

ence by reflecting on the contradictions involved in the context of our work and by becoming aware of the power relations that are operating. These complexities are often not solvable. They are the given reality of our work. Therefore our focus should not be on finding simple solutions but rather on working with differences. Bell Hooks (1984) discusses the necessity of experiencing difference in order to build and understand solidarity. She asserts:

*...when women come together, rather than pretend union, we (should) acknowledge that we are divided and must develop strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness, etc.... Safety and support have been redefined to mean hanging out in groups where the participants are alike and share similar values. While no woman wants to enter a situation where she will be physically annihilated, women can face one another in hostile confrontation and move beyond the hostility to understanding. Expression of hostility as an end in itself is a useless activity, but when it is the catalyst pushing us on to greater clarity and understanding, it serves a meaningful function. (p. 63)*

I have not been a part of any feminist organization where we have been able to reflect critically on our internal and external interactions. We have not looked at our diverse identities (e.g., as lesbians, heterosexuals, women of colour, white women, etc.) and our multiple roles (e.g., as workers, clients, mothers, lovers, etc.) with regards to power relations and differences. This in part has been because of the demands of social service work, but also because the complexities are frightening and we have little experience in dealing with difference in a positive and respectful way. When doing the survey on feminist collectives, I was struck by the number of women who were eager to find out and learn about other collectives. I was also struck by the small number of collectives who engage in evaluations of themselves and their work (only 44%). What are we afraid of? If we are to continue to develop feminist organizational forms then I think we need to engage in regular evaluations where we can both criticize and validate our work, and force ourselves to begin to acknowledge the contradictions and differences. Regular evaluations will also allow us to work with differences before they reach a level of crisis.

## Conclusion

Feminist collectives are present in every province of Canada, yet little has been written that documents, challenges and develops our unique feminist form of work. I am eager to have women respond to this article — I want to know more about how collectives struggle with difference and contradictions. I would like to see a network of feminist collectives so that we can discuss our difficulties and strategies and prevent further isolation in our work. I would also like to correspond with women who are working or have worked in collectives and document our diverse and valuable experiences with difference, power, contradictions and empowerment.

There are both strengths and difficulties involved in our work as feminist social service collectives. Our ideal of being empowering within our agencies is embedded within an oppressive social service system and is tied to our funding sources. This context is necessary to understand if we are to move beyond the "us and them" dichotomies that get created in both our external and internal practices and relations. In particular, real differences exist between women because of our different roles and diverse identities. These differences need to be grappled with and not denied. Bringing forth an understanding of and respect for differences and an analysis of contradictions into our collective processes will enrich our struggle for mutually empowering work environments.

## References

Hooks, Bell (1984). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press: Boston.

Ristock, Janice (1987). "Making Changes: Feminist Social Service Collectives Across Canada." (unpublished manuscript). Paper presented at the Canadian Psychological Association, June 1987, Vancouver, B.C.

*Janice Ristock is currently in her last year of the doctoral program in community psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Her dissertation is on feminist social service collectives in Canada.*

## ROBIN POTTER

### Levitation

begins when she gives away  
her possessions when words weigh  
too heavy, like sandbags weighing  
a balloon filled with tepid air. It starts  
when, like so many kilograms per  
packet,  
new clothes, memoirs are tossed  
over the side, she begins to rise in a  
basket  
of dry woven reeds; comes after  
she invited us to tea, gave her cats to  
B  
for a little while: she seemed calm  
then,  
unlike the frenzied soul we knew.  
What did we know?  
She was going with S, she said,  
emptied the 'fridge, disconnected it;  
we heard ice shifting; even then  
we noticed her levitating:  
a few more kilograms  
gone, and the basket rising, we below  
with keys to fussy ivy reaching  
across  
panes.  
How could we know, and who was  
that  
strange man  
anyway, to carry her out of her house,  
we thought at last she'll be free.  
With signs as black and dull as sullen  
pupils,  
we should have known,  
could have stopped this final parting.  
Now she shoves the heaviest sandbag  
over the side,  
unsmiling, recedes below a balloon  
too red, too yellow, too visible for  
minutes  
into hours. Now she's dying, oxygen  
slowly  
sucked from her lungs with each kiss  
from Suicide  
(a close friend we thought), her eyes  
attempting  
destination, the nozzle of the balloon  
opening intermittently, a balloon  
filled with tepid air, rising, so many  
kilograms  
of air escaping into thin air, her lungs  
inside out,  
a fancy delirium rising over the trees,  
short of everything,  
while Suicide's artificial heart keeps  
pumping.