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The Feminist Library: An Interview with Author Leslie Kern

Kali Herbst Minino, News Editor

What does a feminist city look like? Leslie Kern, an associate professor of geography and environment as well as the director of women's and gender studies at Mount Allison University, tackles this question in her book, "Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-made World." She will be releasing a new book titled "Gentrification is Inevitable and Other Lies" in September.

KHM: You live in Sackville, New Brunswick—a small rural town in Canada. How is that environment different for a woman compared to a big city?

LK: There's definitely challenges here—there are not as many services that women often rely on in cities like childcare, health care, recreation, public transit and affordable housing. In a rural area, there's just not as much.

When I moved here when my daughter was about 11 years old, I noticed things in the town were closer together. It was easy for her to go from school, to work or to swimming lessons without my immediate supervision. My work was close to where she was all the time, so it felt like it was easier to balance paid work and care work responsibilities.

KHM: When you talked about how some feminists' version of feminism will exclude marginalized groups, you specifically mentioned protests with Take Back the Night gatherings in the 1990s. Could you talk a little bit about that?

LK: That particular strain of feminist activism at the time was emerging out of a strand of radical feminism that was very focused—and not wrongly—on violence against women, especially male violence against women. They saw the roots of that violence as being inherent within patriarchy. Their priority was women claiming the spaces back, but there really wasn't much of an intersectional understanding of how that scenario could be very exclusive to women who were trans, who did not fit necessarily into a neat gender binary, who were lesbians but were still experiencing violence in their relationships, who were sex workers and were seen as a whole 'other' category of women. That was not really discussed. The reality of the high levels of violence faced by disabled women and older women, that kind of nuance to the conversation wasn't as prevalent as it is today. Not that we still couldn't do better, but it is a little more nuanced.

KHM: What can we improve on?

LK: The idea of intersectionality has a strong foothold in feminism and there's an acknowledgement that we always have to recognize that racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia and so on, are always at work. We can always be cautious against elevating white feminism, which is the idea that we improve conditions for women who are already at the top of the hierarchy in terms of income, profession, all that stuff, and then everybody else will be lifted up. That hasn't been the case.



There are some wings of folks who call themselves feminists, yet are very anti-trans, “terfs.”, I see that as a major problem for feminism today. There are folks who would consider trans women in particular to not be included in the category of women and see that as a threat to feminism. We need to be really vigilant against letting that discourse take over.

KHM: One of my favorite chapters in the book talks about how female friendships are a tool for women in the city. You talk about how urban planning and policy isn't something we can depend on to foster those relationships—so what do we do then? How do we help those relationships thrive?

LK: I love seeing stories of women or older folks who are taking this into their own hands in different ways. That might be, if they have the means to, buying a piece of property like land or a big farm and deciding to live together in it as a group. Stories about single mothers choosing to buy or rent homes together so they can share the work of childcare and domestic responsibilities. Stories about friends creating cohousing scenarios.

I think it's going to be a while before we see a lot of non-single family home type housing being created. I'm always encouraged by stories of people being like, “Oh, we don't see anything that fits our needs, so we're just going to make it happen for ourselves.”

KHM: You say that women's fear benefits somebody, and that changing city design won't get rid of their fear. Why is that?

LK: Women are socialized to constantly be fearful in public space. It has a broader purpose within a patriarchal, heterosexist and racist society, which is to keep women in a subordinate role so that they'll keep doing things like taking on the majority of the care work. It may also function to keep women limited in terms of their choices, career, where to live and go to school. That allows male dominance in those areas to continue. It benefits the status quo.

The answer cannot be fully found within better lighting, better sight lines, although I do think urban design can play a role in creating a better sense of safety. Clearly, it's a much deeper cultural, social and political problem that requires intervention in the legal, educational and pop culture realms, as well as the physical urban environment.

KHM: In that same realm, you talk about how cities try to look safer, but they're not actually safer, could you tell me about that?

LK: I think a lot of the beautification or aesthetic redesigns of what may have been previously working class or industrial areas of the city creates a perception that things are physically cleaner, but also socially cleaner. You're not going to encounter crime, or people experiencing homelessness, or drug use in public or any of those things deemed to be unpleasant aspects of living in cities. That middle class white takeover of urban space creates a lack of safety for those who are lower income, unhoused or engage in things like street-based sex work. There's a greater incentive to criminalize those people and the behaviors they engage in.

There's a surveillance culture that goes along with this. When you have more policing and surveillance, we tend to have more racial profiling, so people of color are more at risk of being harmed. That bright clean facade can really hide a lot of underlying processes that are potentially harmful to others.

KHM: What kinds of facilities or changes would you personally like to see to create more inclusive spaces?

LK: One thing I've been thinking about a lot since the pandemic is, “how do we create more spaces for collective care and care work in cities?” Rather than all of the care work being done primarily by women, hidden away in the home, or for very low wages by women of color or recent immigrants, how can we think about using our urban public spaces, indoors and outdoors, to create more collective systems of care? That's community kitchens, increased welcoming spaces for children, spaces of rest and spaces to be out and to be social. I think care is often an afterthought in planning. So if we could increase the visibility of care, maybe we would increase its respect and value as well.