Out of Canada

The Pedagogy of Transnational Feminist Activism

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Cet article examine "Féminismes canadiens en action" dans le contexte d'une organisation féministe internationale et la question inhérente des relations de pouvoir entre les femmes. L'auteure suggère un cadre conceptuel appelé "la pédagogie de l'activisme" pour illustrer comment l'engagement dans l'action aide à nommer et à s'attaquer à la dynamique du pouvoir. Elle a inclu une liste des principes à suivre.

In the 1990s I worked with Japanese women's organizations such as the Japan-Asia Women's Resource Center on women's human rights tribunals which were organized transnationally by feminist groups from Asia. I was the only white westerner working on these Japan-based planning committees and was recruited for strategic reasons: I was locally based, bilingual (Japanese and English) and feminist in the early 1990s when women activists from Japan were increasingly attending United Nations (UN) conferences and Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) forums. Accordingly, in addition to planning committee work, I taught "feminist English" to activists. Many of the women whom I taught, while inspired by the possibilities, were also determined to develop a counter-discourse in English to resist the linguistic and cultural imperialism at these gatherings. This meant that in the process of "teaching" feminist conceptual language I began to unlearn some of the ethnocentric biases inherent in those concepts. For example, in preparation for Beijing we read newsletters from South Asia that challenged the assumption that the perpetrators of domestic violence were necessarily male partners acting alone. My involvement with these groups was an ongoing process of unlearning ethnocentric notions of feminism and activism that I acquired in Canada (and which can circulate in transnational spaces as a dominant though contested discourse), and of learning by osmosis new language, priorities, and strategies.

How did I put my Canadian feminist education into action? How did doing so inhibit or enhance the possibility of forging feminist solidarity? I asked these questions then as an activist struggling to balance the insights and blind spots of my Canadian women's studies education with the lessons of my Japanese activist education. I ask them now as a graduate student and teacher interested in exploring the pedagogical nature of activism. I had read anti-racist and anti-colonial critiques and believed that I understood the basics about how white western feminists had attempted to universalize our experiences. Yet, I am convinced that I learned these ideas more profoundly through activism, and that those learnings, distilled into principles, guided my feminist work. Accordingly, I want to suggest that thinking of activism as pedagogical is one way of engaging in feminist praxis (theory, reflection, and action) around questions of power relations between women as they shape transnational feminist organizing. Below I define the terms pedagogy and activism, outline a conceptual framework called the pedagogy of activism, then share insights in order to show how thinking through the "pedagogy of activism" can help us to learn from transnational feminisms.

Pedagogy

Conventionally, pedagogy is understood as methods of instruction employed by teachers to educate students. Feminist and critical pedagogues have questioned the fixed roles of student and teacher implied in this definition. Some posit three agencies of pedagogy: student, teacher, and the new knowledge that they together produce (Lather 121). I define pedagogy as a dynamic interaction between people, ideas, things, events, and/or situations that can produce new knowledge, skills, consciousness and/or insights in any of the people involved. This definition is intentionally broad, so that it encompasses public pedago-

gies (such as education via media), classroom pedagogies, as well as activist pedagogies. The practice of pedagogy that I prefer is a mutual interaction that simultaneously acknowledges fluidity in the roles: the teacher-in-the-students and the students-in-the-teachers. This dynamic practice is also one that fosters accountability for the differential access to social power that students and teachers have as a result of their positionality, yet also allows for moments of subversion. Thus, while not *necessarily* oppressive, pedagogy is always a relationship of power.

Acknowledging that the roles of teacher and student shift repeatedly helps us both to trace the directionality of power as well as to resist the fixing of power/authority along certain lines.

Defining pedagogy as I have highlights its interactive nature and references the conventional association with students and teachers with all of the attendant implications about power and knowledge. Acknowledging that the roles of teacher and student—or long time activist and neophyte—shift repeatedly in any encounter helps us both to trace the directionality of power as well as to resist the fixing of power/authority along certain lines. This approach is meant to counter unrealistic feminist pedagogies that seek to eliminate power differentials between students and teachers (and by extension here among activists).

Activism

In this paper I am using the term activism in the broad sense of work for social justice. I realize that there are important distinctions to be drawn between types of social change work, however my purpose here is to discuss the learning possible through engagement with social movements, be that grassroots organizing, international networking, advocacy or direct action. Activism is a collective endeavour, and not immune from power inequities between activists. Inattention to power inequities, particularly when coupled with assumptions of collectivity and consensus contribute to dynamics within transnational feminist organizing that can be labeled imperialist. The definition that I use for imperialism is: "the imposition of a particular worldview and conceptual framework across nations, languages, and cultures" (Namaste 103). I am referring here to the imposition of particular feminist worldviews, for example in terms of analyses, frames, and strategies within the context of transnational feminist organizing.

Decolonization of transnational feminist practices occurs in part through learning, unlearning, and teaching. It can mean the unlearning of ethnocentric feminist notions and learning to see the context specificity of one's own situation where one previously did not It can mean learning to relinquish control over organizing for women from dominant or privileged groups both in national and international contexts. Alternately, it might entail the assertion of a counter-hegemonic discourse that reshapes the agenda, in a sense educating dominant activists. I have suggested that much of this learning can happen by osmosis through activism. There are no guarantees however, that action will necessarily lead to emancipatory learning. Reflection on that learning is also needed. Therefore it is important to pay attention to the mutually implicated elements of pedagogical and activist praxis: action, reflection, and theory.

The Pedagogy of Activism

Research has shown that the learning done in social movement work, what Griff Foley calls "learning in struggle," is often not consciously acknowledged at the time, and only sometimes retroactively (4). Furthermore, in activist environments the roles of "teacher" and "student" are arguably more fluid than one finds in a classroom, shifting repeatedly within even a single encounter. Seeing the pedagogy of activism can be difficult. Nonetheless, in some cases, such as where well-known feminist activists run organizations powered by the work of many anonymous volunteers, it is often clear whose knowledge, analysis and vision determine the agenda. Therefore, it is helpful to ask of encounters not normally deemed pedagogical: how can this moment be read in terms of learning, teaching, and the production of new knowledge?[1] I want to highlight the pedagogical, interactive nature of activism, and by doing so draw attention to the power relations in learning moments. This can offset the risk of generating celebratory analyses of individualized social movement learning that neglects questions about how power operates productively and prescriptively. Attention to the "teaching" and learning that transpires among activists can reveal how people are positioned. It also helps demonstrate how and why dynamics that are labelled imperialist by some are missed by others.

The "pedagogy of activism" refers to informal education embedded in specific activist practices, such as daily organizing, advocacy, planning direct actions, networking, demonstrations, campaign planning, and alternative media production. Significantly, the learning in this model is embedded in practices designed for other purposes. For example, in

translating or photocopying documents one might discover new strategies. This type of learning happens as if by osmosis, and may or may not be consciously acknowledged at the time or even afterwards (Foley 3). Activism involves learning, and in transnational feminist organizing we need ways to ascertain whether that learning reinforces or undermines imperialist dynamics between women.

Transnational Feminist Activism

Admittedly, there is no absolute line between scholarship and activism; however, there is an undeniable gap between how many activists and scholars talk about what can be called transnational feminism. I would like to clarify some of the distinctions I see between transnational feminist activism and transnational feminist theory (as articulated by scholars working in Anglo-American universities). I use the term transnational feminist activism to refer to feminist collective action (collaborative and conflictive) across borders, for example through feminist advocacy networks. Most of the groups I have worked with use transnational feminist networking to effect change through supranational bodies such as the UN and at the national level.

Doing support work for Japanese transnational feminist networks, I witnessed moments of tension and solidarity. Transnational alliances were a strategic means to a (negotiated) shared goal, sometimes the brain child of a few well connected conference-going women in response to UN initiatives, sometimes motivated by a vision of Asian women's solidarity, sometimes a desperately needed response to the pressures of globalization. Transnational feminist alliances were a reality, however tenuous. They were constantly negotiated as part of the daily work of feminist activism. A politics of immediacy governed what got discussed and how. The quest for a functional degree of solidarity was rarely posed as a theoretical question, but manifest more as issues of ideology and logistics.

Many scholars of transnational feminisms are engaged with activist concerns, albeit in an academic way: there is a stronger emphasis on (self)-critique in academic writing, and less so on the practical aspects of organizing. This results in differing degrees of usefulness of academic analyses to activists. Sherene Razack outlines a transnational feminist approach in a reflective essay on transnational feminist collaboration. Her language is more evocative of academic discussions, but the implications for activist negotiations are clear. The method she suggests is to trace interlocking systems of domination in order to see how privilege and penalty situate women in hierarchical relationships while paying attention to place (geographical location). Her focus is on the transnational flow of ideas, labour and capital, such that western/northern complicity is traceable. The editors of *Women and Environments* offer another articulation:

> A transnational feminist approach attempts to de-stabilize familiar boundaries, such as those placed around nations, gender and race. It hopes to debunk what we 'know' about power, spaces, and peoples and to look at the uneven and power-laden relationships among people, including among women, in different parts of the world…. Central to a transnational feminist framework is highlighting inequalities and differences rather than overemphasizing commonalities. (4)

Other transnational feminist scholars emphasize, though do not *over*-emphasize, common vision and goals within a framework well attuned to differences of power (Mohanty 7). It was the process of negotiating collective action within the context of these differences and commonalities that formed the bulk of the transnational feminist activist work in which I was involved. This is not the same as making the negotiating of differences and commonalities a central concern, which is how I would characterize some academic feminist discussions and even some activist work derived from it that I have encountered in Canada. Inevitably, these tasks are intertwined, however the difference in emphasis is instructive. Transnational feminist activist projects will likely reinscribe certain power relations and challenge others. Accordingly, making academic critiques movement–relevant (Bevington and Dixon 2) is another important way to bridge the divide.

How, then, to bring together the critique and reflection that is the strength of academic feminism with the practical work that is the strength of transnational feminist organizing in a way that will not just name power relations between women but also begin to address and transform them? I want to suggest that the concept of the "pedagogy of activism" offers a way to map power relations between women and complicity with systems of domination, two of the goals of academic transnational feminist theory. It helps us to recognize the un/learning that

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happens through activism. Accordingly, we can become more aware of imperialism, ethnocentrism or other systems of power that manifest in transnational feminist spaces. It can also show activists how learning and unlearning can be embedded in other activities thereby reaffirming new skills and knowledge gained as a by-product of activism. The methods suggested by the pedagogy of activism also helps to connect micro and macro analyses by considering the new knowledge produced in activist work, the positionality of people involved, and the wider context of power relations that inspire and shape activism. Simply paying attention to what, where, and how one is learning and unlearning through activist work can lead to important insights. It can help us to see how we are embedded in networks of power, to identify complicity, and, in a best case scenario, to address it.

A lack of self-awareness of the context-specificity of our analyses and strategies could easily translate into ethnocentric biases and assumptions that undermine cross-cultural feminist solidarity. Ethnocentrism plus the (social) power to impose that vision is a dangerous equation.

The Pedagogy of Transnational Feminist Activism: Distilling Principles from Activism

In the early stages of doing feminist work in Japan I did not see myself as a representative of "Canadian feminism," and I was not consciously pursuing an agenda that I would have labeled as such. Yet, I was most certainly operating within a particular feminist worldview shaped by feminist studies and activism at Canadian universities, as well as by aspects of my positionality. I was involved in a number of feminists groups in Japan, some of which were dominated by western feminists, some by Japanese feminists, and some where the numbers and power were more balanced. It became increasingly clear to me as I observed the oral interventions of some western feminists in the mixed interactions that what might have passed for confidence in one environment seemed like arrogance in another. I am thinking here, for example, of women whose feminism was learned in university classrooms and whose spoken style was fast, confrontational, and self-assured, and how such a tone and pace *particularly in English* were received in a Japanese environment. (This dynamic is perhaps familiar to student and activists in Canada as well.) In such moments I would argue that English-speaking western feminists situated ourselves as "teachers" and our Japanese-speaking interlocutors as students creating a pedagogical dynamic in situations that were not obviously pedagogical. A lack of self-awareness of the context-specificity of our analyses and strategies could easily translate into ethnocentric biases and assumptions that undermine cross-cultural feminist solidarity. Ethnocentrism plus the (social) power to impose that vision is a dangerous equation. Combined they form a root of imperialist dynamics between women. Learning to recognize and transform hierarchical relations between women is crucial to the success of transnational feminist alliances. My Canadian feminist education had made me aware of this as even as my positionality blinded me to certain manifestations. Through activism I was able to relearn those lessons.

To illustrate how feminist activist praxis (action, reflection and theory) can yield movement-relevant insights, I offer the following principles which are drawn from my early feminist education in Canada and my subsequent activist education in Japan. They are directly relevant to my own positionality as a bilingual, white, western feminist activist and educator working in Japan in grassroots lesbian/bisexual organizing, Asian regional women's human rights networks, and feminist teaching. They are offered as an example, not a definite list, of how classroom and activist learning can enhance each other.

Principles drawn from my feminist education in Canada:

- Don't speak for other people.
- Don't impose a western feminist agenda.
- Be aware of power and privilege.
- Be accountable.
- Know that you don't know; do your homework.
- If the issue does not effect me directly, I should not be in a decision-making or agenda-setting position, but I can support work, discuss the issues, etc.

Principles drawn from my activist education in Japan:

- Activism is pedagogy: it involves learning, teaching, and generating new knowledge.
- Seek first to understand. Focus on educating myself, not others. Practice humility.
- Practice non-attachment to views.[2] Commitment to my current understanding of feminism can blind me. Try to unearth my assumptions. Be open to views that contradict my own.

•Critique should be movement-relevant and enhance accountability. Disengaged critique can be undermining and self-indulgent.
•Don't explain away the disengagement of a core group who has a stake in a particular project. Instead of asking "why do they… ?" ask "how might own analysis, assumptions or choice of strategies have alienated them?" (But stop short of recentering myself.)
•Activism operates with different definitions of failure and success: some short-term failures can be long-term successes, and vice versa.
•Place is significant. Learn the context.
• Don't emphasize target identities to avoid facing agent identities. I am at risk of learning to become a better imperialist through activism. Don't centre my analyses. Self-reflexive engagement with different visions will broaden my understanding.
•Learn by thinking, both reflectively and theoretically, about what I am doing. Some decolonization of practices can happen, but the process is uneven, difficult, and ongoing.
•Don't assume that I will necessarily find feminist groups or analyses in the same spaces that I am accustomed to. Don't assume that they don't exist just because I haven't found them, especially if I do not speak the local language. Find out how, by whom, and where issues are addressed locally.
•Beware familiar discourses. The new knowledge generated through transnational feminist activism should be hybrid. If it sounds just like what I learned in my—Canadian women's studies classroom, it might have more to do with the imposition or adoption of a western feminist framework than the "universality" of patriarchy or women's experiences.
•Demonstrating accountability builds trust.

These principles, learned through reflecting on my own actions as well as those of the variously positioned women with whom I worked, did not protect me from making mistakes, missing the point, or facing troubling contradictions. They meant I stuffed envelopes, translated and edited texts, organized translators and interpreters, and did other behind the scenes work. Inevitably, this work, however removed from agenda-setting and decision-making, lead me to moments where these very principles served to compromise the values upon which they had been based. What do you do when the author**s** of the text you are translating assume the right to speak for others in troubling ways? What do you do when you see respected senior activists silence any critique of ethnocentrism, classism or racism advanced by minority activists? Are these critiques ("naïve," "self-indulgent," "western") sometimes valid? Engagement in praxis is multilayered. You start with questions and end with questions, but sometimes, along the way, you find a few precious answers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that activism is inherently pedagogical. Thinking of it in this way helps to meet some of the demands of transnational feminist theory; i.e., to map power relations between women, to see the contours of complicity with systems of power, and to move us towards accountability. It also speaks to the strengths of transnational feminist activism in terms of working out some of the power imbalances between women through the very practices of activism. While neither academic nor activist visions of transnational feminism hold all the answers, taken together they merge a healthy amount of down-to-earth practical work and the necessary critique of such work.

Transnational feminist solidarity is not the elusive chimera posed in western feminist classrooms, it is a fragile empirical reality. However, without critique and reflection transborder networks can implode. Understanding the pedagogy of activism can move us towards movement-relevant self-reflexivity and more equitable organizing for social change.

Learning though activism put my Canadian women's studies education to the test. It enabled me to unlearn some of my ethnocentric biases, trace and offset my complicity in western feminist hegemony, build trusting relationships with women from different backgrounds, and cultivate humility. It has also helped me clarify important principles for transnational feminist activism-as-pedagogy that I offer here by way of inviting discussion, critique, and sharing with other activists and academics wishing to participate in this ongoing interactive process. These are the fruits of seeing of activism as a pedagogical practice.

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[1]Other questions might include: Who listened? Who talked? Who learned? Who set the agenda? What was being taught and learned? Who was situated as teacher/situated herself as teacher? Who was situated as learner? How have my assumptions been challenged by the work? What

have I had to unlearn or stop doing to arrive at this new perspective? Which beliefs stopped me from understanding a different perspective? How do these roles and the knowledge produced highlight power differentials?

[2] I am grateful to the work of engaged Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh for this insight. Online: http://www.plumvillage.org/MindfulnessTrainings/14MT.htm. Accessed December 21, 2006.

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DESI DI NARDO

Zephyr

Being a girl is one thing, being a lady is quite another
I don't know why he doesn't take the credit
Why he's never shown his face
The brave man who picked the cut-off age
That point when she's no longer soft and sinuous,
Pliant like a grasshopper or blithe like the breeze
Because what a girl has to say is far more wondrous
Her whole existence is unreal
Until the gray hairs catch up
And the luster in her eyes is misplaced
The lines below them do lead to somewhere
There is definition in her face
He wants her undefined, unexplained and supernatural
Not unfolded in the least

Being a boy is one thing, being a man is quite another
(Though a real gentleman is an entirely different matter)
It's too bad he won't show his face —
All I want to do is shake his hand
And grip it tightly to let him see my strength
If nothing else
Because a girl is one thing…
And a lady is quite another
It's really too bad he won't show his face —
At this moment I can only imagine
The metamorphosis
His manifestation
Transforming into something
Striking and substantial
Visible unlike me

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