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A Canon of Our Own?

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Diana M.A. Relke

Loose Canons: A Canadian perspective on feminist power relations and knowledge production

When it came time to decide who had been the founding mother of second-wave feminism, Americans picked Betty Friedan. Canadians concurred. In many Canadian women's studies textbooks, *The Feminine Mystique* (1962) is identified as having launched the women's movement. Yet, long before *The Feminine Mystique* was accorded this honour – and even before American women took to the streets – Mary Two-Axe Earley was campaigning in Canada against what she called "sex discrimination" in the Canadian Indian Act, thus delivering to Canadian women our earliest understanding of how patriarchy structures large systems, not just our personal and professional relationships with men. Her example inspired many of us to participate in the sit-ins, protests, and marches organized in the 1970s by Native women's organizations. But Mary Two-Axe Earley is a Mohawk woman. She therefore does not qualify as the mother of anybody's feminism. You will have to look long and hard if you want to find her name, much less transcripts of any of her many addresses, in a Canadian women's studies textbook. While textbooks are not canons, this Canadian habit of deferring to American influence can nevertheless tell us something about feminist canon formation. This paper, written from a privileged Canadian perspective vis-à-vis the United States, will address some of the reasons why the future of feminist studies may well depend upon our willingness to revisit our conceptions of canonization in the context of current geopolitical realities.

This paper is about *geography as destiny*, a topic that Canadians know something about. We live in the shadow of the world's only superpower, which has become something of a loose cannon these days – that is "cannon" with two Ns. This fact intersects with the feminist canon, since it's American feminism that dominates it. It is not an official canon, of course, but it nevertheless has hegemonic power. But if women's studies requires a canon, we must have more than one. We must have many, and they must be loose enough to escape being written in stone. So, for both reasons apparent in the pun, I am keeping a hopeful eye on Continental

European feminism as the source of new canons arising from European particularities. I cheered when France and the Netherlands rejected your constitution treaty, even though I do admire its "gender mainstreaming". The rejection of the treaty denies your economic élite the political ammunition to argue that it serves the interests of *all* Europeans. As with that élitist treaty, so too with Anglo-America's feminist canon.

Our experience in Canada is perhaps an extreme example of the extent to which American scholarship has influenced what academic feminists around the world regard as canonical. But just as the post-9/11 wars have exposed the weaknesses of the United States as the global hegemon, so too have they exposed the weaknesses of American feminism and thus the unofficial canon it dominates. For example, there is a contradiction between the high value placed on American feminist scholarship on women's oppression in the developing world and American feminism's failure to exert its influence on the source of much of that oppression: namely U.S. foreign policy. American feminists are beginning to acknowledge this dislocation. As Charlotte Bunch wrote in 2002:

> Often what American feminists must do to help women elsewhere is not to focus on their governments but to work to change ours so that US policies and corporate forces based here stop harming women elsewhere. To do this, we need to engage in more serious discussion that crosses both the local/global and the activist/academic divides. [...] US feminists can benefit from the support of women elsewhere, which we will need if we are to challenge what is now openly defended as the American Empire. (Bunch 2002: 36)

In view of this need for American feminists to retrench, rethink, and start deconstructing the binary structures that work to undermine the integrity of their feminism, European feminists are wise to start asking if what serves as a canon has any meaning or usefulness for a newly expanded EU. Experience has taught me that if you import an analysis of a problem you do not have, the analysis may well bring you the problem along with it. To illustrate what I mean, I need to explain what the current situation looks like from where I am situated, just a couple of hundred kilometers north of the border that separates Canada from the putative centre of the universe.

It would be difficult to overstate the truly stunning contributions of American feminism to the women's movement, especially its huge and important body of women's studies scholarship from which both Canadian and Continental European women have benefited. It was American

women's outrage at being second-class citizens in what they regarded as the most important and indispensable country in the world that empowered them to assume a leadership role that no other nation – not even Britain – could challenge. But I do think we need to understand those contributions as, in part, an American soft-power export. Had American feminism not cannibalized itself during the late 1980s and 1990s, its leadership might have survived the steep decline in American soft-power influence over the last four years.

Canadian feminism might have been better off, had we been more aware of the extent of our dependence on that leadership. We might have been able to forego much of the friction among our various constituencies, had we been conscious of our habit of reconstructing Canadian issues through American feminist analyses, metaphors, and terms of abuse, which worked powerfully on the level of rhetoric but sometimes lacked convincing Canadian evidence in support of their overheated claims. To cite just one example, although there was definitely room for improvement, neither our women's studies curricula, nor our national women's organizations had ever been quite as "white" as initially presumed. Indeed, we may have thoughtlessly erased Mary Two-Axe Earley from Canadian feminist history, but her influence had left its trace. This tendency to generalize from American to Canadian experience may have been partly a reflection of changes in the Canadian political landscape – especially the success of our corporate-owned politicians in "harmonizing" more than just trade with an increasingly ambitious Washington agenda.

Although the American political regime has only just recently begun to celebrate its imperialism openly, the United States is an empire in decline. We now live in the kind of world that makes empires obsolete: most of the world's nations are democratic, interconnected in cyberspace, and economically interdependent. Power is determined more by relations of trade than relations of force. But this does not mean that imperialist ambitions will just wither away. It was that understanding which made the United Nations necessary – and makes it increasingly necessary for the international community, feminists included, to resist Washington's determined efforts to annihilate the UN. Imperialism is horrendously expensive, and America is currently in debt to the tune of eight trillion dollars. The regime has impoverished much of America's intellectual and social infrastructure – its education system, its scientific research community, its healthcare system, its social safety net – to finance its current wars and its vast network of military bases around the world, and to prop up its corporate

sector's competitive advantage. But the United States cannot sustain this economic drain for much longer, nor will it be able to perfect its current program for repressing internal dissent. Nevertheless, it pays us to remember that empires in decline are almost always at their most dangerous, and the rest of us are probably in for a rough ride until America gets used to being merely one important power among several (cf. Todd 2003; Dyer 2004; Johnson 2004).

American academic feminism, weakened by almost two decades of racial conflict and paradigm warfare, exists in this difficult context. In addition, women's studies is situated within an academy very different from the one in which it was established. If it is truly the case that feminist scholarship has become too abstract and apolitical to be considered a threat to the status quo, this may well be an effective shield against the new wave of McCarthyism sweeping across American campuses. Indeed, the well-organized assault on academic freedom is extremely troubling. The reigning campus mythology is that the academy is infested with what Americans understand as "liberalism" – an obscene word in America. According to the Florida legislature, this rampant liberalism is nothing less than "leftist totalitarianism" by "dictator professors" who misuse "their platform to indoctrinate the next generation with their own views." Florida has now passed legislation designed to stamp out these un-American activities. As of last June, thirteen additional states had introduced similar bills (Vanlandingham 2005).

Such outrageous claims could not have been taken so far, had American professors not betrayed their responsibility as public intellectuals by opting for self-censorship in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and offering little in the way of sustained and sophisticated political analyses of either the attacks themselves, or the assumption that a large-scale military response was the only possible way to answer them. In contrast to the faculty and student "teach-ins" that challenged the Vietnam war, today's campus conservatism implicitly supported the illegal conquest of Iraq (cf. Jensen 2004: 47-49). Indeed, even the Canadian academy was more responsive, and this took some people by surprise, as we do not have what Americans mean by a "liberal" academy. With the exception of that historical blip of the radicalized 1960s and early 70s, the Canadian university system, like the rest of the Western academy, is more conservative than the Church. This makes it an ideal home for those who would devote their careers to the kind of sterility of which academic feminism stands accused. Yet a month after the attacks on New York and Washington, Sunera

Thobani, a Canadian Professor of Women's Studies, delivered an impassioned and factually accurate conference paper on the recent history of America's violent foreign policy and its impact on women and children around the globe. Conservatives were enraged, and the news media on both sides of our common border transformed the event into a media extravaganza: Thobani's professional credentials were questioned on prime-time television news, and demands that she be charged with hate crimes against the United States captured headlines. If any Canadian feminists were waiting for some sort of public statement of support for Thobani's position from the American feminist community, they waited in vain. Is it any wonder, then, that Charlotte Bunch is calling upon her feminist compatriots to wake up to geopolitical reality?

If this paper sounds as if it is turning into an anti-American diatribe, let me make one thing absolutely clear: Canadians *invented* anti-Americanism. We were anti-American long before it became a transnational fashion. The term "anti-Americanism" is, of course, American hyperbole for what is nothing more or less than a genuine difference of perspective. Canadians have been cultivating this different view since the War of 1812. But sharing upward of nine thousand kilometres of undefended border with the United States, most contemporary Canadians work at preserving a distinction between the American nation, of which we are fond, and the American state, of which we are fearful. The truth is that no two nations on earth are as similar as Canada and the United States – not even Austria and Germany. There is one small difference, however: a difference at the state level that makes all the difference at the level of the nation.

The United States is a *centripetal* union served by its myth of "one nation, under God," indivisibly genderless, colorless, classless. Its current division into liberal Blue states and conservative Red states constitutes a national crisis drawn along lines of race, religion, class, and sexuality. Canada, by contrast, is a *centrifugal* confederation that clings to its officially-mandated myth of multiculturalism in order to keep its diverse constituencies from flying apart. Quebec separatism, Western Canadian alienation, Aboriginal self-government – these and myriad other regional and cultural divisions are "business as usual" in Canada. As "a nation of minorities," we like to acknowledge that "the 'human' is a completely open-ended signifier, subject to endlessly different interpretations" (Halliwell and Mousely 2004: 12); even if acknowledging such a progressive idea is not the same as actually living it out in practise.

In my view, these two models – the centripetal and the centrifugal – extend to American and Canadian academic feminisms. The American divisions of activist, academic, cultural, postmodern, Black, white, Latina, and lesbian feminisms constitute a crisis from which women's studies cannot seem to recover. This crisis appears to be fuelled by a lingering assumption that feminism must be "one nation, under sisterhood," indivisible by race, sexuality, agenda, or theoretical approach – despite the repudiation of feminist sisterhood as oppressively indifferent to women's diversity. As a consequence, American women's studies continues to be ravaged by theory wars, sex wars, race wars, and arguments over whether or not women's studies lies dead upon this battlefield (cf. Brown 1997; Zalewski 2003; Hawkesworth 2004).

In Canada, feminists seem to have settled into distinct but overlapping constituencies, products of an earlier, multi-pronged activist phase, consisting of francophone, First Nations, anglophone, and immigrant women's movements. While I cannot speak for all Canadian academic feminists, current scholarship appears to suggest that we have reached the unspoken consensus that the unique focus of each constituency is legitimate, that we do not need identical agendas to be mutually supportive. I am not quite sure if this is a strategic move or merely the path of least resistance; but radically different histories and regional peculiarities have given rise to radically different priorities, making the current division of labour not only necessary but inevitable. If there are still residual criticisms, controversies, and differences of opinion among us – well, this is "business as usual" in Canada.

Given the tension between our fondness for multicultural ideals and the impossibility of our ever fully realizing them, it is hardly surprising that many Canadians are curious about how Europe is reconstructing itself. Will Europeans continue to reinvent polity and community, or will they simply become another predatory trading block, sacrificing their natural environment, the welfare of their working people, their elegant Western communities, their vibrant new Eastern democracies? Will they sacrifice all of this on the altar of supply-side economics? Will they cash in their precious wealth of cultural difference for the only difference that matters to global Darwinism, namely, class difference? These questions may be naively North American, but they are, in fact, questions that students have raised in my senior seminars. In their view – and in mine – the European Union represents a chance to realize, on a vaster scale, the kind of multicultural

social democracy that Canadian corporate and political élites sold out by hitching Canada's economic wagon to America's falling star.

Thus far, I have done little but set the stage for an answer to one of those provocative questions about the canon in the conference call for papers. Let me identify the one that sums up all of them for me: "How important are different languages? What about English as an academic *lingua franca* on the one hand and as a hegemonic language on the other?" If English-speaking Canadian feminists can lose a critical piece of their early history by uncritically embracing an American-dominated canon, what might non-English-speaking Western European feminism have unwittingly sacrificed by doing the same? For example, what does an Austrian feminist do when she intuits a dislocation between the Anglo-American paradigm she has internalized and the Austrian evidence that lies all about her? Does she even see that evidence as evidence; does she see anything at all? Now, ask yourselves what the consequences might be of a post-Soviet feminist operating within a language group even farther removed from English and trying to reconcile the Anglo-American paradigm with the task at hand? To borrow language from another canon question, she looks as if she's struggling to reconstruct herself as a Spivakian subaltern speaking from the semi-peripheries by recapitulating concepts and theories coming from the centre. Why would she want to do that? Why would anybody cultivate a subaltern identity when the data that can give rise to a whole new theory of centre and periphery lie all about her?

In case you had not noticed, no one at the Anglo-American center has had a new idea for years. We all seem to be operating within the equivalent of Khunian "normal science," a period of relative stasis in which we put the final finish on the paradigm, improve and perfect our ability to solve textual puzzles with it, and generally settle into assuming that we have finally nailed down what physicists call "the theory of everything." But I think what we are nailing down in Anglo-America is the lid on our own coffin. In my experience, when a theory stops spinning, somebody raises the academic stakes by spinning another one – one with even more bells and whistles on it. But that brilliant somebody will not be a feminist scholar located in any post-soviet community: everyone there will still be too busy trying to get the made-in-Anglo-America paradigm to solve *their* textual puzzles too. As anyone who has studied the history of science knows, new ideas rarely come down the main road, so why would we want to make English the only road we travel?

I don't like canons. Like history, they are written by the winners. In the academic world, the winners are the best funded, most privileged, most widely published, lecture-touring, conference-hopping, name-dropping scholars, tenured in the world's poshest research institutions, situated in the world's wealthiest neighbourhoods. If we are lucky, a hundred years from now there will be a new wave of academic feminism, and a new generation of scholars will build their reputations unearthing all the wonderfully original and useful papers that never made it into our canon. Imagine their delight and bewilderment when they find one written in non-academic German, by an impecunious, under-published, poorly-connected lecturer at St. Pölten community college. In short, we need a canon like we need a repeat of the American feminist paradigm wars.

I don't know what Continental European scholars of feminist, women's, and gender studies need, but it is definitely not more advice from the Anglo-American feminist community. You are situated at the heart of one of the most promising projects that Europe has ever attempted – although some of you will see that view as ignorant of geography, which is destiny in Europe too. Indeed, you have the enviable task of reinventing feminist studies for a uniquely multicultural, multilingual, twenty-first century European community of communities, and for an ignorant North America as well. Success may well depend on how effectively you deconstruct that troublesome East/West binary.

I cannot tell you what you need to accomplish that task, except energy and commitment – and state-funded childcare. But by sharing with you a fantasy I have been building since I read through those canon questions, I can tell you what we in North America need. My fantasy involves a European Institute for Feminist Research – academic *and* community-based research, because progressive change happens where they intersect. This institute's top priority would be financial support for the production, publication, and translation of as much European research as possible, into as many EU languages as possible – which, happily for Canadian feminists, includes both English and French. I envision this burgeoning body of knowledge doing more than just feathering academic nests. In addition to decentring the Anglo-American view of the world and adding to your already impressive record of building democratic institutions, this institute's work would influence EU policy and make crucial contributions to the redrafting of that rejected constitution, producing one worthy of all Europeans, not just the EU's economic élite. This new knowledge would make Europe the centre of the feminist universe – until it is time to expand

the centre to include all geographies where the feminist possibilities are as promising as they are here in Europe today.

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