

WenCh RaDio

FuNky feMInist fuRy

by the WenCh Collective

WenCh est un collectif de jeunes féministes dans un poste de radio communautaire basé à Toronto, Canada. Elles nous livrent une série de questions et de réponses sur leurs expériences comme activistes, féministes et, bien sûr, à la radio.

This article was difficult to write. We knew that we wanted to chronicle our cultural production, which we view as activism. We also knew that the standard academic format would not accommodate the complexities of our identities. This article, much like our program, is not a monolithic voice. We do not subscribe to the notion of singular feminism.

Since WenCh began as a zine years ago, the collective has gone through many changes. The shifting nature of our collective is difficult to manage at times. It is also our greatest asset. Currently, the collective consists of ten women between the ages of 21 to 30. We represent a variety of socio-economic classes, sexual identities, and ethno-cultural/religious communities and body sizes. Our collective is limited in many ways; we are all non-disabled, biological women who have had some exposure to post-secondary education. Immigrant women and Jewish women are under-represented. We work within a system of constraints (time, money, CRTC regulations) and we strive to produce programming that is feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonialist, anti-xenophobic, fat and sex positive, anti-ableist, anti-classist, religion-positive, anti-transphobic, queer-positive, anti-corporate, and free of anti-Semitism. We are not always successful. We receive criticism within and outside our collective. Each show represents

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hours of discussion, debate, and personal reflection. Still, we often fall short of our mandate.

This article is the product of a collective effort. A smaller committee brainstormed three possible formats and the entire collective gave input. The committee then composed a list of questions and each woman answered the questions independently. We edited only for length and spelling.

At the time of writing this article, the WenCh Collective Members are: Afshan Ali (AA); Debbie Pacheco (DP); Fatima Mehtab (FM); Joanna Pawelkiewicz (JP); Mary Roufael (MR); Michelle Maloney Leonard (MML); Rebecca Saxon (RS); Renee Ferguson (RF); Ruthann Lee (RL); Rylee Crawford (RC); Tara Atluri (TA).

What's Your Definition of Activism?

AA: My activism: learning about

the various oppressions that people face on a daily basis and making a commitment to change myself as a result of that knowledge. Activism is about the struggle for justice that is at once fierce and motivated, but also flexible and open-minded. My activism is about justice, not just on the grand, lofty level of revolution, but about justice and compassion in the way I treat people immediately around me. Does that make sense?

DP: As a relatively new “activist,” my definition of activism is ongoing and currently unconsolidated. My previous description of activism consisted in being socially “active” (that is attending rallies, protests, etc.) with a political consciousness. However, I now realize the narrowness of that definition; the act of being “socially active” takes many forms, just as people’s primary motives for social activism may not derive from political awareness. They may be due to personal moral beliefs in social justice or to better improve their own social conditions. The one prerequisite of activism that has remained constant in my shifting definition is being active, of engaging in some way with the social.

FM: Taking my personal beliefs into a public forum and acting out my wishes for change through speech or physical action (e.g., by marching). Being seen and heard among others who share a similar ideology.

JP: An act of resistance—be it individual or collective. I especially admire people who struggle against a systemic oppression that they do not personally experience.

MML: Any resistance to the dominant culture's sexist, racist, heterosexist, homophobic, classist, fatphobic, transphobic, ableist hegemony. It could be coming out to a protest, writing a letter to an elected representative, writing a song or just getting up everyday.

MR: Basic definition: Any kind of action(s)/activities that have the potential to impact not only your life but others as well, with the goal to change a situation for the better. Can focus on different levels: e.g., interpersonal relationships, in the workplace, school, neighbourhood, community, or on an international level.

RS: I used to think that activism was letter writing, protesting/marching, sit-ins and sorts of other activities that are most often associated with activism in the media. But I think this is limiting. I think activism is about the belief in change and vision of a better society/environment. It can occur on any level, from how one lives one's life to relationships to actively working towards change in the world/society around oneself. I think the definition of activism needs to be expanded beyond mainstream images of "protestors" facing off the police to a philosophical idea about change.

RF: My definition of activism is very limited, perhaps too limited. I think that because I first "broke out" onto the "activist scene" at University of Toronto I associate it with young, urban students, male or female, middle-class, and white. I see it as something that can be worn, consumed, consuming. Activism is something that seems to define who is not rather than what people do, a way of challenging that status quo without really doing it, if that makes sense. I've become very conscious of the ways in which I have embraced these notions and I'm trying not to give myself or the work I do a name and just think of myself as doing things

that need to be done. It seems strange because people who go down in history as "activists" weren't called activists at the time; they were doing what had to be done because they were hungry, tired, frustrated, dying and so on.

RL: I used to think that in order to



Activism can range from challenging racist jokes, to singing songs about women loving women, to reading up on the largely untaught histories of colonialism, to organizing safe social spaces for marginalized community members.

be an activist, a person had to be an extremely outspoken, white, anarchist-type who wears face paint and carries clever placards while demonstrating at protests and rallies. My definition of activism has expanded considerably since I've come to realize that not all activists have to look or act a certain way. Even day-to-day survival can be a form of resistance to the white, patriarchal, ableist, heterosexist, capitalist society we live in. Thus for me, activism involves any form of resistance to social oppression as well as self-education about where and how oppression operates. Activism can range from challenging racist jokes, to singing songs about women loving women, to reading up on the largely untaught histories of colonialism, to organizing safe social spaces for marginalized community members (such as queer youth of colour).

RC: My definition of activism in-

involved the will or choice to struggle against conditions one deems undesirable. It involves sacrifice and determination but both are connected to a vision of transformation.

TA: Activism: The struggle to live, not just exist. Activism is struggling everyday to carve out a safe space for yourself. A space where you can breathe the air and drink the water and not be insecure even though sometimes it feels as though the whole world has been orchestrated to produce doubt. Activism is kindness and care, humour and persistence. Activism is putting your 50 cents in the slot of the *Toronto Star* dispenser and not letting it slam shut so that the next person can read the paper for free. It is taking the time and energy to think about where other people are coming from. It is understanding that there are centuries of history behind every "Paki" or "Bitch" that someone spits in my face, but there are also centuries of history behind every word I spit back at them. Activism is my parents' immigration. It is getting a free cab ride because my driver says he'll just charge the next white guy double. Activism is making a daily effort to be a bad girl. It's fishnet stockings and graffiti. It's refusing to be a product and trying to be a producer. Oh yeah, and there is a lot of hugging involved....

Name an Activist Skill That You Most Value in Yourself.

AA: Compassion.

FM: My perseverance, independence and creativity.

JP: Original thinking or what more corporate types would call "thinking outside the box." My greatest asset is my family, their immigrant roots and conservative stance never fail to keep me in check and hooked into what real people, not just activists in some insular circles, are thinking.

MML: Good social skills! Also, know

where to find information to find and make connections with other activists.

MR: Ability (or at least striving for) to maintain a balance between respecting process (e.g., listening, valuing, consensus) and forging ahead with getting stuff done.

RS: I try to stay informed of the numerous issues and struggles that exist and not assume that the issues I'm working with are the most important. I guess I try to keep perspective. Also, I try to infuse fun into all of my activism.

RL: A general activist skill I strive for is commitment (in terms of time and responsibility) to projects and collective organizations. A more personal activist skill I value in myself is my desire and ability to listen and attempts to respectfully consider, appreciate and learn from the different perspectives and experiences of the people I meet.

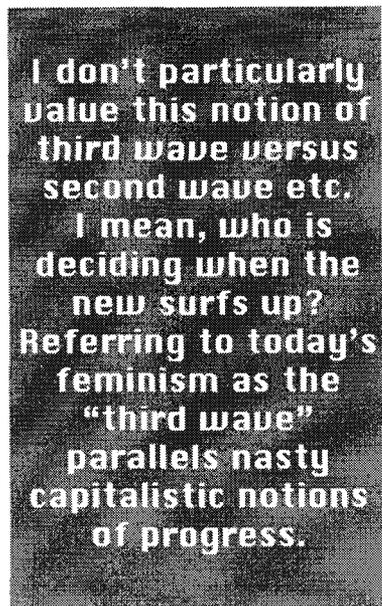
RC: An activist skill that I value in myself is my willingness to risk personal comfort. (I also recognize how my identity affords me this ability because of the way I am positioned in relation to racial and class hierarchies).

TA: Humour. Sometimes I am in some triple-latte, moccachino coffee establishment and I see people talking on those head-set cell-phones or I see couples on the subway who aren't even talking or looking at each other, who are probably on their way to Ikea and are making a mental note of all the home décor merchandise they will have to purchase to fill the "committed and in love" demographic; or better yet I'm in a bookstore or restaurant and some person decides to tell me "how lucky you people are" because she just loves Mendhi or curry and I wonder how people can take the world so seriously. To combat the tyranny of seriousness that causes so much stress, I

try and laugh at the world once a day; twice on weekends.

How Do You Think Wench Radio Fulfills a Third Wave Agenda?

AA: I'm very reluctant to answer this question because I don't par-



ticularly value this notion of third wave versus second wave, etc. These waves are really suspect. I mean, who is deciding when the new surfs up? Referring to today's feminism as the "third wave" parallels nasty capitalistic notions of progress. More importantly, by categorizing the various feminist movements in this way, this conceptualization of feminism as coming in waves fails to fully comprehend the critiques that are being presented today about feminism and inclusivity. Perhaps the feminism in the '60s was a second wave for white middle-class women, who were seeking economic and social parity with white middle class straight men. But what about all the women who don't fall into this category? Was the feminism of the sixties a second wave for them?

DP: Wench fulfills third wave feminism in its intersectional analysis. Social and cultural critiques on

Wench incorporate third wave feminism's move beyond a simplistic gender analysis of female oppression.

JP: Wench steps up to the challenge of speaking to the experiences of all young women. We realize that most women are dealing with more than just sexism.

MML: We don't need to fulfill the "third wave agenda." We *are* the third wave. We're making the agenda and it's always changing.

MR: Provides a creative outlet with a political edge for a younger generation of feminists. Strives to air an integrated analysis in show topics and content. Aims to incorporate this integrated analysis in how it works as a collective.

RS: Well, this question assumes I know what third wave means which I'm not 100 per cent sure I do. If third wave feminism means a shift away from looking at gender issues to incorporating an integrated analysis around race, class, sexuality, gender, colonization, etc., then I think Wench works really hard to be third wave.

Wench goes beyond tokenism or multiculturalism to taking up all issues with an integrated analysis. We try to ensure that all parts of who we are reflect this, meaning our programming, promotional literature, language, music, the collective itself, etc.

Also, if the third wave agenda is about young women, then Wench certainly is a part of that! Not only is our programming done by and for young women, we also interview, profile, review and promote young, funky women.

RL: I'm not sure what a third wave feminist agenda is precisely but if it's about incorporating more than just gender into the analysis of social oppression then I know that Wench is trying hard to be a part of that. Wench always attempts to voice the expressions of various young women and

give an analysis that is multiply focussed. I think that for each show we try to ask: how is this issue gendered, classed, raced? How does it link to the legacies of colonialism? How is it linked to heterosexism and how does it affect queer communities?

RC: Wench fulfills a third wave agenda by the mandated and continually taken-up goal of "diverse" membership bringing experience and concern in many different shapes to the collective and, ultimately, the show. I believe we struggle against becoming a middle-class white woman's show. We struggle to become aware of our assumptions and to challenge our biases through anti-oppression workshop initiatives. It also "empowers" us as women to produce using technology with our own hands.

TA: Third wave agenda? It sounds like a contradiction in terms. The breaking down of the unified subject "woman," of which earlier movements were based on, has brought feminism to a place of multiple, sometimes conflicting agendas. I think what characterises the third wave is the understanding of the way in which many oppositional movements often reproduce the same hierarchies they fought against once the revolution is over. This is true for earlier western feminist movements in which male dominance was often replaced by upper class, able-bodied, heterosexual white women's dominance. Wench is very conscious of these dangers. An effort is made to let differences stand, rather than trying to subsume them under a communal voice. There is also an understanding within the collective and within what I conceive of as third wave feminism of the way in which issues of race, class, sexuality, ability are all interrelated. Hence there is an effort to challenge our own and each other's privileges.

Who Are Your Feminist Heroines?

AA: The Wench crew. And I'm not

just being silly. I am really impressed with the people I work with on the radio. There is a strong commitment to bring the best of ourselves and our progressive politics to the radio. Our segments and show ideas are provocative and mostly well-thought out. Some have been at this for three years. We take for granted that we

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can all just jump in front of a mike and start chatting. I also like the Bruderhoff kids in New York who put out *Blu* magazine. I'm impressed with how solid their pieces are and how they can put out such a quality magazine and only charge people pennies for it. The politics of *Blu* is reflected in the financial accessibility of the magazine. If knowledge is power, then they are truly all into sharing. Toni Morrison. Hard to explain.

DP: One of my feminist heroes is definitely bell hooks. She successfully combines a piercing insight into social inequalities with very accessible language, even within academia and its penchant for exclusivist discourse.

FM: My friends. Women who, unlike media starlets, don't need to hype their image in order to sell themselves. I look up to women

whose experiences differ from mine and from whom I can learn, for example, my roommate who was a Riot Grrrl in high school. My friend who is a single mother who has just completed her university degree and who *also* volunteers at the Rape Crisis Centre in Hamilton. My friend Meredith in Halifax who is an artist and has reclaimed her body and sexuality through creative expression. Women who live to claim their truths and apply their experiences to everyday living.

JP: I admire Winnie Ng for her continual organizing and optimism, any musicians who place politics before profit and academics who write theory that is relevant, useful and accessible.

MML: bell hooks, T.J. Bryan, Mimi Nguyen, Rita Fatila, Jill Nagle, Deena Ladd.

MR: Angela Davis all the way; my friend Ana Sapp; Marg Delahunty/Mary Walsh.

RS: The editors of Bitch magazine – that magazine rocks my world!!! It's fun, smart, political, and third wavy.

RL: Lee Maracle; Maxine Hong Kingston; Dionne Brand. Tina Turner rocks. Michelle Yeoh kicks ass. So does my mom. My pals—including the Wenches, of course.

RC: Ani Difranco, bell hooks.

TA: My mom. Yes it's a cliché, but here goes. Consider this is the "remembering your spirit" part of the article, okay? When I was 16 I discovered Gloria Steinem. I was convinced that the women in my family were victims. When I went to university I took women's studies and my condescension worsened. When I talk to my mother now, I realise that I got my resolve and my inability to tolerate ignorance from her. While I was busy pouring over course readers about immigrant women's labour,

my mother was underemployed in the paid workforce and overworked in the domestic sphere. While I was busy falling all over women's studies professors, my mother was instilling in my sister and I the strength to speak up even if it seems that you are speaking alone. And when I began to see cracks in the feminism that I had clung to, when I began to notice no faces or last names that looked like mine, I turned to her again. She offered me a feminism that could not be separated from racism because these things cannot be separated in our lives as brown women. I admire the patience it must have taken to immigrate from India to Canada in the late '60s, and the even greater patience to raise "Canadian" children who have internalized notions of racial and national hierarchy and who took about 21 years to realise that you were right about a lot of things—okay, most things.

What Role Do You Think That Academia Can Have in the Feminist Movement?

AA: Academia is vital to the feminist movement in that it can be a place where feminism reflects on itself, refuels itself and arms itself. As such, academia gains its value from how effectively it is, or can be, used by the feminist movement. The more esoteric academia becomes, the more useless it is to the feminist activist community.

DP: Academia can play a crucial role within the feminist movement. I guess I'm a little biased because I'm such a theory junkie. It helps me to organize and better understand the world around me and how I might function as an activist within it. However, it also works the other way around. Academic theory does not just explain or inform the social and activist goals and practices, but practical experience also informs theory. The potential danger of academia and theory is if it remains detached and divided from the practical, namely grassroots feminisms. Also,

despite some changes, academia remains an inaccessible institution of privilege that is still very much raced and classed. This reflects the issues feminist academia addresses, and how they are addressed, which may not be directly pertinent or relevant to the issues feminists working at a grassroots level are dealing with. In order

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I think it's one
of feminism's big
challenges: how
can academic
feminist theories
be transformed
and translated
to be more
accessible?**

for academia to play a progressive role within feminist activism, the hierarchy between theory and practice must be dismantled and the line between the two must be reconceptualized and materialized as a border, where people and ideas are welcome to flow, rather than an impenetrable divide. (Idealistic, huh?)

FM: I think that before academia can reach a mass group of women the structure of it has to change. Formal education contains barriers (language, cultural, and economic) and academic feminism is biased towards middle-class white women who have the freedom to disagree and critique their surroundings. The concept and the importance of knowledge must change. What is important and valuable and to whom? Whom does it speak to and whom does it ignore?

JP: Ideally, academia should be a resource for activists. A place to do

some critical thinking, a place to interrogate why certain institutions/constructs exist. Academia should complement *not* replace grassroots activism.

MML: Academics produce some kickin' theory, which influences and structures a lot of grassroots movements. It can make a space available for young women to be exposed to ideas about radical resistance and change.

MR: Important role of reflecting on different aspects of the movement itself and how it can move forward to meet present and future needs.

RS: I think that it has an important influence on a lot of young feminists. My feminist and political ideas have changed and developed because of my women's studies classes. But I think that academia needs to be taken into consideration not only when writing and studying feminist theory in the classroom but also in feminist organizations.

RL: Academia can have the role of providing a very nuanced and extended analysis of social issues and providing a space for re-thinking and challenging the dominant (read: white patriarchal, heterosexist) social order. It can't solve all of feminism's challenges—in fact, I think it's one of feminism's big challenges: how can academic feminist theories be transformed and translated to be more accessible? How can academic theories be applied to everyday realities and experiences and attend to social change at a material (rather than a discursive or ideological) level? Sometimes it seems like the gulf between progressive academia and the "real world" is so huge you need to sprout wings to get from one to the other.

RC: I think academia performs a function for the feminist movement by reaching into hegemony and spreading the words of feminists in "acceptable language and form." A

sort of transforming from within. Feminist law, for example, can influence those whom might otherwise dismiss the feminist movement as too radical for them to pay serious attention. But this would be most effective if feminist courses were mandatory in all disciplines, and not just there for those of us who are interested enough to choose women's studies. The dangers of feminist academia are many—elitism, classism, white racism, ableism. So academia in general (and not just in women's studies or feminist courses) needs to seek a more inclusive outlook to those who can't, won't, or don't approximate the white, able, straight, wealthy western European male archetype.

TA: Women's studies classes were the first safe spaces in which I encountered women who were proud to call themselves feminists. Educational institutions can be valuable resources for activists, which is ultimately the most productive role I see them playing in the women's movement. Unfortunately, one cannot even begin to envision this until issues of access are addressed. How can we even talk about the good that academia could bring to the women's movement, when the majority of women cannot afford to attend post-secondary education? Furthermore, many of the underpaid jobs done on university campuses are done by women of colour and immigrant women.

Furthermore, one need only examine the case of Dr. Chun at the University of Toronto to see the hypocrisy of an educational institution that claims to teach from an anti-oppressive framework, while simultaneously attempting to maintain a white power structure at all costs. I can remember taking countless English classes in which I was told to examine the work from a "literary" point of view, meaning to look at it apolitically. To ask a person of colour to read nineteenth century English literature in which your people are

being called less than human without referring to politics, is putting you at a disadvantage for not being able to see the world through a white lens. If tuition continues to be unaffordable and universities continue to engage in unfair, racist labour practices and canon formation the gap between the women's movement and the academy will be huge.

Conclusion

Our answers reflect our views at the moment of writing. Our views are constantly shaped by our lives, our families, communities, outside political projects, our jobs, friends, our learning process, our mood of the moment, an article we may have read in the mainstream press, a heated debate during a high holiday meal, or a fucked-up subway ad that caught our eye.

If you want to hear more about Wench Radio and less about us tune into CIUT 89.5FM every Sunday, 1:00 - 2:00pm. Many thanks to the committee that compiled and edited this article.

KRISTY MCKAY

i.
this blood-pink towel
hanging magnified
becomes
living
sponge a tongue

ii.
in your absence i
remember licking
dry your body
kissing pearls of
perspiration

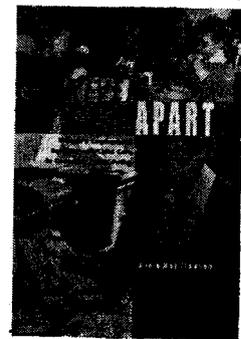
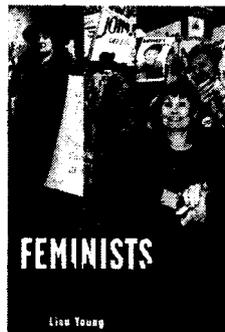
Kristy McKay's poetry appears earlier in this volume.

Child Care and Politics

Driven Apart

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Annis May Timpson

Timpson explains why federal governments have been able to implement employment equity policies, but have failed to develop a national system of child care.



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Lisa Young

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