

Strangers in an Estranged World

Two Radical Feminists in the Academy

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Cet article signé par deux femmes universitaires relate les défis et les moments de bonheur rencontrés dans leurs efforts pour appliquer un cadre d'analyse féministe radical dans leurs études orientées vers les femmes. En essayant d'intégrer un certain militantisme à leurs parcours universitaires, leur expérience démontre que quoique ces deux mondes prétendent travailler main dans la main, ils sont en fait difficiles à réconcilier.

Montreal has seen a resurgence of left-wing activism in the last decade, a resurgence that has created a fertile environment for the development of radical groups. With the one month long province-wide general strike in CEGEPs¹ in 1996, followed by the 1997 actions around the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) conference, all the way to the well known Summit of the Americas in Quebec city in 2001, a number of groups and collectives have appeared and expanded the already existing activist scene (Pagé; Dupuis-Déry). This flourishing Quebec activist milieu, and the frustration experienced by many women who felt discriminated against in that context, created the conditions for the creation of feminist groups, out of which *Les Sorcières*—a radical feminist collective against patriarchy, capitalism and the state—has emerged (for more information, see Pagé).

Both members of this group, our political ideology has been greatly influenced and shaped by our feminist sisters, encountered in the anti-poverty movements as well as in learning institutions, through the student movements or our respective domains of studies. As feminists involved in the academic world, our own activism has been fuelled by our academic knowledge, in the same way that activism has stimulated our desire to learn more. Therefore, we decided to pursue academic endeavours and try to reconcile the contradictions inherent in that choice. As a consequence, we sometimes face the judgmental glance of a certain part of the feminist and activist movement who have chosen to deal as little as possible with capitalist labour and its elitist learning institutions—the universities. We have heard some fellow activists criticizing the fact that two members of a radical feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-state group were pursuing doctoral degrees *and* were being financed and encouraged by the state through governmental grants to do so. On the other hand, within the academy, we face other kinds of difficulties.

This article is an attempt to summarize our on-going discussion of the challenges and moments of happiness in our attempt to bring a radical framework to our respective domains of studies as women-ori-

ented scholars. Our reflections are drawn from our experiences in various institutions and departments, including the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University (Montreal), the Institut de Recherches et d'Études Féministes (IREF) at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM), the History departments at UQÀM and Université de Montréal, and the Canadian Studies and Women Studies departments at Carleton University (Ottawa).² The ideological gap we experienced, even in the context of women's studies, will constitute the heart of this essay. We are constantly faced with contradictions and resistance, but also with enthusiasm and hopes about our position in the struggle. Our experiences of trying to integrate an activist standpoint in the practices of our academic studies led us to think that although these two worlds sometimes pretend to work together, they are in fact difficult to reconcile. Nonetheless, it is our belief that we could not do without one or the other, hence our persistence in seeking middle-grounds. First dwelling on the challenges, our words should not be understood as personal attacks but rather as constructive and relevant *critiques*. The second part is a tribute to the strengths of our allies and the support we have received that has allowed us to continue.

The Long and Winding Road: Strangers Amongst ... Our Sisters

The larger academic world abides by its own rules, rules that are often considered problematic from a radical feminist point of view. The required “objectivity,” the struggle for grammatical feminization³ of academic texts, the hierarchical distance between transmitters (profes-

sors) and receivers (students), the elitist grant application process, and the resistance to integrate women’s experiences as a source of knowledge are only a few examples amongst other hurtful compromises (radical) feminist scholars, and especially students, have to face. Fortunately, not all of these features make their way to women’s studies departments, where feminism is an acceptable and encouraged standpoint.

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Feminism ought to be not only a political ideology, but praxis as well. As radical feminist scholars *and* activists, we have the responsibility to use our knowledge and engage in society’s debates. Not only do we feel the desire, but also the duty to go beyond researching the history of women and feminists for our peers—though a very useful and valuable contribution by feminist scholars—but also to make it accessible and transform it into a tool for progressive action. Gerda Lerner, a historian of feminism, has demonstrated that the “discovery” and writing of women’s history has been one of the most crucial steps in the development of a feminist consciousness in the western world, a prerequisite for women’s emancipation, and a first step for the building of a feminist movement. In fact, we

ing the state of affairs and actively participating in the construction of alternatives and utopias, hence engaging social change.⁴

We don’t expect everyone to agree with us. However, notwithstanding that feminist research can be considered activism, we must acknowledge the inherent division between grassroots activism and the academy—although some manifestation of this separation seems harder to digest in a women’s studies context. In order to illustrate the following points, we would like to use an example of an interaction that happened between one of us and a professor. At the beginning of a women’s studies class, informing my fellow students about an up-coming radical feminist get-together, I was greeted with the professor’s comment on her dismay at the existence of contemporary radical feminist groups, in a tone that undeniably expressed her dislike of such category of feminism. Having been active in radical feminist groups for already a few years, and my interaction with such groups being at the core of my feminist “coming-out,” I was deeply hurt and insulted by the professor’s comment. I finished my announcement and left quickly at the end of the class.

A number of elements should

be analyzed from this situation in order to draw a bigger picture, elements we will address in the following pages: the growing distance between activism and the academy, the resistance to integrate action as a legitimate form of knowledge, a general misconception of the meaning of radical feminism, and finally the marginalization of radical feminist activists in classrooms. We are

aware that our experience might not be generalizable to the whole of Canadian universities. However, we feel that our concerns are not exclusive and that our critiques can be useful even for institutions not directly targeted.

A Growing Distance Between Grassroots Activism and the Academy

The ignorance of some women’s studies professors, in that case and in others, of organized grassroots activist groups was a constant surprise. Although such groups are not the most prominent in the media, and when they are, the coverage is not favourable, our expectations were probably too high when we assumed that Montreal professors as passionate about feminism as they were would stay in touch with local activism. Therefore, comments such as “Oh! Radical feminism still exists?” is an additional silencing that we don’t expect from feminist scholars who are so close to the cause and have fed us with their knowledge and experiences.

Women’s studies departments pretend or have as an objective to stay in touch with the “real world.” Our ambition here is not to discuss

the height of the ivory tower, but rather to highlight the gap between the two worlds.⁵ At least in women's studies departments, this pretension to study women's movements and women's condition requires a minimum of interaction between academics and activists as well as a minimum of knowledge about what is happening outside specific fields of research.

tion of action and involvement as recognized forms of knowledge in feminist classrooms. We feel professors in general could benefit from the experience of feminist activists, just like we benefited from their academic skills. However, we have up to now encountered some resistance to the integration of actual actions even in courses on feminist activism itself. Both as students and teach-

formed, one should not judge. Here again, we suspect that the language barrier between francophones and anglophones, in Montreal as well as in Canada, is not irrelevant to this critique. The existence of contemporary radical feminism seems to be greeted with suspicion, if not disbelief in the anglophone communities we encountered. Geneviève also felt some resistance to her premises when she presented her Ph.D. proposal to a few Canadian universities outside of Quebec, since her topic focuses on contemporary radical feminist groups. This attitude is not limited to professors' reactions. We felt similar responses from our fellow students in women's studies classes at Concordia.

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However, we need to acknowledge that the gap we note in the institutions we attended—despite some noteworthy individual efforts from professors—appeared in the context of what we call the intellectual sweatshop, where professors and researchers are forced to produce and publish at an unrealistic pace. This over-valorization of publication does not leave a lot of time to be involved in the community. In addition to the production requirements that professors and especially professors-to-be must face, we must also acknowledge the specific difficulties in staying informed about activist communities in Montreal. Namely, the language barrier creates two very distinctive scenes of activism, which only come together occasionally when there is a strong will from a few people to make bridges and sustain them. Apart from these occasions, the two environments seem to evolve each in their own solitude (Steenbergen and Perreault).

A Resistance to Integrate Action as Legitimate Knowledge

Though we understand the many constraints imposed on feminist professors, we argue that the distance between activism and research could be attenuated by the integra-

ing assistants, we have felt that there should be a place for the recognition of action, and the processes behind it, at least peripherally. There must be *at least* a space or a period of time allotted to announcements and links to the community in the classrooms and most importantly during public events such as book launches and conferences. Women's studies are not just about acquiring knowledge, but also about character building and politicization/consciousness-raising on a multiplicity of issues. Most women's studies programs seem to promote unofficially or officially the development of student awareness and encourage them to get involved in their community. These goals should not just be well-articulated, but should be transformed into praxis. As such, we feel there should be a place for the recognition of the skills developed through activism, skills we will discuss later.

"Isn't it Old School Feminism?": Radical Feminist Theory in the Early 21st Century Academy

It is one thing to be surprised about the existence of contemporary radical feminist groups, and it is another to condemn it: if one is not in-

One explanation that we have posited is that francophones and anglophones have a different understanding of radical feminism. Namely, some American and Canadian authors (Jaggar; Spelman; Adamson, Briskin and McPhail) mistakenly associate radical feminism with cultural feminism, which posits an essentialist understanding of the category of women. Although they share a number of common premises, feminist typology tends to make them two historically different movements.⁶ On the contrary, the francophone movements, namely in Quebec and in France, associates radical feminism to materialist feminism, hence grounding women's oppression in the theorization of women as a political class. Using the work of Christine Delphy (1970, 1975, 1982, 1984) and Colette Guillaumin (1978, 1995), there seems to be a completely different take on the meanings of radical feminism.

Again, one should not expect all professors, because it is such a contested concept, to have an exact understanding of the specific ways radical feminism is being used by grassroots groups. However, we do expect our feminist theory professors to have an accurate understanding of the different trends of radical

feminism, and of the controversies around it. We also expect them to teach such controversies, and dismantle the myths and stereotypes around radical feminists so that our fellow students, once they took feminist theory classes, are not confirmed in their beliefs that radical feminists are, at worst, essentialists, at best young “old-second-wave farts.” Furthermore, we do expect that before ditching an activist group on such preconceptions, a few questions be asked to confirm or dismantle such stereotypes.

The Marginalization of the Radical Strangers

The stigma associated with such stereotypes has an even greater influence in a context where only a minority of students in universities has coherent and clear political ideas, or at least a clear frame of analysis and can therefore remain critical of what they learn in class. In the context where universities tend to act more and more as training institutions rather than trying to form critical minds, public expression of political positions is more the exception than the rule, and when encountered in classrooms, can be considered problematic. It is our experience, especially in departments other than women’s studies, that students often react negatively to the public expression of political ideas in undergraduate classes. “Activists,” regardless of their standpoint (whether it is Marxism, Quebec nationalism, or feminism), are often labelled as show-offs and subversive agents who might, sin of sins, contradict the professor, create polemics in class, and divert other students from learning the “program.”

In women’s studies, the case is different and the expression of political opinions is more often encouraged. But all students of women’s studies classes are not self-identified feminists, which is understandable (we are here to learn, right?). Yet, beyond our individual exasperation in the face of repeated concerns for men’s

condition—which directly fuels the growing masculinist discourse⁷—it is frustrating to be marginalized in classrooms by other self-identified feminists. Clearly, influences from post-modernism have secured substantial space in the paradigm of academic classrooms in the last few years. The fall of “grand structuralist theories” in academic circles makes it hard, if not unorthodox, to devel-

alized resistance, feminist or not, namely with a focus on political action through consumption. Far from denigrating the importance of individual and daily empowerment, it is our belief that such actions *need* to be inscribed in a larger collective struggle. For one, collective political actions have proven successful not only in attaining concrete gains for women, but also in shaping femi-

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op critical stances on issues such as sex work and transgender and queer theory. As a matter of fact, maintaining that “woman-identified women” have the right to regroup and create a *rapport de force* is automatically associated with promoting an essentialist understanding of women. This oversimplification of issues is understandable coming from our fellow students as we can give them the benefit of the doubt about their understanding of radical feminism and the ramifications of these debates, but when some professors start to make such quick association, and fail to adequately inform students on the matter, we think they fail us. Let’s be clear: the point here is not to rally everyone to our position. However, it is our understanding that professors have the responsibility to be informed on the matter. Being a minority in the minority, our point of view is often lost in the debate before we even have a chance to start. Luckily, activism has given us many tools to counter this phenomenon, as we will discuss later.

The marginalization of radical feminists we encountered is even stronger in regards to the organization of political action. Contemporary discourse on activism tends to emphasize the shaping of individu-

nist communities, breaking isolation and favouring networking. In contrast, individual acts of feminist resistance, although useful and essential, if not accompanied by wider political struggles through coalition politics, fail to change structural oppression. Furthermore, in a context where there is a growing trend in academic feminist circles to emphasize individual instead of collectivized struggles, we often have to face the quiet paternalism of some older professors and even our fellow students toward political movements, a paternalism that de-legitimizes every action. Whenever we discuss contemporary actions in classrooms, it seems as though nothing is big enough, everything has been done already, or that collective actions are pointless in today’s context. In the face of such comments, one can feel demoralized. It is hard enough to believe in what we do and that we can make a difference when we are clearly in hostile territories with the rest of society, it is even harder when our mothers and big sisters look down on it.

The Long but Hopeful Road: Our Sisters, Our Allies

Although we exposed many criti-

cisms—which we hoped were constructive—we also want to highlight the many joys of studying in a feminist environment and give credit for all the amazing innovations and support we received, in spite of, or because of, our radical feminist position, from those we consider our allies in the generally hostile world that is academia. This part is therefore a tribute to the wonderful experiences radical feminists can have amongst scholars.

Finding Allies Amongst Others and Older Radical Feminists

An important source of enthusiasm is in finding strong allies amongst older teachers and academic staff who still identify themselves as radical feminists. Those allies, often thrilled to witness the survival of this ideology through another generation, are also amazing sources of information in the form of references but more importantly of “lived” history of radical feminism. Radical or not, some professors have been an inexhaustible source of knowledge, and in some cases, knowledge not otherwise accessible such as first-hand experiences of the “glory” days of the ’70s. For example, personal testimonies or knowledge of obscure events and initiatives have been for us a strong motivator in pursuing our academic interest in documenting feminism.

We built with some self-identified feminist scholars a strong solidarity, which influenced our relationship with them mainly in the academic and sometimes even in the activist circles. Not only do they provide us with a space to diffuse activist information about demonstrations and actions, they sometimes attend them or co-organize them with us. Amongst others, we remember Louise Gavard, a sessional in history at UQAM, giving a workshop on the patriarchal coverage of the December 6th massacre during a remembrance week. We also remember Diane Lamoureux showing up at a radical feminist get-together orga-

nized by *Les Sorcières* and *Némésis*,⁸ two grassroots feminist groups. One can also think of the unconditional public support Lillian Robinson has given to student issues at Concordia. There are so many other ways in which some scholars have expressed their support, ways that we cannot necessarily give justice in this essay.

Using and Providing Tools: In Academia, in Activism

Though we are often marginalized in the classrooms, as stated earlier, the experience of activism has taught us how to speak up, debate, posit strong arguments, and expose our ideas (almost!) clearly. Furthermore, the strong political knowledge acquired in all areas of activism often gives us a base on which to draw concepts and analysis. These skills give us a degree of power in the classroom. Although some professors will be quick to try to diffuse this power, others will try to help us make it constructive for other students, making it a collective empowerment tool.⁹ Interestingly, the “edge” that activism provides us in the classroom also has a counterpart in the activist movement. The research skills, the raw knowledge, and the rigour that we learned in university settings become handy in activist circles. Thus, the capacity to construct robust argumentation and to back it up with sound research can be in parts attributed to our stay in school. Furthermore, knowledge of previous social struggles can be useful to the strategic planning of actions. It can also feed our creativity and inspire us in developing tools for social change. As well, it helps us posit our contemporary struggles in larger historical movements for progressive social change and sometimes forces us to see positions we would not have encountered otherwise.

The Desire to Know More: Enthusiasm About Action

Furthermore, in different ways, some professors have been personal-

ly involved in encouraging us to not only develop a coherent discourse, but also to continue on the activist path. Others, because they have not been active themselves in any direct way, also distantly admire the work we are doing. This has started to surface specifically on mainstream issues such as globalization and anti-war demonstrations. They have supported us whether or not they actually agreed with the means or the discourse, and have provided us with valuable tools to further our reflections. This engagement, whether rhetorical or actual, has been crucial in integrating and trying to reconcile these two aspects of our lives—activism and academia.

As much as we have criticized some professors for their attitude towards integrating action as legitimate knowledge, we have to state that others have also been very open to it. Namely, the integration of a concrete activist component in a class on women and activism is a good example of such open-mindedness.¹⁰ Furthermore, some professors have been publicly excited about activism that was taking place. In some cases, they would not only advertise an up-coming action or event, but also strongly encourage students to go and participate. This attitude has been essential in fostering the desire to pursue our academic and activist engagement, and maintaining our desire to work within these two worlds.

Conclusion

This exercise has been rather challenging for both of us. To criticize our close environment—even more a progressive environment that in many respects is far closer to our ideals than other environments—is not something that is done lightly. Furthermore, although we propose some solutions, we are not in a position to be the main agents of change on these issues. We might appear too demanding, but the goal is to foster the development of an aca-

democratic environment conducive to the betterment of its students, professors, and community members. Academia and women's studies in particular has taught us the importance of keeping a critical outlook in all situations in order to construct an environment that is closer to our ideal, a feminist utopia within women's studies. Women's studies have taught us that it is worth investing our time and energy into the realization of such utopia.

Although this text contains a lot of criticism which are easily made coming from a student perspective, we are also aware of the many constraints feminist scholars have to face—the underfunding of Canadian universities, a growing demand for performance measured in numbers of publication, the stigma attached to feminists in a patriarchal world, the double performance women have to face to establish their competency are just a few. Therefore, we know that it is easier said than done. On that note, with these criticisms of our peers-to-be, we are anxious to see how much of these well-intentioned comments we will actually be able to apply concretely if we ever become university professors. Hopefully, in a few years, we will be able to pull out this paper and happily realize how much progress has been made in feminist circles in the academia. Even if activism and academia are two separate worlds, our ultimate goal would be that feminist scholars and activists in as many different ways as possible create strong solidarities in order to work together for progressive and anti-patriarchal social change.¹¹

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involved in the student movement since her Cégep years all the way to her graduate years, and in the feminist movement mainly since the creation of the radical feminist group Les Sorcières in 2000.

Ève-Marie Lampron is currently a doctoral student in the History department of the University of Montreal, working on the history of women and feminism in the late eighteenth-century France and Italy. Her MA thesis, in the same department, focussed on the perception of activist women during the French Revolution. She studied in the History department of Université du Québec à Montréal during her BA, doing a concentration in Feminist Studies. She was introduced to radical feminism at that period, both in the academy and activism, involved in the student's movement and joining two radical feminist groups, one of them being Les Sorcières.

¹The postsecondary system in Quebec is unique in that the colleges (CEGEPs) provide a program that is a requirement for entry to university. Students who complete high school (normally after 11 years of schooling) must complete two years of the "general program" of the colleges (as opposed to the "vocational" programs) and they then proceed to university for completion of their program, which normally takes three years for a pass bachelor's degree in arts or science" (Statistics Canada).

²For more information on our academic endeavours, see our short bios at the end of this article.

³Feminization is the process that consists of using both masculine and feminine nouns and adjectives when referring to human beings and human experiences. This process goes against traditional French grammar cannons, which consist of using the masculine as referring to both genders. This is an ongoing debate amongst French grammarians. Member of the *Académie française* Maurice Druon

has recently denounced in a Montreal newspaper the "abusive" use of feminization in Quebec (see "Maurice Druon écorche le parler québécois"). However, the practice of feminization is usually considered acceptable, due to the struggles led by feminist predecessors. Most Quebec universities now have feminization policies, which are rarely used in departments. For example, a radical feminist friend was once told to "de-feminize" her essays; another pro-feminist friend had to re-write his entire M.A. thesis in order to "include the feminine in the masculine"—the department labelled it as "minor revision." According to the history professor in question (the same in both cases), feminization is too "aggressive," "not suitable to the cannons of French grammar," and too revealing of a feminist standpoint. Like we care! For a *résumé* of the debate and strong feminist arguments in favour of feminization, see Larivière.

⁴Two recent works in French demonstrated that although some positive changes have occurred related to the general conditions of women, in some geographic areas and regarding specific issues (i.e., body image, etc.), women's condition seems to have worsened (see Lamoureux, Trat and Pfefferkom; Ockrent).

⁵This gap can be found in different countries. For the American case, see, among others, Offen, Pierson and Rendall (xx-xxi); for France, see Mosconi (370); for Québec, see Lamoureux (95).

⁶For more on this issue, see Descaries-Bélanger and Roy; Miles; Crow; Pagé.

⁷The emergence of the masculinist discourse and its necessary deconstruction is currently the topic of much feminist scholarly attention (see, among others, Bouchard, Boily and Proulx).

⁸For more information about the radical feminist get-together held in February 2003, see Pagé; Côté. For more information about *Némésis*, see Kruzynski.

⁹For example, a professor provided Ève-Marie the remaining of a class to expose main features of second-wave radical feminism and thereby try to correct the misconceptions.

¹⁰In that specific case, it must be acknowledged that the professor did not yet have tenure in the department and went along with the idea regardless of the risks.

¹¹We would like to thank our radical feminist allies and fellow students who have allowed us to vent on these issues, as well as encouraged us to pursue our goals and stay as true to ourselves as possible within the academia. As for our peers who faced the same issues as us, we deeply appreciate the solidarity found amongst radical feminists in the academy regardless of the specific institutions. One of them, our long time friend, Mélissa Blais, has recently finished an MA in the History Department of UQAM, working on the feminist memory of the Polytechnique's massacre. For the frustrating and enthusiastic examples she provided us over the years and for her support, she deserves a special thank you of her own.

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