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A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press

Barbara Smith

If any one had asked in 1980 whether books by women of color could sell or whether a press that published only work by and about women of color could survive, the logical answer would have been “no,” especially if the person who answered the question was part of the commercial publishing establishment. Even less than a decade ago, writing by American Indian, African American, Latina, and Asian American women was barely noticed by literary and academic establishments, let alone by the general reading public.

Since the early 1970s, however, a small but devoted group of feminist activists, teachers, and writers, many of them Black women, have been working to make visible the writing, culture, and history of women of color. It was their work, not Madison Avenue’s, that laid the political and ideological groundwork for Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and also for the current eighties renaissance of writing by Black and other women of color.

Starting a press for women of color in 1980 may have defied logic, but it was one of those acts of courage that characterize Third World women’s lives. In October 1980, Audre Lorde said to me during a phone conversation, “We really need to do something about publishing.” I enthusiastically agreed and got together a group of interested women to meet in Boston on Halloween weekend, when Audre and other women from New York were in town to do a Black women’s poetry reading. It was at that meeting that Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was born. We did not arrive at a name or announce our existence until a year later, but at that initial meeting we did decide to publish all women of color, although there were only women of African American and African Caribbean descent in the room. This was one of our bravest steps; most people

of color have chosen to work in their separate groups when they do media or other projects. We were saying that as women, feminists, and lesbians of color we had experiences and work to do in common, although we also had our differences.

A year later we were officially founded. We chose our name because the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other. We also wanted to convey the fact that we are a kitchen table, grass roots operation, begun and kept alive by women who cannot rely on inheritances or other benefits of class privilege to do the work we need to do.

Why were we so strongly motivated to attempt the impossible? An early slogan of the women in print movement was “freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press.” This is even truer for multiply disenfranchised women of color, who have minimal access to power, including the power of media, except what we wrest from an unwilling system. On the most basic level, Kitchen Table Press began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us. As feminist and lesbian of color writers, we knew that we had no options for getting published except at the mercy or whim of others—in either commercial or alternative publishing, since both are white dominated.

The late seventies and early eighties were the era of the “special issue,” the response of some white feminist journals and periodicals to increasing numbers of women of color raising the issue of racism in the women’s movement. Although our working relationships with white women were not universally problematic, too often we were required to fight with the white

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women who had begun and/or controlled these publications in order to get what we believed into print. We were writers and activists who had always cherished the written word, and we were determined to provide an alternative.

In our description of the press, written in 1981, we stated: "Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is the only publisher in North America committed to publishing and distributing the writing of Third World women of all racial/cultural heritages, sexualities, and classes." In 1984 we added: "Our work is both cultural and political, connected to the struggles for freedom of all of our peoples. We hope to serve as a communication network for women of color in the U. S. and around the world."

We have always considered Kitchen Table to be both an activist and a literary publisher; we are committed to producing work of high artistic quality that simultaneously contributes to the liberation of women of color and of all people. We publish a work not simply because it is by a woman of color, but because it consciously examines, from a positive and original perspective, the specific situations and issues that women of color face.

Since 1983 we have published thirteen titles: eight books and five pamphlets in the Freedom Organizing Pamphlet Series.¹ We also distribute more than one hundred titles by women of color from other independent presses.

Despite this publishing focus, we have always defined our target audience as people of color: not solely women of color or lesbians of color, but the entire gamut of our communities. Other women's presses can more logically define women as their priority constituency, since white, Christian, middle-class women do not share an oppressed identity and status with their white male counterparts. The history and everyday reality of women of color have been shaped at least as much by racism as by sexism, and racism of course affects all women, children, and men of color of every age, sexual orientation, and economic status. Kitchen Table's goal of informing and educating people of color about crucial and often difficult issues, especially those close to home, also determines how we see our audience. Our commitment to publishing feminist and lesbian writing has sometimes made our relations with our communities difficult and even painful, but the longer the press has existed, the easier it has become to get an intelligent and open response to this work, and we have been met with increasing interest and understanding. Books have proved to be a powerful vehicle for challenging sexism and heterosexism in Third World communities.

An effective strategy for reaching our priority market has been to bring our books, physically, to places where people of color are, especially to conferences, book fairs, concerts, or readings. We make a special effort to attend events like the annual Asian/Pacific American Heritage Festival in New York City, the semiannual Latin American Book Fair, also in New York, and the annual convention of the College Language Association. When we cannot travel to an event, we try to send our catalogues and sample copies for display. Sometimes, when we cannot attend, we are able to get friends in other cities to sell our books for us. We also give a high priority to events that focus specifically upon women of color, such as the recent National Institute for Women of Color conference in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and N. O. W.'s Women of Color and

Reproductive Rights conference at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Our goal is not simply to sell books, but to spread the word about our work among individuals who do not necessarily get their information through the women's movement.

We also keep our target audience in mind when we design our books and advertising. We are all too aware of the inaccurate and denigrating images of women of color and people of color, generally, in all aspects of the media. From the very beginning, we wanted our books to reflect, visually, the writing they contained. We would not, for example, design or title a book in such a way that the only way to determine that it was written by a woman of color would be to turn it over and look at the author's picture on the back. We have often used traditional graphics from indigenous African, Asian, Latino, and Indian cultures for both cover and text illustration and also in promotional materials such as catalogues and ads. Kitchen Table's "look" has influenced the graphic presentation of books by and about women of color from other presses.

Similarly, in writing copy for ads or fliers we make sure that the subject matter is apparent. We would not, for example, do what was done by the commercial publisher of a recent book by a contributor to two of Kitchen Table Press's anthologies. Nowhere did the advertisements for her book indicate that the author was Black or that the book presented a Black perspective. This may well have been a marketing decision on the part of the publisher, who preferred to sell the book to a "general"—that is, a white—audience. To us, one new reader of color is just as important as a hundred non-Third World customers.

This philosophy does not limit our audience, but in fact expands it. There is a large and growing white readership for writing by women of color. Being explicit about our books' subject matter does not decrease this particular audience, while it does ensure attention from our target audience of people of color. Our constituency, in fact, may be much larger than those of most other women's presses because we have something to offer feminist, Third World, lesbian, gay, progressive, and literary audiences.

As good as all this sounds, do our philosophy and strategies work? Sales figures, reviews, and widespread recognition of our activities indicate that the answer is definitely "yes." Our average first printing for a book is more than 5,000. All of our books have gone into at least a second printing, and our two best selling titles, *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Home Girls*, have 47,500 and 17,500 copies in print, respectively. These figures are attributable to another aspect of our philosophy: we market our books as thoroughly and aggressively as possible. Unlike some alternative presses, we have never viewed smallness or lack of sales as a sign of either artistic success or political correctness. It is also clear to us that we have only begun to reach our potential audience. If, for example, our titles were widely available in chain book stores, where most of the books in this country are purchased, we would see even higher sales figures.

Kitchen Table's work is international in scope, both because of our foreign distribution and because the issues addressed in our publications make connections with and are inspired by the global movement of Third World women. Because Kitchen Table is the only publisher for women of color in the

U.S., and one of a handful of feminist of color organizations with national visibility, we function not only as a press, but as a resource network for women of color worldwide. We must cope daily with the stresses of tokenism, of being the only one—for example, having to handle an inconceivably large and far-ranging correspondence.

Although Kitchen Table is the only resource of its kind for women of color, some white women still do not comprehend our need to have at least one press of our own. Sometimes white women academics who are doing research on women of color, usually in Third World countries, ask whether they can submit manuscripts to us. At workshops, when I discuss the numerous barriers to women of color trying to get into print, white women have asked me, “What about white women who can’t get published?”—implying that our policy of publishing only material by and about women of color is somehow discriminatory. Racism and traditional power dynamics die hard. Until this society completely transforms itself, and justice for all people prevails, there will undoubtedly be a need for a Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

In fact, I can foresee the Press existing in a revolutionary society, although by that time it would undoubtedly not be the only one.

Recently, I have begun to acknowledge that Kitchen Table does indeed play an important role in making political change. When we began I was hesitant to confuse our cultural and ideological work with grass roots organizing and activism. Having done a great deal of the latter, I believed that it was inaccurate to view the cultural work of the press as identical to the grueling work of directly taking on the power structure around such issues as economics, housing, education, jobs, racial violence, violence against women, and reproductive rights.

After seven years I have started to see things differently, perhaps because I have had time to experience the difference it makes for women of color to control a significant means of communication, a way to shape ideology into a foundation

for practical social and political change. Consider, for example: if Kitchen Table and other independent feminist presses did not exist, the writing of lesbians of color would be virtually unavailable, since with only two exceptions (Audre Lorde’s poetry and Ann Allen Shockley’s fiction) commercial publishers do not print the work of “out” lesbians of color. And yet it is these writers who have most incisively defined sexual politics in communities of color and who have inspired feminist organizing by women of color of all sexual orientations.

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is a revolutionary tool because it is one means of empowering society’s most dispossessed people, who also have the greatest potential for making change. After seven years our work has only begun. We have been able to come this far because we have not been afraid to defy white male logic, which will always tell us “no,” when our hearts and spirit tell us “YES!”

NOTES

This essay will also appear in *Communications at the Crossroads: The Gender Gap Connection*, ed. Donna Allen and Ramona R. Rush, forthcoming from Ablex in spring 1989.

1. Kitchen Table’s books are *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women*, by Cheryl Clarke; *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas*, edited by Alma Gomez, Cherrie Moraga, and Mariana Romo-Carmona; *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith; *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa; *A Comrade Is As Precious As a Rice Seedling*, by Mila D. Aguilar; *Desert Run, Poems and Stories*, by Mitsuye Yamada; *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*, by Hisaye Yamamoto; and *Healing Heart, Poems 1973-1988*, by Gloria T. Hull. The Freedom Organizing Pamphlets are #1, *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*, by the Combahee River Collective; #2, *Apartheid U. S. A.*, by Audre Lorde, and *Our Common Enemy Our Common Cause: Freedom Organizing in the Eighties*, by Marie Woo; #3, *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing across Sexualities*, by Audre Lorde; #4, *It’s a Family Affair: The Real Lives of Black Single Mothers*, by Barbara Omolade; and #5, *Violence against Women and the Ongoing Struggle against Racism*, by Angela Y. Davis. Prices and further information may be obtained from Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, P.O. Box 908, Latham, NY 12110.