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2016-The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Spinifex Press

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PRESS REVIEW: 2016–THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF SPINIFEX PRESS

Kathleen Barry

Professor Emerita, Pennsylvania State University

KEYWORDS

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SPINIFEX AUTOBIOGRAPHIES span the globe, sexual orientation, culture and race from the often mind-boggling daring of Mary Daly's *Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Journey* to the incomparable courage of Nawal El Saadawi's life story, *A Daughter of Isis*. Radical feminism emerges in the lives of women who make it. And it constitutes a history in which Spinifex grew to take feminist publishing into the 21st century.

Summer 1967. After our first Women's Liberation consciousness-raising group, with a thirst for more, I went to my favorite bookstore, only to find that there were just two books on the shelves that addressed the subordination of women: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. It suddenly dawned on me that, unlike every other oppressed group of people, women did not even have their own literature. In fact, we did not have our own culture, or our own geography, neighborhood, colony or state. Rather than being segregated from the oppressor as black people had been, most women individually lived with one.

Women's Liberation was about to change all of that patriarchal burden, which deceptively told us that we were nothing/nobody. Around the world, radical feminists began taking action on women's personal issues by making them political, and we were creating our own culture, our own intellectual world, our own art and film, our own spirituality, resurrecting our history and digging deep into our pre-history. Feminist writers, from poets to political analysts, from historians to archeologists and art historians, were in the publishing pipeline. Central to our uncompromising radical feminist politics we became creators of our own culture.

Just as quickly, we started to become independent of the male-dominated publishing industry. The year 1975 gave rise to feminist publishing around the world: Frauenoffensive began publishing in Germany, Tartarugua Edizione issued its first books in Italy. Preceding these publishers was the Feminist Press in the US, which began publishing in 1970. By 1978, the number of feminist presses around the world, filled a 300-page book, according to feminist poet and publisher, Susan Hawthorne (Hawthorne, 2016). "The Guide to Women's Publishing" had grown into a 300-page book. Going global, the feminist press, Kali for Women, became

the first feminist publisher in India in 1984 and by 2011 its publishers, Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon, received the Padma Shri award from the Government of India for their contribution to the nation.

Women's presses brought us our literature, which we found in newly opened women's bookstores. We could now thrive with feminist and specifically lesbian poetry, fiction and nonfiction. Radical feminism had forged its independence, and with the proliferation of Feminist Studies programs around the world women were learning their history, their culture and from that strength, shaping their politics.

In the 1980s in Australia, radical feminist Susan Hawthorne, lesbian poet, academic, aerialist and author of political non-fiction, was working her way into the publishing industry. By 1986, she was an editor at Penguin and turned to focus on women's writing with the Penguin Australian Women's Library. At the same time, radical feminist Renate Klein was the editor of the new feminist journal, *Women's Studies International Forum*, and a feminist studies professor at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. As a biologist, social scientist and feminist ethicist, she taught courses on reproductive medicine and feminist ethics. Klein and Hawthorne met in 1986 and became life-long partners the next year.

There is no doubt in my mind that we can trace the birth of Spinifex Press to its gestation at the beginning of Susan's and Renate's lesbian relationship and feminist friendship. Both were writers, and both were interested in feminist publishing, not only as a business but even more significantly as central to their feminist activism. Each is a passionate radical feminist in her own right. Susan brought her publishing experience, her works in lesbian poetry; Renate came into publishing from her scientific background and her experience being a non-fiction editor. As I see it, falling in love with each other was simultaneously a mutual act of Susan's and Renate's love for womankind whose liberation they continue to inspire, support and serve.

Susan and Renate launched the radical feminist Spinifex Press in 1991 with their first book, *Angels of Power*, an anthology on reproductive technologies, the first of 200 and more books they would publish in the first 25 years up to 2016 on feminist issues, poetry, fiction and nonfiction. Spinifex books are a testimony to and promotion of the fact that feminist culture creation ultimately went global and that women are making as well as writing history.

I asked Renate Klein about the name of the press, "A weed?"

"Spinifex, isn't it a weed?" She responded, "Spinifex: It is an important native desert grass that **holds the earth together**. It is **beautiful to look at** but **very prickly** when you touch it." How is that for a description of radical feminists and a radical feminist press? "And we wanted something Australian," she continued. While Spinifex Press is devoted to Australian feminist writers, its reach is as global and expansive as are both the conditions of women and creations of feminism. As it developed its publishing momentum, Spinifex led the way in Australia publishing when they introduced Internet technology and Ebooks.

From the publishers themselves, "Spinifex Press is an independent feminist press, publishing innovative and controversial fiction and nonfiction by Australian and international authors," a fact to which the 25-year Spinifex booklist testifies (Hawthorne & Klein, 1995). Diversity by sexual orientation, race, class, cultures and countries is fully present and pulsates through Spinifex's booklist.

In the same spirit as we found in the origins of radical feminism, Spinifex books are acts of feminist activism and for many of their readers are the source of their

feminist consciousness-raising. Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne recognize that their books “may help a heterosexual woman come to terms with falling in love with her best friend; it may inform her readers of the ecological mayhem happening in our backyard; it may open a reader's eyes to new experiments in poetry or fiction; it may increase readers’ knowledge of history or contemporary society; it may create a space for critical rethinking of abusive behaviors; or simply open a reader’s eyes to another way of existence.” (Hawthorne & Klein, 1995).

FLAVORS OF FEMINIST WRITING

Globalization

Radical feminism established that the domination of women by men does not vary significantly across classes, cultures, races or states. From the origins of male domination in women’s lives, feminist politics connects to their control of the economy and the planet. Spinifex publications such as *Seed Sovereignty, Food Security: Women in the Vanguard of the Fight Against GMOs and Corporate Agriculture* edited by Vandana Shiva to Susan Hawthorne’s *Wild Politics: Feminism, Globalization and Biodiversity* reveal the power of transnational corporations in controlling markets, jobs and women’s lives. Maria Mies’s *The Lace Makers of Narsapur* exposes the dispossession of women by economic globalization in one case study while *The Great Climate Robbery: How the Food System Drives Climate Change and What We Can Do About It*, by Grain (editor) reveals in different accounts how that exploitation works.

Sexual Exploitation

Spinifex titles include books by famous authors as well as newly emerging or forgotten feminist writers. A particular focus of the press mirrors the major issues of global radical feminism today on sexual exploitation. Among the many important books in this area is Gail Dines’s breakthrough book, *Pornland* and the powerful, award-winning anthology, *Big Porn Inc.: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornography Industry*, edited by Melinda Tankard Reist and Abigail Bray. Just these two works take us from one feminist’s study of porn to a wide range of authors who expose the hidden realities of the porn industry. Likewise, in Rachel Moran’s story of her journey through prostitution, *Paid For*, her lived experience of prostitution becomes iconic of the prostitution experiences of most women, many of which are found in *Prostitution Narratives: Stories of Survival in the Sex Trade*, editors Melinda Tankard Reist and Caroline Norma. This volume includes the stories of prostitution survivors from around the globe that refute the lies and debunk the myths spread by the sex industry.

THE OTHERS

Indigenous Women

Oppressed peoples, from Ireland when it fought back to break from British colonization to Black America when it was in the last stages of throwing off the bonds of slavery, often turn first to fiction to tell their stories, which could not otherwise be spoken or written, let alone published. Those works are essential to us being able to receive the unsaid. Spinifex author, Betty McLellan, writes on the *Unspeakeable: A Feminist Ethic of Speech*.

In every country that is home to living tribes of indigenous people, their decimation, barbarous re-education by dominating state powers are among the last stories to come alive. Travelling Australia in the mid-1980s, before Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne published *Australia for Women: Travel and Culture*, seeing the deplorable conditions of Aboriginal peoples, I searched every bookstore I could find for the stories that women of these tribes were telling. Nothing. Not by Aboriginal women or men. Probably there were some research articles, but I was looking for how women expressed their lives in their stories. Just a few short years later, Spinifex stepped into that silence and took their part in filling that void with books like *Trauma Trails, Recreating the Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australian Women* by Judy Atkinson and *Listen to Ngarrindjeri Women Speaking*, edited by Diane Bell and the women of the Ngarrindjeri nation. Their list also includes books by indigenous writers from Aotearoa/New Zealand and the US as well as Fethiye Cetin from Turkey.

Lesbians

There is another country, where male-dominated heterosexuality has enforced silence before the advent of radical feminism – that is the world of lesbians. Their writing is likewise the act of discovering our invisibilized history, our culture that for too many decades was known only to the lesbians inhabiting their world with each other. *Car Maintenance, Explosives and Love and Other Contemporary Lesbian Writings*, edited by Susan Hawthorne, Cathie Dunsford and Susan Sayer, brings to life the diversity of lesbian writing and variety within the lesbian culture. Up against that culture comes the backlash of the “sexual revolution,” which Sheila Jeffreys critiques in *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution*. The breadth of lesbian writing published by Spinifex includes such writers as Finola Moorhead and Gillian Hanscombe from Australia as well as the rarely heard voices of Suniti Namjoshi from India and Marou Izumo from Japan.

Feminist Publishing Decisions

How, you might ask, do Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne decide which books to publish from those they find or that are sent to them? First, they try to agree on every book. However, with over 200 books and counting, and as they are only human, that did not work with every book. Early on, they decided that if one of them wants to reject a book that the other wants and *feels passionately about*, they both will get behind the book and publish it as if they had jointly agreed. Their art of decision-making made me think of all of the non-hierarchical methods feminists have developed for working together and making decisions without resorting to power plays.

That experience was brought home to me when Renate and Susan worked with me while I was writing *Unmaking War, Remaking Men*. Their ongoing feedback as I progressed chapter by chapter through the manuscript buoyed my flagging spirits when I was in the midst of writing about the US war in Iraq. At times, they were tough. I look back now with gratefulness for the passages I deleted at their suggestion. Likewise, my business experience with them on contracts and terms was unlike anything I had experienced in my previous four books with traditional US publishers. A kind of “what is the best for everyone involved” ethic prevailed through all of our discussions.

Critique of Medicine and Science

For feminists, saving women's lives too often means protecting ourselves from the medical establishment and its brutalization of the female body, such as Evelyne Accad's experience in her award-winning, *The Wounded Breast: Intimate Journeys Through Cancer*. Janice Raymond exposes the use of *Women as Wombs: On Reproductive Technology*. In addition, of course, feminists grapple with menopause, extricating it from medical control through hormone replacement therapy (HRT), as found in Sandra Coney's *The Menopause Industry: A Guide to Medicine's Discovery of the Mid-Life Woman*. Not to be missed on this subject is Jennifer Kelly's *Zest for Life: Lesbian Experiences of Menopause*. As its title suggests, this book gives voice to lesbians whose experiences at mid-life are not constructed in the male presence, either industrial or personal, but instead offer a positive approach for all women.

The Art of Culture: Feminist Fiction and Poetry

At this point, you might think that Spinifex specializes in non-fiction. Not so. Susan Hawthorne's substantial and profound body of poetry resonates through the Spinifex collection. One reviewer said of *Cow*, her poetry collection imaging cow in different forms and entities, that she could be "reimagining the history of modern women." Her long poem, *Valence*, its own book, takes us breathlessly through violence and war. She glimpses the challenges to our planet in *Earth's Breath*. The poetry of Sandy Jeff's in *The Mad Poet's Tea Party* gives insight into both the suffering and flashes of humor of living with schizophrenia.

Spinifex's substantial list of fiction spans the globe and encompasses the varieties of stories of women's lives. Just to name a few, Lin Van Hek in *Ballad of Sidddy Church*, writes of a household of stories looking back over her grandmother's disappearance years before. In two different novels, *A Bit of Difference* and *Everything Good Will Come*, Sefi Atta tells the story of a Nigerian girl moving back home from London to face challenges that make her determined to chart her course. *The Floating Garden*, set in Sydney in 1926 is Emma Ashmere's historical fiction of a woman writer confronted with homelessness in the face of progress. In *Getting Your Man*, Melissa Chan is said to write in the tradition of Thelma and Louise.

Novels from authors around the world that expose exploitation and abuse are central to Spinifex's fiction collection. They include Palestinian feminist khulud khamis, who writes of the pain of living under Israeli occupation, confronting it, and all the while, insisting on her own life. Merlinda Bobis's recent, prize-winning *Locust Girl* imagines a future where climate change and border protection have taken hold.

On the occasion of their epic anniversary, Klein and Hawthorne have published the *SPINIFEX PRESS: Anniversary Catalogue, 1991 – 2016, 25 Years of Award Winning Feminist Publishing*. This catalogue certainly will be that major document discovered by feminist researchers of the 22nd and 23rd centuries, who will marvel at the scope and depth of radical feminism at the turn of and into the 21st century.

And there is more – Spinifex's forthcoming 2017 books include:

Robert Jensen, *The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men*, January

Helen Lobato, *Gardasil: Fast-Tracked and Fatal*, May

Renate Klein, *Surrogacy: A Human Rights Violation*, July/August

Merlinda Bobis, *Accidents of Composition*, August (poetry)

Susan Hawthorne, *Dark Matters: A novel*, August/September

Spinifex, in its first twenty-five years, brings to the world women's culture as well as women's daring, spunk and fight, which sometimes can only be told in fiction, other times through poetry, and our staple of political research and analysis. As I look to the future of feminism, connect with the new movement coming from today's radical feminists, I feel more confident than ever that we will never go back to the days when only two books on women's liberation can be found in a bookstore.

Contact information for Spinifex Press: <http://spinifexpress.com.au>

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Kathleen Barry, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, Pennsylvania State University, is a sociologist and radical feminist activist in global human rights against sexual exploitation. From her books *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979, 1983) and *The Prostitution of Sexuality: The Global Exploitation of Women* (1995), working with UNESCO Division of Women's Rights, she is building a global movement to introduce a new law, the Convention Against Sexual Exploitation, to the United Nations. She continues in her writing and activism to expose the masculinity of war, a work she began with her 2011 book, *Unmaking War, Remaking Men*. See www.kathleenbarry.net.

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