

## REPORTS / RAPPORTS

### REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST ACTIVISM WITHIN TWO DISTINCT UNIVERSITIES: TIMING AND LOCATION FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL ACTIVITIES

**Constance  
Backhouse<sup>1</sup>**

Professor of Law  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario

*This text is a slightly revised, written version of remarks delivered on September 29, 2000 at York University, on the occasion of the launch of York Stories: Women in Higher Education, edited by The York Stories Collective, and published in Toronto by TSAR Publications, 2000.*

It is a great honour to help mark the momentous launching of *York Stories: Women in Higher Education*, edited by The York Stories Collective.<sup>2</sup> This wonderful occasion takes me back, poignantly, to the launch of *Breaking Anonymity: The Chilly Climate for Women Faculty*, some five years ago on November 4, 1995.<sup>3</sup> It was on that date, at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, that a group of the authors, publishers and members of The Chilly Climate Collective gathered together to celebrate the publication of our collection of essays and stories.

At that time, we expressed our thanks to all of the brave women who spoke about their oppressive experiences in the academy. We thanked all the courageous members of the editorial collective who banded together to put their names on a volume that we feared might inspire backlash and defamation litigation. We even expressed our thanks to the heterosexual, white, male administrators and faculty members who created the chilly climate that



inspired our writing. Without them, there would be no such books to write. In the apt words of Kathryn Morgan, we reminded ourselves that we must never forget to acknowledge the “rutting struggles of the antlered species.”<sup>4</sup>

On a much more serious note, we also spoke that night of the many, many women and men whose accounts were not included in the *Breaking Anonymity* publication. We spoke of those who were unable yet to speak or write about their experiences of discrimination within the academy. We lamented the stories that were not included in our collection out of fear of the legal sanctions that would flow forth from those whose battle cry is “freedom of speech.”

That evening I closed with an expression of hope that our book would do some small bit to break the silence, to begin to redress the shocking imbalances in our academic institutions, and to inspire many others to go far beyond our preliminary efforts. The spectacular efforts to break the silence and preserve the historical record of women’s experiences at York University have gone way beyond what we hoped for and imagined might come in the future. The contributions in *York Stories* take my breath away.

### **The Breadth and Scope of *York Stories***

This marvelous collection of edited transcripts and submissions goes well past what The Chilly Collective accomplished in *Breaking Anonymity*. Far more than we were able to do, *York Stories* confronts issues of intersectionality. The book brings a much-needed testament to a far broader range of oppressions — race, gender, class, disability, age, sexual identity, anti-Semitism. More than we did, these accounts have also moved well beyond anonymity. Many of the women students and faculty have bravely identified their “stories” with their full names.

*York Stories* also takes us a step further towards articulating what we are demanding from our universities in the way of concrete change. We dwelled more on the devastation wrought by institutional failure. This book has itemized what would move the academy forward:

- lower tuition, and more financial support for students;
- recognition that students with families, disabilities, and lives outside the academy need specialized, flexible programming;
- more meaningful courses that engage social justice issues more deeply;
- smaller classes;
- affirmative action programs that bring concrete results, measured by quantifiable numbers;
- more faculty who embody diversity in their person as well as their teaching and research;
- more safe spaces for meaningful dialogue, so that we create a university where the only silences that reign embody “productive listening” not fear;



- intellectual openness towards feminist, marxist, and anti-racist faculty members, in terms of teaching evaluations, tenure and promotion, and a supportive climate for their scholarly work;
- awareness of the appallingly high rates of cancer and immune disorders that overtake outsiders in academe as they suffer, in Nancy Nicol's words, "the humiliation of clamouring at the gate;"<sup>5</sup>
- efforts to correct the tragic divisions between anti-sexist and anti-racist activists;
- complete debunking and rethinking of the concept of "academic freedom," that now uncritically and arrogantly parades itself through university corridors as a mere "cloak for abusive practice."

This collection of stories calls the university to account. It begins the critical process of re-imagining the university of the future, a university that will meet the expectations and dreams of those of us who hunger for knowledge and social transformation. It moves the struggle forward another notch, by extending validation to those whose lives mirror the experiences so beautifully illustrated in *York Stories*, and it encourages those whose spirits are lagging to ask for more, to dream of revolutionary change.

### **The Historical Sweep of Academic Change**

My background is that of the historian, who seeks to understand the forces that resist change, and why efforts to improve our society chalk up victories and losses over time. I want to reflect a bit on the timing of the publication of *Breaking Anonymity* and *York Stories*, on their institutional locations and on their significance in the ebb and flow of academic activism at the turn of the 21st century.

*Breaking Anonymity* was published in 1995. It was written and edited primarily by individuals located at Western, an institution that prides itself on its regressive politics, that gives breath to the racist writing and teaching of Philip Rushton. Western's faculty voted overwhelmingly, in the context of its first union negotiation, to shackle the union representatives with an insistence that there be no equity language of any kind put in the first collective agreement. In fact, this earned Western the dubious nickname of "Anti-Equity U."

Many of the women who worked on *Breaking Anonymity* arrived at Western in the late 1970s, flush with the exhilaration and empowerment that exemplified the women's movement of the late 1960s to the mid 1980s. It was an odd juxtaposition: feminist radicals meet "Anti-Equity U." There were no women's studies departments. There were no women's courses. There were almost no women faculty members. The entire university — faculty, staff and students — was overwhelmingly white, apparently heterosexual, able-bodied. We knew we were on poisoned ground. But we believed, as surely as we breathed air, that we would change the world.

Interestingly, that sense of radical empowerment was not localized into small pockets. Traces of it grace the text of *York Stories*. Himani Bannerji



remembers that she "saw the beginnings of a struggle for [a good education in a full sense] in the late 60s and 70s."<sup>6</sup> Ann (Rusty) Shteir recalls the 1970s as "such a dynamic time [with] such a strong sense of possibility."<sup>7</sup> Saroj Chawla remembers the women faculty as very "supportive in terms of helping each other" in the early years.<sup>8</sup> We thought we could transform our workplaces, our laws, our academic disciplines. We saw ourselves as part of a wave of change, sweeping, solid, and unstoppable.

We were astonished when we discovered the intransigence of the resistance, the vitriolic denunciations, the paranoid terror exhibited by those who resisted. At Western, we tried to build solidarity amongst our cohort. We gained strength within our feminist reading groups. We created the feminist institution known as the "Wednesday lunch." We marched together on Take Back the Night and Person's Day marches. We parodied our enemies in annual entertainment extravaganzas at which we laughed until we wept. We awarded annual medals to the women who distinguished our community with their acts of bravery. We trekked collectively to women's music festivals. We wrote university briefs, petitioned academic administrators and wrote countless outraged letters to the university media. We bought feminist art.

Along the way, we had some terrible losses and some dramatic victories. We lost some of our best feminist faculty and students, who chose not to continue in university life or were forced out, often through sexist and homophobic tenure battles. But others of us got promoted and received tenure. Some became chairs of departments, deans, assistant vice-presidents. We established feminist publishing venues, with feminist review processes. We published radical writing. We created women's studies courses and centres. And we did this at Western, with all its florid pride in patriarchal privilege.

In the oddest way, I think that the wretched environment at Western gave rise to a cohesive, determined, deeply rooted community of resistance. When Sheila McIntyre released her famous "McIntyre Memo" at Queen's University in the early 1980s, her courage was infectious.<sup>9</sup> It spilled over to Western. We wanted to be part of the determined drive to put our experience into written narrative, to document what we were living through, to demand space and airtime for our perspectives. We wanted to document our resistance at Western, "Anti-Equity U."

We managed to compile a series of "reports" describing discriminatory abuse and demanding affirmative action and climate change. We helped to get three documentary films produced on sexual harassment and the chilly climate.<sup>10</sup> We got ourselves into the newspapers, the radio, and onto TV. In the end, we also published *Breaking Anonymity*. The pace of publication being what it is, some of the essays that appeared there were written in the mid-1980s. The book itself appeared a decade later. But it was the product of an era of change, catapulted upward from the belly of the beast, the viciously, arrogantly anti-egalitarian institution of Western University.



The research that ultimately resulted in the publication of *York Stories* was begun a decade later, in the 1990s. This was a strange decade, in which the forces of political conservatism swept our province and our country. Financial cutbacks in public services ate away at the small gains we had accomplished through tentative equity programs. The rhetoric of “affirmative action,” which had transmuted into “employment equity” in an effort to Canadianize the term and make it appear less offensive, became an anathema to virtually all those who commanded power and media airtime. Right-wing religious forces with political agendas expanded beyond reckoning. The evils of the global marketplace and the ethic of competition clobbered the country.

Despite these appalling trends, our universities continued to build women’s studies courses and institutes, some feminists reached even higher positions of power within the academy, and others reached into the highest echelons of faculty unions. Racialized and gay and lesbian faculty achieved a toe-hold in universities, although not much more. Some of us are now asked to review those very tenure files that our colleagues once spat upon. Some of us have at least some power in hiring committees. Some of us sit at a peculiar juncture as “insider/outside” in heart-wrenchingly self-contradictory positions within the institution. And universities like York, and the University of Ottawa (to which I have since moved from Western) define themselves, rhetorically at least, as politically progressive and equity-minded.

We know the rhetoric is more often abused and dishonoured than regarded, but I think it is no accident that this very radical new book comes — at the turn of the century — out of York University. The stories of discrimination give the lie to the smug, self-satisfied and hollow claims made by some York administrators. At the same time, there are glimmers throughout the manuscript of deeply radical movements within an institution whose self-image itself potentially heartens those who seek social transformation. I was moved and inspired by the description of the anti-graffiti campaign throughout the Fine Arts Building. “Stop the racist, sexist, homophobic graffiti, this is our space.” It was beyond dispute a bold and uncompromising retort. I was equally inspired by the multiple acts of generosity and solidarity bestowed by faculty, teaching assistants, staff, and administrators that evoked such unqualified praise from the narrators.

The timing and the location make sense to me. It takes the twisted, deeply contradictory milieu that epitomizes York University to give life to these courageous narratives. The bold exposition of institutional abuse, the dream of the ideal university, flow directly out of the deeply troubled, inherently oppositional, institutional context. This is precisely the combination that it takes to produce such a volume in the face of the punitively conservative political and economic frameworks of the late 1990s.



### And for the future?

My last comments relate to what comes next. What does the future hold? The book contains within it tales of exhaustion, illness, and intellectual and psychological debilitation. It also contains within it predictions of renewed energy, of inspired resistance, of solidarity of purpose. These are conflicted times within the movements of social change. If I am right about timing and location being of the essence in charting revolutionary transformation, what can we predict for the future?

I think time is a matter of intense importance. The globalizing world is at a critical moment, when dramatic changes swirl constantly around us. We need to call upon our finest strategists and tacticians, our wildest dreamers, our most incisive critics. We need the "little acts of subversion" that Saroj Chawla describes, like "the mouse digging up the mountain."<sup>11</sup> And we need death-defying moments of heroism beyond reckoning. When one of our number performs these most daring of deeds, we need to ensure that she never remains isolated out at the forefront, but is joined immediately by two, ten, or twenty of our number.<sup>12</sup> We need to make the next decade resemble the energy and unbridled expectations of the reform movements of the 1970s.

In the 1970s, the feminist community in which I participated frequently asked its members to volunteer one day a week toward activist work. There was also a custom of "tithing," in which many offered a tenth of their income to the movement. These are traditions we need to resurrect. Imagine the dramatic upsurge in energy we would create if half of our number - even a quarter - were to donate one day a week and a tenth of their annual income to the movement.

We need to use every force at our command, from those of us who have fallen into positions of power, to those of us who have not begun to imagine enrolling in universities. We need to create inter-generational linkages, so that those of us who are white-haired and immune-disordered can match our experience and ideas with the energy and goals of youth. We cannot afford to rest. We cannot afford to wait.

I also think location is of the essence. It is now difficult for me to speak of Western, since I have recently left behind the institution I loathed and the legion of comrades I adored. It will become easier for me to begin to speak of Ottawa University, an institution that I think bears more resemblance to York than to Western. I hope I have joined an educational institution that will be able to match York, woman for woman, with demands for revolutionary change that produce dramatic, substantive results.

As for York, reading *York Stories* has made me proud, in a way I have never been before, to claim my status as an alumna of Osgoode Hall, a faculty within your university that shares its own troubled history of educational abuse and resistance.<sup>13</sup> York is a place of momentous import on the landscape of Canadian academic institutions. It is the institution that gave life to *York Stories*. It must now face the remarkably brave narratives of all of the undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members who com-



mitted their experiences of belittlement, invisibility, hyper-visibility and discrimination to publication. This book becomes part of the history of York University, part of the institutional body of knowledge. It will stand splendidly side by side with the marketing blurbs, the promotional touting, the embellished declarations of progressive politic. It will remind the institutional name-keepers that York University contains the potential to transform university education and Canadian society.

### Notes

1. Professor of Law, University of Ottawa, 2000 onward; prior to that Professor of Law, University of Western Ontario, 1979-2000.
2. *York Stories: Women in Higher Education*, edited by The York Stories Collective (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 2000). The back jacket description of York Stories is as follows: "*York Stories* is a collection of interviews and first-person narratives of women at York University (Toronto) — Canada's fourth largest university, with the distinction of having the most diverse student population. *York Stories* probes how women are faring at York University today and their thoughts on issues such as government policies on higher education, student debt, the curriculum, the role of universities in today's world, and barriers such as ablism, classism, racism, sexism and heterosexism."
3. *Breaking Anonymity: The Chilly Climate for Women Faculty*, edited by The Chilly Climate Collective (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995). The back jacket quotes Bernice R. Sandler, of the National Association for Women Education in Washington, D.C. She describes the book as follows: "*Breaking Anonymity: The Chilly Climate for Women Faculty* not only clearly describes the chilly climate for women faculty but also what happens when women on campus document the climate and try to warm it up. Although several of the articles are specific to particular institutions, the experiences described are instructive because they are the same ones that are prevalent everywhere, in both Canadian and United States institutions."
4. Kathryn Morgan, Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto. I apologize that I do not have the specific citation for Dr. Morgan's statement. It has become something of a folk-saying at the University of Western Ontario, and is often cited without actual reference to the written text.
5. *York Stories*, p. 171.
6. *York Stories*, p. 114.
7. *York Stories*, p. 195.
8. *York Stories*, p. 131.
9. The "McIntyre Memo," which documented tenacious and systemic conditions of sexism within a law faculty, was published in the CAUT (Canadian Association of University Teachers) Bulletin in 1987, republished in the *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* vol. 2, no. 1 (1987-88), p. 362, and republished again in *Breaking Anonymity*, pp. 211-63.
10. All three films were produced by Kem Murch Productions, London, Ontario. One was titled "*The Chilly Climate for Women in Colleges and Universities*," copyright 1991 by The University of Western Ontario, Executive Producers: Western's Caucus on Women's Issues and the President's Standing Committee for

Employment Equity. It is distributed by the Department of Equity Services, 295 Stevenson Lawson Building, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6A 5B8.

- 11, *York Stories*, p. 136.
12. I am indebted to Sheila McIntyre for this observation, which she made in a workshop at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario in the early 1990s.
13. I was honoured to have been asked to serve as a member of the Steering Committee for the Complainants' Group in the human rights complaint concerning Mary Jane Mossman, *Mary Lou Fassel et al. v. Osgoode Hall Law School, York University and Harry Arthurs*, 1988-1992. The complaint that was issued in this proceeding, copies of which are on file with the author, outlines a history of systemic and individualized discrimination on the basis of sex.