

THE ReVoLUtION at LaSt!

by michelle balaban

L'auteure décrit son approche au féminisme et à l'activisme dans le cadre des écoles secondaires publiques et alternatives.

Someone once said I was a reactionary when they saw the

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Band-Aid covering the burn mark from a bastard's cigarette on my arm. On it I had written a line of Audre Lorde's that read, "your silence will not protect you" (41).

Audre's words have remained in my mind ever since I started to understand feminism: "Your silence will not protect you." When I wrote an article on violence against women, I quoted it. When my friends and I marched in the Take Back the Night we held it high above our heads. When I moved into residence at the University of Toronto, I hung that sign on my wall. It was the last thing I read before I fell asleep, the first thing I saw when I woke up the next morning.

There were other Band-Aids, my favourite having been, "Enfin la révolution!" for the group of scratches from running through prickly bushes late at night. "The revolution at last!" I thought, because the thought of any revolution, from out of the dark and below the belt, fills me with an anticipatory jubilation. Something powerful is happening, and it can't be stopped. Change is on its way.

I was revolutionized in my grade 12/OAC year at an alternative school in downtown Toronto. There, classes are held under trees in warm weather, and teachers ignore late marks on assignments if a protest falls on the due date. Chubby girls are the popular ones, students smoke with the teachers, and when a girl who doesn't shave her armpits wears a tank top, no one blinks an eye. Calling someone else a faggot or a dyke is simply not on. There, people who want to change the world learn how.

Generally speaking, alternative schools are a hotbed of young activists. Aside from enormous pressure from the Ontario government to conform to the ways of "normal" schools, their common goal is to challenge dogmatic styles of learning. If a public high school is a machine drilling

information (and not knowledge) into students' minds, an alternative school gives students the opportunity to learn. Classes, teachers, and students alike generate opinions, unlike the public school experience which promotes indifference as the safest route to a good grade.

My thirst for a new way to learn was well on its way by the time I was 15 years old. This was my first of two years at a big brown public high school in the suburbs. To varying degrees, the students were restless middle-class minors cutting themselves just to remember what it's like to feel. On the orange school bus they talked as loudly as possible about being drug dealers, going to court, dropping out, coming back, being expelled, and so on.

My own reaction to the environment was almost immediate. Within months I was calling myself a feminist (even if I didn't yet know what that meant) and stopped shaving my underarms just because I liked the way it looked. (I would not try to argue it politically, not yet at least). When teenage hands slid across my chest in the darkroom during one photography class I dug my jagged bitten nails into the skin. Later that week the scabbed hands pointed at me, and he called me a "fucking lesbian." The name never made me angry enough to say anything back. A sign.

Beware of "the lesbian" at your high school, I learned. Sometimes you can tell them apart from the other girls, but often you can't. "The lesbian" can be the girl in politics class who disagrees with what the boys have to say. She can be the girl who has no friends who are boys. She can also be the girl who has no friends who are girls. She can be the girl who has one female friend she spends a lot of time with. She can be the girl who turned down the guy for a date. She can be the girl who doesn't make as much of an effort to look pretty under fluorescent lights as the other girls. She may also be a feminist. Like a lesbian, a feminist is an ugly woman, a bitch, one who never marries or has children, not because that may be her decision but because *why would a man want that anyway?*

No wonder no one wants to be called a feminist. Girls raised in North America are constantly reminded of misogynist standards of beauty and sexiness, a standard most women do not realize is unattainable until later on in their lives, if at all. Carol Gilligan, in her study of teenage girls, says,

The wind of tradition blowing through women is a

chill wind, because it brings a message of exclusion—stay out; because it brings a message of subordination—stay under; because it brings a message of objectification—become the object of another’s worship or desire, see yourself as you have been seen for centuries through a male gaze.... [T]he message to women is: keep quiet and notice the absence of women and say nothing. (26)

Most of the people at my alternative school were reactionaries who, like me, had given up on “normal” high schools. Their reasons included everything from being silenced when they spoke their minds to being closeted, queer, and insecure. “Youth,” said James Baldwin in *Just Above My Head*, “must be the worst time in anybody’s life. Everything’s happening for the first time, which means that sorrow, then, lasts forever” (87).

And ever and ever. On my first day of class, I learned that one-third of all queer youth commit suicide. “They would rather be dead than gay,” my teacher explained to us. How could we possibly account for this? How, when the majority argues vaguely that gays and lesbians have all their rights now, can we as youth, as active youth, as queer youth, as swearing, rebellious youth, *how can we make this right?*

We answered it ourselves. We get loud. We get committed. We get dirty. Our politics become our life because we are young enough—jaded and naive at the same time—to use our time wisely. Overwhelmed with so much life and so much time to live it, we plan ahead for this revolution of consciousness to come to fruition, and we will not budge in the face of oppression. “While we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness,” said Audre Lorde, “the weight of that silence will choke us” (44).

Gail,¹ the woman who would teach me history and English, taught her students about those revolutions of consciousness. When she smoked outside the school she would gesture at the one group of “ghetto boys,” the ill-tempered middle-class white ones, with her hand-rolled cigarette, and mutter to us, “These guys are such assholes.” She was vocal about what she believed in to the point where students, always the ill-tempered white boys, would regularly storm out on her lectures. Looking back over my notes from her classes I found quotes by great women that were too good not to scribble down: Marilyn French,

Toni Morrison, Rita Mae Brown, Dionne Brand, Dale Spender, and of course, Gail. These women raised me. In those notes I found my own journey into radical feminism, which next to all the other feminisms, was the only one

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that ever seemed real enough to feel in my flesh and bones and fat.

December of that year marked the tenth anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, where and when 14 women between the ages of 20 and 35 were rounded up in a Polytechnic University and shot dead. Fourteen died there, but there are many more women to remember. Say it, we chanted: say *remember, remember, I will remember*.

I do remember. Feminism taught me how to remember, what to remember, and who. Even if I don’t know all the names and haven’t seen all the faces, I learned that there is always a woman to remember. Even if she wasn’t shot dead in Montreal, she was beaten in front of her children at home, or she was stoned to death in the street, or she had her genitals stolen from her, or she is dying on the inside from weight of all these things not spoken of, not acknowledged, and not put to an end. That we are hacked into pieces and left in bags by the river is not headline news. Headline news tells the life story of men whose actions flick innumerable amounts of women on to industry’s casualty pile. Radical feminism is about remembering these women.

And we do.

Women like Gail are the positive role models that my generation of feminist activists needs. I don’t need an older woman who has lived and shouted through the ’60s to tell me right from wrong; I need women like her to teach me just how precious my energy is, and to remind me of my privilege. Our actions must justify this privilege. “For god sakes,” she would say to the class, “*do something!*” Her experiences in years we idealized (the repressive ’50s; the revolutionary ’60s; the onset of second wave feminism) put things into perspective. Something clicked when she

explained why the pill and the sexual revolution did less for women than we had been raised to think. "Because all of a sudden," she said, "women couldn't say no. They couldn't say they would get pregnant. And the Pill wasn't always that effective either, and I had that experience, of having to go uptown and have a coathanger stuck up me, and I almost died."

Remember, remember, I will remember.

In "The Next Stage," Kiké Roach states that there are few entry points for today's young feminists who want to get involved in the movement. This had never occurred to me. In my school, girls were running the show, organizing protests, handing out flyers, making signs, advertising reusable sanitary napkins and organic tampons, and participating in self-defence demonstrations. If there was someone who wasn't participating, and wanted to, friends and organizers would find a way to get them involved. That was how it worked, and how I had always assumed activism worked best. How can a movement that excludes the very people it is trying to work for, sustain itself to the next generation? Roach's words felt like a slap in the face to my own experiences; they also reminded me of the drive, the sheer need to get loud and stay loud. Of course it's easier to be indifferent, but I picture myself being indifferent in the face of oppression. I must have left it behind when I drew blood from the boy's hands in the darkroom.

In the same way that the girls of Joyce Carol Oates's *Foxfire* knew that their world was corrupt, we fight back against it, knowing that we will be responsible for running it some day. *Foxfire* tells the story of five teenage girls in New York State in the 1950s who form a "girl gang" to help each other as well as the disadvantaged. Legs, the ringleader, coins the phrase that, like a revolution, "*foxfire burns and burns!*" (Oates 4).

Legs' imagination had been stirred by much that was current in the newspapers and on radio having to do with espionage, accusations of Communist spies here at home and glorified American spies in wartime, almost in retrospect it began to seem that the massive historical event "World War II" itself had been but the mere outward consequence of ideas in a few men's heads, a very few devious men holding power over the lives and deaths of billions. There were two moralities: two ways of being: what you did because you were empowered to do it regardless of the cost to others innocent or otherwise, and what you acknowledged you did because such actions were criminal or sinful or scandalous. (Oates 35-6)

A typical example of this grassroots resistance is a Toronto-based girls' group called Mad at Misogynist Ads (MAMA) who make it their mission to deface every misogynist advertisement, no matter how subtle the message. When they have a permanent marker in their bag, every Calvin

Klein model in every streetcar stop is begging for a "please feed me" bubble next to her emaciated face. Typical of young activism, MAMA goes straight to the point.

People are usually surprised when they meet young people who are so politically active. Opposition to patriarchy manifests in a currency that misogyny does not collect. It does not mean stabbing a man with a knitting needle or hanging his testicles from a rearview mirror; it can mean beautiful art, powerful essays, peaceful protests, and the Michigan Women's Music Festival. Why is the stereotype of an angry feminist, an angry lesbian feminist, a "feminazi," so terrifying that *even women* put us down? Feminism has never embodied any principles that would harm a woman, or a group of women, nor has it promoted any of the principles of nazism, for that matter.

Feminism has never been simple, and it has never been easy. Yet, it has always been rewarding, even if it's been a fight the whole way. We are young, we are vital, and we have a responsibility to light this world on fire. The revolution at last.

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¹Name has been changed to protect privacy.

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