

Part IV

Making | Selling | Distributing



MAKING | SELLING | DISTRIBUTING: INTRODUCTION

Claire Battershill and Nicola Wilson

IN THIS FINAL SECTION, we turn to the complex and generative work of bringing texts into being through making, selling, and distributing. Moving from inside-the-text editorial practices and processes to thinking about books as circulating, vibrant, physical objects also involves situating these works in a feminist frame as they find their way into the hands of readers. As Susan Hawthorne notes, ‘it is impossible to be feminist and not notice that knowledge is political,’ and these essays turn their attention to the political and social dynamics of women’s participation in the book trade as it engages with the very public acts of bookselling, distributing, illustrating, printing, printmaking and reprinting.¹ All these acts of making and distributing are collaborative and require the participation of many actors. ‘Publishing [is] a social activity,’ Rathna Ramanathan reminds us in her interview at the start of this section, ‘fuelled by creative conversation, dialogue and shared purpose.’ Outlining her work with Tara Books and others, graphic designer Ramanathan describes herself as ‘proud to be a design co-author’. Printmaker Jennifer Mack-Watkins (formerly part of Black Women of Print), whose Japanese woodcut **closes our General Introduction**, also stresses the significance of being ‘part of a bigger picture’ in her interview, coming together and co-creating ‘as publishers, printmakers, collectors, supporters, artists’.

By bringing together the visual and material dimensions of book production with distribution and sales, we focus here on the ways in which the metaphorical embodiment of text into book is neither static nor stable, but is always mobile, distributed and complex. Focusing on and valuing material and visual cultures of textualities, as bibliographers have long done, can also be reframed and rewritten as a feminist gesture: a move to centre the book’s own embodiment and its affective dimensions as it moves from maker to reader, often through a variety of important intermediaries.

We begin with Amara Thornton’s chapter, which offers a fascinating insight into some of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British women who forged professional identities as editors, illustrators, lecturers and tour guides, as well as booksellers, in and around the popular field of archaeological research and excavation. While the focus has traditionally been on a small number of relatively famous women who worked on actual sites, Thornton’s research is part of growing efforts to recover the wider role of women’s contributions to archaeology.² Drawing on notices of lectures, tours and artists’ exhibitions in archives, newspapers and periodicals, as well as long-running publications like *The Englishwoman’s Year Book and Directory* (1881) and *The Handbook of Women’s Work* (1875) – the latter edited from 1908 by Geraldine Edith Mitton at A. & C. Black – Thornton’s research reminds us of the need to look beyond literary publishing to understand the much broader remit of book

work available to women at the beginning of our period. Thornton's analysis complements the work in Sue Walker's essay on Marie Neurath, which explores her varied roles as a maker of illustrative material in books for children from the end of the 1940s to the 1970s. In both essays, the practice of illustration and visual representation are important aspects of book design that become sites also for excavating different kinds of collaborative labour within the book production process.

Matthew Chambers' essay develops the important theme of distribution that runs throughout this section with a close look at the role of women booksellers in the early twentieth century. Chambers reviews a variety of bookshops run by women in the UK and US to explore how bookselling became professionalised for women over the course of the last century (the Women's National Book Association was founded in New York in 1917) and how women's visible work in the book trade saw a shift in 'the possibilities for what might happen with a bookshop space'. His chapter considers different types of bookshops, beginning with the impact of suffrage shops established in Britain and the US: a place on the high street for women to meet and network. Chambers then turns to the famous example of the women-owned Sunwise Turn bookshop in New York (run by Madge Jenison and Mary Mowbray-Clarke), before considering the lesser-known Harlem People's Book Shop (run by Naomi Davis), London's Bermondsey Books (established by Ethel Gutman), and Eva Collet Reckitt's bookshop, Collet's. These later shops promoted book culture in African American and British working-class neighbourhoods. The history of bookshops, as Chambers points out, can be especially difficult to uncover, with records of sometimes short-lived businesses often lost to history. Chambers's work contributes to collective efforts to uncover the roles women have played through bookshops in establishing readerly networks and communities in this most public-facing aspect of publishing and print culture.³

Clare Hutton's chapter on Harriet Shaw Weaver takes us to the crucial role of female patrons in making, selling and distributing literature by examining how Weaver – alongside other women – worked behind the scenes as James Joyce's patron, publisher and distributor, offering material and financial support that backed his writing of *Ulysses*. Based on her intimate knowledge of Weaver's surviving papers and her work as curator for an international exhibition on the making of *Ulysses* at the Harry Ransom Center in 2022, Hutton highlights how Weaver's financial support to Joyce has been occluded from the published volumes of his letters, resulting in a 'micro-narrative of Joyce's gratitude and Weaver's generosity [. . .] elided from the record'. Critically analysing Weaver's work as economic patron, distributor, family friend and tireless champion, Hutton shows – like many contributors to this volume – how a 'feminist literary history often involves this kind of reading from inference, from small scraps, gaps and silences'.

Fiona Ross and Alice Savoie draw from their exciting broader project, *Women in Type*, for their chapter, examining a professional role and occupation that is frequently left out of book historical narratives. Drawing on materials from the now-closed Monotype Archives, Ross and Savoie situate their work on women's labour in type drawing offices in the history of women's participation in the printing and typographical industries more broadly. Ross and Savoie are careful not to counter a (patriarchal) 'great heroes' narrative of male designers with equivalent famous women in type. They focus instead here on women in industry, the 'not-so-famous' for whom the designation 'type designer' is, for the most part, a misnomer;⁴ furthermore, research findings

demonstrate that type design (as in design in general) frequently relies on some kind of collaborative process. In emphasising the collaborative cultures of the type drawing office and the frequently unsigned labour of workers in this context, Ross and Savoie reconstruct a whole context and professional milieu that has rarely been discussed in accounts of the period. This chapter is also amplified by the inclusion of many images that, now that the archive has closed, find their home here in order to reconstruct some of the visual cultures around this work along with a feminist historical account.

Kaja Marczevska, D-M Withers and Rosy Mack focus on the vibrant growth in feminist book-making, community, transatlantic networks and distribution seen as the cornerstone of second-wave feminism and the women's liberation movement. Marczevska explores the impact of 1970s US group Women in Distribution (WIND), set up to enable the outputs of the women's movement to reach as wide an audience as possible. Drawing on a rich layer of archival sources, Marczevska's research makes a compelling case for distribution as a feminist issue – as the women involved with WIND pointed out – and a counterbalance to a common academic tendency towards what she calls 'production-focused discussions of publishing'. Like Virago Press in the UK, WIND engaged strategically with a wider book trade and publications which had historically ignored feminist and small press publications, that contributed, as Marczevska points out, to a 'repositioning of feminist publications as viable mainstream consumer goods that was also the cause of [WIND's] demise'. The case of Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* – first published by a small feminist press, Daughters, Inc., and distributed by WIND before it was taken up by the publishing mainstream – is an interesting example of the long-running tension, traced in various chapters of this volume, between commercial 'publishing feminism' and smaller-scale 'feminist publishing'.⁵

Through surviving correspondence from readers, booksellers and librarians in the Virago Press archive, D-M Withers offers an innovative take on the history of the firm by exploring how the influential Virago Modern Classics reprint series was sourced and produced. Like other chapters (especially Thornton's and Mack's) and the interviews in this section, Withers's reminds us how the success of a publisher is founded on personal networks and communication with readers. Showing how Carmen Callil and the Virago editors engaged with library services, specialist readers, frustrated book buyers, antiquarian booksellers, professional book-finders and the prominent literary critic Elaine Showalter, Withers demonstrates how the Virago Modern Classics list was put together in collaboration with an invested reading audience. Following on from Chambers' essay on bookshops as important cultural and social institutions, Withers reminds us of how 'libraries keep the circulatory possibility of discarded works [. . .] alive', acting as crucial repositories of feminist archiving and memory.

Rosy Mack explores how another seminal feminist list was put together, in her case the Women's Press's influential 1980s list of crime fiction. Uncovering the transatlantic networks and sales of rights behind many of the authors who came to be published by the Women's Press in the UK, Mack explores 'how the development of the genre was facilitated by the complex infrastructure of feminist print culture of this period'. This included working closely with independent bookshops and community writing venues on book promotion, author tours and innovative events like the Feminist Book Fortnight. 'Getting books published was one thing . . . getting them in to readers' hands was also a political project and one that many women in the trade worked hard to make happen,' Jane Anger says to Mack, echoing the concerns of other chapters

in this section.⁶ Mack also considers the literary politics of the genre, exploring the prominence of lesbian crime fiction as well as the whiteness of the list. Feminist crime writers would sometimes use their work to explore ideological tensions within the movement, Mack points out – as in the case of Barbara Wilson’s contribution to the anthology *Reader, I Murdered Him*, ‘Murder at the International Feminist Book Fair.’

Sydney J. Shep’s chapter aligns with Jennifer Mack-Watkin’s interview to leave us on a compelling creative note. Challenging the individual model of publishing history (as outlined in our General Introduction), Shep’s work on how feminist publishing collectives have informed the publishing landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand is an excellent reminder of the role of collectives and collaboration in shaping this field. Shep examines the Spiral Collective – a small, not-for-profit feminist publishing group who published Keri Hulme’s *the bone people* to global success – considering the structural and postcolonial tensions in how international literary prizes and global publishers operate. Shep also looks at the impact of feminist journal *Broadsheet* (1975–97), an Auckland-based collective that was an important part of the feminist movement. She concludes with letterpress collective the Old Shebang, begun informally in 2016 by Ya-Wen Ho, Meredith Paterson and Charlotte Darling. The Old Shebang is part of a vibrant world of artists’ books, zines, ephemera and letterpress printing that is revitalising contemporary feminism internationally. Shep makes a powerful case in this chapter for the influence of small-scale feminist collectives in ‘paving the way for today’s female-dominated publishing profession’. Her work takes us full circle in terms of the concerns of this volume and is an important decolonial, feminist statement about the power of making books collectively to end on.

Notes

1. Susan Hawthorne, ‘Bibliodiversity: The Politics of Knowledge and the Distribution of Ideas’, in *Distributed*, ed. by David Blamey and Brad Haylock (London: Open Editions, 2018), p. 170. Cited in this section by Marczevska.
2. See <<https://trowelblazers.com/>> [accessed 13 January 2013] and Amara Thornton, *Archaeologists in Print: Publishing for the People* (London: UCL Press, 2018).
3. See ‘Database of Women Booksellers’, *Bookselling Research Network* (compiled by Barbara A. Brannon, c. 1998) <<https://booksellingresearchnet.uk/database-of-women-booksellers/>> [accessed 12 January 2023].
4. As they were considered ‘drawing clerks’ or ‘letter-drawers’ and had little agency to initiate designs until the digital era. See Ross and Savoie, p. [xxx].
5. Marczevska draws on Andi Zeisler’s work in *Feminism and Pop Culture* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008) to make this distinction.
6. Jane Anger to Rosy Mack, ‘Letter from Jane Anger to Rosy Mack’, 6 January 2020.

Voices: Interviews with Women in Contemporary Publishing

Interview 7: Jennifer Mack-Watkins

Interview on video call with Marrisa Joseph, 9 August 2021. Transcribed by Marrisa Joseph, Sophie Heywood and Helen Southworth.

Q1. Could you describe your trajectory in the field of publishing? How did you get into printmaking and what motivated you to work in this field?

How did I get into printmaking? It probably started in high school. I started to learn from a teacher who came in during the summertime for gifted and talented students, and I was selected as a gifted and talented student. I had a week to learn monoprinting, and that was the first time I got a chance to publish, or edition works of art. Just for that one week, I remember I made a monoprint of a paint tube, a paintbrush, and



Figure V4.1 Jennifer Mack-Watkins. Image provided by Jennifer Mack-Watkins.

I had some little designs in the background. I made a lot of them and I got a chance to put it in a contest in the mall. I got second place in the county or something like that. So that was cool because it was my first time ever making an edition or publishing my own prints by hand.

I think what motivates me is being able to know that I'm part of a bigger picture, no matter where I live. No matter where I am, no matter what I am making, there's a whole bunch of other printmakers and publishers out there who are doing amazing things. Our whole idea is to come together as publishers, printmakers, collectors, supporters, artists – everyone plays a part in this whole situation of knowing that printmaking is here to stay. We don't want it to go away. There are ways to incorporate technology and still do traditional printmaking – but I feel it's really important to continue to promote printmaking and publishing by hand. Because some things are printed by hand, and I guess the hand is showing that the layers are here, the text is here, the images are here, but they're all made by hand and it's something different that you can't just take a picture off the internet and print it. It's like someone's way of thought, separating it and then putting it back together like a puzzle.

I feel that the field of publishing will expand into more publishers collaborating with one another and co-creating with each other and with published artists. I think there'll be more co-creating with publishers and artists, more partnerships to expand audiences, and collectors. Because each publisher has their own network or listserv people they can reach out to, and then artists have collectors and followers and supporters, and so each of them brings a great idea for a business because you have double the audience that you could have, versus one person doing it on their own. One person can promote, one person might have access to doing virtual events. So I think the pandemic helped us to really think about how we can create together, safely, but still make works of art that can be shared worldwide.

Q2. What do you consider to have been your major achievements or the aspects of your career that you are most proud of?

One of my major achievements was being able to get recognised at my first solo museum show that was displayed at the Brattleboro Museum Art Center in Vermont this past year.¹ It was really great to have a team of people: Danny Lichtenfeld, Sarah Freeman, Molly Krause, David Rios Ferreira, fayemi shakur and Mara Williams. There's a whole bunch of people that put that thing together, from where the work was going to go and how it was going to get there, and how it was going to be written and how it will be published in other entities. When I got into the publications like the *New York Times*, *Vogue* and *Essence* I was like, whoa, this is big. Everyone who has opened up this page online is able to access it, the reach was vast, and it happened all of a sudden. It was just so exciting to see that work was being recognised in print, and having the interview before it was even published online, that whole experience was amazing.

I'm also proud of getting into the Met Library. I self-published my own catalogue, and I got press from the Met Library saying 'come to our library, we have this' and they even put it on their social media page.² That was really big. I was on there with Tyler Mitchell, a famous photographer who photographed Beyoncé. My friend who did the poem for my show, fayemi shakur, she put together this photographic literature

book that I was a part of, and that got on there too, along with my book of the solo show that I created.

More achievements are that I got a few works acquired by the Zimmerli Museum, which is part of Rutgers University in New Jersey, and I also got some prints acquired by the Library of Congress. So I am able to get into major collections who just house books, just house work and show them, and share them with the community for academic and educational purposes. And I'm all about education and artistic outreach.

MJ: Library of Congress. How exciting – I bet you felt that was such a proud moment, didn't you?

It was nerve-wracking, just even packing it up and sending it to the library. It had to be a certain way, a certain size and weight, and that was nerve-wracking. Then the museum bought my Japanese woodblocks, so that was cool as I've only done a few and I'm going to be doing some more pretty soon. But they're my few first babies that I was doing when I first started to learn how to edition or publish the works, and they are really intensive in process.

I just finished the course that I taught for two weeks to people online. I taught them how to edition or publish their own editions, virtually carving wood, printing it with watercolour or gouache or pigment, and printing it on wet paper, checking the moisture of the wood and paper, and they published their own prints virtually with me, without ever meeting them, so that was really, really amazing.

MJ: So would you say that the pandemic allowed that to happen for you? Or do you think that would have happened anyway?

I think if the pandemic didn't happen, we wouldn't be thinking about offering so many virtual classes. Before the pandemic, how often did I go to virtual art talks or in virtual classes? I'm sure it happened, but it just increased more because we had to figure out a way to communicate and continue to learn and educate one another.

Q3. Do you have any particular role models, mentors or support networks in your field?

Well, in terms of support, Leslie Diuguid of Du-Good Press in Brooklyn, and Angela Pilgrim of Fruischen Press in Newark. I got a chance to meet both of those young ladies, publishers, printmakers, artists when I was part of a group called Black Women of Print.³ We were grouped together to promote African American printmakers who are females and making sure they got the credit and compensation that they needed, and partnerships, and so it was a way for us to come together and learn the business of promoting ourselves as African American female printmakers. I left the group in January to see if I can take some of the skills and apply them on my own as an individual artist again. I've seen that I've learned a lot by working collectively, and I understand more about what it takes to promote and advocate for yourself, because no one is going to advocate more for yourself than yourself, right? I think being part of that collective and being able to meet the two women I just mentioned. I would say also Bisa Butler. She's really doing a great job. Really great friend of mine. She's a mom. She has two older kids now, but she was able to make a profession – she retired from

1 teaching art, and now she's full time making her own art. And I still talk to her. We still
 2 text and she's making it really big right now. fayemi shakur, she is over at the cultural
 3 arts in Newark, and she's an interdisciplinary artist, and she's always able to gather
 4 photographers and writers and artists to make books.⁴ They did risograph books that
 5 they published inhouse and they put them together, they bind them – everything. I got
 6 a chance to be part of that book twice.⁵ The book money is going to charity, for the
 7 programme I believe. I like being part of things that are about the bigger picture, and
 8 not just individuals. I like partnership, anybody who's mentoring would be anybody
 9 who's willing to partner and collaborate. I think those would be mentors for me. The
 10 Paulson Fontaine Press that publishes artists' work in California. One of the directors
 11 [Rhea Fontaine], she's probably one of the only African American females that has
 12 had a successful press that publishes works by artists like Gee's Bend and Kerry James
 13 Marshall. Anybody who is saying 'hey, this is missing, our voices need to be heard –
 14 here's how you do it, I'm going to show you', anybody who does that, I feel like that's
 15 what I'm all about.

16
 17 *Q4. What are the major obstacles or issues around gender that you have encountered in*
 18 *your career? For example, did you feel that you encountered a glass ceiling, or old boys'*
 19 *networks? Did you experience difficulties in accessing credit (if required) or systemic bias*
 20 *in other forms? And what strategies have you developed to overcome such obstacles?*

21
 22 I think the major obstacle for me around gender, is probably just being a mom. Being
 23 a mom, being an artist in that time period when it takes your body a good year to get
 24 back to normal. And also now there are more residencies where they cater to parents,
 25 but for me I feel like I can't leave my son or daughter with my husband for six weeks.
 26 I think even two months – most residencies are way too long. I can't see [my family]
 27 coming out of an environment and having to put them in another environment. I feel
 28 like the whole residency thing shows study, it shows scholarly, it shows academic, it
 29 shows discipline, but sometimes they're too long. I have to constantly decide, am I
 30 going to be not such a good mom if I leave my son or daughter to go publish work
 31 at a residency for two months? I know that's something I struggle with. The obstacle
 32 for me was asking when do I apply and when do I not? So, I feel like those things that
 33 have to be longer like that, I definitely would save those for later, you know, apply
 34 later when my children get older. The obstacle was, do I continue to promote myself
 35 and apply for a residency, or do I just wait? And then if I wait too long, maybe not get
 36 my name out of the hat or even be chosen? I think the obstacle for me is how much it
 37 takes for us to have to leave home. Whether it is for residencies, or whether it is going
 38 to the studio. I have made a home studio here for Japanese woodblocks because I can
 39 go right outside my door and then the bedroom is right there, and I can watch the kids.
 40 I have another studio – I just moved to Savannah – downtown, so I can have access to
 41 foot traffic and other artists and other networks and that's in a whole building with
 42 other artists, and so I'm lucky I'm able to have two spaces.

43 I think another obstacle could also be the old boys' network, but I feel that after
 44 the pandemic, and after Black Lives Matter, people started to analyse themselves, and
 45 started asking 'who are we representing?' and 'who are we hiring?' and 'who is in our
 46 print shops?' So all these things started making people question more, and start reaching
 47 out more. So there definitely used to be an old boys' network – you're in because you

went to this school, or you're in because you're part of this collective, but now they're opening up collectives and getting people to bring their ideas together, because they're seeing that they need to diversify how they're seeing, in order to expand their outreach. And so, I think definitely it is changing – there's more work to be done, but it's a start, right? I started volunteering for diversity committees for the Mid America Print Council and I'm also on the exhibition committee. I'm going to try some different committees, and see who has a say so, and how things are done, and who agrees and who votes – to help me to understand more of how these things go into play.

MJ: Do you feel that if your husband was the artist and he wanted to go on a residency, do you feel like it's easier for him to go because he's a man or the father?

I think if you're really committed to why you truly had children, it's about being a parent rather than being a mom or a dad. They're missing out on you being there. But for me it's just more of me in my mind saying okay, this can benefit my art career but I'll be gone for two months and thinking of all the things I would miss. I birthed them. I carry them, you know, I feed them, I cook for them, and I make sure they're taken care of, so I have a different role. Because I birthed them, they're my babies. My husband is an awesome husband, but I birthed them so for me, it's just like a baby bird and a momma bird. You know, she leaving them for a long period of time. That's how I feel, because my home is my nest, so I would feel horrible because I would miss out on hearing the stories that happen after school. I wouldn't want to be gone for two months in this primary stage of their life right now because my son is just trying to learn how to talk. I wouldn't want to miss those first couple of words or miss anything that shows their development as they're growing and being more independent as human beings.

Sometimes, I think it's easier for some artists to get residencies based on what school they went to, or who they are associated with, or who they studied with, who's considered a master printmaker (I like expert because I don't like the way master sounds). But all these things are systematic biases that exist in different publishing spaces, or in institutions or colleges. That's a heavy question! I hope I answered some of it . . .

My strategy to help me to overcome the obstacles is I just reach out to people, saying 'hey, I see that you don't have this', or 'hey, I'm interested in what you do, I like what you're doing and how can I be involved?' I just reach out to people who I think could be good partners; by studying them, their mission and what they do, and what other projects have they done to promote other artists, and where can they be improved? Where can the voices that are diverse be more included? And that's where I jump in. I might go to events virtually. I might reach out, send the email or an instant message, use social media to promote myself and I make a press kit to show like hey, this is where I am. Everything is there to promote who I am as an artist. I just promote myself to people or places I want to work with to show that I'm valuable and let's work together.

Q5. What are the best things about working in your part of the publishing industry? And on the flip side, what's the worst?

I think the best thing is being able to make your own schedule and having a space that's uninterrupted – as long as you schedule your time, and have back-up for your children, make sure you have somebody to watch them. But even if [my children] have to come in

with me, I put a high chair in here and put Cocomelon on and my little son can watch that while I'm doing a zoom call. Everything is self-managed. It kind of forces you to do things for yourself and hold yourself accountable, and be realistic and not bite off more than you can chew, which is hard because I always try to do too much.

Sometimes, I wouldn't say it's the worst part, but the challenging part would be spending a lot of time by yourself. That's the hard part that I'm seeing, because I worked in the classroom for sixteen years and so I've always had people around and co-workers. But now it's kind of solo, but I'm going to be teaching at a college. At least I'll be able to be around co-workers and students, but when you're publishing, it's pretty much by yourself. But I'm hoping that once I get my studio where I want it to be then I can eventually have an intern, to mentor them and teach them, teach them how to publish work, and that's the plan for the future.

Q6. Is there anything about the industry that you would like to see change? If so, why?

It's very difficult to work with a publisher. And it's also difficult to promote yourself as a publisher, as a printmaker, because people still don't understand the value or how much work it takes to make prints; from the materials, to the amount of hours, to the planning. You're just producing a small edition of works to share with whomever wants to have them in their collection. I think people should continue to educate buyers or collectors or the public and promote the idea of 'Here is a print. What is a print? How is it made?' Being aware of all the different processes, and not just the ones you always think of like relief or silkscreen. There are other ways that people make prints and it's not always traditional, but it might be contemporary methods as well. I think more education of people understanding what print is and what it takes. Talking to the artists, and studio visits and asking them about the process so they can understand why the conversation is what it is. And making sure that you trust the person who you are working with. If I work with a publisher, then this is a partnership. We have to work together to promote this print that we're putting out. I've gone from working with a publisher and then publishing my own work, of course. So, we just need to see the two different sides.

Q7. What advice would you give to the next generation of women coming into the publishing industry?

Definitely take a business class! I didn't take any business classes. Then find someone who can mentor, guide and support you. That way if you have questions or you keep making the same mistake, you have someone you can go to. Continue to take classes, continue to learn new and old methods. Gather information like tools that you could use whenever you need them. Mentor each other! Enlighten each other. Don't think you know everything. Someone always has questions that they need answers to. Be there for someone, mentor somebody else if you can and pay it forward.

Q8. Imagine you could invite anyone who worked in publishing, from any era, to a dinner party. You have space for three at your table. Who would you invite and why?

At the top of my list would have to be Emma Amos (African American painter and printmaker). Amos was able to make her life as an artist, as a mother, as a black

female and make works of art and narratives about her struggles and challenges of being an African American female artist. Her background is really interesting. She was born in Atlanta, and she lived up in New York and worked with people like Robert Blackburn, a prominent African American publisher. Amos was one of the only African American working females that was part of Romare Bearden's (African American artist, author and songwriter) Spiral group (arts alliance). Amos was so talented and passionate about sharing her view as an artist. Elizabeth Catlett (American sculptor) for her technical abilities and her influence in education, teaching and communicating. Finally, Jacob Lawrence (American painter) – he seems like he would be a nice person to talk to about stories and his experiences. He worked with a lot of different publishers to produce books with poetry featuring his artwork. He worked with a lot of people in the publishing business. He's one of the artists that I remember who tells a story with the text, piece by piece, print by print, painting by painting without many words. You can follow a story just by his imagery, and that is a strength of his talent. These guests would definitely make an interesting dinner table party.

Q9. How have your experiences in publishing as a printmaker compared with working in other environments, such as working in the arts?

I spent sixteen years in the classroom. You're there at school all day from the morning until the afternoon and it's that one place you know. I feel in the publishing and printmaking world you have to be able to experience the world. You have to be able to network. You have to be able to go to art talks, to go on trips to be inspired, to form partnerships and collaborations. You have to travel to make those connections. I think that's the major difference. If you're part of a department then you have to find a way to think collectively and do things collectively. But as a sole publisher or printmaker in your own studio space, you don't work with anybody else – it is hard. You don't have anybody to bounce ideas off of, but within the institution or another work setting, you have a team of people to work with.

When you're with someone who really values the work of the artists and knows what it takes to promote them and is passionate about what they do, then they'll be at other smaller shows. I went to Art Basel [art show] in Miami and that was amazing. There are parties upon parties. There is art up everywhere. You can network and talk to people you like. It's just like speed art dating because you're like 'hey I'm an artist, I'm in the Art Basel, represented by this gallery'. Then you go to an art party, see more people, celebrities are walking around, and you think it can't be like this in real life. It's not. It takes time to have those types of opportunities. But you can continue to do great work and continue to cultivate partnerships. If you just keep to yourself and don't partner or collaborate or promote yourself when opportunities arise, then you could miss out.

Once the collaboration and partnerships are strong then the networks are open. You know, because that's how you carry yourself and what you are a part of and how you conduct yourself as an artist. The wine and the pictures that's just one aspect, but then it's not all glamorous. I have to order supplies. I have to make sure this month I make a certain amount of sales. I have to make sure I spread myself over social media. All these things help to guarantee income. I feel like that's only a small portion but

there's a lot of things that go into managing your studio ensuring that you know you are able to sustain yourself.

Q10. How has your background in printmaking influenced your perspective on the publishing industry?

I think it shows how much of a business it is. I think it's no longer me making this piece because I want to be in a show. But when I'm making a piece, I try to make work that I can connect with my own background. As a female African American, as a mom, as an educator, I try to tie all those into my work. But it is a business as well.

We as artists are trying to juggle between making editions of work, providing these works for people to be able to put in their own personal collections or special collections within institutions. Then juggling with the business side, trying to live. I feel it's important that people understand that it's more than just making a picture, but what does it take to get to that? That final product, what is the sacrifice? You know what artists have to go through to get to that point. Once all these pieces are put together, how does that benefit the artist? What does that say about the artists once they produce all this work? I'm trying to advocate for artists and their work.

Interview 8: Rathna Ramanathan

This is a written interview, conducted by email in May 2021 with Marissa Joseph.



Figure V4.2 Rathna Ramanathan. Image provided by Rathna Ramanathan.

Q1. Could you describe your trajectory in the field of publishing? How did you get into graphic design and typography, and what motivated you to work in this field?

I started working in publishing with Tara Books, an independent publisher based in Chennai, India. I've worked with mainstream publishers as a freelance designer – Phaidon, Quarto, Thames & Hudson, but was always more interested in the independent publishing approach as it seemed to allow for more conversation about the book process. Pushkin Press, Harvard University Press and Tara Books – each of these different publishing approaches fuelled my interest and my belief in the book as an object.

My first attempts at reading were the big visuals I saw on the streets in India – posters and billboards for cinemas. My childhood in India has influenced my approach to typography, seeing it both as text and image. I see typography as a visual, colourful language in its own right, with its own voice.

I was drawn to the world of publishing as a child, through the realm of books. My parents were both avid readers and we had a library at home. I also had a fantastic English teacher at school who brought characters to life through reading and conversation – from Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. I spent many summers under a mango tree in my childhood home travelling through different realms in my imagination through Enid Blytons, Amar Chitra Kathas (Indian comics), and any books I could get my hands on. Books gave me a chance to explore my world imaginatively without boundaries or expectations. They still do.

I think publishing as well as design and typography helps us situate universal narratives within a local context. It gives us an opportunity to share multiple human experiences through creative practice, across national boundaries. For this reason, no book is the same as another.

All of the publishers I work with have a passion for the unheard, for supporting voices that are not usually found in books. This is a big motivation – to be a part of this larger purpose. I also find publishing a social activity – fuelled by creative conversation, dialogue and shared purpose, even if the people you're working with live in different countries.

Q2. What do you consider to have been your major achievements or the aspects of your career that you are most proud of?

It feels odd to consider sole achievement as a part of the publishing process because it is, by nature, collaborative and dependent on others within the publishing team. I am honoured and proud to work on projects which are purpose-driven such as the Murty Classical Library, published by Harvard University Press. I am book designer of this bilingual series, with Professor Fiona Ross and John Hudson, who have designed the typefaces. The library seeks to bring classical Indian works alive and accessible to audiences within India and beyond. Publishers like Tara Books in India challenge publishing process by asking the designer to have a voice as an author. They are the first to acknowledge that design plays a predominant part in the publishing process. I'm proud to be a design co-author.

Q3. *Did you have any particular role models, mentors or support networks in your field?*

The creative community of artists, designers, publishers. There's a band of people across the world, who are connected through their purpose to employ publishing in a meaningful and purposeful way that touches other people. I'm also fortunate to have a lot of strong creative women who have come into my life – Gita Wolf, Geetha Varadharajan, Jasia Rierhardt, Rani Chandran, Sheena Calvert, Fiona Ross amongst others. And then there are the women who I have never met except on the page of a book who continue to inspire me through their words and actions on a page – Arundathi Roy, Sylvia Wynter, Franciscka Themerson, Isabel Wilkerson; and men – Arjun Appadurai, Bhajju Shyam, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Sheldon Pollock, Stuart Hall, Stefan Themerson, amongst others.

Q4. *What were the major obstacles or issues around gender that you encountered in your career? For example, did you feel that you encountered a glass ceiling, or old boys' networks? Did you experience difficulties in accessing credit (if required) or systemic bias in other forms? And what strategies have you developed to overcome such obstacles?*

This is a such a big question. I grew up in India and worked with creative women and men for whom gender, nor race was a limitation to their lives' purpose nor to connecting with others. They never let it stop them. This anchor, I now realise, is a strength and a privilege I have been lucky to have. It took leaving India for Britain to make me understand how Anglo-centric our profession and subject biases are. When we speak of typography or graphic design, to this day, we often refer to the canons and texts of the West. Often written by white men. The strategy I have developed to overcome this is to surround myself with people who understand the importance of other knowledges, who fight for them and value them. Today, I am a Reader in Intercultural Communication at a university – I would like to think that I am carving a path for graphic design and typography that acknowledges culture and context, and different ways of knowing, being, doing and making in the world.

Q5. *What are the best things about working in your part of the publishing industry? And on the flip side, what's the worst?*

The best thing is connecting with people from across the world, on a common purpose. The worst thing is that there are not enough people in publishing with this sense of purpose that's beyond the economic. We have so far to go.

Q6. *Is there anything about the industry that you would like to see change? If so, why?*

I'd like to see more purpose, and more support for the more marginalised voices, a recognition of design as an authorial voice.

There is a dramatic difference between mainstream publishing and independent publishing. I think our industry is far too driven by market, categorisation and labelling and

less by real purpose of supporting other knowledges, marginalised voices and unknown authors. This limits the exposure of books to specific audiences, age groups and often times, this idea of commercial success limits experimentation and risk-taking. I think there's some very good work being published by independent presses. Stefan Themerson, publisher at Gaberbocchus Press, when asked why he published books, noted that he did so because books deserve to exist. I'd like to see more of this as a rationale for book publishing.

Additionally, it would be good in the UK to have more prizes that support authors from diverse backgrounds. A good example is the Jhalak Prize, which celebrates books by British authors of colour.

I often see books featured on social media platforms where only the author or illustrator are acknowledged. Yet you can see from the books how much design has contributed to the success of the book. Design has been acknowledged as an authorial voice in many other industries, but publishing is still behind in grasping this.

Q7. What advice would you give to the next generation of women coming into the publishing industry?

Don't be afraid to find your own voice. To do things in your own way. Reach out to other women in publishing. There's a huge support group of well-meaning people.

Q8. Imagine you could invite anyone who worked in publishing, from any era, to a dinner party. You have space for three at your table. Who would you invite and why?

I would invite one of the Themersons – possibly Franciszka Themerson, Mahatma Gandhi, and Gita Wolf, publisher at Tara Books. Sadly, the former two are no more. All of them have non-mainstream, experimental approaches to text and to the book that was about value-driven purposes that transcended language, culture and countries.

Each believed/believes in the purpose of publishing as a process and an act that can bring different people together as a community. Through acts of publishing they displayed their belief that books can begin in multiple places and not just text – with a tribal artists' experience of travel to a big city, with image before text, with different genres mixing to create one publication. They believed and believe that publishing can make a difference in people's lives.

I'd love to hear them share thoughts with each other, and to simply share food and listen to this amazing conversation.

Q9. So much of your work is collaborative – across cultures and countries, but also sectors and disciplines. Can you tell us about this, please?

Publishing for me is about relationships. As a designer, I have the privilege to bring to life the stories and narratives of people from across the world. It doesn't matter if this is a roadshow in rural India with the BBC, a book with Tara Books about a tribal artist's first trip on a plane to London or a 100-year book series that aims to bring classics to life.

Q10. How has your experience of working in publishing compared with other working environments, in particular academia? Or perhaps other publishing sectors?

My publishing life and my academic life have enriched each other. As an academic I believe, as Arjun Appadurai did, that research is a fundamental human right. This curiosity to know and journey has been the core of how I journey through the publishing process from dialogue to design, from process to production, from text to typography. Publishing has taught me how important dialogue is and how you can give life to something that is beyond yourself by working truly collaboratively and cooperatively with others. Working in independent publishing has taught me that you can design beautiful books without hierarchy, and that failure is an integral part of the creative process.

Notes

1. Jennifer Mack-Watkins, 'Children of the Sun', 18 March–13 June 2021 <<https://www.brattleboromuseum.org/2020/12/07/jennifer-mack-watkins-children-of-the-sun/>> [accessed 27 July 2023].
2. Sophia Alexandrov, 'Three Artists' Books in Celebration of Juneteenth', 17 June 2021 <<https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/articles/2021/6/juneteenth>> [accessed 27 July 2023]; see also Jennifer Mack-Watkins' holdings at the Met Museum <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/852561>> [accessed 27 July 2023]; Jennifer Mack-Watkins, *Children of the Sun Exhibition Catalogue*, 2021 <<https://www.artlovescompany.org/bmacgiftshop/jennifer-mack-watkins-children-of-the-sun-exhibition-catalogue>> [accessed 27 July 2023].
3. See Black Women of Print <<https://www.blackwomenofprint.com/>> [accessed 27 July 2023].
4. See <<http://fayemishakur.com/>> [accessed 27 July 2023].
5. See fayemi shakur, *A Womb of Violet: An Anthology*, volumes I and II <<https://www.wombofviollet.com/>> [accessed 27 July 2023].