

“ You be Vigilant! Don’t Rape!”

Reclaiming Space and Security at York University

NAOKO IKEDA AND EMILY ROSSER

Cet article décrit le développement et les pratiques d'une campagne anti-viol chez les groupes de la base organisée par des étudiantes au programme d'études supérieures en Études de la femme de l'Université York. Cet article discute la valeur de leur pratique en repensant à ce que veulent dire les mots sécurité, espace, et changement social.

Sexual assault on Canadian university campuses has long been an issue of concern for students and continues to be a major site of campus activism. A Statistics Canada study shows that four out of five female undergraduate students on Canadian campuses have been victims of violence in a dating relationship (German), while one fifth of male students in another study agreed that forced sex is acceptable if someone spends money on a date, is stoned or drunk, or has been dating someone for a long time (Johnson 115) At York University, one of the major universities in Toronto, the incidence of sexual assault is a serious and ongoing concern for the community. Particularly in the past few years, numerous sexual assaults against women in campus residences were reported, and diverse groups of students and community members have been persistently responding by organizing protests, rallies, and pressuring the administration to provide adequate services.

This paper outlines the development and practice of several distinctively feminist actions against rape on campus, organized by a group of students in the Graduate Programme in Women's Studies at York University. After a brief introduction about recent sexual violence at York, the paper discusses the development of the grassroots student anti-rape campaigns and examines the implications and significance of our practice for thinking about the meanings of security, space, and social change. We argue that the university's policy implementation, such as tighter security measures, increased patrolling, and enforcement of self-vigilance on students, cannot be sufficient for combating campus rape, as these “law and order” methods lack an analysis of campus rape as a structural issue of oppression. While acknowledging the urgent necessity of transforming security policies at the institutional level, we maintain that ending a culture of sexual violence on campus must engage with multiple strategies and knowledge-sharing, in which students are not mere recipients of new security policies, but important actors in the very process of articulating, analyzing, and practicing a more radically democratic kind of security, community, and safe(r) space.

Background

On September 7, 2007, two men

entered Vanier residence and forced their way into a residence room where they committed gang rape on a woman and escaped. On September 9 and 21, Daniel Katsnelson 25, of Thornhill, and Justin David Connort, 25, were charged with five counts of break and enter, two counts of sexual assault, two counts of gang sexual assault, and two counts of forcible confinement (*Y-file* September 21, 2007). York University's quickest response was to enhance security after sexual assaults, including patrol and CCTV coverage.¹ On September 9, 2007, York University officials implemented the following extra security measures: effective doubling of York security patrols, increased staffing at residences on campus, heightened on-campus presence by Toronto Police Service, and reminders to students to be vigilant, through various alerts in posters, websites, and emails (*Y-file* September 10, 2007). Prior to the beginning of winter break, the university also hired 22 in-residence patrols in order to increase security (*Y-file* January 21, 2008).

Nevertheless, in the very beginning of the following year, another sexual assault was reported to have taken place in Founders College residence, which is close to Vanier College (*Y-file* January 16, 2008). Only two months later, it was reported that a woman was sexually assaulted near

the bus loop at the Harry W. Arthurs Common (*Y-file* March 21, 2008). And two months after that, in May, another woman was reported to have been sexually assaulted on the south side of the same Harry W. Arthurs Common in the early evening (*Y-file* May 21, 2008).

Throughout these periods of continuous sexualized attacks against female students on campus, the university placed the highest priority on increasing security measures and surveillance, while simultaneously enjoining individual students to be “vigilant” (Boesveld). Officials highlighted these measures as the most effective way to support police investigations and prevent further assaults. They included implementing more security on campus, “the installation of 126 new security cameras and employing more night patrol ... while the exact locations of those cameras would not be revealed” (*Y-file* January 21 2008). The administration confirmed in an on-campus interview that they were “working closely with the police presence on campus as a security measure and offered better training for York security” (Yip).

While the university administration’s response to the sexual assaults was systematic, quick, and very public, some student groups and campus unions immediately questioned the effectiveness of the security strategies that the administration adopted. For example, the York Federation of Students critiqued the York administration’s actions as a “band-aid solution” (Pelley). Frustrated with the narrowness of the approach, many began to interrogate the ways in which York University, as an educational institution, has nurtured a particular space in which violence is tolerated.

Race and Displacement

Much interest has developed over the last several decades in analyzing space as a product of social relations. Many scholars have used

what Sherene Razack calls “unmapping” as a strategy to better understand the complex dynamics through which violence emerges and comes to be seen as natural in particular locations (5). In our view, York’s public relations strategy involves intentionally disconnecting the campus and university community from the surrounding area. It is located in North Toronto, close to the intersection of Jane and Finch, a low-income area of the city that is often the focus of sensationalized media reports on crime, gun violence, and poverty. York’s publicity and promotional materials usually downplay this proximity through omission rather than overt disavowals. In administrative approaches to the assaults on campus, what is usually a problem became very useful to the administration by allowing the displacement of campus violence onto the racialized area. One editorial in the Ryerson University student publication, *RyersOnline*, illustrates how natural this displacement can seem. Writing in the wake of the 2007 gang rapes at York, the author considers the relative safety of the two campuses:

Worst of all, York students told *RyersOnline* they don’t feel safe on campus because it’s in a “shady” area of the city. Women complained there are no boundaries between the university’s vast campus and the surrounding neighbourhoods. [The online source then gives readers the option to compare York’s and Ryerson’s campus maps]... This leaves the campus wide open to whoever wants to stroll through York’s forest-filled, and often poorly-lit grounds—including “sketchy” people wearing gang colours. While students admitted there was evidence of elevated security after the sexual assaults last year, it still wasn’t enough to prevent two 19-year-olds from being at-

tacked while sleeping in their dorm rooms. So next time ... [you] notice the lack of trees in the heart of Toronto’s concrete jungle, think about your York University counterparts. Our grey, sometimes dirty, urban community isn’t that pretty. But feeling safe on campus is a beautiful thing. (“Sexual assault at York U dorm”)

Referencing a shady area, porous boundaries, and “sketchy” people wearing gang colours” implies both that outsiders are dangerous racial others, and that they are responsible for the assaults on campus, regardless of the fact that one of the perpetrators in this case was soon revealed to be a recent graduate of York. The apparent ease with which this student journalist slips between discourses of women’s safety and spatialized race-danger indicates how closely associated race and gender are in dominant imaginaries of sexual violence in Toronto.

As Razack notes, violence does not occur in a vacuum, but in the spaces that are “constituted through laws and the mapping of the hierarchical social relations they create and sustain” (20). In the context of sexual assault on York campus, the administration’s problem-solving approach to rape failed to recognize that the campus itself is deeply implicated and constituted through particular social relations of power, including gender and racial hierarchy. Decrying assaults without articulating their structural dimension, then, makes it easy for the media and others to link perpetrators to discursive constructions of outsiders (or stranger-danger) who can be distanced from any link to the community (Bumiller 21-30). In addition, the term “community” was often used in official communications, while in practice, York’s strategies seemed more akin to corporate forms of social organization where students are treated as consumers or clients rather than active participants or citizens of a

community. This strategy makes security measures and a law and order or crime control approach seem like the only effective weapon against what is effectively a culture of violence and fear (Bumiller 6-11). This strategy was something that many at York explicitly and fervently rejected, opting instead for more expansive and less individualistic notions of community.

degree of violence on university campuses, but we still learned surprising new things from one another. One student who had attended York in the early 1990s told us about the vast network of underground tunnels that had to be shut down because of the prevalence of sexual assault—but not before an amazing array of anti-violence graffiti surfaced on the walls. Others had learned about

violence already scripted out for us through the security apparatus of the institution. We wanted to mobilize around this anger and our continuing feelings of insecurity, both against York administration and the broader climate of violence. Some of the main things we wanted to do were:

1. Reorient our discussions around the idea of “rape cul-

It was frustrating to be framed as potential victims who must watch out to prevent our own assaults, but at the same time having all the appropriate responses to violence already scripted out for us through the security apparatus of the institution.

Talking Back

A group of Women’s Studies graduate students began talking on our listserv and then met to discuss the problem in early 2008. Though colleagues and in many cases friends, we were not a group that regularly meets, mobilizes or agrees on very much. In the politicized environment of Women’s Studies and the fragmented lives of graduate students, Teaching Assistants, commuters, and mothers, this is hardly surprising. Our academic work is spread across a very wide theoretical terrain, and our life experiences are also very different. Some of us had backgrounds in some type of anti-violence work, but many were also critical of the problematic tendencies of much feminist activism of the past—especially the ways it has avoided discussions of racism by championing an overarching universalism about women’s shared vulnerability that does not adequately account for structural inequalities.

However, we did agree on certain aspects of the problem—the campus was not safe, but this was no new phenomenon, and it was definitely not specific to York University. We were all already aware of the high

the dangers of such rape tunnels as part of crisis training on other campuses. Everyone could describe a few specific corners of York’s vast campus that lack adequate lighting at night. This concrete institutional knowledge is not the kind of thing you get in the mail when you pay your tuition deposit, but it helped us to break down the idea that the recent incidents of violence were isolated, random events, or that we were somehow individually responsible for preventing them. This was the beginning of a discussion that sought to place things in a broader context that might help make feminist sense of the problem at hand.

We wanted to feel like we had some control over what happened to our bodies, and we knew that there are limits to what we can do to improve our actual safety, but none of us felt positively about York administration’s security strategies and public relations, or the broader Toronto media coverage. We felt that the administration’s strategies contributed to the climate of fear and disempowerment rather than dismantling it. It was frustrating to be framed as potential victims who must watch out to prevent our own assaults, but at the same time having all the appropriate responses to

ture” and make explicit connections to York’s and the media’s ongoing attempts to racialize or “other” the aggressors;

2. Refuse the individualization of responsibility for violence; especially, to rescript “vigilance” and other security language that feeds into common rape myths, and to turn the focus away from women onto those men who actually *commit* sexual assaults; and

3. Make a really feminist statement, in language that has currency in broader public consciousness—in other words—to make a gesture of outreach to others who might feel the same way without necessarily identifying as academic feminists.

Since all words about violence are loaded, and some are more gender-neutral than others, we spent some time discussing terminology. We eventually decided to use the word rape as a strategy to highlight the misogyny that thrives in violent spaces. Rape is a word with enormous rhetorical power, and we discussed the tensions around how to use it without continuing to feed into rape scripts and other dynamics, such as racism,

Open letter from Graduate Women's Studies Students Association to the York Community

Re: *sexual assaults on campus*

We're writing this letter because we're angry. Why?

First, because women at York are being attacked, sexually assaulted and raped. Like everyone, we have the right to study and work without fear of violence.

Second, we're angry because instead of hearing a loud and repeated condemnation of sexual assault, we're told how to avoid being raped. York administration's security bulletin calls on us to be "vigilant" about our safety. Women have heard this before: don't make the same mistakes as 'those' women; don't go out alone at night; don't be in the wrong place at the wrong time; basically, don't get raped.

We're angry because this is about our bodies, our lives, our dignity. But our anger about York's official response does not stop with administrators: when they imply the perpetrators are strangers with no ties to York, no one has to take responsibility. Rape is a public relations nightmare, but denying its rootedness in the York community will not protect us.

Sexual assault and rape at York is done by people from York. We're angry because we want to trust the people we live, work and study with. We want to be in a community that does not tell us, tacitly or officially, "don't get raped," but instead, values women enough to say, "don't rape." Rape is not accidental, and it is not isolated. It thrives in a culture that is tolerant of violence, especially violence against women. Currently, it thrives here, at York.

We want this culture to change, and that takes work. Security cameras and extra lighting are not the kind of "vigilance" we need.

We want to feel safe and respected. So *you* be vigilant: don't rape.

The GWSSA

Open Letter from Graduate Women's Studies Students Association to the York Community Re: Sexual Assaults on Campus.

that were operating on campus.

Here are some of the main principles behind our strategies:

Urgency—we deal with bureaucracy all the time and were unwilling to wait for something better to happen while more campus alerts went up and

more women got attacked. While we did not think we could end patriarchy or stop all rape, part of the urgency came from a strong desire to act as subjects, instead of objects of security discourse and victim language.

Pragmatism—we would do what

was possible with our meager resources, but without precluding institutional approaches (such as the safety audit that later emerged as a result of concentrated student pressure on the administration).

Collective anonymity—in solidarity with survivors, we wanted to make space for anger, and at the same time not risk that any one person would be singled out publicly for speaking out. We also wanted to turn the "it could happen to anyone" fear tactic about rape back on itself, into "anyone can fight back." This sort of position is very threatening to an institution that makes explicit claims about what is good for us and how we should behave as vigilant, self-monitoring, self-controlling individuals. To do something organized, anonymously, rejects the claim that vigilance (our own or that of the administration) is a valid strategy of rape prevention.²

Open-endedness of methods—we wanted to challenge a security discourse that does not allow student feedback or contestation, and also make space for smaller or larger collectivities to develop.

Concrete Actions and Responses

Here are some of the things we actually did collectively:

a) We co-wrote an open letter about vigilance and the culture of violence at York and sent it to the *Excalibur*, the York student newspaper, and some listserves. This letter was published and received numerous responses, also published.

b) We co-wrote an open letter of support for York University Black Students' Association (YUBSA), along with the undergraduates in the tutorial taught by one Women's Studies Teaching Assistant. Recently there had been incidents of anti-Black, white supremacist graffiti in the Student Centre, as well as some racialized attacks in the same area. We wrote to show solidarity and also to make explicit our support for cross-campus anti-racist work against violence.

c) We started a guerilla postering campaign. The posters were extremely simple, mainly printed in a word program and easily photocopied. They had messages like “Don’t Rape,” as well as some plays on the York logo and motto that were inspired by Adbusting.³

d) We took our activism into the classroom. Many of us who work as teaching assistants brought this issue and the posters to our tutorials to start discussions that were relevant to our students’ lives at York. We were able to have some good discussions around guerilla activism and direct action, as well as expanding the meanings of victimhood and safety. Some of us used the York Campus Alerts as texts for critical analysis, and often students offered to help with postering on campus.

Raising these issues in tutorials allowed space not only for making abstract feminist concepts relevant to students, but also for information-sharing about York’s approach and students’ own experiences of poor lighting, disappointing experiences with Yorksafe (the walking service for students moving around campus at night), and frustration around York’s media responses. This opened space for sometimes unusual engagement between graduate and undergraduate students, where many of us got the chance to collaborate on something for the first time.

Our strategies were met with mixed reactions. One male professor, in a research centre where students had posterred, complained about the way the posters implicated *all* men, as though he should never be expected to take responsibility for violence he was sure he hadn’t committed as an individual. One male grad student told us—with no hint of irony—that the posters would not be effective because they were “not sexy enough.” What was (to him) an unacceptable choice of urgency over aesthetics was for us a different sort of choice, with a different measure of effectiveness that included making him feel less comfortable. One of us asked him



Guerilla postering campaign.

if he would post some in a men’s washroom for us. He declined.

There were some letters and articles in the student press that painted feminists as whiny, but there was also some coverage of the postering as a positive intervention (as far as we could see, no one in the *Excalibur* linked the writers of the open letter to the anonymous posterers). We think there was a small shift in feeling in public spaces, and especially when individuals adopted posters for their own local spaces, like on the doors of offices where we hold our office hours as Teaching Assistants.

In broader terms, there was an increase in discussion and student involvement in resisting securitiza-

tion on York’s terms—many others were organizing at the same time. Student advocacy groups and an introductory women’s studies course formed a coalition called Women Against Rape. They worked with anti-rape activist, Jane Doe, to formalize the relationship between the disparate student groups, and organized a media conference where students, and not the administration, would be able to frame the problem and demand adequate responses. This group and others called for a third party anti-oppressive safety audit by the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC). The audit was finally approved in 2008, and though interrupted by

the three-month CUPE 3903 strike, will be presenting its report later in 2010.⁴

The safety audit was an idea generated by the student body and it is a great victory to see it in place. METRAC has been actively investigating the conditions of safety and security on York campus, through electronic surveys, focus groups, and other methods. Their anti-oppressive approach stresses that safety can include measures like policing and better lighting, but that these are only part of a larger picture. METRAC's methods highlight the importance of collecting and reflecting students' ideas and feelings about campus in/security, rather than creating a one-sided security policy template.

However, the victory may not be so clear cut. Low participation in the audit's activities has been disappointing, but can be attributable to more than just student apathy and stress in a year shortened by a prolonged strike that divided students, faculty, and administrators. Several other factors should be considered, including disillusionment with one more consultative process that can easily be ignored, and skepticism about whether the audit is truly independent. Many are keenly aware that the university administration has the discretion to monitor all yorku.ca email. The audit website is a part of yorku.ca, displays York's logo, and its preamble makes it seem as though the President of the university took the initiative to implement the audit, when it was actually a response to increasingly loud and critical student pressure. It is important to hail METRAC for doing important work, and also crucial that they are supported by many allies within administrative structures. At the same time, we should remain vigilant against the appropriation of protest back into a security narrative that is completely framed by an administration with an enormous public relations budget and a keen interest in maintaining amicable "student-client relations."

Concluding Thoughts

We cannot take credit for any of the other student activism or for getting the safety audit in place. Many undergraduate and graduate students played key roles both in public and behind the scenes in keeping these issues on the agenda and pressuring York to respond. While we acknowledge that our activism was not highly organized or institutionalizable, we also found our methods and practices were not inconsistent with change at the institutional level. Rather, a person-to-person, often emotionally charged approach to counter-educating about safety made the process itself an integral aspect of the transformation we sought. It opened up space for more direct student engagements with the issue of campus rape, which is vital to generating institutional and policy changes that have broad-based legitimacy.

We cannot know the long-term impact of student activism over the last few years, nor do we think that one example can encompass and change sexual assaults in diverse educational and social contexts. But through such small, basic actions, we already succeeded in changing the way the space felt, how we felt, and what we felt was possible. We hope others will find these materials and our analysis useful in their own struggles to reclaim space, safety, and subjectivity.

The authors would like to recognise the collective work of all York students who participated in the efforts and actions described in this article. We would also like to extend a huge thanks to the organizers and participants of the After Jane Doe conference at University of Ottawa, 2009, where a version of this paper was first presented.

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¹York University Security Service, September 8, 2007.

²We were fascinated to see that many papers at the *Sexual Assault Law, Practice and Activism in a Post-Jane Doe Era* conference in Ottawa (March, 6-7, 2009) where we first presented this work, also discussed the feminist utility of combining direct action and anonymity as a tactic in the face of sexual assault and unsatisfactory institutional responses. ³Abusting or "culture-jamming" is the term used by counter-cultural activists who change recognizable corporate ad campaigns to communicate critical messages. See Adbusters collective at <www.adbusters.org>. Other inspiring examples include the grassroots actions of the Guerilla Girls around the representation of women in art and pop culture. Self-proclaimed "feminist masked avengers," they write, "We could be anyone; we are everywhere." See <www.guerillagirls.org>.

⁴The current website for the safety audit is <www.yorku.ca/safety>. We hope the report will be made widely available and installed permanently online.

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Post Script from York U

BRITTANEY CARON, ALYSSA TEEKAH AND MELANIE REDFORD

Three years after the activities in the preceding article took place, the culture of violence at York University persists. According to an article in York's student newspaper, *Excalibur*, dated September 23rd, 2009, "Since January 2007, there have been 15 reported sexual assaults and 10 reported assaults causing bodily harm on campus, according to York security logs. Campus alerts have been issued for only 20 percent of them" (Birukova). Another assault was then reported in Bethune residence on November 19, 2009 (Kwan). A few months later, on April 21, 2010, a woman, a York community member, was raped by

three men just outside of the York campus. This sexual assault became the "straw that broke the camel's back" for student feminist activists. Sexual assault is a problem for many university campuses, and York, like many other universities, seems to have fallen short of developing effective preventative measures, and adequate response and security. This indicates what might be perceived as an overall indifference on the part of the administration to the severity and impact of sexual assault for the entire student body, as well as for teachers and staff members.

Following this last attack, a group of students of which we were part,

decided to mobilize. On an evening in May of this year a coalition of York students and non-York allies assembled and organized an event that had multiple goals. Like other feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppression students before us, we sought to provide safe walks home from the campus (given by volunteers in teams of two), and to inform students about the culture of violence that we perceive as being indirectly perpetuated by the administration. We took to the campus to occupy space, to show the administration that students have a voice that will not be silenced, to protest that our tuition fees are not being put to proper use, and to make it clear that our sisters (and brothers) who have been directly and indirectly affected by sexual violence have our support. We wanted to show that rape is not simply something women should be

fearful and lament about. We will not tolerate its normalization and we refuse to be “vigilant” by changing and policing our lives and actions. We were adamant that female students not be asked to function under the threat of violence as if it were, as it seems the administration assumes, an unavoidable “given.”

In addition to our volunteer walk services, we created a response to the commonly seen “Campus Alert” posters that are issued by York Security each time a rape is committed on or around the campus site. Our “reviewed and improved” version of the alert concerning the recent rape corrected the victim-blaming rhetoric used systematically by the university. We exposed the way in which the language of official alerts seemingly exempt the administration from responsibility, pushing all accountability onto students, telling us to “walk on well lit paths,” “exercise vigilance,” and “watch out for suspicious people.” Such messages are misleadingly gender neutral and reinforce rape myths, from the racist to the sexist, rather than questioning why these crimes occur, that the perpetrators are male, and questioning why our university, one of the largest universities in Canada, seems unable to mobilize and direct more effective preventative and security measures to avoid sexual assaults perpetrated by men against its students and employees.

During our postering action, York security harassed one of the authors of this article, even going so far as to contact her by accessing her personal cell phone number. Threats of applying the University Code of Conduct against her and contacting the Toronto police were made. When the student e-mailed the Director of Security requesting that she not be contacted on her personal phone, he attempted to set up a meeting with her, to which he invited the Director of Student Conduct and Dispute Resolution (which she felt implied she was involved in a dispute with the administration).

We believe that the reason for these

actions by security staff is clear: our group was exposing the truth of what is happening at our university and in our community. We believe that administration and security swept their lack of visibility, vigilance, and concern under the carpet and adopted instead a “blame-the-victim” mentality that reinforces their biases about student resistance and activism. These biases were made clear to us during our action, when security reacted angrily to our posters and attempted to shut down a service they themselves should have been providing.

In June of this year, the York University Safety Audit conducted by the community organization the Metropolitan Toronto Action Committee on the Status of Women and Children (METRAC) was finally released. The 60-page document examines York’s security services arguing that the origins of this culture of violence are connected to Eurocentric teaching and curricula and the attitudes found among some of the security staff (20). The report suggests obvious solutions such as better lighting on our isolated campus. It also identifies the victim-blaming rhetoric used by administration (20)—exactly as we attempted to expose during our anti-rape mobilization—and argues that the origins of this culture of violence can be found in patriarchal attitudes that point to a “need to enlist men to change destructive elements of ‘masculine culture’ and help campus communities understand how this culture is maintained and challenged...” (21).

As feminist activist students, we were affirmed to learn that a third-party audit identified the same systemic problems we did. The audit is a step in the right direction on the part of the administration, and an excellent tool for us to use in further mobilization. We are concerned, however, that without a transparent implementation process the next step will not be taken and that the audit will be appropriated/disappeared into the culture of the academic institution. To be successful in any

way implementation must include students as full partners. Likewise, it is gratifying to know that students before us organized and took action to address sexual assault on campus. The problem is that there is no mechanism to make us, and the students who follow, aware of the audit and our collective history of identifying and “talking back” to sexual assault in our academic community. Why not make this kind of information available in student packages during Welcome Week or reference it in other promotional material? What if funding spent on security that is not effective in preventing sexual assault was redirected to student and community initiatives regarding sexual assault that have been proven effective?

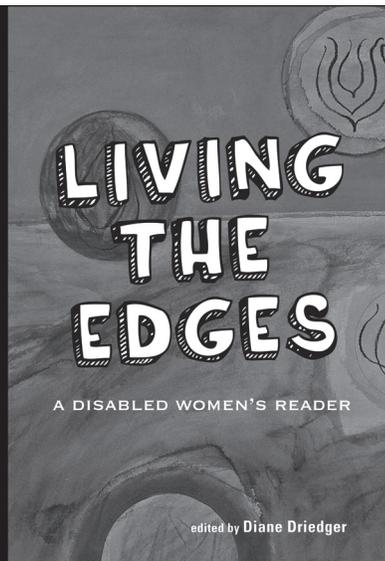
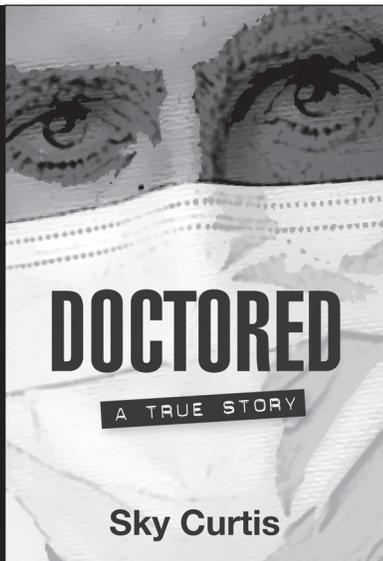
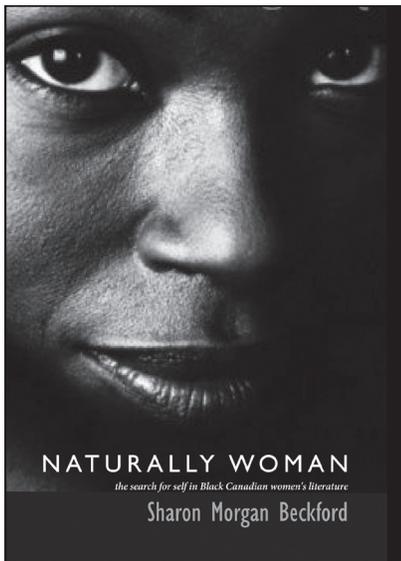
Until then, women on campus will have to continue to censor their activities, limit their freedom, and become accustomed to the threat of sexual violence. Until then, students will have to be “vigilant”—vigilant in pressuring the administration to do their job! Vigilant in mobilizing, resisting and talking back. Vigilant in yet another fight in our long battle at York, but one with much fire and commitment. And now, one with some documented history to build on.

Brittaney Caron, Alyssa Teekah and Melanie Redford are undergraduate students at York University.

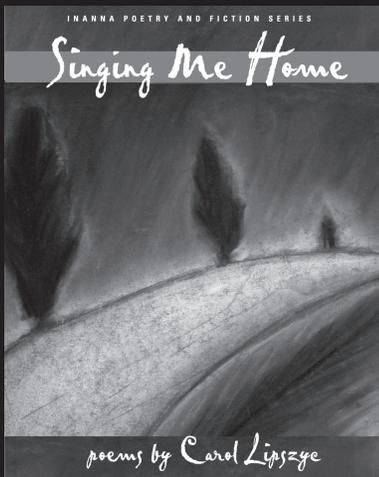
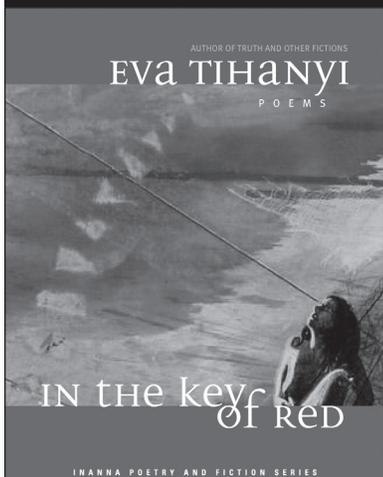
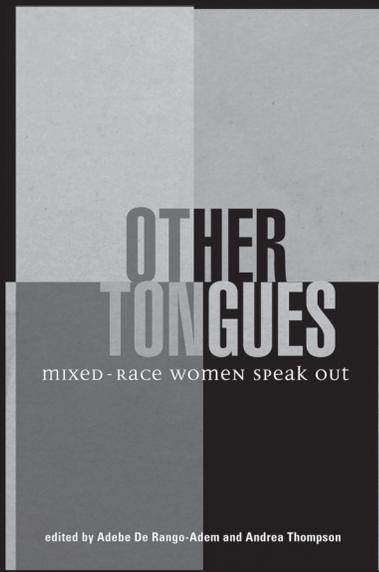
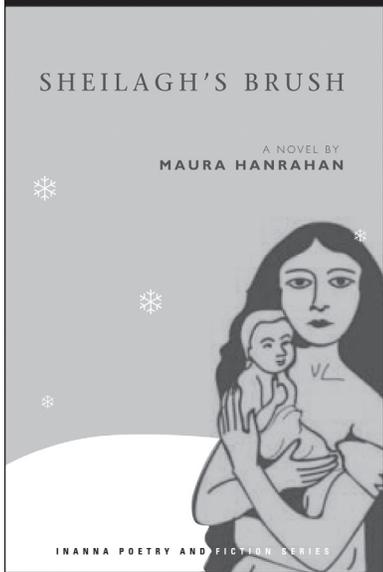
¹Personal voicemail received 05/01/2010 and personal e-mail sent on 05/02/2010.

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