Why Are You a Feminist?

by Samantha Sacks

*L'auteure raconte les expériences personnelles qui l'ont menée à devenir féministe.*

“Oh, so you’re in university….”

Feminism is about change, about a redistribution of power. It is about challenging the status quo. It is call for the redefinition of the family, the mosque, the temple, the church, the synagogue, and of love.

The eyes of those professing interest in my occupation light up; the prospect of an interesting area of study, maybe something they know. Hey, perhaps they think they can teach me a little, tell me what it was like in the good old days.

“What’s your major?” asks my new-found friend.

And while the potential for sparkling conversation still lingers sweetly in the air, (I can almost hear the clinking of good cutlery and wine glasses), I alone have the seasoned prescience of a thousand encounters of an identical nature to know that momentarily I will squash out any titillating tête-à-tête with the oppressive weight of my major. . . .

“Women’s studies.”

And of course, a glassy-eyed stare settles over my partner’s face. Sometimes it conveys condescending humour, sometimes hate, sometimes astonishment, sometimes indifference spliced with ignorance. The combinations are endless. If I were to mix the ingredients of these myriad gawks and gapes and leers, I could make a vicious cocktail, as the one thing these ogles have in common is their absence of genuine interest.

Regardless, I will still be asked to testify on my own behalf. . . .

“WHY ARE YOU A FEMINIST?”

And this is what I will say. . . .

Because at the dawn of a new century we have so much death in our lives. Nature struggles to catch its breath. The earth heaves gently as the last drops of juice are sucked from its bowels. Sanitized lives hang leaden in the hot, rotting air. Intolerance seeps into our kitchens through radioactive TV screens. Breastless women, their faces lit with the gaunt glow of chemotherapy, cruise florescent supermarket aisles, where delicacies from the four corners of the earth meet in prepared meals, elegantly displayed on styrofoam trays—microwave-ready cultural diversity. The first oxygen bar opens in Toronto and with AIDS comes the death of love.

Because the only security I feel leaving my home at night comes from countless self-defense courses. Because my body is qualified, quantified, valued, and valueless; bought and sold on every street corner and television advertisement that invades my solitude—on purpose. Because where would we be without hysteria? Without anxiety we may be able to get a grip, our claws in perhaps, to reality, or the power structures that comprise it.

Because our lives are histories. The culmination of a thousand stories, myths, and oracles; recorded over many thousands of years by the most powerful societies, throughout time—as they see it. A myopic vision, a false prophecy. Where am I in your history? I look in the mirror, craning my neck to see past the gaunt glow of chemotherapy, cruise florescent light up; the prospect of an interesting area of study, lingers sweetly in the air, (I can almost hear the clinking of good cutlery and wine glasses), I alone have the seasoned to know that momentarily I will squash out any titillating prescience of a thousand encounters of an identical nature with the oppressive weight of my major. . . .

And Gloria Reina Santos Montes stared at me, from her home at night and a Coca-Cola billboard, and said, (and I paraphrase). . . .

“I don’t care what you call it, I just want to feed my babies and maybe someday shit in a toilet.”
Then the world stands still. The earth stops spinning, the sun shines in one single long ray and except for my pulse throbbing gently in my ears, silence is everywhere. For a wrinkle in time I’m breathless and speechless and I want to puke because no matter how many post-colonial, post-modern binary pedagogues I suck from the lily white asshole of some underexposed academic, YOU CAN’T THEORIZE BREAKFAST.

Hungry children are not concerned about political nuances.

Where is the value of my course in Strategic Adjustment Policy in this land where the American-owned Standard Fruit Company is mother’s milk, the juice of life, fueling the Honduran economy while matricide pulses through the blood of the people? Who do I think I am in this wild west armed only with a university degree?

And Maria Reina Santos Montes and I lock eyes and I recognize what it is I have seen in her stare from the moment we met. She knows me. She was expecting my armament of questions, my textbook sensitivity. She has merely been watching to see if I will recognize myself. If I will catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirrors that are her eyes.

And now that I have, what will I do? Will I escape from this parallel universe, slinking away, tail between my legs in search of a more comfortable reality? Will I return to fill my head with someone else’s words? Until I forget the hot green stink of the earth and those omniscient eyes, my thoughts sterilized and sanitized, my brain rocked into an academic stupor by the embryonic lull of saniflush? Or perhaps I will go home to twist, bend and shape my words until, like bulimic consumption and eruption of meaning, I can purge my mixed-up self. And pass it on to you.

So as I stand before you, my bones racked with the ache of expulsion, perhaps we can build a bridge, or do something lyrical and metaphorical and uplifting. That will make us all feel better. Conflict resolution. Or closure, or some such thing.

Or maybe, for a brief moment, we will take a break between the spewing forth of academic bile. Because if somebody says the word “problematic” one more time, I’m going to scream. A silent beat between syllables. In our ugly language, our long vowels that reek of imperialism. We will stop and shiver as a gust of reality makes this comfortably heated room seem cold. And know ourselves.

And now the shimmering edges between questions and answers become blurred, wavering in the stifling heat of revelation. And I’m still wondering….

WHY AM I A FEMINIST?

Samantha Sacks is a recent graduate of York University, with an honours degree in English Literature and Women’s Studies. She is an avid rock climber and inveterate traveller, having travelled extensively in South East Asia and Central America. She is currently in the Philippines where she is planning to combine her interests to make documentaries on rock climbing, nature, and the status of women.