into being with a focus on the women behind them in a market that is usually fed by the structures they are dissatisfied with and that might not have published the work in the same way they did. Selling their work through well-established channels of dissemination places it in reach of a public that might not have found access to the work before.

Going further with the example of Linen Press, Warner's aspects of policy are readily identifiable in their work and setup. The policy for Linen Press is to center women, to further their access to publishing, as well as to enhance their visibility. Just as their mission statement and its transparency about their aim and positioning, the way the press describes who they look for in submissions clearly pursues the centering of women and their lives:

Linen Press is looking for beautifully written manuscripts which are relevant to women's lives and which surprise us with their style and content. We welcome submissions from established and emergent writers, writers from minority groups, and those who write in English as a second language. We publish literary fiction, top end contemporary fiction, memoir, biography, short stories and poetry. Non-fiction that is relevant to women's lives and experiences will also be considered. We are building a list of international authors. ("Submit" *Linen Press*)

This call for submissions, paired with the mission statement and the carefully chosen name—which hints at the feminized space of domestic labor—indicates the kind of public they form. From their authors, to their staff, all the way to their readership, women are front and center. At the same time, as they do this with and for women, they also publish the way they do in order to change the publishing scene by bringing books relevant to the people behind Linen Press into distribution. They further interject with the larger public, fulfilling Warner's proposition for counterpublics to set themselves off against a dominant backdrop. Of course, with women now publishing widely with commercial publishing houses, the question of what exactly sets them apart from the large conglomerates must be answered. I argue that it is not merely the fact that the feminist press' authors and publishers are women that sets them apart, but that their distinctiveness lies in their focus on working strategies that acknowledge the still-existing bias towards women's writing. Additionally, they are part of established and lasting structures that secure the work of earlier feminist and women-centered presses, who laid the foundation for the rise of women in writing and publishing. Charlotte Bunch describes that feminist presses were and are

not just a stopgap for women who cannot publish elsewhere. Supporting [feminist media] is not so much the question of individual choices about where to publish when, but of support for one of our movement's vital institutions. Feminist publishing is a critical part of our future—it is an institution and a wellspring of our words, thoughts, and action. As a people, it is our looking back and going forward in the written word. (221)

The presses thus become an institutionalized, firmly established part of the feminist movement's dissent with dominant structures, as well as their own alternative to them. With this active confrontation of and interaction with the dominant structures as one possible strategy, I want to turn to the second strategy and its case study, which lies rather on the opposite end of the spectrum of market connection.

Retreat:

Sheltered in plain sight

Having discussed publishing that inhabits traditional and well-established structures but does so on its own terms, a look at those formats that cast aside these structures allows turning towards what I call *retreat* as a strategy. Just as the presses that engage with the market, publishing ventures that turn away from it are aware of the larger publishing structures and name them as their foil. Choosing retreat means choosing to intentionally move as far away from literary markets and circulation practices as possible. It means, to move away from marketing and larger monetization and professionalization. While this cuts out many of the aspects that publishing offers, such as marketing, advance payments, or sales in general, it can also allow moving more emphatically towards discursive aspects of the publics formed by the publishing ventures that I want to look at. Retreat can be a purposeful turn towards the authors, readers, and their community, without the pressures of market demands, questions of merit and profit, and thus allows for more flexibility in setup, structuring, and public positioning. While retreat as a term can carry connotations of defeat and a sense of giving something up, this is not the way I intend the term to be used or understood. It is an active decision of a tactical retreat from certain spaces and dynamics to protect writers and their work. The publishing ventures that employ the strategy of retreat regularly feature writers that are part of other, potentially larger and more traditional publishing structures but place some of their writing in more sheltered spaces, where it can be considered and received by a different public and thus be treated differently. The example I want to bring forward here is a fully digital format, more precisely, a digital literary magazine. I look specifically towards digital spaces that are set up and used for consolidated publishing undertakings. I understand consolidated undertakings as processes that involve the collecting, editing, and then publishing of a set collection of texts in form of, for example, (themed) issues. This form stands in contrast to structures that allow for posting one's writing individually. The consolidated format of issues and themes makes digital literary magazines more graspable in their form and the entailed making of a specific and intentional public. This type of digital publications lend themselves especially well to undertakings that use retreat as one of their publishing strategies, as they are less dependent on financial stability, physical copies, or physical spaces for organization than, for example, print-focused or salaried structures are. The magazine serving as an example here is *Tangled Locks Journal*.

Tangled Locks Journal was founded in 2021 by Teresa Berkowitz with the aim to have a space that houses writing by women and stories that do not want to place their female characters

at the margins or show them as passive figures. It has rolling submissions and offers a small compensation to its writers (“Submit” *Tangled Locks*). Berkowitz opens the “About” section on *Tangled Locks*’ website with the following story:

After a glorious day, a young child runs into the kitchen with her brother. They excitedly talk of grand battles and a forest so thick and dark that they thought they would never make it home for dinner. The parents listen with love. Such adventures. But the mom gently reminds the daughter that her hair is tangled and her face is dirty. The child goes upstairs to fix her hair and wash her face before dinner. In her brother’s retelling, she becomes the princess he rescued, not the warrior goddess who battled the giant snakes into submission. Her parents compliment her on her beautiful hair. She sits down to dinner. She is no longer a main character.

This story represents the gap Berkowitz sees in literature when it comes to the way women, or girls, are depicted and how she is looking for a space where the stories are different. Berkowitz then founded the journal to have a space where women and female characters do not fall prey to the dynamic of being “plot devices designed to move the male protagonists along on their journeys” (“About” *Tangled Locks*). The magazine is run primarily by Berkowitz and financially relies on donations and small fees (US \$4) for submissions. Their publishing is digital only and open access, thus not monetized or tied to the publishing market. Whether it is the quarterly full issues, individual essays, or the MoonBites, a format that centers one author, all writing is freely accessible, readable, and shareable through *Tangled Locks*’ website. *Tangled Locks*’ focus, as many of these magazines’ focuses,⁹ is not to get their writing into a wider market-regulated circulation, but to have it published and read within the smaller framework of their website. This retreat lies not in a general retreat from accessibility for a larger public, but in a retreat from dynamics of being edited, judged, and reviewed in the way that most print publications are. This, however, does not mean that they are not present on other platforms. *Tangled Locks* is active on a multitude of social media platforms as a way to express their being “[c]ommitted to building a vibrant community of writers and literature enthusiasts...[and] welcom[ing] connections on these platforms [as well as] [...] actively exploring new options to further support and promote writers and the written word” (“Submit” *Tangled Locks*). They push the aspects of creativity and community of their work rather than those of (financial) success and prestige. Accordingly, they do not retreat entirely from accessible spaces but position themselves towards an intended audience of writers and readers.

⁹ A second example for this can be *Hags on Fire*. Founded and run by author Laraine Herring between 2020 and 2024, the journal published women’s work focused on peri-menopausal topics and writing related to aging, appearing twice a year at summer and winter solstices. *Hags on Fire*, too, was entirely free to access and was especially focused on the writers/readers community, offering them a space for their work to be published and read. Unfortunately, the magazine had to be closed by Herring in 2024.

When turning towards the publics of *Tangled Locks* and similar formats, it becomes visible that the strategy of retreat, different from that of engagement, shapes not a counterpublic but something that can be understood as an enclave. An enclave is a concept that I borrow from Catherine Knight-Steele's work in *Digital Black Feminism* (2017), who primarily uses it in the context of Black beauty blogs. Knight-Steele explains that "unlike counterpublics that seek engagement with the dominant group, enclaves hide counterhegemonic ideas from the dominant group for protection and survival" (49). Hiding ideas here is less an act of actively restricting access to something and more one of positioning the content and work towards an audience that will look for it and understand it, thus making it somewhat invisible to other readers, to whom it might seem irrelevant or uninteresting. The format of blogs or literary journals illustrates this way of hiding in plain sight nicely, as they are publicly available on the internet, but chances of finding them without actively looking for them—thus being the intended audience—are rather small. Applying the enclave to my case study of *Tangled Locks* means looking at it as a space that, though openly accessible, is frequented mainly by a public that is either aware of it, involved in it, or intentionally seeks it out. With the enclave's capacity to hide ideas and work in plain sight, I specifically want to focus on the practicalities of protection and survival that Knight-Steele names.

Protection, in the context of women's publishing, can on the one hand be seen as the protection from hostile voices and/or perceptions of their work in a broader public. So where the presses that seek engagement certainly are aware that publishing can be a potentially hostile environment for women and their writing and decide to access it on their own terms and in their own ways, those that seek retreat take themselves as far away as possible from this environment. Protection here can also mean protecting the texts and their integrity that might fall under harsher scrutiny in editing processes, as well as a protection of rights and royalties of the text. One of the strongest arguments and advertisements for self-publishing or smaller publishers is the higher level of control over the text and what happens to it in the stages between writing, printing, and publishing, as argued in Jane Friedman's overview of publishing paths and implemented by She Writes Press (see footnote on page 4). Publications like *Tangled Locks* ensure the survival of the ideas and the texts themselves and preserve them. By giving them a space to be placed in, which can bring forth texts that otherwise might have never been published or read, the texts are moved from the authors' heads, word documents, or notebooks into a more formalized and retrievable format. In a way, the enclave thus also offers a sort of archiving capacity for the writing placed in it. With some of the formats on *Tangled Locks* also featuring a comment section, they can not only archive the writing but also parts of the discourses around it. If these websites are kept alive, they can, just as the printed works do, be part of a textual genealogy that comes into being when there are spaces for women's work to be written, read, and circulated as valuable material. They constitute a part of what Melanie Micir calls "a transhistorical feminist community of readers and writers" (233). The enclave thus does not actively work against the market or seek to

interject it, but aims to offer a separate space that can exist despite and aside from the market, its structures and dynamics, or the access to it.

Different Presses and their Publics

As previously mentioned, both the enclave and the counterpublic in women's publishing are often structured along ideals of community, care, and a desire for a better, more equal publishing space for women and their work. Rebekka Kiesewetter describes how,

within destituent¹⁰ publishing undertakings [*sic*], those individuals or groups whose voices would otherwise be suppressed and marginalized by the existing social order, can find a shared thinking-frame, a mutual base for action, and a common voice. They may imagine, devise and performatively anticipate alternative publics and public spaces and partially also realize them.

Destituent publishing undertakings, in Kiesewetter's use of the term, allow for a connection between her understanding of the counterpublic and the enclave. Thinking of counterpublics and enclaves as ways to provide spaces in which "shared thinking-frames, a mutual base for action, and a common voice" (Kiesewetter) can come into existence once more underlines how the strategies of engagement and retreat can offer ways of creating productive publics that, though working differently, grow from the same desire for having a distinct and determined space for their work. They form the two ends of a scale, yet both arise from a similar impulse, a similar complaint. It is the envisioning and then the realization that Kiesewetter mentions that brings together the strategies and their publics. When looking at the strategies of engagement or retreat, it thus becomes clear that they make publics in their own rights, publics that manifest in their own ways.

Aside from the examples above, there are, of course, further forms of publishing and circulating literature that differ in setup and work from traditional trade publishing overall. One example for such a space would be self-publishing, and for an example of a less mediated format, fanfiction writing. Self-publishing in its varying forms employs different modes of relating to the market and thus also creates other publics, which allows me to, once more, emphasize the scalar character of publishing strategies. Looking at strategies as a scale holds potential not only for further investigation of the two strategies I wrote about, but also for an exploration of how they mix, overlap, or blend, especially in digital formats. The examples chosen here are all chosen for their nature as rather consolidated publishing undertakings that work in a combined effort with writers and publishers. This aligns with a general professionalization of feminist publishing, which was immediately critically discussed within

¹⁰ Kiesewetter explains that she sees "publishing as a 'destituent' way of thinking and acting. A destituent approach, according to Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben is a reflection and activity in opposition to the constituent power of the dominant narrative, an 'action that enables us to probe the possibilities of forms-of-life outside the governmental apparatuses and *dispositifs*.'"



the community as it began. In a 1990 interview with *Off Our Backs*, Barbara Wilson, writer and founder of Seal Press, was asked, “Do you think the professionalization of feminist publishing has a downside to it?” to which she answered:

No, I think it’s necessary. Publishing is a business, a highly political, cultural, visionary business, but a business nonetheless. Twenty years ago it was enough just to get pamphlets and poetry chapbooks printed and sold in women’s bars and coffeehouses, but today, in order to be economically viable you have to interact with general bookstores, chain book-stores, wholesalers, distributors and libraries. Even though we’ve built our alternative structures and the feminist bookstores continue to be our most loyal and highly valued market, we still need and want to sell to other sources. (qtd. in Thomas 10)

Wilson’s emphasis on a strengthened and stable structure of feminist publishing (and engagement as a strategy) can be read in connection with Charlotte Bunch’s call for sustaining feminist media as a necessity, no matter how widely successful women and their (feminist) texts grow within the general field of publishing:

But even if they [the conglomerates] print feminists, we must also keep our own media alive, growing, and expanding, for it is part of women’s power base made up of political, economic, and cultural institutions of our own. Having a feminist press is also important to controlling our words and making sure they are disseminated even when not popular. Perhaps most important, we need to keep feminist publishing alive as a method of creating new words /new works. (220)

While both of these assessments are from the late 1980s and 90s, their arguments still hold. Finding, employing, and sustaining different strategies in publishing then is a way to not only shape publishing and its publics to fit the needs of the authors, publishers, and readers in it, it also becomes a way for women to uphold their place in publishing and further being self-sufficient and working independently. In their significance for the movement and for (feminist) publishing at large, contemporary feminist publishing ventures and their publics exemplify how nurturing feminist practices contribute to the movement’s continuity and its resilience and capacity to endure.

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