

"Diversifying" The Nova Scotia Advisory Council On The Status Of Women: Questions of Identity And Difference In Feminist Praxis¹

Brenda.L. Beagan

ABSTRACT

This article outlines the author's experience with 'diversifying' a provincial feminist organization in 1993, and assesses that experience in light of competing feminist theories.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article passe en revue l'expérience de l'auteure avec le processus de 'diversification' d'un organisme féministe provincial en 1993. L'auteure évalue les résultats en tenant compte de diverses théories féministes qui se font concurrence.

In recent years feminist groups representing "women's interests" in Canada have faced serious challenges from women who have historically been excluded from full participation. Several groups have responded with commitments to outreach and "diversification," to getting women with greater diversity of race, class, sexual orientation, abilities, age, and so on involved in their organizations. Unfortunately, too few of these groups have documented their processes of "diversification." Fewer still have reflected analytically on these processes, to understand them better, and to explore exactly what happened-- something there is often no time for while in the process. In this paper I will use current feminist theories, which are multiple and contested, to make

some sense of a diversification process I was involved with at the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

I not only want to use theory to make sense of experience; I also want to use that experience to examine contemporary contesting approaches to feminist theory and praxis. What things do they bring to light, or leave in shadow? How are they helpful, and how less helpful in understanding our work as feminist activists? What are their political implications? I will begin with description: a brief accounting of what happened at the Status of Women, as I observed and perceived it. I will offer an analysis of the process and will explore the approaches of 1) feminist praxis rooted in a notion of shared identity; 2) feminist praxis focused on notions of

difference or diversity; and 3) feminist politics that incorporate or emerge from what I would call postmodern feminism.

"DIVERSIFYING" THE ADVISORY COUNCIL ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

From December 1993 through August 1994, I was involved in an intense series of meetings with the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women. The Advisory Council is an organization "at arms length" from the provincial government, established in 1977 to monitor women's issues and to advise the government on "matters of interest and concern to the women of Nova Scotia."² Historically, the Council has been perceived as rather exclusive. The members, all volunteers except for the President, are chosen to represent the twelve Federal ridings in Nova Scotia. Until 1993 there had never been a First Nations woman nor an "out" lesbian on the Council. There had been only two or three Black women³, one woman with disabilities, and few low-income women on Council. Acadian⁴ women had been represented on Council mainly because a significant proportion of one riding is Acadian. In short, Council members had largely been White, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and English-speaking. The Status of Women was regarded by many as an elite government body, filled with government appointees.

In the fall of 1993 the Council had committed itself to a "process of diversification," to getting women on the Council who represented the diversity of women in Nova Scotia. I was invited to join a "Community Advisory Committee," a group of women who would help guide the Advisory

Council through this diversification process. I was there representing "the lesbians" (though I didn't find that out right away). After a painful three-month process of strategic planning, the Advisory Council and "the community women" developed a Selection Committee whose task was to devise a selection process that would recruit women from the groups that had historically been excluded from the Council. The five of us on the Selection Committee worked together from April to August 1994.⁵

There were now seven vacant Council seats and we had to work out a selection process quickly. We started by designating seats for the "target groups" of women; then we would ascertain regional representation and rural/urban balance. We decided to allocate the "designated seats" on the basis of who most needed voices on Council. The most thoroughly alienated were Black and Native women, who were designated two seats each. Lesbians, Acadian women, and women with disabilities each were designated one seat, for a total of seven.

We developed an advertisement specifically inviting applications from members of the targeted groups⁶. We created an application form asking women to tell us about their connections to women's communities, their connections to their own community (however they defined that), and their personal life experiences they felt would help them on the Advisory Council. We also wrote a statement about the changing composition of the Council and what we were looking for in applicants.

This was when the process came closest to breaking down. All five of us agreed

on some crucial attributes like team work, listening ability, agreement with the mission statement, interest in women's issues, and commitment to working against racism, homophobia and discrimination against disability or income or class. But we could not agree about abortion.

One of the committee members was a long-term abortion rights activist. I had worked at abortion clinics and was strongly pro-choice. And the staff had sent a strong request that pro-choice be part of the qualifications we looked for in new Council members. In a sense, it was a measure of feminism for us --a "real" feminist will be pro-choice on abortion. When it was suggested, we all pretty much agreed. Then after a pause, the one Black woman in the room said something like, "If you say they have to be pro-choice, you won't get women who represent the Black community on this Council."

Of course. The indigenous Black community in Nova Scotia has a long history and tradition in the African Baptist Church. In addition, the history of Black women in North America, a history which includes slavery, forced breeding, and forced sterilizations, as well as exclusion from the pro-choice movement, has made the issue of abortion a complex and highly charged one for many Black women⁷. Many members of the Black community in Nova Scotia are not pro-choice on abortion.

We very quickly reached a point where no one was willing to budge. We were all making "bottom-line" statements: "It's a bottom line for me. Council members have to be pro-choice;" "If you insist on the abortion thing, you will not get any good Black

women." In my mind, and probably others', was the awareness that the same position was quite possibly true of First Nations women, too, as well as Acadian women. In both of those cultures in Nova Scotia, religions play important roles, religions which oppose abortion. In my mind, if in no one else's, was the awareness that those same religions (and to some extent the Black, Acadian and Aboriginal communities) would also be against homosexuality (against me). We left that meeting totally discouraged, afraid we had reached an impasse.

When we returned a couple of weeks later we were able to resolve this impasse. We simply reframed the issue, focusing on reproductive rights, rather than abortion. We agreed to a wording that read:

prospective Council members should be prepared to support women's reproductive rights, however that might be defined by women in the context of their lives, their cultures and their communities. While in some cases that might mean access to abortion services, for other women it might mean access to midwifery, safe contraception, artificial insemination, adequate sex education, or opposing coerced sterilizations.

With this agreement we sent over 800 application forms around the province. In response, we got 164 applications, of which 52 were from the designated groups. With very little disagreement, we short-listed 14 women for the seven vacant seats, and sent that list to

the Interview Committee. On August 31, 1994, seven new members were appointed to the Council. The new Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women included women from the Black, Acadian, aboriginal, lesbian and disability communities, as well as low-income women and single mothers.

FEMINIST PRAXIS: ISSUES OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

There are three general approaches in feminist praxis, the weaving together of theory and practice, that I would like to look at using this experience as a lens: 1) praxis focused on identity; 2) praxis focused on difference/diversity; and 3) praxis emerging from or incorporating postmodern feminism.

FEMINIST PRAXIS FOCUSED ON A SHARED IDENTITY

In its early days, the Women's Liberation Movement established the remarkable notion that women are oppressed as Women. It argued for a globally shared sisterhood--a notion that has since been shown to be ethnocentric, essentialist and ahistorical. It was centered in the lives of a select group of women who assumed their own experiences were common to all women, and constructed a sort of generic female "essence," an essential identity of Woman. Politics centered around an essential identity risk excluding everyone who does not quite fit. Inevitably, defining an identity creates and maintains inside/outside distinctions (Young, 1990). It constructs Us and Them: We are the ones who are not Them.

Not only does feminist praxis focused on shared identity tend to be essentialist and exclusionary, but there is also a tendency to

"ontologize" identity. That is, feminism becomes a matter of being rather than doing. I recall times, especially in my earliest feminist days, when I prefaced almost every statement with "As a feminist, I . . ." I think of it as capital-F Feminist, when being "A Feminist" became the core of my self-identity.

Australian Anna Yeatman (1993) argues that the tendency to ontologize identity seems almost inevitable in the politics engaged in by emancipatory movements. She argues that "emancipatory voices," voices for liberation, exist only in relation to governing politics. They exist solely in the challenge they pose to inequality and exclusion. Thus feminism exists only in relation, only in its acts of challenge to governing powers. It is not something one can simply be, without enacting that challenge.

Yet participants in emancipatory struggles often take up their positions of opposition as ontological identities, as conditions of being not necessarily attached to enacting opposition. As Yeatman says, "Thus, the feminist lives her life as a feminist and subjects all aspects of her everyday life to the political discourse of emancipation.... [M]uch of the time [this] involves the inappropriate subjection of social and personal life to what becomes a pseudo-politics, namely a politics without contestation" (Yeatman, 1993: 236-237). In other words, my feminist voice is only really relevant when it is contesting exclusion from the dominant discourse. If I assume simply being feminist is political, whether or not I contest the status quo, I engage in a kind of ineffective life-style politics (Kauffman, 1990).

Yeatman (1993) also argues that

grounding emancipatory movements in fixed identities is likely to result in "no-change politics." As those in emancipatory movements ontologize their oppositional status as identity, making oppositionality a matter of who they are rather than what they do, the political contest between them and those who govern becomes based on the interests of each group, interests which are materially based and fixed. If my opposition to the status quo is a matter of who I am, and your opposition to me is a matter of who you are, we can really only ever exist in opposition. There is little room for change.

This limiting of the potential for change seems to occur when we take on our marginal positions as identities and cling to them tenaciously. Thus at the Status of Women it was crucial at several points that women be able to let go of our singular identities that defined how we were different from each other (often the very identity that we were asked to be there for) in order to find ways to work together. This took a certain amount of trust that the others were well-intentioned, and were not following a hidden agenda.

Despite its limitations, identity politics was built in to the process we were engaged in at the Status of Women. The very name of that organization implies unity among women as Women. Whether we liked it or not, the mandate of the organization assumes a shared identity.

FEMINIST PRAXIS FOCUSED ON DIFFERENCE/DIVERSITY

Feminist praxis focused on diversity is epitomized by the caucuses of the early 1980's (Findlay, 1993). Seemingly every women's group, conference, or organization had

caucuses, for lesbians, for women of colour, for all those who found themselves outside the implicit or explicit definition of Generic Woman. This move added a crucial dimension to feminist praxis. Yet this politics of difference still risks falling into notions of fixed and singular identities, especially if it avoids examining the interconnections among differences. This is especially the case if decisions about which categories of difference count are determined by the categories on the grant application form, or the availability of cheap space for the conference, or the need of funders to have "stats" on who attended the event (Khayatt, 1994).

What often seems to happen in practice is that privileged groups tend to ignore their own specificity, so that their own views appear neutral while those "other" women are characterized by their "diversity." (Gunew and Yeatman, 1993: xvii). The dominant group maintains a singular identity (Generic Woman), while "diverse" women have a race, a class, a sexual orientation, specific physical or mental abilities. White women do not have to problematize their own Whiteness; race is a Black or First Nations issue. Straight women do not have to problematize their heterosexuality; "sexuality" has become equated with lesbianism, just as "gender" usually means "women." Black, Aboriginal and immigrant women have a race. Lesbians have a sexuality. Working-class women have a class. Everyone else is neutral.

This dynamic got played out over and over again in "diversifying" the Status of Women. There were the Generic Women, and then there were the Others who came to the work complicated by race and class and sexuality and disability and culture and

history. We Others were even named as outsiders; we were referred to as "The Community Women," as if none of the staff or Council members lived in communities. There was a very strong sense that we brought with us issues that were from the outside, external to the usual operation of the Council. Even among the Community Advisory Committee, we locked ourselves and each other into singular categories of difference that reflected what issues we brought to the discussion, and we did not problematize, or draw upon, the other aspects of ourselves.

For example at the very first meeting we went around the boardroom table while each woman introduced herself and said who she was there representing. None of us gave more than one category. A woman with disabilities, for example, did not say she was representing White, heterosexual, middle-class women with disabilities. Most of our categories were apparent--the Black women represented Black women, and so on. As my turn was approaching, I had to decide whether to "come out" as lesbian or not. I had not been told I was there representing lesbians. Perhaps I was there as a young woman? Or an anti-violence activist? Or to represent White, middle-class, educated women? I felt a rising anger that none of the other women had named themselves as heterosexual (assuming they were. . .) yet I was expected to name my sexuality and define that as my issue, my constituency. And yet, I, like the other White women, did not name my race--that was left to the Black and Aboriginal women. Nor did any of us identify ourselves as able-bodied. As often happens in a feminist praxis rooted in difference, we locked ourselves and each other

into singular categories of difference. Thus even when we deliberately invoke "difference" we can easily be pushed back into us-them dualisms; when we employ categories of identity without allowing for their complexity, we tend to reify a single component of our or another's identity.

Gabriel and Scott (1993) suggest that women from dominant groups avoid coming to terms with our own sources of privilege because we want to cling to oppression to validate our oppositional politics. The lines between oppressed and oppressor are often clearly drawn, and many of us in emancipatory movements want to stay on the oppressed side at all times, to enjoy solidarity. We have identified ourselves as "the powerless" and so we do not examine the places where we hold power. I preferred to name my lesbianism and leave my Whiteness unspoken.

FEMINIST PRACTICE EMERGING FROM A POSTMODERN FEMINISM

Both the desire for unity in a common identity and the desire for unitary categories of difference fail to acknowledge the multiplicity of identities among individuals, as well as within individuals. Unitary categories can only exist through the exclusion or suppression of differences. We are never just women; we all, always, have a race, a social class, sexuality, a range of physical and mental abilities, as well as a host of other personal and collective elements of history and culture that make up who we are. Postmodern feminism emphasizes that our identities are multiple and fragmented, constantly shifting, and internally contradictory. It allows us to name and explore our multiple identities, using categories of

difference where they are useful. It allows us to explore how aspects of our identities may be sources of both oppression and privilege at the same time.

For example, sometimes oppressed marginal statuses can become a form of power. In the planning process at the Status of Women my status as a lesbian gave me a certain authority that I was able to use, if I chose to, to silence other women who were not deemed to be "marginal". In one sense my lesbianism gave me a measure of privilege, if not power, in this process. It gave me a privileged location from which to speak, a strange sort of "more oppressed than thou" privilege. At the same time, aspects of my identity other than my lesbianism are socially privileged--my Whiteness, my education, my articulateness, my knowledge of feminist processes. I could, if I chose, use these aspects to get my way, virtually unchallenged because I was a "marginal Other." To some extent, my "marginalized" lesbianism permitted me to enact other forms of dominance unchecked.

The notion of identities being contradictory and constantly shifting is, to my mind, what is most valuable in postmodern feminism. It allows for the possibility of a politics based in identities that do not lock us into fixed, unitary positions--a state of partial recognition where we are required to talk on cue when the lesbian issue is raised, or the Black issue, or the disability issue (Truame, 1994). Refusing to lock ourselves or each other into such partial and fixed identities offers the potential for truly new ways of working together and understanding our work together toward equality. In our daily lives and in our politics we all constantly negotiate among multiple subject positions, sometimes

foregrounding one, sometimes another--and sometimes retreating to whatever common identity we find we can share simply to get on with the work.

At the Status of Women, this was highlighted by the tensions that occurred around the issue of abortion. We could have gone into that with a rigid identity politics, in which we said "we are all feminists and feminism is pro-choice and therefore all new Council members must be pro-choice on abortion". We could have laid down a bottom-line, and as was predicted, we probably would not have got Black women on Council who were very connected to their community. Had we remained rooted in a politics of difference that relied on singular categories of difference we still could not have reached compromise. I, as a lesbian, might have remained adamant that sexual freedom was central and therefore, pro-choice on abortion was unnegotiable. The woman who was a long-time abortion rights activist might have simply found herself unable to budge. And the Black woman on the committee might have intensified her refusal to support a process that required women to be pro-choice, since she herself--and many in her community--could not support this position.⁸

The compromise that we reached in the end came from allowing ourselves to hold multiple, shifting identities. I was trying to find my reaction to the claim that, basically, our pro-choice requirement was racist, or at least ethnocentric (centered in White notions of feminism). I shifted among my identity as a pro-choice activist, my identity as a daughter of Catholic anti-choice activists, my support for anti-racist politics, my lesbian fear of the homophobia often attached to anti-choice

positions. Mostly though, that first day, I hung on to my Whiteness, in which I felt somewhat neutral about the whole thing: she had a race issue with this abortion thing. It was up to her to sort it out. Or, at best, it was up to us to find a way around this obstacle she had erected in the name of race.

It was when I spoke with other lesbians, between meetings, that a solution emerged for me. When I foregrounded my lesbian identity, abortion was simply not a major issue for me. It isn't for most lesbians (we don't tend to get pregnant accidentally). But access to artificial insemination is a salient issue. Lesbians are often excluded from insemination services. At the next meeting, when other women began to consider the reproductive issues that are central for them, in their communities, abortion was just one of many. For Black and Aboriginal women it may be the frequency with which they are prescribed contraceptives with dubious safety records. For women with disabilities it may be simply being considered sexual at all, or fighting selective abortion of "defective" fetuses. For some women, access to abortion is central. Framed in terms of reproductive rights, when we were all willing to let go of singular identities and allow our shifting multiple identities free rein, we found a way to work through what might have been an impasse.

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis highlights some limitations of different approaches to feminist praxis. Feminist praxis too heavily focused on a shared identity tends to be essentialist and therefore exclusionary. There is a tendency to turn oppositionality (which is always a social

relation) into ontological identity. The result may be a pseudopolitics and/or a "no change" politics. Feminist praxis too heavily focused on notions of difference and diversity is limited by a tendency to see only the "diverse" women as having a race, a sexuality, a class, and so on. There is also a tendency to lock ourselves and each other into rigid, singular categories of difference. And we tend to cling to areas where our status situates us among "the oppressed" rather than examining the areas in which we hold privilege and power.

An advantage I see in postmodern feminist praxis is its allowance for shifting and contradictory identities. It may leave us temporarily located in identity politics or politics of difference. At times it is necessary to find the common ground, the identity that "we all share as women" to insist that there are still structural and systemic factors that lead to women's oppression as women vis à vis men. At times it is necessary to hold onto difference, to fight for your cause, to claim authenticity for your position--even while questioning the possibility of authenticity. Postmodern feminist politics takes up these approaches strategically.

Postmodern feminist praxis can enable us to examine simultaneous aspects of power and oppression, without locking us into fixed unitary positions of shared identity or incompatible difference. We may take up a subject position when it is useful, and insist on our freedom to take up a contradictory position at another time. We can refuse to be just a woman with disabilities, just a lesbian, just a Black woman. We can insist on our complexities, our multiple selves, and our freedom to shift among those positions

strategically.

ENDNOTES

1. I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial assistance. Thanks to the reviewers for their helpful comments. Finally, many of the ideas worked out in this paper are the product of discussions with Bethan A. Lloyd. "Ownership" of ideas seems unfathomable; I cannot possibly sort out my ideas from hers. Nonetheless, I take full responsibility for the words and interpretations I have committed to paper here.
2. In practice this has included advising the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, bringing issues to his or her attention, conducting research, bringing issues to the attention of the media, responding to the media, and establishing a fieldwork program to work with women in rural areas of the province.
3. I recognize the political implications of using the term 'African-Canadian' rather than 'Black.' However, in Nova Scotia in 1993/94, 'Black' predominated and was the term used by all participants throughout this process, so I use it here.
4. Acadians are French-speaking Canadians who have lived in certain areas of the Maritime provinces for centuries.
5. Throughout this brief descriptive section of this paper I am skipping rapidly through decision-making processes that were long and difficult. Over and over again through this process we expressed our frustration at being torn between the pragmatic need to get things done and the knowledge that how we accomplished things was far from perfect.
6. There had been long and heated debate during the Strategic Planning about whether to have women's groups from specific communities nominate Council members or even select them. Though the other "community women" and I argued for this, it was finally defeated. It was seen as too complex and too divisive for the community groups. I still question whether this approach was unpopular because it placed too much power in the hands of the community groups.
7. Phil Okeke's comments at this conference were helpful here.
8. I am using the issue of abortion as an example; it most clearly shows the struggles we were engaged in. But our struggles were not about

abortion or abortion politics. We were all there as representatives of identity-based categories, and I argue that our struggles were about how to work with those identities. In my view, abortion was simply the issue that forced us to grapple with our differences. Reaching consensus requires naming and engaging with difference, rather than denying and ignoring it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Findlay, Sue. (1993). Problematizing Privilege: Another Look at the Representation of "Women" in Feminist Practice. pp. 207-224 in Linda Carty (Ed.), And Still We Rise: Feminist Political Mobilizing in Contemporary Canada. Toronto: Women's Press.

Gabriel, Chris and Katherine Scott. (1993). Women's Press at Twenty: The Politics of Feminist Publishing. pp. 25-52 in Linda Carty (Ed.), And Still We Rise: Feminist Political Mobilizing in Contemporary Canada. Toronto: Women's Press.

Gunew, Sneja and Anna Yeatman. (1993). Introduction. pp. xii-xxv in Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (Eds.), Feminism and the Politics of Difference. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.

Kauffman, L.A. 1990. The Anti-Politics of Identity. Socialist Review, 20: 67-80.

Khayatt, Didi. (1994). The Boundaries of Identity at the Intersection of Race, Class and Gender. Canadian Woman Studies, 14(2), 6-12.

Truame, Anneliese. (1994). Tau(gh)t Connections: Experiences of a "Mixed-Blood, Disabled, Lesbian Student." pp. 208-214 in Linda Garber (Ed.), Tilting the Tower: Lesbians Teaching Queer Subjects. New York: Routledge.

Yeatman, Anna. (1993). Voice and Representation in the Politics of Difference. pp. 228-245 in Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (Eds.), Feminism and the Politics of Difference. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.

Young, Iris Marion. (1990). The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference. pp. 300-323 in Linda Nicholson (Ed.), Feminism / Postmodernism. New York: Routledge.