

# **We-women<sup>1</sup> and non-mixed organizing: intersections and divergences among Queer and feminist anti-authoritarian activists in Quebec**

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We are members of the Research Group on Collective Autonomy (CRAC), a self-managed research group composed of anti-authoritarian and (pro-)feminist activists working to document the diversity and complexity of our own movement, *with* activists from the networks and groups under study. CRAC focuses on anti-capitalist groups and networks with an "anti-authoritarian culture" which have emerged in Quebec since 1995; that is, groups which refuse all authority deemed illegitimate, advocate the use of direct action<sup>2</sup> strategies and call for an organizational form characterized by the affirmation of spontaneity, autonomy, direct democracy and a decentralization of power<sup>3</sup>. Some of these groups and individuals are explicitly anarchist, while the anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist discourse of others reveals a certain affinity with the anti-authoritarian culture defined above.

## **Methodology**

This essay is the result of a collective editing process following three focus groups discussing the theme of the colloquium, whether being feminist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means rejecting we-women. Specifically, we looked at we-women and the question of non-mixed organizing starting from four data sources: an analysis done by CRAC last year of discourses propagated since 2000 by anti-authoritarians fighting primarily against patriarchy and heteronormativity; a preliminary analysis of interviews carried out in the process of producing monographs with queer and radical feminist groups; a case study of contemporary radical feminists of Quebec by Geneviève Pagé (2006)<sup>4</sup>; and our own activist experiences.

We all consider ourselves feminist, and three of us are queer. We are all active in anti-authoritarian, mixed, non-mixed women or queer groups<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a literal translation of "*nous-femmes*", a concept that is widely used in francophone feminist circles. "Sisterhood" is perhaps the closest term in English. We have chosen to use the imperfect term "we-women" as best representing our meaning within the limits of translation.

<sup>2</sup> Reducing as far as possible dependence on intermediaries to achieve goals.

<sup>3</sup> In setting the criteria and scope of our subject of study, we were inspired by Rosanvallon (1976) and Pucciarelli (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Pagé interviewed activists from *Némésis*, *Les Sorcières*, *Les Insoumises* and *Cyprine*.

<sup>5</sup> One of us participated in the organization of the second meeting of radical feminists which took place in February 2008 and is currently working on a monograph on radical feminism in Quebec; another was a member of *Némésis*, a radical feminist collective born during the rise of the anti-capitalist movement in Quebec; a third, also a radical feminist, is active in mixed anti-

A discourse analysis allowed us to identify three micro-cohorts among anti-authoritarian groups (Breton, Grolleau, Kruzynski, Saint-Arnaud Babin, 2007). In this text, we will focus on two of them: radical feminism and radical queer. The third, which we provisionally call women-of-colour feminism, is not strongly represented in our sample and, since we have not yet had the opportunity to deepen this aspect of our research, we will not touch on it here. We will sketch a (very exploratory) portrait of the convergence and divergence of radical queer and feminist micro-cohorts on we-women and non-mixed organizing. A caution is necessary here. These micro-cohorts are not mutually exclusive. Activists can identify with one while organizing with groups associated with the other.

### Positions on systems of oppression

The entire anti-authoritarian feminist and queer cohort shares an anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist and anti-state analysis. All the groups are radical, in the sense of aiming at the roots of systems of oppression and not their external manifestations or symptoms. In theory, most activists do not recognize a hierarchy among the different systems of oppression, viewing them instead as inter-locking. However, in speech and practice, the different micro-cohorts assign a greater or lesser degree of importance to various systems of oppression.

The majority of **radical feminists** seem to hold an analysis emerging from the materialist feminism of the previous political generation; they posit the existence of a system of oppression specific to women, patriarchy, exploitation which is combined with "capitalism, racism, hierarchy and all other forms of domination" (extract from the definition of radical feminism, call for a radical feminist gathering, 2003). This analysis is clearly reflected in the theoretical texts produced by feminist radical collectives, notably *Némésis* and *Les Sorcières*, and the interviews conducted by Geneviève Pagé (2006). This is hardly surprising, since these groups emerged, for the most part, from the post-Seattle anti-authoritarian movement, which brought together anti-capitalist, anti-poverty and student groups in particular. However, in some of the interviews with radical activists it was clear that, despite this analysis, many of them have noticed a tendency in practice to emphasize patriarchy.

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authoritarian groups while struggling on a daily basis against patriarchy and is finalizing the editing of a monograph on *Ainsi Squat'Elles*, a feminist radio show broadcast in Québec; a fourth has begun the monograph process with Q-Team (of which she is a member), an affinity group of radical queers founded by people previously active in the Anti-capitalist ass pirates who wanted to prioritize political struggle; a fifth is responsible for a monograph on the Queer People of Colour movement and is a founding member of the Ste-Emilie Skillshare, a group of artists and activists, mostly people of colour and queer, who promote artistic expression and self-representation in their communities: and the last, working on a monograph on Ste-Emilie Skillshare of which she is also a member, is well known under the pseudonym lolagouine and is a *zinester* and *zine trader*.

The positions adopted by the **radical queer** micro-cohort address the multiplicity of systems of oppression more systematically. However, we note that, since the birth of the first radical queer groups at the end of the 1990s, there have been noticeable changes in the analysis adopted by this micro-cohort. Affinity groups born in the frenzy of the post-Seattle anti-capitalist movement, such as the *Panthères Roses* and the Anticapitalist Ass Pirates, theorized the inter-connections between systems of oppression, while prioritizing the expression of patriarchy, heteronormativity and capitalism. These groups refused all institutions, normativity and the exploitation of gay and lesbian groupings by capitalist businesses courting the "pink dollar". We are using the past tense because these groups are no longer active.

These first experiences attracted several critiques, including the perspective that racialized people were largely absent from this conceptualization. From this there emerged a growing interest in establishing a more complete, intersectional analysis. Numerous anti-racist and anti-oppression workshops were organized and queer activists became increasingly connected with groups working on issues prioritizing racialized people. Thus, at this point, there is a shift from activism focused on high-profile street actions towards work closer to the base, focused on services and an anti-oppression approach. Many activists are invested in the 2110 Centre, formerly the Concordia Women's Centre; a support, reference and awareness-raising service which fights against sexist and transphobic oppression:

more specifically [against] their impacts on people of colour and indigenous people, handicapped people, transsexual and transgender, LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer], sex-workers, people of diverse sizes, and low-income (<http://www.centre2110.org/about/a-propos/>).

Others have set up the Ste-Emilie Skillshare in the working class neighbourhood of St. Henri; a group of artists who coordinate "an art studio allowing people to learn new skills, create art in a spirit of revolution and anti-oppression (anti-racism/sexism/classism/homophobia/transphobia, discrimination based on handicap or size, etc.)" (<http://snap.mahost.org/distro/>).

In brief, both micro-cohorts seem to conceptualize the different forms of oppression (or poles of identity formation) as operating within the same social and institutional spaces, whether work-related, educational or familial. Moreover, no system of oppression operates independently of the others; they are interdependent. However, differences are expressed in the practical application of this analysis and, more specifically, in the choice of strategies and organizational form; that is, in the use or not of we-women as a strategy, and its corollary, non-mixed identity organizing.

## **We-women**

Both micro-cohorts believe that there is a political system which leads to the oppression of women and both reject the contention that equality has been achieved in countries of the global north. However, the strategies arising from this shared analysis diverge.

While some **radical feminists** believe that biological sex is constructed, most refer to the category "women" as a social construct; that is, personality traits, qualities and behaviours associated with the masculine or feminine are produced by socialization and the experience of different material conditions. Thus constructed, women are "individually and collectively appropriated to the ends of biological reproduction and economic production" (definition, radical feminist meeting 2003), while men, as a collectivity (some refer to a "class") benefit from the subordination of women by means of the privileges they derive from this situation. From this perspective, the hierarchy between the sexes is universal; in other words, everywhere in the world, women are oppressed by this patriarchal system. It is important to note that this does not mean that radical feminists consider "women" to be a unified category; they believe that all women are oppressed, but not in same way. However, this analysis leads to the strategic choice to build counter-power which, radical feminists believe, requires a certain unity to force the transformation of a system, patriarchy, which privileges men at the expense of women. This unity is we-women.

In theory, the **queer** micro-cohort refuses to use this we-women. We are led to conclude that, for the most part, they do not categorically refuse the identity, but rather struggle for a multiplicity of identities. Drawing on critiques levelled at white western feminism by feminists of all origins, radical queers seem to have adopted the following positions: that the "self" is plural (multiplicitous) and not unitary; that difference is relational rather than natural; and that unity and common struggle are a matter of will and creativity and not passive discovery (Harris, 1991, quoted by Burack, 2001: 38). Thus for these activists, we-women includes differences expressed as social relations of domination. There is no automatic harmony among "women" as we-women implies. These activists reject the idea that women throughout the world share a common experience and that this automatically results in a shared political struggle.

In this conceptualization of we-women, radical queers, undoubtedly influenced by ideas developed by queer thinkers (for example, Butler, 1990), oppose the idea that sexualities are fixed and delineated by the binary hetero/homosexual. They refuse this binary as well as that which implies the existence of distinct feminine and masculine sexes – a binary reinforced, they believe, by we-women. Sexuality, gender and sex are diverse, shifting and fluid. The man/woman binary denies the existence of trans, of all who were assigned a gender at birth with which they are not comfortable, who change biological sex, who transgress gender norms without undergoing operations, who display androgynous characteristics, as well as people born with genital organs which do not conform with the norm, who are very often assigned a biological sex by the medical establishment and whose organs are "normalized" by an operation at birth. This diversity leads queer activists to conceive of sex and gender as multiple.

### **Postions on non-mixed organizing**

From these different positions on the significance of we-women arise different organizational choices, more or less coherent with the analytical positions advanced.

For **radical feminists**, non-mixed organizing is not only legitimate, but essential to the feminist struggle. Within collectives, affinity groups or ad hoc caucuses, they try to practise egalitarian social relations. Operating on the margins of mainstream feminist groups and institutions, they attempt, more or less explicitly, to build an autonomous, diffuse, diverse and relatively informal network (for example, occasional gatherings of radical feminists). Some feel the need to come together as women because they feel oppressed by men, often in their mixed activist experiences or in their daily lives. Others desire to create a space free from masculine domination, in which they can unplug from daily reality, support each other, breathe, and build confidence in themselves. For most, non-mixed organizing becomes a space for retreat in which to develop collective political analysis of individual daily experiences; often leading in turn to collective action, whether high-profile actions to denounce the control of women's bodies by patriarchal institutions, focused interventions to promote their perspectives in mixed organizations, or alternative projects such as feminist radio shows or zines which share recipes and Do-it-yourself skills to reduce the influence of pharmaceutical multinationals over feminine gynecology.

Some believe that men, pro-feminist or not, have no place in the fight against patriarchy, because they benefit from this system as a group and thus have no interest in seeing it fall. Others think that pro-feminist men have their place as allies in support of non-mixed organizations or in raising awareness with other men. In practice, radical feminists sometimes form ad hoc alliances with pro-feminist men's groups to organize events or campaigns. These experiences are not always conclusive because the domination related to the masculine presence can, in the view of some, make the experiences tiring or even oppressive for the women involved (Blais, 2008).

However, for some **queer** activists, the existence of relations of domination within mixed organisations doesn't justify the need for non-mixed "women's" organizing. In their view, it is impossible to create an entirely "safe" space where everyone feels "protected from the oppressor" because any gathering of people will feature relations of domination: between racialized people, between people of different capacities, among different social classes, between culture x or y, etc. On the other hand, everyone who participates in a group must be accountable for their actions, they must be held responsible and bear the consequences of their acts. Such an analysis calls for the creation of conditions which allow everyone to participate, whatever their social identity, and for the establishment of mechanisms which allow power relations to be named and collective solutions developed. This approach forces the people involved to address their own privileges in a way that non-mixed groups, often more homogenous and more inward looking rarely succeed in doing. Moreover, these queer activists believe

that, despite an analysis acknowledging the inter-connectedness of systems of oppression, in practice most non-mixed women's groups universalize the experience "women" according to a majority model. Consequently, racialized women or those who are not hetero, for example, are forced to erase parts of their experiences or, if they have the courage, (constantly) remind people that they exist and that their reality must be taken into account. Finally, it would be impossible to create a non-mixed space without (implicitly or explicitly) defining the rules of exclusion and inclusion. Thus in non-mixed "women's" groups, people who don't fit the feminine norm are forced to "come out of the closet", defend their "identity", and even see themselves denied access, unlike those who fit the norm.

Queers seek ways of "complexifying" understandings of privilege, especially masculine privilege. Radical queer organizations promote sexual and gender diversity; they denounce the rigidity of sexualities, the categories of man/woman and all resulting hierarchies. Anyone sharing this analysis, ready to work towards transgressing norms of gender and sexuality, is welcome in a queer group, no matter what their biological sex.

Radical queer activism in Quebec is expressed in many ways: political affinity groups<sup>6</sup>, alternative service groups<sup>7</sup> and virtual spaces<sup>8</sup>. In addition to these more stable initiatives (over time), there are a wide variety of ad hoc and very fluid activities, events and campaigns. Festive events like *QueerEaction* or parties held on the fringes of Montreal's gay village are highly valued among queers. *Anticapitalist pink blocs*, during protests or parades, bring together different groups and organizations as well as a whole range of activists active in anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist groups. In addition, queer groups and activists take part, along with other activist groups, in organizing the annual March 8<sup>th</sup> women of diverse origins events as well as campaigns such as the one against the reasonable accommodation consultations and the campaign for status for the Algerian Abdelkader Belaoui.

Within queer groups, racialized activists sometimes decide to organize non-mixed spaces either on a punctual basis or in a more long-term way. Queer People of Color (QPOC) and, more generally, People of Colour (POC) caucuses are currently a feature of the anti-authoritarian movement, particularly on the anglophone side. Given the relatively clear position against non-mixed "women" spaces in queer circles, it could seem paradoxical that this organizational form, also based on a non-mixed identity, is approved. Some queer activists have resolved this dilemma by creating non-mixed groups of racialized people rather than visible minorities or people of colour. Starting with individual or group experiences of racialization, rather than criteria of inclusion (and exclusion) based on physical appearance, they avoid reinforcing fixed identity categories which imply the existence of distinct "races". Conceptualized in this

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<sup>6</sup> *Panthères Roses*, Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates, Q-Team

<sup>7</sup> 2110 Centre for Gender Advocacy, Ste. Emilie Skillshare.

<sup>8</sup> Zine exchanges, blogs.

way, these non-mixed groups avoid many of the pitfalls in which non-mixed "women" are mired. However, the term "racialized", rather "academic", is not very widespread in activist circles and most continue to speak of QPOC and POC. While recognizing the contradictions inherent in the use of these concepts, they continue to deploy them for lack of a popular alternative to name the basis of affinity of such groups.

On the other hand, many in queer circles support the existence of non-mixed women of colour or women in situations of poverty affinity or conscientization groups. In addition, many in these circles believe that anyone has the right to self-define as a woman. This seems contrary to the preponderant position in queer circles that we-women and the social organizing principle of non-mixed women should be proscribed. This apparent contradiction is not easy to resolve and leads to questions about power. Some believe that, in the current context, because many privileges are associated with living according to established norms, it is not possible to ask everyone to adopt a "transgressive" stance at all times. Moreover, people identified as "women", living *multiple oppressions* or hyper-marginalized, understandably feel the need to come together among themselves; no matter what a person's *chosen* identity, the identity *assigned* to them by social norms is very often what they must use to form daily life, in the streets, at work, at home. Non-mixed spaces, allowing these women to share their experiences, refine their analyses, and develop confidence to better act collectively.

This last remark could have been made by a radical feminist. Thus, in queer circles, it is acknowledged that, from time to time, non-mixed women's spaces can have a place, but only when they do not reproduce a we-women which is non-racialized, educated, and from the middle class or higher. Herein lies the problem: groups of women who, in Quebec society, enjoy the greatest privileges (among women, of course!); who in practice give priority to the system of oppression which concerns them most (patriarchy); who promote political positions assuming that women around the world share a host of common experiences; who have the resources to publicly assert their ideas; whose members will become university researchers financed by the state to carry out feminist research or professors who train the next generation; who become leading lights of the women's movement; who influence both public discourse and the internal politics of grassroots groups; and finally, who attempt to create a cocoon of well-being protected from masculine domination while generating discomfort created by interpersonal relations with those who are different from themselves.

Groups of radical feminists that we have included in our study<sup>9</sup> are more homogenous than the queer groups. Educated and non-racialized women are over-represented in the first micro-cohort; while, in the second, it is more common to encounter racialized people as well as lesbians, gays and trans. How can this difference be explained? Is it simply a matter of demography, reflecting the fact that queer groups

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<sup>9</sup> We are aware that there are anti-authoritarian, racialized feminists active in Quebec who, for the most part, do not respond to the call of radical feminists, but we haven't yet had the opportunity to deepen this aspect of our research.

are more present in anglophone universities, particularly Concordia, relative to UQAM or Université Laval, home to many radical feminists? Or are we still living with the vestiges of a francophone radical feminism of the 1970s, sympathetic to the idea of an independent Quebec, a question which often causes racialized people to flee? Is it the fact that current radical feminism is in some respects a continuation of materialist feminist struggles of the past, now mostly a matter for reflection by educated, non-racialized women, meaning that these groups are in "recruitment" mode and not - as queer groups are doing - newly creating a common project starting with diverse experiences, for the most part in rupture with the past? Is it a question of accessibility or a lack of mechanisms to facilitate the participation of people with less privilege and thus often with fewer resources? Is it a direct consequence of organizing on the basis of we-women rather than around a diversity of genders and sexualities?

Several nuances to these queer critiques should be noted. Despite a great openness to difference in queer groups, invisible barriers can still limit participation. As we noted earlier, racialized and less educated people were not very present in the first queer groups. But since the groups began to systematically centre their analyses and actions on the interdependence of gender and sexual oppression with other systems of oppression, notably racism and classism, the groups seem to have become more diversified. The most diversified groups seem to be those whose founding members included racialized people in positions of leadership and who had input into vision, principles, and the group's mandate. However, these groups are not without their challenges. Would someone in their fifties feel comfortable in this "youth" - dominated movement? What about those who don't conform to the look or style of what could be characterized as a queer sub-culture? Or those who don't have the "right language" or the same non-verbal signs as the "gang"? Does this movement, more characteristic of cosmopolitan centres like Montreal, contribute to creating incomprehension or distrust among people living in the countryside or small towns of Quebec, who are only rarely exposed to sexual and gender diversities?

### **By way of conclusion**

It would seem quasi-impossible for a single group to embrace the needs and aspirations of all oppressed people. Regardless of how open a group is, there will always be invisible borders and different affinities. The ideas developed by Chela Sandoval, inspired by what she calls Third World Feminism, can help guide our reflection on this issue. Sandoval argues that identity politics (and identity-based organizing) should be viewed as a tactical manoeuvre rather than a general strategy of struggle. That is, rather than thinking of identity as a fixed category of belonging, it should be used as a strategic position. For Sandoval, the feminist struggle encompasses an entire landscape of issues, some of which may be better served by a particular position or posture or identity than another. The concept of differentiated

conscience, which Sandoval (1991, quoted by Lotz 2003: 8) puts forward, requires grace, flexibility and firmness from feminists:

Differential consciousness requires (...) enough strength to confidently commit to a well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month, year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if readings of power's formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committed to egalitarian social relations and race (sic), gender, and class justice, when their readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands. Differential consciousness, then, proposes that feminists constantly shift the construction of the social movement and tactics for activism according to the situation. [*we added the underlines.*]

This type of feminism calls for the strategic formation of temporary coalitions or networks around certain social identities, at different times, according to the context and the issues. Concretely, the use of we-women, "we-queers", "we-lesbians", "we-racialized people", "we-people-in-situations-of-poverty", becomes a tactic in a larger struggle for social justice for everyone. This requires groups who hold the most power, privilege and resources, to take a step back, to discover the realities of other groups; opening their strategic analyses and rethinking their strategies of struggle in light of these discoveries. This way of thinking about identity politics poses a challenge to activism which systematically serves or defends fixed and mutually exclusive social identities and tends to "represent", for example, "women" in their totality. On the other hand, it allows feminists from different circles and horizons to inter-weave, dialogue, develop new relations and conceptualize theories and, above all, a method of oppositional conscience. In this way, responding to the question of the colloquium: yes, we-women as a general strategy is to be proscribed. Nevertheless, we-women could be maintained as a tactic, provided that it is self-identified, diversified, and always subject to question.

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