Feminism and Multiculturalism in Quebec

An/Other Perspective

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Cet article tente d'expliquer et d'explorer les paradoxes qui surgissent quand les priorités féministes découlent des expériences historiques des bâtisseurs de la nation. L'auteure tire de son expérience comme fondatrice du Centre communautaire des femmes de l'Asie du Sud à Montréal (South Asian Women's Community Centre) (SAWCC) et de son engagement comme féministe au Québec, au Canada et en Inde, les éléments pour comprendre l'antagonisme présent entre les féminismes. Elle conclut que les programmes basés sur des impératifs patriarcaux en sont la cause.

This article examines the paradoxes that are thrown up when feminists inhabit spaces contested by imperatives of nation-building on the one hand and assertion of place on the other. The location of the article is Québec, but there are resonances with other locales and the discussion invites comparisons with them. Most of the examples in this piece reflect the experiences and engagements of minority women, filtered to a large extent through the lenses of the South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC),[1] an organization of which I[2] am a founding member. It is the aim of this article to illustrate tensions and conflicts within feminism as experienced and practised by minority women in contemporary Québec as we struggle to assert and access equality rights. They elucidate how feminisms can be antagonistic to one another, as a consequence of agendas that are based on patriarchal and colonial imperatives. Interventions of history and nation-identity inform, colour, and influence to a great deal analyses and understanding of feminism. As feminists we can agree on issues such as violence against women, pay equity, legal equality. However, experiences of colonialism, migration, discrimination, and racial profiling, as well as barriers to access due to language, race, and culture, demonstrate that unless a clear understanding of difference informs our feminism, there can be no real substantive equality for women and between women. The tensions among feminists in Québec cross racial divides, especially with regard to notions of secularism and equality. The challenge to feminism in Québec is how to ensure choice without coercion.

To provide some background to the current discussion of feminism and difference as it relates to Québec, we need to briefly review history from the time of white settler colonialism in the sixteenth century. White settler colonialism wiped out the autonomy and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and imposed European and Judeo-Christian norms and practices. The French were the first white settlers in New France (as Québec was then known). After the Seven Years' War in the mid-eighteenth century, when Britain defeated France, Québec, as it was then known, came under British rule. In defeat, French Québecers suffered economic and cultural oppression. The Catholic Church was the only institution that was left intact. It assiduously refrained from political challenges to British dominance as long as it was left free to subordinate the majority Catholic population of the province. This meant an emphasized patriarchy and no reproductive choice for women. Then, in the 1950s, the "Quiet Revolution" ushered in changes that put an emphatic secular stamp on government and society. The stringent secularism that is a marker of Québec today is, to some extent, a reaction to the history of church domination. With the Quiet Revolution, movements for language and culture led by French Québecers grew in importance, and eventually, the nationalist Parti Québecois (PQ) was swept to power in 1976. However, before this, the activities of more radical nationalists in the *Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ)* caused the Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Trudeau, to invoke the *War Measures Act* in Québec. This history has given many Québecers a sense that their experiences are unique, that they are different from Canadians. Subsequent to the troubled history of the early 1970s, in an attempt to

undermine the radicalism, legislation concerning language was passed in Québec, making French the language of business and commerce. Until then, English had dominated, and French Québecers found it difficult to find employment if they could not speak English. The linguistic and economic dominance of English-speakers and people of British origin had meant that the majority French Québecers were an underclass in their own province (see Vallières).

The PQ of 1976 was a social democratic party, whose main platform was eventual separation from the rest of Canada, as a cure to Québec's ills. As the years passed, the move to separate had its ups and downs, even as the PQ moved to the right. Today the separatist ethos in Québec has all but disappeared. It might reappear, given fertile ground, but for now earlier demands concerning language, culture, devolution of powers from the federal government, and unique status with regard to many issues, including taxation and immigration, have all been met. The French language is no longer under threat and in Québec today, every party that wishes to gain ground or maintain its base must acknowledge the unique status of Québec and the sanctity of the French language.

In terms of political outlook, there has generally been a strong progressive tradition in Québec with regard to labour, the status of women, and international issues. Québec accepted refugees fleeing the Chilean coup in the '70s, supported the reproductive rights of women as witnessed in the mass support for Chantal Daigle in 1989 on the streets of Montréal, and again in 2008 as Bill B-484 was presented in Canadian parliament,[3] the impending war in Iraq (when 100,000 and then 200,000 Québecers braved frigid February and March temperatures in the largest anti-war demonstrations in North America, contributing to the Canadian government's decision to stay out of the war in Iraq), and the Palestinian issue. Some of this social progressiveness is the reaction to many years of Church control,[4] as well as the resonances of memories of centuries of British colonialism. In the last two decades, however, increasing numbers of immigrants from non-European backgrounds have generated a sense of uneasiness, in some circles causing anxieties about loss of identity and culture, which has contributed to a siege mentality. The interstices of feminism and multiculturalism in Québec must be examined in this context.

Experiences of colonialism, migration, discrimination, and racial profiling, as well as barriers to access due to language, race, and culture, demonstrate that unless a clear understanding of difference informs our feminism, there can be no real substantive equality for women and between women.

From Language Wars to Culture Wars

Today, in Québec, French is the dominant language and, in most cases, the only language. A newcomer to Québec quickly becomes aware of this.[5] The issue manifests in selecting a school for one's children, language and signage laws that need to be implemented if one is running or owning a business, or accessing services that might require the mediation of an interpreter. As the pendulum swung towards strengthening French from the elementary school level up, there was a proposal in 1989 that only French be allowed in the schoolyard and corridors of French languages schools.[6] In response to that the SAWCC presented a brief on "Language in the Schoolyard" to the then Montréal Catholic School Commission,[7] concerning the use of languages other than French outside the classroom.[8] It emanated from our experiences as a feminist organization, whose members and users of services were largely new immigrants and political refugees from South Asia.[9] Our brief recognized the proposal as an expression of linguistic insecurity, but it cautioned that it bordered on racism with respect to allophones.[10] The brief "supported the concept that people who live and work in Québec should make every attempt to learn and speak French" and it pointed to how at the Centre, via the French language classes it offered, members and users were encouraged to develop the ability to communicate in French. On the other hand, it also pointed out that insensitive public policy may backfire.[11] This perspective was grounded in our feminist practise, based on the lived reality of SAWCC constituents. Feminism and gender equality cannot be narrowly constructed and understood. It has to reflect the lives of the women concerned, and it needs to be relevant and contextualized. The SAWCC pointed to how further marginalization and isolation of South Asian (and other linguistic minority) children would impact on a child's ability to develop in an holistic and secure manner with future ramifications for a fuller citizenship. We predicted that the parents of such children, especially the mothers, who were already linguistically isolated in a majority French-speaking environment would be forced to cope with additional insecurities

mediated through the experiences of their children at school. To feel comfortable, South Asian women did not in this instance require some vague assurance of gender equality, but rather a comfort level for themselves and their families, based on acceptance of their own ethnic and racial identity.

Almost two decades have passed since that brief was presented. Language is no longer a contentious issue in the way it had been. The French language has become secure in Québec,[12] and a Québecer is no longer defined by linguistic ability. Children of parents who have migrated to Québec from parts of South Asia and elsewhere attend French schools. French has become the language they have in common, irrespective of their mother tongue. But race and ethnicity have become problematic. The children of immigrant parents, born and raised in French in Québec, do not feel accepted. Often seen as exotic and different, they find areas of employment closed to them.[13] Even in the '80s, black Québecers from Haiti and francophone Africa had challenged the assumption that language alone made a Québecer.[14] Their experiences had demonstrated otherwise. The multiculturalism of Pierre Trudeau evolved differently in Québec than it did elsewhere in Canada, due to the progressive outlook already mentioned. However, this did not mean that Québec multiculturalism was not also premised on difference defined by majoritarian constructs and ideals, and hence riddled with racism, and with regard to certain issues, patrinormativity.

What Does Bhangra Music Have to do With Feminism?

In the early 1990s, the SAWCC decided to stake its claim to be a Québec organization by holding a celebration and challenging mainstream definitions of "Québecer"—"white," "French," and "many centuries in the making"—by participating in Fête Nationale[15] festivities. We submitted an application to the ultra nationalist Société Saint-Jean Baptiste (SSJB), the organization that disbursed funds received from the provincial government for these celebrations, many of which took the form of neighbourhood parties. We were rejected by the SSJB on the grounds that our proposed party was ethnocultural and insufficiently Québecois because the music to be played included bhangra.[16] The SAWCC responded via an op-ed column that challenged the narrow definition of culture and identity. It pointed out that most likely other block parties that got funded would not play music solely from Québec folkloric traditions;[17] there would be rock, including home-grown Québec rock, which like all rock music had its roots in African-American music derived from Africa and the experiences of the enslavement of Africans. Clearly this could also be classified as ethnocultural music, distinct from the ethnocultural music of the French settlers in Québec in the sixteenth century. Embedded in the SAWCC challenge was that culture is not static; it evolves with lived realities. The question posed was how much time should pass for something to be accepted as Québecois? And the same for people. The piece called the SSJB on their racism. Central to our challenge was the question of who are the arbiters of Québec identity?[18] SAWCC had stepped into the quagmire of identity based on a notion of origins defined by a majoritarianism unwilling to recognize changing demographic and cultural realities. Situated in the realm of language and music, these struggles might seem to have little to do with feminism. However, as a feminist organization, the SAWCC from the start critically engaged not just as service providers. Its *raison d-être,* from its founding, emanated from a lived reality, where race and identity issues were integral to equality rights in terms of sex and gender. We were demonstrating that contesting a racist definition of a Québecer was as much part of feminist struggle as that of violence against women.

Secularism East and West

A decade and a half later, 9/11 and rising Islam phobia coincided, for numerous reasons, with a perception of the loss of cultural identity in many places in Europe, Canada, and the United States. There exists, especially in the regions of Québec, removed from the larger urban centres, shades of an earlier *disparaitre*-type fear.[19] In 2007, the erstwhile leader of the political party, *Action démocratique du Québec* (ADQ), Mario Dumont, feeling the need to bolster support for his party's neoconservative platform, fuelled these insecurities in the wake of the declaration of Herouxville.[20] Women, as has been the case so often in history, became the currency of debate. In this, the ADQ were not alone. Other Québec MNAs[21] over the past decade had already declared themselves ardent defenders of women's rights with respect to forces of fundamentalism. Some of these pronouncements were made during the so-called "sharia" controversy in Ontario, which generated debates that spilled over into Québec.[22] These developments were problematic, in that identity was narrowly defined in a diverse society; that legitimacy was sought by reiterating secularism, and the defence of women's rights. It set up a false dichotomy—Us and Them. The premise was that secularism and religio-cultural particularities were incompatible, and there was no basis for discussions that attempted to problematize these connections.[23] Québecers' history of antagonism to clericalism and disregard of the agency of Muslim women like the members of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, which has a Québec chapter, emerged in the exaggerated secularism of Québec governmental (Québec Council on the Status of Women) and non-gov-

ernmental (Fédération des femmes du Québec) women's rights organizations.[24]

The ideology of secularism arose in specific historical contexts, in Europe, as a way to wrest control and dominance from church authorities and gained impetus during the Enlightenment, when rationality and individual rights were privileged. It fit well with the project "western civilization," with its assumptions of progress and development. In some cases it was also the result of an imposition of a constructed national identity as a nation emerged. Secularism may have taken fierce anti-clerical tones as it did in France, or evolved, as in Britain, as a gradual reiteration of the separation of church and state. Modernity's conflating of rationalism with secularism, combined with the ambitions of a rising bourgeoisie, is key to understanding aspects of the current debates and tensions around secularism. Another pivotal aspect of the emergence of secularism is that it arose among communities and nations that were mostly ethnically homogenous. Irish, Blacks, Jews, and "Others," who lived in these communities and nations were miniscule enough to escape attention, or it was assumed they would fit in and assimilate. Western secularism reflected homogeneity and despite often fierce anti-clericalism, a commonly held Judeo-Christian heritage and ethos. As such, "tolerance" was not required. What we witness today are tensions arising as these societies become more heterogeneous as a consequence of migration and demographic change, in terms of race, religion, and cultures that are not predicated on the Judeo-Christian ethos.

This is the setting for hijab controversies.[24] A Muslim woman wearing hijab embodies a challenge to this historically and racially constructed secularism. It is presumed she is oppressed by patriarchal religious authorities. There is no consideration of her agency, resistance, or choice.[25] Instead, opposition to her is framed as an opposition to an avowal of religion in public space, and as such, cannot be accepted or tolerated. In 1993, a Québec judge ordered a woman to remove her hijab, or else leave his courtroom (see Baker; Norris; "Judge in 'hijab' case…"). No Roman Catholic nun has ever been asked to do this, demonstrating the invisibilization of the familiar and possibly a reductionist logic, conflating celibacy and veiling, which can be interpreted as a policing of our sexuality.

During the political campaign leading up to the last Canadian election, Samira Laouni, a woman of North African origin running for parliament, was insulted and treated in a misogynist manner by a Montréal area radio talk show host ("Face-off at 98.5FM").[26] On air, in the worst sexist and misogynist traditions, the talk show host sexually harassed her, calling her headscarf "cute" and "sexy." He baited her, commenting that if he raped her there, she would never be able to prove it because under Islamic law she would need the witness of four men. He questioned her about how as an observant Muslim woman who was married with children she must have had to get her husband's permission to run for office. There was little media coverage of this incident and minimal public discussion. Secularists did not defend Laouni's right to choose what she did and what she wore. Mainstream provincial feminist organizations were silent. Such silences demonstrate the limits of narrowly defined feminism. The implicit message is that support is forthcoming just as long as one conforms to the accepted mainstream definition of feminism. This is very detrimental for it undermines long years of feminist struggle for women's right to choose, with respect to reproductive rights, lifestyle, dress, career, profession—everything that choice stands for. Supporting choice should entail doing so even when it challenges one's own ideas. Limiting choice to what majoritarian secularism deems appropriate, undermines the very bedrock of feminism. The argument that speaking in support of a woman who wears a hijab is succumbing to fundamentalism is a denial of choice and a slippery slope. While one can appreciate that some adherence to rigid secularism comes from women who have suffered under fundamentalist regimes, often fleeing for their lives, equating the right to choose with succumbing to fundamentalism is simplistic. Even as feminists oppose coercion of women under fundamentalist regimes, they themselves can be seen as exerting majoritarian coercion. This is secular fundamentalism that sees realities in black and white, devoid of nuance and subjectivity. Choice that does not violate the rights of others has long been accepted towards building workable societies.

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Secularism per se is not the problem. The post-colonial Indian state in which I was born and raised, is a declared secular state. The premises and practice of Indian secularism are far from perfect, but it does serve as

a working example of the inclusion of difference, while not marking specific practices as "different."[27] Secular practice in India accommodates difference in ways that maintain equity and access. There is no privileging of one norm. A female official verifies the identity of a woman in burkha who comes to a polling station to cast her ballot. The woman is not denied voting rights because she is dressed a certain way, and there is no anxiety about loss of identity, rights, or equity for women with these arrangements. In post-colonial India, secularism was a pragmatic choice to accommodate difference within a framework of constitutional rights and guarantees. Its genesis, unlike the secularism of the West, lay in accommodating the heterogeneity that existed. Indian secularism was adopted as official policy for a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multilingual state, whose advocates were committed to modernity, as different from secularism in the West. Indian secularism has been about many "differences," to the point where one begins to see "difference" as the norm, rather than the exception. This practice has lessons in equality and justice. In other parts of South Asia diversity is being cleansed and populations homogenized. And there are those who wish the same for India.[28] The lessons of Indian secularism demonstrate that there is strength and resilience and a better chance for equality, justice, and democracy in a heterogeneous society where diversity is protected. As one moves away from narrowly-defined official state multiculturalism and looks at the conscious and unconscious actions of the multicultural subject who refuses to live by such narrow definitions, multiculturalism spills over into the contested area of secularism—a narrow church-state separation versus a more complex and nuanced accommodation of difference.

Feminism and Multiculturalism —Solidarity and Homogneity

Québec, the nation in the nation, has struggled to assert and retain its identity, with little regard for First Peoples. But this is not unique to Québec. It merely adds another layer of complexity. The 28 years of experiences of the SAWCC provides a particular take on the twinning of feminism and multiculturalism. With regard to official policies and programs, majoritarian feminist formations as well as individuals identified with the majority community, have time and again shown an inability to position themselves within a critical race perspective. Feminists in the service of nationalist agendas have failed to call the question. As head of the *Fédération des femmes du Québec* (FFQ),[29] Françoise David[30] castigated premier Lucien Bouchard for insufficient attention to the issues facing poor women in Québec. However, when Bouchard had earlier spoken of the falling birth rate in Québec—saying —"We're one of the white races that has the fewest children," and urging white francophone women in Québec to have more babies to reverse the falling birth rate and bolster the Québec nation— David, who shared the podium at the event where the comments were made, did not challenge the blatant patriarchal assumption of women as reproductive machines in the service of the nation, or the essentially racist premise of white Québec women bearing white Québec babies.[31] The primacy of the national question, resulted in an inability to see any of this as anti-feminist and racist. As a feminist organization, the FFQ has failed to extricate itself from the clutches of nationalism and compromised its feminism. The litmus test of feminism cannot be a vague commitment to gender equality. The engagement with how that equality takes on different meanings is neither straightforward nor clean-cut.

In the face of onslaughts from religion-defined identities, feminists in Québec of the majoritarian group have adopted a rigid defence of secularism, which has resulted in an essentially anti-feminist position, if one's understanding of feminism includes an anti-racist perspective.

In the debates around the defence of secularism in the face of onslaughts from religion-defined identities, feminists in Québec of the majoritarian group have adopted a rigid defence of secularism, which has resulted in an essentially anti-feminist position, if one's understanding of feminism includes an anti-racist perspective. There are some feminists from minority communities who align with this majoritarian view, but we can appreciate their vehemence because by birth, affinity, or research interest, they are linked to parts of the world that have seen the rise of misogynist religious fundamentalism and extremism.

In terms of socio-economic realities and reproductive rights, Québec feminists have been pioneers in areas of equity and social policy. However, what has been singularly lacking is a real engagement with minority women whose lives are as drastically affected, if not more so, by various intersectionalities. What has been the reality is the slotting of minority women into a niche as objects to be studied and acted upon. Monies are spent on workshops where our lives and experiences are analyzed, but this

is not translated into solidarity and actions. We are not accepted on our own terms, and this is an essentially anti-feminist way of knowledge-building and working. Unified action, working in coalitions, being accepted as equals, has yet to happen.[32] In challenges to government policies and legislation that marginalize and target minority groups, mainstream feminists and feminist organizations have not been responsive. In struggles for status for refugees and migrants, against unequal labour practices imposed on migrants, against the police racial profiling, especially of racialized communities and against security certificates, we struggle in isolation. There is a racial divide. We are the ones who have to raise awareness of our issues and force recognition for them. It is challenging and frustrating. There is a lack of mainstream feminist engagement with issues of minority women, faced directly as women or as mothers and family members. Majoritarian feminist practice is rarefied to the point of disconnection with the issues that inform the lives and struggles of minority women. However, we know that our struggles for better lives for ourselves, and for our families, are feminist struggles. That when we protest the police killing of a racialized youth or work to stop the deportation of a family to Pakistan, this is our feminist practice in action, just as much as when we gather to remember Milia Abrar, a young woman of Bangladeshi origin who was murdered by a jealous man.

Just prior to the last provincial election in 2008, the government of premier Charest, in an attempt at populism, instituted the requirement that newcomers to Québec sign a declaration that they will respect "Québec's common values."[33] The racist undertones and vote-grabbing impetus behind the introduction of this policy elicited no protest from the feminist mainstream. We were left to assume that feminists shared these views. Feminists of the majority population do not make the links between anti-racism and feminism. As such there is a failure of feminism to engage with multiculturalism. In addressing concerns about cultural relativism, we should use "choice" without coercion as our guide. As feminists we need to defend choice. This is what should inform our positions on issues. Just as historically feminists have defended and continue to defend a woman's choice in matters relating to her reproductive health, irrespective of what one's personal moral and ethical positions are, similarly with respect to dress codes, a woman's choice should be respected. And this should not be construed at all as a cultural relativist position.

Overt and implied racism that is not challenged by the feminist mainstream demonstrates a lack of sensitivity and solidarity. In contestations between notions of culture and identity there needs to be a demonstrated understanding of the complexities involved. That not only by virtue of being feminists in Québec is solidarity so important, but equally, and in more pragmatic ways a defence of "obvious" visible threats to a patriarchally-defined notion of society does not augur well for *all* women. We are the canaries in the mineshaft. And feminists who stridently raise alarm bells about rights curbed by religion might in reality be playing into the hands of nationalist and xenophobic patriarchal agendas. Unfortunately mainstream feminism in Québec has often played second fiddle to nationalism.

"Popular" Multiculturalism

While the Canadian practice and experience of multiculturalism has been a way to manage difference, multiculturalism itself is a much-abused term. What is at issue is the imposition of policies that are controlling and diversionary. The discourse of multiculturalism should be about tolerance. However "tolerance" has come to mean a minimum level of toleration. In order to create and generate positive approaches to difference, "acceptance" is healthier because it holds the promise of a level playing field, one that offers the possibility of gazing at one another from the standpoint of equality. In the experience of the SAWCC and its allies and associates, such as PINAY,[34] the 8th March Committee of Women of Diverse Origins, as well as examples from other places in Canada or in Britain, it is the multiculturalism, forged in struggle for common rights as women, that challenges socio-economic privilege and patriarchy with an understanding of race, that leads to critical engagement. Himani Banerji, in bringing her perspective of "anti-racist and feminist class politics'" to any discussion and understanding, writes about a multiculturalism of resistance, a popular multiculturalism (5). This is a notion of cultural pluralism that comes from below, that truly reflects lived reality, rather than an imposition from above. Historical contextualization—the embattled nation, protection of identity, mantras that get repeated without continual assessment, realities that need to keep pace with time—must inform our thinking on culture, identity, and feminism. Feminism as the ideology of equality for women with men, when situated in the Québec and other contexts, must be seen in tandem with many other factors. It is not an entity that stands alone. In order to ensure equality, feminists and feminist positioning must intersect with identity in its fullest meaning.

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[1]The South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC) is a 28-year-old feminist service, support, and advocacy organization for South Asian women and their families, which has consciously opted to not dichotomize service provision and political activism.

[2]And here I identify as a transnational feminist with origins in India, a member of a minority community, who maintains ties with feminists in the Indian sub-continent and the struggles that are waged there.

[3]Chantal Daigle, a young Québec woman decided to get an abortion after ending a relationship with her abusive boyfriend, Jean-Guy Tremblay. He went to court to get an injunction to prevent her from doing this. The case made it all the way up to the Supreme Court of Canada. The decision of the court, in Daigle's favour, that a man has no legal right to veto a woman's abortion decision, essentially struck down Canada's abortion law. Bill C-484, a private member's bill called the "Unborn Victims of Crime Act," ostensibly to protect a foetus that is harmed when a pregnant woman is attacked, was seen by feminists as bringing anti-abortion legislation in through the back door.

[4]Québec women were the last to get the vote in Canada, only getting the franchise in 1944 (though they could vote in national elections much earlier, in 1917). Even as the birth rate dropped elsewhere in Canada, Québec women, especially in rural areas, still bore on average seven to eight children. Priests told women in the confessional and from the pulpit that it was their sacred duty to lie with their husbands without contraception. Today, Québec has gone within a generation and a half to a society that has among the lowest birth rates in the industrialized world. The number of heterosexual couples in Québec who live together without being formally married is the highest in Canada. Québec has a subsidized daycare system in place at $7 a day, irrespective of family income, compared to other parts of Canada where parents might pay anything from $300 to $500 a week. This has huge implications for women's choices about working outside the home. And Québec was the third province in Canada to legalize same sex marriage (Bélanger; Dumont et al. 136-140, 262-265; Prentice et al. 207-208; SAWCC; Statistics Canada).

[5]However, a francophone friend with origins in North Africa recently informed me that it is considered fashionable today among some circles in Québec to speak English.

[6]At the time the brief was presented, changes to Québec law, meant that all children must attend school in French, with the exception of children with parents at least one of whom had attended primary school in English prior to 1977. Subsequent legislation in Québec has further narrowed eligibility for English language education.

[7]In 2000, public schools in Québec were deconfessionalized. Since that time school boards have been organized along linguistic lines.

[8]The SAWCC brief is included in Dodge.

[9]South Asia includes the countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. Since the current war in Afghanistan, the SAWCC has been working with Afghan women as well.

[10]Allophones is a term used in Québec for everyone who is not a Francophone or an Anglophone.

[11]The proposals included such things as school boards developing resources "to assist parents who do not speak French to communicate with the schools about the progress of their children and also to encourage them to participate in school activities, so that positive reinforcement is provided to students," that school boards sensitize teachers and train and equip them with resources to build classrooms of inclusiveness.

[12]There are still the threats from cable television, the internet and other insidious areas as English dominates the sound waves, cyber space and the business world.

[13]In March 2007 of 67,138 provincial civil servants, 2,736 or 4.1 percent of Québec civil servants were members of ethnic and visible minority communities. In 2002-2003 the figures were 3.1 percent, indicating a 1 percent increase (or 595 positions) in a five-year period (CRARR).

[14]Amanthe Bathalien in "Sisters in the Struggle." Dir. Dionne Brand (Studio D, NFB, 1991).

[15]Saint-Jean Baptiste day on June 24th was a very popular holiday in the *Ancien regime* of France.

[16]At that time, "bhangra" music was sweeping the mainstream in places like Britain, but it had yet to take hold in Canada, Québec, and the U.S.

[17]Fiddle music, often with spoon percussion accompaniment. Early music was derived from the places of French migration to New France, especially Brittany, Normandy, Île-de-France, Picardy and Poitou.

[18]Ironically, today bhangra beats are sampled into a lot of music and are as ubiquitous as standard blues and rock riffs.

[19]In 1989, the television documentary *Disparaître,* raised alarm bells about white Francophone Québecers being swamped by non-white immigrants.

[20]Herouxville is a small town in Québec with a population of 1338 who are white, francophone and Catholic by tradition. It catapulted into the spotlight when the town published new prescriptions on their website. Among them were "We consider it completely outside norms to … kill women by stoning them in public, burning them alive, burning them with acid, circumcising them etc."

[21]Members of the National Assembly.

[22]The controversy came about after the Attorney-General of Ontario Marion Boyd recommended religious arbitration in certain areas, including those of family law. The practice was taken up by some groups of orthodox Jews. However when Faisal Kutty, an Ontario lawyer and a Muslim, actively advocated that the Muslim community use religious arbitration in legally binding ways, it unleashed a furor of responses in Ontario and other parts of Canada, including Québec. The governing Liberal party of Québec opposed it. A bill was presented by a Liberal MNA Fatima Hoda-Pépin, a Muslim woman originally from Tunisia. Québec's Justice Minister spoke out against it. The Canadian Council of Muslim Women also spoke out against this measure. However the discourse on rights went to the extreme when Monique Gagnon-Tremblay, Québec`s International Relations Minister, said that immigrants, "who do not respect women's rights or who do not respect whatever rights may be in our Civil Code should stay in their country and not come to Québec, because that is unacceptable. On the other hand, if people want to accept our way of doing things and our rights, they will be welcome and we will help them to integrate." While this might sound in line with a feminist approach to equal rights, the lines drawn between Us and Them in this discourse is marked (*Toronto Star* 16 May 2005).

[23]Outsiders to Québec from the rest of Canada (ROC) erroneously read this as Québec taking its cues from France. Though there were some parallels between France and Québec with regard to cause and effect and similarities in the arguments put forth, this was home-grown opposition.

[24]In May 2009, the FFQ voted to support the right of women working in the public sector to wear religious signs, which though couched in general terms was about the muslim veil (see note that follows). This was a response to the Québec government's action following the Québec Council on the Status of Women's recommendation that the *Québec Charter on Human Rights and Freedoms* privileges gender equality over freedom of religion.

[24]Hijab is the scarf that covers hair and often the neck. The face is visible.

[25]"Secular fundamentalist" is a term I choose to use from time to time to emphasize the intransigent and literal interpretation of secularism by some.

[26]Benoit Dutrizac was the talk show host.

[27]Of course the secular accommodations of post-colonial India have been challenged because they discriminate negatively with respect to the Personal (or religion-based) Laws that govern marriage, divorce, property, and inheritance. Indian feminists have been pointing out how they are inequitable in terms of women's rights. Their demand is for a Uniform Civil Code for all, irrespective of religion. These demands have been born of struggles by women whose rights were compromised under the Personal Law codes.

[28]Hindu nationalists wish India to become a Hindu state, Hindutva. Ironically, they also demand a uniform civil code for all, based on their interpretation of Hinduism and Hindu law.

[29]The FFQ is a province-wide independent and autonomous organization that is seen as a voice of Québec women. In terms of the national question of Québec its stance would be described as "soft nationalism."

[30]Françoise David was head of the FFQ from 1994-2001.

[31]Lucien Bouchard, 14 October 1995 just before the 1995 referendum, the second to ask voters if they wished Québec to form an independent state (see Thompson).

[32]The 8th March Committee of Women of Diverse Origins was founded in Montréal in 2001 specifically because for many years International Women's Day had not been marked in the city in any significant way and to also bring to the centre issues of importance to women who were marginalized for a variety of reasons.

[33]Included in the "common values" were French as an official language, gender equality, and separation of church and state.

[34]Filipino Women's Organization in Québec.

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SHEILAH ROBERTS

The Library

Deep in the tall stacks
several rows away
they gather,
books in arms
flicking long hair,
clutched together.

They share secrets,
while stands of ancient
volumes
gorged with knowledge
gaze down upon them in
mild contempt.

Rustling air,
their whispers shadow the
halls.
I want to join in but I am
new.
The sibilant 'sh' of she floats
down towards me.

Sheilah Roberts is the mother of two adult children and a senior dog. She lives in St. Philips, Newfoundland. In addition to poetry, she has published a book and is about to publish her first short story.

MARGO SWISS

Mother God

Thus God is our mother…and He wills that we know this, for He will have all our love fastened to Him.
—Julian of Norwich, *A Shewing of God's Love*

On hands and knees before you, God, I fall,
bear with grief this wretched beggar love.
Face down dead I lay
the once soft heart You worked in me,
turned now so sickly hard,
that hardening harder still
is doomed to kill
my light and life.

The sin I bring is like a serpent's tooth
devouring rest, that eats and burns within
yet wears itself without
by such disguise as otherwise
seems meet and right.

How shall I find You now, O Saviour God,
in this all parching heat?
A desert land extends no hand to spare
what further shame I fear:
your mighty rod that reigns
to break the back of my desire
to be your constant child –

Become, dear Christ, instead my Mother God.
Exchange this brutal love that bends
for one that raises up,
that You, once soiled for me,
shall call this breach a necessary sin
to lead me home
and by my own
poor nakedness in You
redress your glory, Lord.

Margo Swiss teaches English and Creative Writing at York University. She edited an anthology, Poetry as Liturgy: An Anthology of Canadian Poets (The St. Thomas Poetry Series, 2007), which received an Alcuin Society Award for book design and a special award from the Word Guild of Canada.