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The making of *Mamatoto: Virago, The Body Shop* and Feminist Business Strategy

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The making of *Mamatoto*: Virago, The Body Shop and Feminist Business Strategy

This article explores a collaboration between Virago Press and The Body Shop (TBS) to shine a light on feminist and women's business, what they have shared historically and how they could work together in late 20th century Britain. It uses as a lens the 1991 sale of a Body Shop book, *Mamatoto: A Celebration of Birth*, to Virago Press. The processes and outcome raise thorny questions: how can political commitments lead to business innovation? How can business support political aims? What kinds of deals can be done between divergent 'activist' businesses, and what kind of identification between feminist entrepreneurs supports such deals? *Mamatoto*, sold alongside a range of mother and baby toiletries of the same name, was important to Virago commercially at a time of economic precarity and expressed TBS's growing interest in combining marketing with social justice campaigns. Yet the book's representation of women in developing countries points to neo-colonial elements in the white, middle class 'mama market' of the 1990s, a market which TBS especially cultivated but which contradicted the principles of the women's movements Virago aimed to serve. The *Mamatoto* deal thus arguably involved political compromise, even if it was good business. Yet the partnership also reflects the strategy and strengths of both Virago (established 1973) and TBS (1976) as enduring and iconic women-centred businesses. TBS simultaneously pioneered fair-trade initiatives and a ground-breaking practice of 'social' audit, while Virago was developing more inclusive, multi-cultural and transnational approaches to its work, including in a contemporaneous production of a cookbook with the development charity Oxfam. Understanding their struggles to align value chains and combine purpose and profit remains positive and instructive for would-be feminist entrepreneurs today.¹

¹ I am deeply grateful to Sue Belgrave, Audrey Bronstein, Robert Cornford, Eleanor Dickens, Lennie Goodings, Ruthie Petrie, the BOWW team and the anonymous readers for their help and support in preparing this article. This work was supported by a Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant as part of 'The Business of Women's Words: Purpose and Profit in Feminist Publishing', RPG-2017-18.

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Introduction

Mamatoto, Swahili for ‘mother and child’, as The Body Shop (TBS) named its 1991 coffee table book, aimed to be a ‘glorious pot-pourri’ of cultural tales which chart the journey from conception to living with a new baby. Chapters include ‘I came from the sky’, ‘Preparing the nest’ and ‘A new stranger has arrived’ (Aria et al. 1991). Its cultural mash-up is echoed in playful collages, photographs or reproductions of traditional sculptures, engravings, and art.

TBS founder Anita Roddick introduced the book with a welcome to maternal community, referencing her own alienated medicalised experience of giving birth in 1971 (4-5). A photograph of her as a baby enhances the motif of shared personal experiences; a second shows her bowing over a dark baby on a straw mat, Roddick wearing a Nepalese headdress. She lauds the healthcare practices of indigenous peoples as free of medicalisation and litigation and describes sharing experiences with mothers from other cultural traditions in contrast with the ‘advertising’ style of Western medical guidance, ‘one-way’ in its manipulative persuasiveness of the correct, patriarchal method. Yet alongside she explains that many of these rituals and stories informed the creation of a new ‘Mamatoto’ range of 11 mother-and-baby toiletries, thus product-placing her natural skin and haircare business. The book itself was clearly part of an evolving business strategy, as Roddick led her company into publishing and other diverse ventures.

This mixing of purpose with profit brought together TBS with Virago, *Mamatoto*’s publisher, similarly founded by a charismatic woman and hailed for its political aims and achievements. Virago was the largest and most enduring of the many feminist book publishers which evolved out of the 1970s Women’s Liberation Movement. Launched by Carmen Callil in 1973, it was inspired by movement magazine *Spare Rib*, aiming to ‘change the world by publishing books which celebrated women and women’s lives, and thus spread the message of women’s liberation to the whole population’ (Callil 2008). But while *Spare Rib* was mostly run as a co-op or collective, Virago was established as a limited company and has always been a commercial venture. *Mamatoto*’s conception and design suggests differences between the companies, challenging assumptions that women can share values as well as profits. TBS was a cosmetics business, experimenting with social responsibility. Virago was a

social movement initiative, which took the form of a business. To understand the deal between them, let us look at their respective evolutions.

Innovation, risk and the rise of feminist business

TBS and Virago Press were both set up in sitting rooms by women with little capital and no business training, and both became enduring businesses with highly recognisable brands. Starting a women's business in the 1970s UK had its challenges: from hyper-inflation to the fact that women were unable to get loans in their own name until after the Sex Discrimination Act of 1976. But there was far less competition than today, business rates and rents were lower, the pace pre-internet far slower.

Book publishing, considered largely a 'gentleman's profession', benefited from controlled prices and was typically based on founder or family ownership. Virago was founded by Callil with financial backing from Naim Attallah, owner of Quartet books, for which Callil was originally PR manager, who also bankrolled The Women's Press in 1977 (Murray 2004: 70; C. E. Riley 2018: 18-20). Callil hired editor Ursula Owen and manager Harriet Spicer; the three taught themselves accounting, went independent from Quartet and dreamed up their distinctive lists in the bright heat of a new women's movement discovering women's culture everywhere it looked.² Their iconic 'Midway' paperbacks with their dark green spines and beautiful covers, adorned many activist shelves – but also were also cheaper to produce than the standard hardback, and anticipated the general shift to trade paperbacks (C. E. Riley 2018: 19-20).

By 1980, Virago was wowing the literary establishment. In 1982 it joined the UK's most prestigious literary house, Chatto, Bodley Head and Cape Group (CBC), with a threefold increase in the value of the business; Callil was made head and Managing Director of Chatto & Windus/The Hogarth Press, with the company renamed CVBC to include Virago (De Bellaigue 2004: 145). Mary Stott, Women's Page editor of the *Guardian* newspaper wrote in congratulation that it was like having one's

² 'How to Read a Balance Sheet', from the International Labour Organisation, with handwritten notes by Carmen Callil, Add MS 89178/1/5; Add MS 89178/1/6 –Notes on how to run a publishing company, handwritten by Harriet Spicer, 1976, both at The British Library.

beloved daughter be offered a diplomatic service job after gaining first class honours at Oxford – extreme pride and joy would be accompanied by sadness that she would surely be moving on and things would never be the same again.³ By 1986, its annual turnover was more than £1.5 million, quite substantial by conventional publishing standards, and indeed by the standards of CVBC itself, which it was by then propping up (Young 1989: 1). By Virago's twentieth birthday in 1994, it employed 19 staff and had published almost 1,000 books (C. E. Riley 2018: 62).

TBS made a modest start in Brighton in 1976, when Anita Roddick secured a bank loan of £4,000 to open a shop selling haircare and cosmetics she had herself made from natural ingredients. Within a few years it was a household name. Describing her motivation as enjoyable work she could manage as the mother of two young children, Roddick's simple plastic containers with hand-written labels, were actually urine sample bottles from the local hospital, her eco-refill policy designed to avoid running out of them. The honey and oatmeal scrub mask, cucumber cleansing milk and cocoa butter body lotion came from squashing ingredients in the bath. The famed dark green painted walls were the best way to disguise the damp. Within a year, she had opened a second shop, and, with husband Gordon, franchised the operation (A. Roddick & Miller 1991: 72-6). By 1984 TBS boasted 138 stores, 87 of which were outside the United Kingdom, and the Roddicks floated the company that year, though keeping 27.6% of the stock. From then, with Gordon handling finances as chairperson and Anita as Managing Director, the company saw extraordinary growth. The London Stock Exchange saw TBS's stock price rise 10,944% in its first eight years, dubbed 'the shares that defy gravity', with investors realising a 97.2 percent annual return between November 1986 and November 1991. By 1994, franchises stretched across Europe and the US and a large manufacturing headquarters had been opened in North Carolina (Grant 2003).

Both businesses faced risks. TBS's structure of franchises and head franchisees required careful management. Ethical cosmetic ingredients were difficult to source, and

³ Letter from Mary Stott to 'Carmen and all', February 17th 1982. Add MS88904/5/2, British Library. I have tried assiduously to contact the copyright holder of this letter. If at the time of publication, it has not been possible to trace them, I would be very pleased to hear from them.

it was challenging to guard formulas while being transparent about suppliers and manufacturing – particularly given the TBS’ commitment not to test on animals. Virago had to establish a market with a tiny team, little capital and high expectation from the feminist community. Once successful, it faced competition and poaching, as bigger publishers recognised the appeal of feminist books. The move to CVBC ironically turned out disastrous, because of poor business practice on the part of the other partners and over-powerful shareholders (De Bellaigue 2004: 145-49).⁴ Virago was able to buy itself back out in 1987, only to face the trials of merger-mania as UK book publishing was deregulated. It required investment by Rothschild Ventures and Robert Gavron, with Random House UK retaining a 10% stake in the company. In 1993 Rothschild Ventures sold their shares to Robert Gavron and the Virago directors, and, for all their ingenuity, circumstances forced them to become a subsidiary, in 1995, of Little, Brown (C. E. Riley 2018: 86; Withers 2019).⁵

Mamatoto was published in 1991 in the midst of these ‘generally discouraging times’, as Virago sought to develop more commercial titles and to seek useful partners in doing so.⁶ Marketing Director Lennie Goodings acquired the book from TBS and Karen Cooper in sales arranged production. TBS offered impactful brand and powerful distribution in their shops, plus subsidised advance and permissions costs.⁷ The Virago archives show it as one of a number of ‘Ideas for Books’ in 1991-93, including tempts to well-known personalities such as Susie Orbach and Glenda Jackson, and to get

⁴ See also Add MS 89178/1/5, British Library, for Callil’s concerns about overheads and productivity in the minutes of board meetings at Chatto & Windus Ltd, (e.g. 2 December 1982).

⁵ See also Add MS 88904, Virago Press Archive, British Library catalogue description.

⁶ Ruthie Petrie interviewed by D-M Withers, *The Business of Women’s Words*, British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C834/02, transcript p. 259/track 10 ©The British Library.

⁷ The book was priced at £9.99 with a print run of 36,000. TBS subsidised the advance and permissions of £15,000, and an agreed sale of 10,000 at 60% discount with no transaction or distribution charge. Virago also sold the rights to Viking for an American edition. Figures from Add MS 89178/1/30, British Library, ‘Virago Business Plan 1991-95, Prepared by Harriet Spicer and Lennie Goodings, July 1991’, p. 8-9.

people to write books about things they weren't known for.⁸ Sales achieved an important £40,000 net profit.⁹

The book reflected TBS's growing political interests, first seen in 1986 when Greenpeace secured Roddick's agreement to display its Save the Whale posters in shop windows. Ten years later, the company felt able to turn its flagship store in New York into an 'Ogoni Freedom Centre', after the Roddicks had become involved in the Ogoni people's struggle against Shell Oil in Nigeria. Over this period, women's and feminist interests became headline causes, with anti-domestic violence and body pride campaigns.

All of this entwined with TBS marketing strategy, which included an unusual refusal to advertise until 1994. Roddick recognised conventional beauty advertising as 'immoral', trading on women's hopes with inevitably ineffective products. Instead, window displays, catalogues, and point of purchase product descriptions were used to attract customers, including cheeky pin ups of men and pastiches of 50s housewives with feminist slogans (A. Roddick & Miller 1991: 15). Roddick discovered that editorial coverage – which was free – was the best form of promotion, and easily done when she won prizes (including 1984 Veuve Clicquot Business Woman of the Year and an OBE in 1988), profile and political attention.

Roddick described her approach in her 1991 business autobiography (co-written with Russell Miller), *Body and Soul*, published by Ebury the same year as *Mamatoto*. She asserts her 'passionate belief' that business 'can be fun [...] conducted with love and a powerful force for good'. All royalties would be donated to 'the entrepreneurial, spirited people and organizations working to right social wrongs', including 'UNPO, the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization', and The Medical Foundation helping victims of torture (Flyleaf). As she put it, 'after education, nothing has been more important to The Body Shop's success than our ability to communicate. [...] We use every available medium to preach, teach, inspire and stimulate – [...] it is not enough to make a financial profit, we must make a spiritual profit' (145). From 1990-91, sales were up 46 percent to \$238.4 million; net profits were \$26.2 million, up 71

⁸ Add MS 88904/3/6, 'Ideas for books to be published', Virago Press Archive, British Library.

⁹ Add MS 89178/1/30 'Virago Business Plan 1991-95', p. 8-9, as above.

percent (Grant 2003). As far as they knew, this would only continue as they expanded their US operation.

Strategy, reception and the mama market

Mamatoto framed a new product range with a story of shared women's empowerment and pleasure. Allying with a legendary feminist publisher's editorial expertise gave cachet and new reach, uniting Virago's strongly feminist brand and TBS's much bigger, less politicised women's market. This is reflected in the book's design and genre.

Mamatoto broke Virago's general formats in its reader-friendly landscape-layout, its equal balance between lavish colour photographs and text. As a handbook, it also contrasted with Virago's speciality of literary fiction, a direction anticipated in its 1988 commitment to new investors to diversify into non-fiction and biography.¹⁰ Credited to 'The Body Shop Team', it was rooted in the research of Carroll Dunham, an anthropology graduate from Princeton, then running a school in Nepal.¹¹ Roddick liked her book *The Hidden Himalayas*, illustrated by Dunham's husband's photographs, and invited them to join her trip to Nepal's Humla region. Roddick then sponsored Dunham to travel the world to gather birth stories, from the ceremonial preparation of vitamin-rich porridge served to, and smeared on, pregnant women in Sudan, to Bedouin sprinkling antiseptic dried rosemary on the baby's cord after birth, or Nepalese baby massage (R. Riley 1991). This, accompanied by local myths and artwork, comprised the book's content, written up by childcare specialist Barbara Aria.

Mamatoto directly appealed to mothers as women undertaking vital reproductive work as well as undergoing the mystical experience of giving birth. Men's participation as carers was also prominent, from experiences of 'sympathy symptoms' in Ecuador and England, to Chagga elders in Uganda, giving prenatal lessons to young fathers,

¹⁰ Add MS88904/3/1 Virago Business Plan, 1987, British Library.

¹¹ Individual names are listed as Carroll Dunham, Frances Myers (designer); Neil Barnden (designer), Alan McDougall (Head of Design) and Thomas L. Kelly, Dunham's husband. See also McDougall, Alan (1991), Responsible Design and the Body Shop. *Design Management Journal*, 2(4), 13-5. doi: 10.1111/j.1948-7169.1991.tb00082.x.

reflecting Virago's mission to publish books which questioned and diversified patriarchal ideologies of motherhood (C. E. Riley 2018: 115). At the same time, Roddick, who had already planned a mother-and-baby range, saw in Dunham's research the opportunity to 'formalise the company's anthropological interests' (R. Riley 1991). Though mocked as more 'silly news' from TBS by some journalists at the time, calling on anthropologists to turn their hand to product development was ahead of the curve from a commercial perspective (Pincombe 1990). So too was 'double marketing' to mothers now buying for themselves as well as for their children. The Mamatoto launch included: Baby Bottom (tissues containing aloe vera gel with camomile extract); Leg Gel (cooling peppermint and camomile); baby powder (talc replaced with traditional maize starch); massage oil; Baby Wash Bags (soapless); a Labour Day Pack and Mamatoto T-shirt; an anti-stretch mark cocoa butter stick, and neroli face wipes (Chunn 1990; Sharp 1991). A related promotion included gift vouchers for baby massage classes at TBS's new 'Green Rooms', anticipating the development of an experience economy (Aschkenasy 1990).¹²

Such products spoke to a new group of women with disposable income, and who wanted books and toiletries which matched their sense of themselves as intelligent, discerning and, to a degree, politically conscious (de Laat & Baumann 2016; Woodward 1994: 120). At the same time, this new mama market also responded to women 'reclaiming' motherhood, influenced by 'new age' ideologies which rejected medical technologies and encouraged natural living and self-help. Often presented as anti-capitalistic, paradoxically this reflected and stimulated new consumer markets in alternative health and leisure. It was also sometimes articulated as a backlash or corrective against the demands for equal pay and opportunity of the women's movements of previous decades, rather than as a reaction to the pressures of dual-earner families and the expectation of longer hours regardless of domestic responsibilities. Public promotion of mothering as a choice thus concealed how feminist demands for reproductive work to be properly recognised were still resisted, by men, business or the state. And it ignored the analysis being led by postcolonial feminists about the exploitation by elite women of the labour of poorer or migrant women, in a

¹² There were seven London-based Green Rooms where the vouchers can be exchanged.

marketisation of carework uneasily unfolding alongside the natural mother ideal (Shorr 1997).

The collaboration also came to fruition ‘a fertile time for ecofeminist writing’ (Buckingham 2015: 845), its thinking certainly evident on the world stage at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (dubbed the ‘Earth Summit’) in Brazil in 1992, the year after *Mamatoto* was published. Ecofeminists proposed that ‘the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism’, but whilst some looked for an answer in an ‘essentialist’ ideal of woman as earth mother/goddess, others articulated more social economic critiques (845). *Mamatoto*’s blending of green products with an idea of natural motherhood can be seen to echo ecofeminist philosophies which relate ecological harmony with lost matriarchies. It can equally be criticised as a case in point of over-simplification or wishful thinking about what developed-nation women have in common with women from the majority world.

Mamatoto then seems to crystallise a range of contradictory forces. On the one hand, the book’s sweep of varied customs challenges Western handbooks such as *Baby and Child*, the UK childcare guru Penelope Leach’s bestseller (1977, revised in 1988), or Heidi Murkoff’s practical American pregnancy bible, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* (1984). One Amazon reader comments ‘this collection allows the Western mother and mother-to-be to step out of our comfort zone and let mothers of the world teach us. [...] Enjoy this book completely until it is in tatters – like mine’.¹³ On the other, its romanticising of ‘natural’ birth and non-Western birth practices is deeply problematic, as explored even at the time of publication by Pam Mason, reviewing it for the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*. While women in the wealthy West are supposedly ‘enclosed in a malevolent bubble of pollution and patriarchy’, non-Western mothers are presented as perfect and natural - the Indian woman watching a lotus flower to enable her cervix to open; indigenous Australian spirit babies dancing about.

The Body Shop is a contradictory affair. All that commitment to greenery and nature, side by side with a commitment to making a profit. All that concern for

¹³ Mroczek, Liberty (16 January 2002), Customer review, available on the Amazon.com website at <https://www.amazon.com/Mamatoto-Celebration-Birth-Carroll-Dunham/dp/0670842788> (viewed 20 February 2020).

humanity, with products sold at prices that would seriously diminish the average giro. These products are developed using natural resources from 'Third World' countries, and although Anita Roddick is reported to have pledged her personal fortune to the peoples of the Rainforest, there are huge contradictions raised by this kind of 'trade' in the 'Third World'. (Mason 1991)

Mason quotes from poet Irma Upex-Huggins's satirical image of the white woman's grotesque consumption not only of the natural resources of developing countries but of the black woman herself: '*Bitter extractions give wispy flyaway hair body/Joboba rejuvenates socio-economic skins/Parched nearly-black on the Costas/Competing with the black-as-native in the Gambia*'.¹⁴

The book admittedly contains inset boxes headed 'Facts You Don't Want to Know', contrasting, for example, death in childbirth for Africa and Norway: 1 in 15 in Africa, 1 in 50,000 in Norway, or the 'The Horrors of the State', citing Romania's forced breeding programme alongside the Chinese forced abortions and sterilisations in Tibet (Aria et al. 1991: 113, 81). Yet as Mason points out, the economic or political contexts are superficial or absent. Sometimes women are themselves implicated, as in the box on women who smoke during pregnancy, with a stereotypically working-class image. It seems that Virago's generally more critical approach to issues of representation lost out here to *The Body Shop*: interestingly Mason does not mention Virago in her review.

Cultural Studies critics Michele Grossman and Denise Cuthbert were also quick to assess the book as having fallen prey to the very conservatism it purported to challenge in its feel-good but troubling positioning of non-Western women's 'birthlore'. *Mamatoto*'s 'metaproduct', for them, is a discourse which reinstates the Western white woman's body as the standard, even as the book appears to celebrate transcultural specificity and difference. This is visually underscored in the collaged layout of unattributed images from traditional cultures, and the photographic chronotype of black women in nature or fields, with white women in houses or hospitals. Images of plentiful yet vulnerable black children replicate an ideology of imperialist or neo-colonial charity but also figure white women's anxiety about childlessness, a subject of public

¹⁴ See Upex-Huggins, Irma (1991), *Aloes and Brown Sugar*. Croydon: Cube.

discussion in the 1990s.¹⁵ Deep segmentations of class and race concealed in the mama market are the subtext to the book's celebration of women's maternal unity. Stated baldly, *Mamatoto* is not a comfortable read in the context of greater public understanding of colonialism and its cultural appropriations. And even at the time, Grossman and Cuthbert were indeed so troubled that they subsequently boycotted TBS, giving up their special favourites of banana hair putty and Australian 'Red Earth' and Koori range.

Accounting and the challenge of accountability

But this glimpse of Red Earth, which had launched in 1989 as an Indigenous Australian-owned ethical beauty business, points back to fundamental questions and dilemmas inherent in the making of feminist business strategy. Ruthie Petrie, one of Virago's editors at the time, commented recently about the Body Shop deal

I remember thinking, oh God, [...] this is really selling out. Whereas other people in the company were very excited by it, you know, they were more commercially minded than I was and they probably [...] were right to be commercially minded if the company was going to survive, but it was a kind of thing that I just thought, oh God, [...] probably I'm a ridiculous purist and [...] it seemed just a step too far into [...] making alliances with the commercial world which I just didn't believe in. [...] So [...] it's lucky I wasn't running the company.'¹⁶

Turning a profit is the aim for any business. But many feminist businesses failed in this regard, focusing more on 'accountability' to their values and perceived communities of interest than accounting to investors or employees. Virago has needed to navigate such choppy waters, and as we have seen, was at this time under exceptional pressure to

¹⁵ See Kaplan, Caren (1995), "A World without Boundaries": The Body Shop's Trans/National Geographics. *Social Text*(43), 45-66. doi: 10.2307/466626.

¹⁶ Ruthie Petrie interviewed by D-M Withers, *The Business of Women's Words*, British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C834/02, transcript p. 260//track 10. © The British Library. See also Murray, p.31.

satisfy shareholders by generating sales and income. Ursula Owen, Managing Director until 1990, just before the publication of *Mamatoto*, pointed out the obvious:

The truth is, anyone can print a book, but selling a book is what you need to do. So that was our mantra really. Selling books was what we wanted, not just printing them. [...] Carmen was very good at publicity [...] and we all [...] learnt how to have that in the back of our heads: who's the audience for this?' (Owen, quoted in C. E. Riley 2018: 29)

The trick of deriving profit from ethical enterprise therefore depends upon developing ethical markets. This is precisely what Virago had done so successfully, building a group of women and men willing to buy its women-centred novels, feminist non-fiction and beautiful design. Yet clearly in this respect, Virago's involvement with *Mamatoto* has to be queried and weighed, especially given the company had faced criticism in the years previously for its 'middle-class pricing' and lack of minority ethnic appeal (Murray 2004: 45-6). This reflected general tensions between classes and between black and white women in feminist circles, which were articulated around the politics of inclusion, representation, tokenism, and the need for white middle-class women to understand the different priorities and greater challenges faced by black and working-class women. In the 1980s, these debates reflected the much greater contact between hitherto separate political movements, and were thus in some ways positive, if painful, processes of intersection (Thomlinson 2016: 161-93). One relatively prominent collaboration in the world of feminist publishing was the establishment of Sheba Feminist Publishers (1980-1994), a small, independent, racially mixed not-for-profit workers' publishing co-operative with a mission to promote writing by black, working class, lesbian and new writers of diverse backgrounds.¹⁷

In comparison, Virago already had a bigger business to maintain, and a stated interest in publishing feminist books for a 'general' rather than a specialist market. To its credit, editors had responded by developing more diverse lists by women writers of colour, publishing for example Grace Nichols' *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984), Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe's *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (1985) and Scafe's *Teaching Black Literature* in 1989. In

¹⁷ Records of Sheba Feminist Press, 6SFP, Catalogue description, TWL@LSE.

1991, alongside *Mamatoto*, publications included *Incantations and Other Stories* (Anjana Appachana), *And They Didn't Die* (Lauretta Ngcobo), *On the Road to Baghdad* (Guneli Gun) and working-class authors Kathleen Dayus and Pat Barker. Virago was also enjoying the best-selling UK edition of African-American civil rights legend Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1984) and sequels (1985), acquired by Ursula Owen after it had been rejected by other publishers. The company equally recognised the general equal opportunities principle that an ethical stance should not just concern products, but also recruitment and diversity in the boardroom and workforce. Lennie Goodings had joined forces with Margaret Busby of Allison & Busby and Ros de Lanerolle of The Women's Press to found Greater Access to Publishing to accelerate inclusion of BME women in the industry in 1987, and Virago appointed Melanie Silgado as editor in 1988 (Busby & Goodings 1988; Goodings 2020: 131-34; C. E. Riley 2018: 68).

Black British writers nonetheless felt under-represented, asking why racism in distant lands might be more palatable for white readers than racism at home, and critiquing the dominance of UK culture by American writers in general (Burford 1986).¹⁸ The embarrassing and painful withdrawal of Virago's *Down the Road, Worlds Away* in 1987, written by a white man hoaxing as a British Asian woman, pointed further to the complex relationship between producer and product, experience and text – and the challenge posed to publishers to authenticate as well as market (Goodings 2020: 135-37). Ursula Owen, in *Publishing: The Future* (1988) put it that 'black women have felt excluded from the account [but we're] conscious too of the difficulties for a largely white women's press in getting such publishing right' (1988: 94). Virago's 'circuit of culture' did not easily make for changing tastes which depend upon social networks and disposable income as much as any marketing strategy (Flew 2013: 70-1, 83). Cross-subsidising the niche and nuanced with popular products is normal publishing practice, but here required a political price. The point is that *Mamatoto*'s commercial success in contrast to its scathing reception by feminist reviewers for its neo-colonial character points to compromise in the interests of attracting TBS and its customer base. Other

¹⁸ For the stereotype of the Virago reader, see Young, Elizabeth (1989), *The Business of Feminism: Issues in London Feminist Publishing*. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 10(3), 1-5. doi: 10.2307/3346431 p.3.

markets perhaps could have been sought: more pertinently, perhaps TBS' mamas could have been teased and pleased in more critical ways.

Whilst considering the questionable anthropology brought by TBS' team, indeed Roddick's self-image as a latter-day 'Columbus', it is important to recognise TBS' contribution (A. Roddick & Miller 1991: 166). The company was perhaps one of the first 'disrupters' and its fairtrade initiatives were truly pioneering. Their 1987 launch of 'Trade Not Aid' commissioned craft products and worked with independent producers, predating the first certification for ethically trade coffee (by Max Havelaar in 1988) and Green & Blacks chocolate in 1991. As the name suggests, Roddick's philosophy was that poverty alleviation worked best through 'work rather than handouts', and was what people preferred (165). She also saw business as able to cut through the 'red tape' she thought emmeshed governments or NGOs (52). Their first venture, selling wooden 'footsie rollers' made by destitute boys in Tirumangalum, India, was a failure. Paying the same rates as to the original makers in the Channel Islands, 'the money did not screw up the local economy because it went straight into the [International] Boys' Town Trust and was used to support its charitable work' (169). Too late they discovered financial mismanagement and hidden sweatshops, requiring a complete relaunch (167-72). However their second venture, handmade paper from Nepal, sourced from women using traditional methods to turn cotton rag waste into saleable designs, worked better. Complementing their decision to use recycled paper throughout the company, the first range was sold during Christmas 1989 (172). Other enduring partnerships were forged. Roddick admitted 'not all of our Third World ventures have worked' although, in her view, 'we do better than the United Nations', which she claimed then had a 10 per cent success rate (185).

A noteworthy success is SoapWorks, a 'micro-enterprise' the Roddicks established in an area of Glasgow decimated by unemployment in 1988.¹⁹ Independently run, with a community profit scheme and 94 permanent full-time employees, the Roddicks launched it to replace a European soap supplier, rejected for cheap labour (A. Roddick 2000: 62-3). At the time of writing, Soapworks Ltd is the UK's largest manufacturer of soaps. The regenerative effects of such investments were equally felt in Littlehampton, Roddick's working class hometown, where TBS

¹⁹ See <https://www.soapworksltd.co.uk/soapworks-story>

established its headquarters. Confessedly unorthodox, staff volunteering programmes, an onsite nursery, counselling, celebrations, inhouse product testing, all gave the place a legendary reputation. In 1991, the year *Mamatoto* was published, TBS established the Body Shop Foundation, supported by a portion of company profits and the sale of 1.9% of the Roddicks' stake. The Foundation supported Amnesty International and a programme of orphanages, women and healthcare in Eastern Europe. But their perfect project was when Gordon Roddick convinced the trustees to put up seed capital to launch *The Big Issue* (Cooney 2017; A. Roddick 2000: 89).²⁰

Undoubtedly, such ethical enterprise was inseparable from the search for profit. Roddick wanted to 'cut out the middlemen', in part to gain a lead on competitors who relied on 'boring old trade fairs' and to source from remote rural areas (A. Roddick & Miller 1991: 166). For the Roddicks, ethical capitalism was not an oxymoron. Roddick refuted the description of TBS as a multinational company, preferring the term 'global' as associated with 'responsible, multi-cultural', anthropological and spiritual', in contrast to 'gobb[ling] up other companies' (253). Further: 'The unmet challenge of Western institutions is to recognize the importance of taking responsibility and building new models of progress. [...] I'm including alternative trade federations, human rights groups, the co-operative movement, the community economic development ideas, independent think tanks, radical academic philosophers, economists and political scientists' (A. Roddick 2000: 64).

Did Roddick's ambition to meet all these standards – and focus more on campaigning than sales – threaten the business altogether? When profits plummeted in the late 90s, the business media blamed Roddick's management style – describing her as ambitious, self-righteous, flighty, in contrast to the 'professional' approach of Patrick Gournay, of Danone foods, who, in 1998, was hired at shareholders' insistence (Cope 1998). Roddick, never hampered by a feminist avowal of 'leaderlessness', described a 'bull's eye on my back' for flying too high (A. Roddick 2000: 215). But she attributed their business challenges to the American expansion, 'the graveyard of European retailers', as Tesco equally discovered to its cost (139-141). TBS' franchise structure ate up their margins. Roddick's policy of hiring on the basis of shared values, rather than management or business experience, was also often self-confessedly disastrous, though

²⁰ See also <https://revolutioninkindness.org/closing-statement-revolution-kindness/>

many business analysts were impressed by the ‘emotional bonding’ of the Body Shop employee community (Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman 1998). Commitments to suppliers and employees hampered when speed was necessary to compete and innovate: ‘There were so many things we couldn’t do, from manufacturing to distributing. We couldn’t use about 50 percent of the available ingredients because they had been tested on animals’ (A. Roddick 2000: 143). The Mamatoto range itself seemed cursed, as the firm discovered too late that *mama toto* means ‘motherfucker’ in some parts of Mexico. Roddick describes this as ‘a genuine cultural mistake’ (144). Further, despite market research into what mothers would enjoy, the range did not compete with established brands such as Johnson & Johnson. It seemed that mothers buy products for children which remind them of their own childhood, and the new scents of essential oils had not yet insinuated themselves into olfactory memory in this way.²¹

Aligning value chains: TBS’s social audit and Virago’s Oxfam deal

The challenges posed by such multiple commitments to satisfying suppliers, employees and customers, were recalled by TBS’ General Manager for Company Culture, Sue Belgrave, who in addition to enjoying her unusual job description, explained her work as ‘continuously providing forces of integration to counter the forces of disintegration that come from change’. Yet Belgrave also summarised her mission as ‘holding onto our values’.²² Fair trading reflected a deepening argument that ‘value chain alignment’ was TBS’ distinction in the cosmetics business. These were the terms used by Maria Sillanpää and David Wheeler, commissioned by the Roddicks in the mid-90s to design a ‘social audit’ tool to go alongside the conventional annual financial audit (Sillanpää 1998; Wheeler & Sillanpää 1998).

²¹ Sue Belgrave interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, 8 February 2019. It is interesting in this light to note Johnson & Johnson’s 2008 relaunch of its ‘classic’ baby range took out parabens, adding in essential oils. See Critchell, Samantha (2008, 20 April), Smelling as Sweet as a Newborn Baby, *Mercury News*. Retrieved from <https://www.mercurynews.com/2008/04/20/smelling-as-sweet-as-a-newborn-baby/>.

²² Sue Belgrave, interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, 8 February 2019.

Conventionally, the ‘value chain’ refers simply to the process whereby financial value is added through the business cycle, from sourcing of materials through design, production, marketing, distribution and customer support. Value chain analysis is therefore a widely-used tool for businesses today in understanding which of their activities are more and less competitive, and therefore the source of profit. But TBS’ approach dramatically foregrounded social alongside financial value – a very different way of thinking about profit. In concrete terms, this meant highlighting numbers and conditions of fair-trade suppliers or energy source or sustainable ingredients; it meant identifying stakeholders beyond shareholders and consulting such stakeholders to develop products and set priorities (Crane & Matten 2010: 213). Consultation also required transparent discussion about company values and independent surveys of employee as well as customer satisfaction. Sillanpää and Wheeler argued this required:

- (i) a commitment to share perspectives and beliefs via dialogue and effective communication; and (ii) a willingness to allow collective values to develop and evolve – again via active dialogue. Values which are articulated top-down or which are cast in tablets of stone are by definition non-inclusive and will inevitably become ossified. (203)

This also formalised the social responsibility of the company not just to shareholders and customers but to employees and suppliers, even to ‘non-human species’, which, as TBS showed, was popular with consumers (206). ‘Aligning’ values, then, was about consistency in ‘environmental issues, animal welfare and human rights’, about employee trust as well as about product quality and service speed and making this clear to consumers (203). In this way, corporate values become an essential part of the value chain, and anchor a company’s culture and brand identity, defining organisational reputation, which then becomes the most important intangible asset. According to its designers, focusing on social value drew on the successes of the British cooperative movement and East Asian business philosophy, and did not hamper but enhanced financial profitability through increasing job satisfaction and consumer respect. Ultimately, thus holding on to ‘values’ meant boosting the sales and profitability of the company.

TBS’ social audit was praised by subsequent business ethicists as a best practice example. The development charity Oxfam showed in 2009 how it worked in practice in TBS’s sourcing of ethanol from a women’s sugar cane farm in Ecuador to build

capacity for smallholders so that they could command good wages and contracts, develop women's leadership, manage negotiations. The great complexity of this policy, which may involve hundreds of agreements through the supply chain, and buying at a pre-determined price, is justified to the shareholders and consumers, as part of the brand's 'value'. This depends on traceability, on proof of social and ethical standards, alongside quality control for delicate, often wild harvested crops (Oxfam 2009). Oxfam had led Fair Trade in the UK, when, radicalised in the 1970s to consider the independence movements of former colonies, it expanded its charity shop income in 'Helping by Selling' craft products made by developing country producers, attempting to cut out middlemen and nurture cooperative structures. In its most radical moments, it even gave all profit back to the producers (Black 1992: 167-69).

It is intriguing then, to consider Virago's Oxfam venture, contemporaneous with the *Mamatoto* deal. The publisher clearly hoped to attract new readers through distribution via Oxfam shops, and, as with TBS, valued a clever case of partner-branding. Oxfam's UK supporters probably mirrored TBS consumers – well meaning, well-off, white, empathic towards developing countries. The deal also reveals Oxfam's long-standing respect for Virago, and its hope that Virago's expertise in popular literature would benefit its own attempts to diversify its supporter base. Negotiations between the two bodies show Virago's Lennie Goodings learning more about aid politics and working to develop a more inclusive product than *Mamatoto*, writing that 'I have only recently begun to see that aid has a particular relevance to gender',²³

The partnership originated when Robert Cornford, Oxfam's Publications Manager approached Goodings as the charity was preparing for its 50th anniversary in 1992, fulfilling its long-term ambition to work with Virago. The initial idea was for two books, focused on north-south and south-south women's dialogues and girls' wishes for a fairer world (from around the world).²⁴ Goodings however suggested retuning an existing idea of a book of 'Writers in their Kitchens'. The end result was *Loaves and Wishes: Writers Writing on Food*, published in 1992 (Till). Contributors included

²³ Ms. Oxfam PUB/1/4, The Bodleian Library. *Letter to Robert Cornford from Lennie Goodings, 27 July 1991.*

²⁴ Ms. Oxfam PUB/1/4, The Bodleian Library, 'Loaves and Wishes: Writers Writing on Food', 1991-1992, comprising correspondence with women's publisher, Virago.

Maeve Binchy, Germaine Greer, Shashi Deshpande, Maxine Hong Kingston, Chinatsu Nakayama (the latter's piece translated by Elizabeth Wood), Sohaila Abdulali, Margaret Drabble, Margaret Atwood and Attia Hosain. Goodings saw 'a rather nice irony' of women writers exploring the 'traditional space for women' of the kitchen, with a 'behind the scene look at public women' and interesting recipes, but noting that 'I expect writers will want to contribute to the book because of their support for Oxfam and I think people buying it will do so in very much the same spirit.' She wrote to Cornford that

it might be a good idea to have a rather hard introduction – perhaps from someone at Oxfam? We have just completed a book about birth (called *Mamatoto*) with The Body Shop and though it's primarily a celebration, we've got pages throughout called FACTS YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW which give a few salutary facts about poverty, corruption, smoking etc.²⁵

Goodings continued: 'I think the book should provide an education for people that will help them to see that politics, power, food are all linked. I would like to talk more about this point in particular reference to the non-Western women who will be asked to contribute to the book.' Oxfam's own internal discussions showed some disquiet about the balance of purpose with profit. Director of Communications Audrey Bronstein objected to what seemed to her to be hardly relevant to development or even gender, noting 'most women don't even have kitchens'.²⁶ Cornford, who had defended the book to skeptical colleagues later acknowledged it had become the niche literary celebrity cookbook they had feared. But for him the Virago branding provided a guarantor of feminist value, continuing:

this is not intended to be an OXFAM book about food/nutrition but a Virago book that they want to do with us about writers and their response to food. Overburden it

²⁵ Ms. Oxfam PUB/1/4, The Bodleian Library. *Letter to Robert Cornford from Lennie Goodings, 27 July 1991.*

²⁶ Ms. Oxfam PUB/1/4, The Bodleian Library. Handwritten note from Audrey Bronstein to Robert Cornford, 1991.

with issues-based material and it will stop being what it is planned to be, and not be what Virago want to do.²⁷

In the end the ‘food facts’ were dropped, and the editorial notes toned down. Yet both sides were happy with the product. Together, they collaborated further over the next two years, producing a women’s pocket diary on the theme of land and land rights. Weaving information about farmers’ struggles into the diarising of women living very different lives was laudable and was perhaps an even stronger alignment of the value chain (Wells 1995). But this attempt at popularly packaging the political proved less commercially successful and Virago failed to sell many diaries outside of Oxfam’s charity shops. Speculations were that more specialist presenting of a ‘dour’ theme was needed; Oxfam felt Virago could also have done more to promote it.²⁸ Yet Virago’s efforts here – notably led by editor Melanie Silgado – suggest attempts to build an ethical market with products which had precisely the insight and respect for developing country women and economies that *Mamatoto* lacked.

Legacies and Lessons in the era of mumpreneurs

The story of *Mamatoto* is one of clever commerce and partnership but ideological challenges. The book’s attempt to celebrate maternal creation spoke louder of the inequality of mothers in neo-colonial and postcolonial economies, and of racial and cultural divide rather than unity. The accompanying mother-and-baby creams no longer exist. But its production also expresses trade-offs within a movement for women’s cultural and economic development, fair trade and corporate social responsibility which was gaining ground even as globalised financial capitalism was being unleashed in the era of Reagan and Thatcher.

²⁷ Ms. Oxfam PUB/1/4, The Bodleian Library. Memo from Robert Cornford to Audrey Bronstein, 11 June 1991.

²⁸ MS. Oxfam PUB/1/8, The Bodleian Library. 'Oxfam/Virago Diary', 1996, relating to a diary created with women's publisher Virago, on the theme of women and land.

In today's environment of austerity and reactive populism, many feminists are troubled by the ease with which the same multinationals have adopted corporate social responsibility programmes. Axiomatic for most of the women's liberation movement and black power generations would be that socialism provides a better basis for ethical development (Brown 1988). But neither Virago or TBS were socialist in structure or ownership. Nor were they alone in pursuing political ideals of redistribution alongside fair employment for ethical products. As we come to know more about the history of activist entrepreneurs in the UK's postwar social movements, we can see that then as now, business ventures offer undeniable appeal to progressives as well as conservatives, promising a life of apparent independence, creativity, and control. This same set of impulses has fostered an extraordinary rise in 'mumpreneurs' in recent years, reflecting women's greater access to capital and education, if not welfare. This includes a plethora of minority-ethnic owned businesses in wealthy countries and women-led small businesses in the developing countries which comprise the majority world. While the promises of micro-credit and the gender and development movement might have been unfulfilled, such businesses may be important ways to generate security and power.

What then might feminist business strategy resemble today? *Mamatoto* in my view, does not pass the test of value alignment, despite its commercial success as a self-help book and organic beauty range that has much in common with 'mama market' products today. The Virago-Oxfam land diary, though worthier, was less commercially successful. We must however respect Virago's longevity and perseverance in trying to walk political-popular lines as a viable business, protecting its editorial independence even as a subsidiary of a conglomerate.²⁹ Notably this reflected the skill of Lennie Goodings as Director until 2017, whom many consider to have been crucial to the survival of a feminist vision, including in business terms: Goodings oversaw an impressive doubling of turnover to a gross of nearly £4 million with six hundred titles in print, between 1996 and 2002 (C. E. Riley 2018: 102,88). Goodings puts it that: 'from the beginning, Virago has wanted to prove that the business of publishing books by

²⁹ For a discussion of Virago's attempts to navigate buyouts – its own and others, see Withers "Enterprising Women". For reflection on the challenges of conglomeration for feminist publishers in general and in relation to *Women: A Cultural Review* itself, see Jolly's introduction, this issue.

women is a profitable enterprise and that the very existence of Virago shows the world that a feminist business run by women would work' (2020: 38). Continually producing 'books about, for women' as its strapline says – the brand remains true to its values of literary excellence and innovation.³⁰ The selection promoted on Mothers' day 2019 included *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (Rozsika Parker), *Life After Birth* (Kate Figes), *What Mothers Do (Especially When It Looks Like Nothing)* (Naomi Standlen), *And Now We Have Everything: Motherhood Before I Was Ready* (Meaghan O'Connell). It promotes culturally and racially diverse lists – in 2019, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* as a Virago Modern Classic.

The struggle to overcome divisions of class, race and region – a key goal of feminist businesses – continues. Sarah Savitt, Goodings' successor, remarked in 2016 on the 'morality in publishing', commenting on the African-American author Brit Bennett's wish as a writer not to be a translator of black grief to white audiences. 'There is that question of who a writer's audience is, and how much you connect with that, and whether you connect with something because it feels familiar or because it does feel different. It's so hard. If you thought about it too much you'd be paralysed' (Savitt & Coonan 2016). Busby, commenting on the still posh white face of UK publishing in 2015 admitted 'I don't deny it's a bore to have to address the same topic for 30 years', referring to her co-written 1988 article with Goodings for *The Bookseller* on the Greater Access to Publishing initiative which began with a Toni Morrison quote – "It's not patronage, not affirmative action we're talking about here, we're talking about the life of a country's literature" (cited in Ellams 2015). The specific remedy for feminist literary traders – and for business and organisational development generally – is provided by numerous commentators: to employ more culturally diverse staff at the point of product selection, design and development and most importantly management. In publishing's case, this means editors, directors, finance executives, judges, festival programmers. As Ellah Allfrey puts it, 'the problem is never the writers', who are abundant, nor indeed 'the readers, who time again prove [...] that they are more than capable of dealing with experiences beyond their own' (cited in Ellams 2015). There are noteworthy efforts within publishing, including growing numbers of paid internships, but the deep structural inequalities that underlie the under-representation of women of

³⁰ In its early days, it described itself as a 'feminist publishing company' (C.E. Riley p.20).

colour in the industry, and in the women's movement, too, will take long to change. A truly feminist business strategy must seek to accelerate the process.

However this article has focused on a third element of feminist business strategy – seeking allies in ethical organisations and businesses, with a goal of extending ethical markets. This writer believes that here Virago's alliance with TBS was not necessarily misguided, even if the end result was. The logos of TBS's circular wings and Virago's bitten apple seen side by side on *Mamatoto's* book cover symbolised the alliance of two powerful women-led businesses which had both made their mark in social movement worlds. Both illuminate the value of innovation, enterprise, and leadership as potential feminist attributes. Both made an economic contribution to the creation of feminist community, gave creative employment opportunities to women and highlighted the production of women-centred goods and development through women's trade. Both made visible ethical mistakes but continued to find ways to practice business ethically. These businesses have been part of a feminist contribution to the cultural and craft industries in post-industrial Britain, and struggled often, if not always successfully to retain integrity in the face of economic downturns, competition and takeovers. But the contrast with the Oxfam partnership – despite the charity's own asymmetrical relationship with aid recipients – showed it was possible to create a more inclusive, still popular product. With the right values and product range, it is possible to build the ethical market to which you aspire.

What we have seen are the risks involved where partners are uneven, here in the very mixed offer that TBS brought to Virago. And TBS's subsequent fate remains instructive for feminist entrepreneurs. In 1999, Roddick was involved in the Seattle anti-globalisation protests, introducing her revised business autobiography by asserting that: 'We must urge governments and businesses to help women in need by supporting small-scale grassroots initiatives. We have to put them first, as leaders and advisers and active participants. [...] Globalization is a mug's game being played in a man's world' (A. Roddick 2000: 118). Proceeds from her autobiography went towards 'visionaries, grassroots groups and non-governmental organizations who are debunking the myths created by the WTO' (Flyleaf). Yet she and her team did not seem able to square the circle anymore. Despite improving its trading relationships, in the same year the chain's difficulties culminated in a restructure and redundancies of 300 people.

Wealthy though it made them, the Roddicks stated that they regretted they had made TBS a public company because shareholder interests ultimately held sway. They

considered buying back the stock not owned by them and placing all stock in trust to the employees, similar to The John Lewis Partnership, but didn't because they would have gone into extreme debt. Eventually they sold to L'Oreal in 2002, publicising their belief that they could influence it from within (G. Roddick 2010). Today, the fruit-candy flavoured retail chain appears almost unrecognisable from its idealistic early form, although its new owners, the Brazilian conglomerate Natura who bought it in 2017, promise not only economic turnaround but an ethical relaunch. Their 'Community Trade' programme – albeit not certified by an independent body like Fair Trade – directly benefits 'over 15,000 producers and their local communities', and aims to ensure that 100% of their products will be sustainable and responsibly sourced.³¹ In 2019, they revived a refill and recycle policy, created a campaigning zone in-store and gained 'B-Corps' status, a coveted certification of high standards in governance, customers, workers, community and environment (Smithers 2019). Feminist businesses may also directly benefit from TBS' legacy of its social audit, and the socially-focused New Academy of Business, paid for with some of the Roddicks' sale proceeds.³²

Challenging global as well as domestic divisions of labour remains essential for any feminist conception of business. Creating ethical products, especially when these embody cultural ideas as powerfully as literature can do, involves further responsibilities. Concepts of social audit, corporate reputation and an expanded understanding of value throughout a supply chain can offer practical tools for carving out sustainable and ethical business when feminists seek to expand into a wider, unequal women's market. Further, digital technology is opening new ways to track provenance and expand the possibilities of stakeholder accountability, for example block-chain technology which, in principle, allows more transparent, decentralised and real-time record-keeping of business transactions across a supply chain.³³ They help

³¹ See <http://suppliers.thebodyshop.com/aboutus/cft/SitePages/Home.aspx> and Carlile, Clare (2018, 8 January), Naturewatch Has Lifted Its Eleven-Year Boycott against the Body Shop. *Ethical Consumer*.

³² Educating shareholders in particular was a long-held ambition. See Roddick, *Body and Soul*, p.142-43.

³³ This technology was developed first to support Bitcoin. It has as yet proved disappointing in its application in fair trade contexts as has its use in socially progressive virtual currency

align fair trade networks and policies with feminist business, bringing together crucial allies in the fight for economic, cultural and social justice and development. A feminist business strategy must be true to values of gender equality which are transformative and intersectional too.

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