

THE siLEnCIng of YoUng WoMin'S voICeS

by Leah M. Thompson

L'auteure critique quelques féministes qui s'identifient à la seconde vague parce qu'elles ont fait obstacle au partage logique de la connaissance et des ressources chez plusieurs générations de femmes, expliquant ainsi le silence de certaines

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jeunes femmes et la distance qu'elles ont prise face au mouvement traditionnel des femmes.

In speaking with young womin involved in womin's studies in both the United States and Canada, and those young womin involved in more active organizing outside academia, I have come across a shared experience. Young feminists often feel silenced and devalued by feminists of a previous generation who monopolize much of the room and voice in womin's organizing. As I explore in this essay, young feminists, like myself, have experienced silence bind our tongues; we need a forum in which to scream out. Although applicable to all womin's organizations, I am referring specifically to academia and womin's studies in particulars. Within the institution of education and disguised in the cloak of a traditional academic relationship between student and teacher, many young womin involved in womin's studies feel that issues relevant to them, their experiences, and their voices are not being heard or taken seriously. This silencing can only be detrimental as it deepens a divide between womin of different generations. Although this is part of my story in particular, this is a problem shared by many young womin.

The Journey Starts

When I discovered womin's studies during my undergraduate year I was thrilled. I felt like I had energy to change the world and that I finally found a subject I could relate to. I found something that I could fight for ... me. I learned about first wave feminism and second wave feminism, I read about womin who, gathering in their living rooms, explored the neglected and invisible experi-

ences of womin and acted to create change. Those womin seemed so passionate and they had goals, goals that they spoke up for. No, spoke up is much to soft a term, they roared for. One day, I was in a sociology of womin class and I saw a film about feminism in the U.S. The womin who spoke on camera voiced words that were so powerful to me and the womin's force to do something about what they felt passionate about was so enviable, I also wanted to do something. I wanted to be active and make a difference in the lives of womin. Maybe this is what all young university students are like: idealistic and passionate. Either way, I saw myself as a feminist in training.

Shortly after seeing that film I was lucky enough to help some fantastic young womin open a womin's center on our school campus. Imagine that ... a university with a womin's studies program and no womin's center on campus! It was wonderful to participate in the venture and for the first time, rather than simply read words off a page, I was actually doing something. I was convinced I was on to greater things and because I felt like I had so much potential, I applied to graduate school. Maybe I could strive to teach other young womin this wonderful feeling that I had recently learned; this feeling of strength and purpose, this feeling of pride and a sense of belonging, one in solidarity with others who, like me, wanted to speak up about how they felt. Other young womin who had something to say and would not stop until it was heard. Then I went to graduate school ...

Bumps in the Road

And so began boot camp. "Head up, shoulders back, speak when spoken to. Here are the theories, read them, engage with them, criticize them, relate them to other material ... what's that, personal experience you say? Ummm ... well ... as long as you base it in theory and connect it to what is being said here, then it's okay." Suddenly my head was swirling.

"Whoa ... wait a minute. What's going on here?" I asked myself. "I thought what I had to say counted ... I thought it was important. What happened to sharing experiences, feeling heard, respected, and understood? What happened to the ideal of a dialectical relationship? Was I dreaming all of that?" It felt as though my experience was only valid if and when it was grounded in theory.

Theory upon theory upon theory. Talk, talk, talk. I

in wOmEN's sTUDiEs

scream, "Can we not *do* something?" There is all this talking and reading and so very little action. I came here to actively create change but there seems to be little room for that. Even my words are deemed weak. In all this speech where is the action? I came to womin's studies with the hopes of "doing" something and being active. But there seems to be little room for this in academia.

And so it continued.... "Listen ... read ... listen ... talk ... read ... listen ... read ... listen.... *Enough!* Please listen to me, I have something to say. Hello out there, is there anybody listening?"

"Yes," I am told, "but first, listen to what the second wave feminists have had to say. This is how they theorize the issue, this is where it all began."

Theory is important, but often times it is abstracted, removed from practice, and students' experiences are seldom reflected within it. A core body of knowledge is continuously reproduced and taught, that, rather than feeling connected to, I have felt removed from and on the outside of. The exclusion of my experiences has led to silence.

Silence is also manifested in classroom discussions. I have sat in classes where, during group discussion after a student's presentation, two or more attending professors have monopolized the discussion, interrupted students and only looked at each other when speaking within the class group. This has not promoted a reciprocal learning process in which those teaching have as much to learn from me as I do from them. It has effectively excluded and silenced the students in the room. Consequently, all too often, discussions that should be fostered in the classroom are privately carried on amongst the students outside the classroom. It is not problematic that such talk should carry on after class, but it is problematic that they are not occurring inside the class.

Furthermore, I have energy to use in active ways beyond the classroom. However, there seems to be little room for this in academia. There has been so much focus on theory that connecting academia to activism in the community is still too little. In previous attempts I have chased the guidance of older feminists, including some professors, to use my energy in the women's community around me. Although at times successful, the chase is a challenge that is far too often fruitless.

Although their perspective is important, so is what I have to say. I have a voice; it may be a voice that does fit the

standard academic conception of what my voice should say, but it is still a voice and doesn't that count for something? And if my speech is not formal and does incorporate slang, does this mean that it will not be taken

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as seriously as someone's with a more developed lexicon? Is (rather ironically) taking on academic language the only way I will be listened to?

I have listened to the past with open ears and a dawning awe, but there is no space for me. I am young; I have experience; I am at times ignorant and I am thirsty. However, by not including young women's experiences in their teaching, thinking, organizing, and events, by asserting authority over young womin based on their own experience and knowledge, and by maintaining a distance between academia and womin's communities outside of it, older generations of feminists are keeping young womin out. Most importantly, they need to actively listen to young womin, open more of their spaces to our ideas and experiences, and help, not direct, young womin in organizing themselves. How often do I hear about how the "way" has been paved for me and other young womin by more experienced feminists? Well it was certainly forged by them but not paved with gold!

The F-word

When I go outside womin's studies or the womin's community I must not forget a single piece of armor in my feminist's iron suit, for there are many moments when I come under attack. Surprisingly, I still encounter many people who cling to an older stereotyped description of what a feminist is and ought to be. This conception often includes the idea that all feminists must be man-haters, lesbians, loud, "ugly" (according to societal standards of beauty), and just plain hard-up. So, when I walk into a social situation that is not related to womin's studies or feminism, and tell people that I am a student in womin's

studies, right away many eyebrows begin to raise. "Oh, really ... " they say and immediately I can sense an uncomfortable tension. "Does that mean you are a *feminist*?" At this point I have to be honest with you. It is a difficult question to answer because when this person asks if I am a feminist, I presume they have a preconceived notion of what feminists are. Sometimes I answer by explaining that the word feminism does not have one monolithic definition. There are so many varied women, feminisms, feminists, and also rejections of these. Past definitions have often meant an erasure of class, race, ability, and all sorts of specialties among women. Consequently, I could explain to the person asking the question what my definition of feminism is but I can not speak for all feminists. However, there are also times that I forgo having to explain myself to the inquisitive person and I poignantly answer by looking them directly in the eye and saying—*Yes ... I am a feminist.*

Then the next question that often comes up is, "What exactly do you study? Um ... what was it? ... women's studies?" Often I come across the assumption that I study the psychology of women and why they act the way they do, or because I am a "feminist," I must be studying women's search for equality. My response usually involves an affirmation of the possibility of the latter, but also, that like any other discipline, I study an array of issues pertaining to women and because women's studies is interdisciplinary women are focused on in many, many disciplines.

Next, my favorite question: "What will you *do* with a women's studies degree?"! This is the best because when I was pursuing a degree in sociology not many people asked "What will you *do* with a sociology degree?" I mean it did happen from time to time, but it happens so much more with my women's studies degree. What will I do? When I've posed this problem and question to some of my colleagues they acknowledged that they too have heard this question. And when I asked what their response is I have heard some great answers: "Brain surgery!" says one. "Teach at university," says another, or research, medicine, policy-making, lobbying, international relations, media, technology. Basically our response is we can do anything we want to do.

And the questions do not always end there: How can you accomplish anything in this world while only focusing on half the population? Haven't women already achieved everything? I mean you are equal now aren't you? What more could you possibly want? You are being too pushy. You are being too demanding. Why do you hate men? Are you a lesbian? In the beginning, when those eyebrows initially raise, it makes my stomach sink because I know I am going to have to defend and explain myself. And most of these problems are centered on the stigma that still exists for a young feminist and the word feminism ... the "f-word." Nobody wants to hear that word in public!

Afterthoughts

In the last few months my experiences in women's studies have been like riding a rollercoaster. On the one hand I have gained much valuable knowledge and experience. I would encourage any and all young women to pursue a women's studies degree. On the other hand, I was completely unprepared for the academic world that lay ahead of me. I had all these ideals of young women gathering together to raise our voices and be heard. But I felt silenced, silenced by my lack of academic knowledge, silenced because of my age, silenced because my voice did not count, and most often silenced by women of a different generation.

There is still much work to be done in academia, but it should also be noted that some positive changes are being made. For example, at Memorial University of Newfoundland the women's studies program has created a new course and graduate programs that focus on activism outside academia. This will potentially foster strong links between academia and the women's community, and give young women more opportunity to be active outside the classroom.

Although gains have been made in the past there are still many roads left to travel and young feminists have much to say. I know I am not perfect, that I do not have all the answers but I do not suppose to either. I want to learn from the past but I also want to explore the present. I simply want to be heard without feeling intimidated and that somehow my knowledge and experience is not worthy of academia or the women's movement. With the barriers voiced here, myself and many other young women feel on the outside of the traditional women's movement. Although the Internet and zines are showing to be a way for increased expression, any bit of silencing in women's organizing and women's studies can only come at a price of distancing and weakening young women who have something to say. At the same time, young women must also value the experience and knowledge of older feminists. The important key being open communication. What is needed by and for all is greater respect, listening, learning, sharing, and giving of resources and experiences so that, as one insightful friend and colleague put it, "The torch may be passed on."

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