

Discovering Our History: Late Twentieth Century Feminist Organizing in Victoria, British Columbia

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Victoria, BC has a thriving community of feminist activists that are quite visible within the city today, but it also has a rich history of feminist organizing that seems to have largely disappeared from the landscape of the city. Instead, this history lives in archives, like the University of Victoria Archives, where I found collections relating to the Everywomans Books Collective and the Victoria branch of Women Against Pornography (WAP). By tracing how these organizations that operated at the end of the 20th Century navigated issues like sex work, pornography, and outreach and education of other women, we as feminists are able to see where the work we do came from and what is still left to do. This paper connects the work of these organizations to work that is currently being done in Victoria and Vancouver in the hopes that building these connections will allow us as activists to better chart future actions and to remind us that these issues are not new and we are not the first ones to attempt to tackle them.

As a feminist living, working, and participating in activism on the land colonially named “Victoria,” I had no idea about the wealth of activist history that existed in this city until I began to look for it. What I found was a history that is important, not just for the validation of seeing what those who have come before me did, but also because much of the work feminist organizers are doing now is part of a legacy of work that the women I discovered in the archives were doing including educating and uplifting one another and advocating for the rights of sex workers. Before I move forward with any discussion of this activism, I want to acknowledge that my activism, the writing of this paper, and the activism that this paper explores all take place on the unceded, colonially occupied lands of the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ peoples. This acknowledgement is especially important given that the organizations I am writing about dealt heavily with issues of consent, while non-consensually occupying Indigenous lands, as I continue to do.

In this paper, I will be looking primarily at the activities of the Victoria branch of Women Against Pornography (WAP) and the Everywomans

Books Collective¹ using collections and records housed at the University of Victoria Archives that include the organizations’ negotiation of sex work and pornography and their focus on education about issues that impact women. I will discuss the activities of WAP with an emphasis on their activism on behalf of sex workers and their anti-pornography advocacy and will connect those activities to feminist action that is ongoing, such as feminist and collectively run bookshops and the work of organizations like PACE and Peers, which advocate for the rights of sex workers and provide services to former and current sex workers. I will look at the Everywomans Books Collective as an act of political feminism and as a resource for other feminists and women’s organizations across the continent. I will also study the ways that Everywomans Books negotiated its stance on pornography and connect this stance to other bookstores in British Columbia that operated contemporaneously as well as ones which continue to operate in the twenty-first century.

Women Against Pornography (WAP) was an organization born out of the work of New-York-area feminist opposition to the sex industry that had developed in Times Square in the late 1970s.² As the anti-pornography movement grew among feminists, branches of WAP were established in different cities, including Victoria.³ The Victoria branch of WAP described itself as “a feminist collective whose aim [was] to defend the rights and dignity of all women ... and break down the barriers that divide women” by working “toward the elimination of pornography, through education, awareness, and grass-roots activism.”⁴ The Victoria branch was active throughout the 1980s and focused on educational work, supporting prostitutes in British Columbia, lobbying for their cause, and legal advocacy.

WAP had what may seem like a contradictory set of ethics around

1 Hereafter referred to as “Everywomans” or “Everywomans Books.” “Everywomans” is the correct spelling, though it is unclear as to why that spelling was chosen. Deborah Yaffe, “Feminism in Principle and in Practice: Everywomans Books,” *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 21, no.1 (1996): 156.

2 George R. Kirkpatrick and Louis A. Zurcher, Jr., “Women Against Pornography,” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 3, no.4 (1983): 12

3 Hereafter, “Women Against Pornography” and “WAP” will refer specifically to the Victoria branch of the organization.

4 “Women Against Pornography Pamphlet,” nd., AR197-1997-100 Box 1, Folder 1, Women Against Pornography, Victoria Branch fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada ; “Women Against Pornography Manifesto,” n.d., AR197-1997-100, Box 1, Folder 9, Women Against Pornography, Victoria Branch fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

sex work. They were “against pornography and for the rights of prostitutes,” seemingly separating out two groups of people who might now be collectively referred to as sex workers based on the specific type of work they engage in within the sex industry.⁵ The distinction they made between pornography and prostitution was that women involved in prostitution had some autonomy over their interactions with customers, while women who worked in pornography were controlled by producers and lacked the autonomy over their work that prostitutes had.⁶ In addition to their anti-pornography work, WAP also put a lot of effort into supporting and helping prostitutes, including publishing a regular pamphlet called “Bad Trick Sheet,” which encouraged prostitutes to call in and report “abusive or violent clients.”⁷ WAP then published the descriptions and licence plate numbers of these so-called “bad tricks” in “Bad Trick Sheet” in order to warn other women against taking them as clients. The sheet also encouraged prostitutes to call in and report police crackdowns on solicitation and on “keeping a common bawdyhouse,” again as a warning to other prostitutes.⁸ “Bad Trick Sheet” was also a medium for disseminating other information, such as information about STIs and STI prevention, news of current legislative motions regarding prostitution and trials of women charged with crimes related to prostitution, as well as educational information about male violence.⁹ WAP also organized self-defence workshops, advertised in “Bad Trick Sheet,” aimed at teaching prostitutes how to protect themselves if they did come across a “bad trick.”¹⁰ However, “Bad Trick Sheet” was not just a sombre source of information: it was also a community-focused publication that expressed a defiant and humorous attitude to the issues it covered through comics that put power back in the hands of women, such as one that states “for feminine protection every day, use ... a hand grenade!”¹¹

Publishing “Bad Trick Sheet” was not the end of WAP’s activism.

5 “Bad Trick Sheet,” 1984, AR197-1997-100 Box 1, Folder 1, Women Against Pornography, Victoria Branch fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Because of this separation, and because it is the language which the records use, I will be using “prostitute” and “prostitution” throughout the paper instead of the more current language of “sex worker” and “sex work.”

6 “Brief to the Fraser Committee on Pornography and Prostitution,” May 1984, AR197-1997-100 Box 1, Folder 4, Women Against Pornography, Victoria Branch fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

7 “Bad Trick Sheet”

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

They submitted two reports to the Fraser Committee on Pornography and Prostitution¹² in 1984, one dealing specifically with prostitution and the other with pornography.¹³ The Fraser Committee provided WAP an opportunity to potentially influence a report from which some recommendations would be passed into law, and the organization put forward its ideas about both pornography and prostitution.¹⁴ In these reports, WAP made clear that its analysis of prostitution and pornography were informed by women with lived experience of prostitution and pornography.¹⁵ The Fraser Committee had put together three proposed strategies for revising Canadian law: criminalization, decriminalization, and regulation.¹⁶ WAP laid out their positions on these strategies, and it preferred decriminalization because it would remove the legal stigma from prostitution, remove the power of police officers to harass prostitutes, and give women the most freedom and autonomy to conduct their business how they pleased, as opposed to regulation (or legalization), which placed regulations on prostitutes and prostitution encounters. This would restrict a prostitute’s autonomy and would allow police to retain the power to harass prostitutes.¹⁷

In the brief dealing with pornography, WAP laid out their case arguing that pornography was dangerous and potentially a form of hate literature.¹⁸ They argued that because there is “an institutionalized, and thus legitimized, third party who profits from” pornography: unlike in prostitution, the performers have no control over the distribution of their image, which creates a system of inequity.¹⁹ WAP thought that pornography reinforced heterosexual relations of male domination and thus was so dangerous to all women that it could be considered hate

12 The Fraser Committee was established to study pornography and prostitution in Canada in order to inform revisions to Canadian law dealing with those subjects.

13 “Brief to the Fraser Committee on Pornography and Prostitution,” January 1984, AR197-1997-100 Box 1, Folder 3, Women Against Pornography, Victoria Branch fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada ; “Brief to the Fraser Committee on Pornography and Prostitution,” May 1984.

14 James Robertson, “Prostitution,” *Library of Parliament*, 2003, 10.

15 “Brief to the Fraser Committee on Pornography and Prostitution,” January 1984.

16 Robertson, “Prostitution,” 8.

17 “Brief to the Fraser Committee on Pornography and Prostitution,” January 1984.

18 “Brief to the Fraser Committee on Pornography and Prostitution,” May 1984.

19 *Ibid.*

literature.²⁰ Part of WAP's anti-pornography work included corresponding with Ann Hansen, a member of Direct Action and the Wimmin's Fire Brigade, about her trial for the firebombing of several locations of Red Hot Video, a pornographic video store.²¹ Members visited her while she awaited trial and supported her in preparing her case.²²

In order to buffer their anti-pornography stance, WAP also had to define what it considered to be pornography. A slideshow that WAP created entitled "Erotica: A feminist Exploration" reveals how they began to work through the differences between pornography, which they were against, and erotica, which they supported. WAP posed erotica as an alternative to pornography, and defines the erotic (as opposed to the pornographic) as including "mutuality, respect, commitment, and a concern for one another's wellbeing."²³ Erotica, argued WAP, highlighted sensuality and challenged beauty standards by including older bodies, fat bodies, disabled bodies, and bodies of colour.²⁴ Above all, erotica was a way for women to take "positive delight in [their] bodies; seeing [themselves] as whole, powerful, and lifegiving," as opposed to pornography, which was not produced for women to look at, but rather for men to look at women as though they were furnishings in a fantasy.²⁵

Both the anti-pornography and prostitute-rights work that WAP was doing in the 1980s continue to be undertaken by feminists today. Organizations such as Peers Victoria and the PACE Society in Vancouver offer services and programs for sex workers, including a way to report "bad dates" and to have that information shared with other sex workers. They also offer a drop-in wellness centre, outreach programs that provide sex workers who work on the street with meals, safer sex supplies, information about sex workers' legal rights, and public education programs that are informed and presented by people with lived experiences of sex work.²⁶ Many organizations now also serve sex workers who are not women, which WAP did not.²⁷ There is also ongoing advocacy for the decriminalization of sex work in Canada, as the laws

20 Ibid.

21 "Letter from Ann Hansen to members of WAP" 1984, AR197-1997-100, Box 2, Folder 1, Women Against Pornography, Victoria Branch fonds, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

22 Ibid.,

23 "Erotica: A Feminist Exploration" nd., AR197-1997-100, Box 4, Folder 2, Women Against Pornography, Victoria Branch fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Peers Victoria Resource Society.

27 Peers Victoria Resource Society ; PACE Society ; "Women Against Pornography Manifesto".

passed based on the Fraser Committee's report are still in effect, and aspects of sex work remain illegal, which continues to put sex workers in danger.²⁸ The anti-pornography work that WAP was doing still exists, but an evolution of feminist conversations about pornography has led to movements toward the definition and production of "feminist porn," which has many parallels with what WAP described as erotica: it is produced by and for women, and focuses on women's desire and pleasure, as well as "connectedness, tenderness, passion ... and longing."²⁹ The work that WAP was doing is still being done today, and being able to trace that legacy allows the people doing that work to historicize and contextualize it and better envision what still needs to be done.

The Everywomans Books Collective was a feminist bookstore that opened in 1979 as a non-profit organization staffed entirely by volunteers with the mission to provide access to feminist literature that was not available in other bookstores at the time.³⁰ During its operation, from 1979 to 1997, it functioned as a space for disseminating feminist information, hosting feminist events, building community for women in Victoria, and as a resource for other organizations and feminist bookstores across the continent.

Everywomans Books made information that was not available in mainstream bookstores accessible, not just to women who could physically get to Victoria, but also to women across the province through their mail-order catalogue, which allowed women to purchase the books Everywomans offered even if they could not make the trip into the store.³¹ The comments and suggestions book that the store kept for customers to request books shows just how integral this service was for so many different types of women.³² In the book, there are requests for specific books by specific authors, requests for books discussing theories of feminism or race or sexuality, requests for children's books that promoted non-sexism, as well as requests for books of practical information that women could not find elsewhere about menopause, ageing

28 "Decriminalizing Sex Work," Pivot Legal Society.

29 Robert Scott Stewart, "Is Feminist Porn Possible?" *Sexuality & Culture* 23, no.1 (2018): 266.

30 "Incorporation of Everywomans Books," 1979, AR050-1995-050, Box 3, File 23, Everywomans Books fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

31 "Mail Order Catalogue," 1989, AR050-1995-050, Box 4, Folder 3, Everywomans Books fonds, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

32 "Comments and Suggestions," n.d., AR050-1995-050, Box 3, Folder 21, Everywomans Books fonds, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

sexuality, and living as a lesbian.³³ The correspondence that the store saved provides a window into how important the store was in the lives of women. There are letters of thanks and gratitude, letters presumably sent in with catalogue orders that express the difficulty women had finding the materials they were ordering locally, as well as Christmas letters sent to the store for years, even after the sender had moved out of the country.³⁴ The grateful, affectionate words in these letters demonstrate the importance of community spaces like Everywomans and the access to information it provided. The archived correspondence of the store also sheds light on its significance to other organizations in Victoria and across the continent. There are letters from Planned Parenthood Alberta inquiring about the book of local resources for women that the store kept as they were looking into making one for their own community, from the Okanagan Women's Coalition inquiring about informative literature for the women's resource centre they were planning in Kelowna, and from other feminist bookstores across the continent looking to keep up to date with what other feminist bookstores were doing.³⁵

Everywomans was also a political endeavour with the aim of furthering feminist thought and women's writing. Feminist bookstores provided a market for women's writing and for independent feminist publishers, who in turn were able to produce more content to stock these stores throughout the latter third of the twentieth century.³⁶ This symbiotic relationship made operating one of these bookstores a deliberate, political act of making space for women's writing and creating opportunities for women's writing to be published, allowing their ideas to reach other women.³⁷ Everywomans hosted and sponsored readings and book signings of authors travelling through Victoria bringing further attention to their thoughts and creating more opportunities for women in Victoria to engage with the works of those authors.³⁸ Even

33 Ibid.

34 "Correspondance," n.d., AR050-1995-050, Box 3, Folder 23, Everywomans Books fonds, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

35 "Letter from Planned Parenthood Alberta to Everywomans Books," 17 October 1990, AR050-1995-050, Box 3, Folder 24, Everywomans Books fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada ; "Letter from Okanagan Women's Coalition to Everywomans Books," 7 January 1985, AR050-1995-050, Box 3, Folder 23, Everywomans Books fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. ;

36 Kathryn McGrath, "Pushed to the Margins: the Slow Death and Possible Rebirth of the Feminist Bookstore," *Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources* 24, no.3 (2014): 4-5.

37 Ibid., 5

38 "Correspondence," n.d., AR050-1995-050, Box 3, Folder 24, Everywomans Books Fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British

the way that the organization was structured was a feminist, political act. The collective was run not-for-profit, and any money that the store earned on sales went into paying rent and ordering the next run of books.³⁹ All of the staff were unpaid volunteers who did not even receive discounts on purchases at the store.⁴⁰ Deborah Yaffe, who was a member of the collective for many years, says that the decision-making in the collective was "decentralized and deliberately anarchic" in order to minimize the power imbalances that hierarchical decision-making creates within a group.⁴¹ Having an organizing structure that deprioritizes hierarchy and actively resists a capitalist, profit-focused power structure is an inherently political, and feminist, act.

Like WAP, though not as intensely, Everywomans Books had to define its relationship to pornography and erotica. They defined this relationship as "anti-pornography ... while being in favour of erotic representation of women, by women, for women," which seems to be analogous to WAP's definition of erotica as well as to the goals of those producing feminist porn today.⁴² Everywomans was pushed towards making this statement in the midst of conflicts with Canada Customs over the importation of material deemed to be "obscene," which was seized at the border.⁴³ This conflict with border agents was a shared experience between independent bookstores in Canada that imported materials about sexuality, especially queer sexuality, regardless of their missions or organizational structures. This conflict story was made most visible by Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium, a gay and lesbian bookstore in Vancouver, through their Supreme Court challenge in 2002, after Everywomans had already closed. As Everywomans was a non-profit bookstore, it did not have the money to challenge the state the way that a for-profit store like the infamous Little Sister's did.

Though Everywomans closed in 1997 due to financial difficulty, that was not the end of independent, activist-focused bookstores in British Columbia. As mentioned above, Little Sister's continues to operate in Vancouver, providing a space for queer community and information. In

Columbia, Canada.

39 Yaffe, "Feminism in Principle and in Practice: Everywomans Books," 154.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 155

42 "Statement on Pornography and Censorship," n.d., AR050-1995-050, Box 4, Folder 10, Everywomans Books fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

43 "Mail Order Catalogue," 1989, AR050-1995-050, Box 4, Folder 3, Everywomans Books fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada; "Statement on Pornography and Censorship," n.d., AR050-1995-050, Box 4, Folder 10, Everywomans Books fonds, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

Victoria, Camas Books & Infoshop has operated since 2007 as a “tool for social transformation, community building ... and the ongoing development of radical alternatives.”⁴⁴ It is a collective run entirely by volunteers, like Everywomans was, and it uses its space to host workshops, book signings, and readings, including a book launch for Ann Hansen’s book *Taking the Rap* in 2018.⁴⁵ Though Camas is not an explicitly feminist space or a women’s space, it is a space that carries books that are relevant to modern feminist work: books that focus on the experiences of Indigenous people, queer and transgender people, and people of colour. The focus on anarchist thought also offers different perspectives on how to move forward with feminist activist work.⁴⁶ Another Victoria-based initiative that is not necessarily a bookstore but carries similar content with a similar mission is the UVic Pride Collective’s library. The UVic Pride Collective, which is the student organization that provides space and resources to the queer community on UVic’s campus, is collectively run, avoiding hierarchy like Everywomans, and their free library carries queer literature, non-fiction, zines, and even films that members of the collective and visitors to the space are free to browse and borrow. These spaces are all doing the same work as Everywomans—disseminating alternative and radical information that would be hard to find in mainstream bookstores and giving members of the community access to information that impacts their lives and ways of thinking.

Activist history is not always easy to find, especially for organizations that no longer operate and thus cannot tell their own histories. Finding these histories serves more than just the purpose of knowing they exist. It allows us as activists to trace the histories of our ideas, which, in turn, allows us to better chart our future actions. It allows us to see the work that was left unfinished and to work towards finishing it. Being able to trace sex worker rights advocacy and anti-pornography advocacy through WAP and feminist information distribution and community space creation through Everywomans Books in Victoria in the late twentieth century allows us to historicize the work we do and refocus our efforts on finishing that work.



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⁴⁴ “About Us,” Camas Books & Infoshop, <https://www.camas.ca/about-us> (accessed 12 March 2019).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.