

**The
*Women's
Liberation
Front*
of Québec**

Janine Marchessault



This essay begins with a commonplace observation; Québec can boast by far the largest number of feminist cultural collectives in Canada. Feminist cultural activity can be found in all women galleries like La Centrale (Galerie Powerhouse), in theatrical spaces like Espace Go and Tangeante, in film festivals like 'Regards de femmes' and 'Cinérama,' in performance collectives like L'Energyne, Justine, Matrix, Coeur Maha, Vox Trot, Venus Fly Trap and others. It can also be found in video/media groups like Groupe intervention vidéo (G.I.V.), Vidéo Femmes, Amazones d'hier/lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui and most recently Studio XX. Certainly the long-standing tradition of women novelists, poets and playwrights is testimony to the unique character of women's culture in Québec.

The sustained force and specificity of this culture must be located within the larger historical origins of its development in Québec society. In their landmark study of the history of Québec women, The Clio Collective includes the important network of religious orders and charitable communities fostered by the Catholic Church. By the end of the nineteenth century, they observe, one in one hundred Québec women took the veil. Such a vocation provided not only a way out of poverty and childbearing but allowed some women to pursue careers and maintain the full legal rights that married women did not enjoy.¹ It is also worth underlining that at the turn of the century most of the social services in Québec were administered and staffed by nuns, many of whom espoused a social feminism that sought to reform economic structures rather than the individuals it most oppressed. This must be contrasted with those Protestant charities in English Canada which endorsed both Temperance and the Eugenics movement. With the professionalization of charity under the rubric of social work and public health in the thirties, the control of welfare services shifted from the Church to the State. Under Duplessis, a conservative and nationalistic Church advocated *la revanche du berceau* (power through elevated birthrates), reducing what little power women did have over social life to a capacity for procreation. In accordance with this vocation, women's right to vote in provincial elections was delayed until 1940. This shift to State controlled services and education, however, set the stage for the Quiet Revolution to assume its full force after the death of Duplessis in 1959.

Throughout the sixties, a vast network of women's organizations came to challenge the religious and patriarchal interests of a previous era. The women's groups and associations who presented briefs to the Royal Commission of Enquiry on the Status of Women in Canada (Bird Commission) 1967-1970 represented the diversity and strength of the movement in Québec. These included: the Québec Federation of Women (the largest association of women in Québec which now comprises more than two hundred groups), The AFEAS (Association féminine pour l'éducation et l'action sociale), The Cercles de Fermières, The University Women's Club, Québec Native Women's Group, La Fédération des unions de famille, La Ligue des femmes du Québec, La Société d'étude et des conférences, L'Association des religieuses enseignantes du Québec, The Montréal Council of Women, Women's Federation, Allied Jewish Community Services of Montréal, The Voice of Women (Montréal). This list only begins to suggest the larger structures (and indeed internal conflicts) that marked the feminist movement in Québec throughout the sixties.

The specific theoretical juncture that interests me is the intersection of feminism and nationalism in Québec during this period. For if feminist culture continues to assert a collective spirit in Québec, it is in part because the rise of second-wave feminism was aligned to the sovereignty movement. In what follows, I wish to provide a very cursory sketch of a moment in the history of feminist politics in Montréal in the seventies. I intend to consider some of the ways in which feminist and separatist politics worked in tandem to articulate a socialist discourse of liberation that hinged upon a distinct cultural identity. My objective is not to present



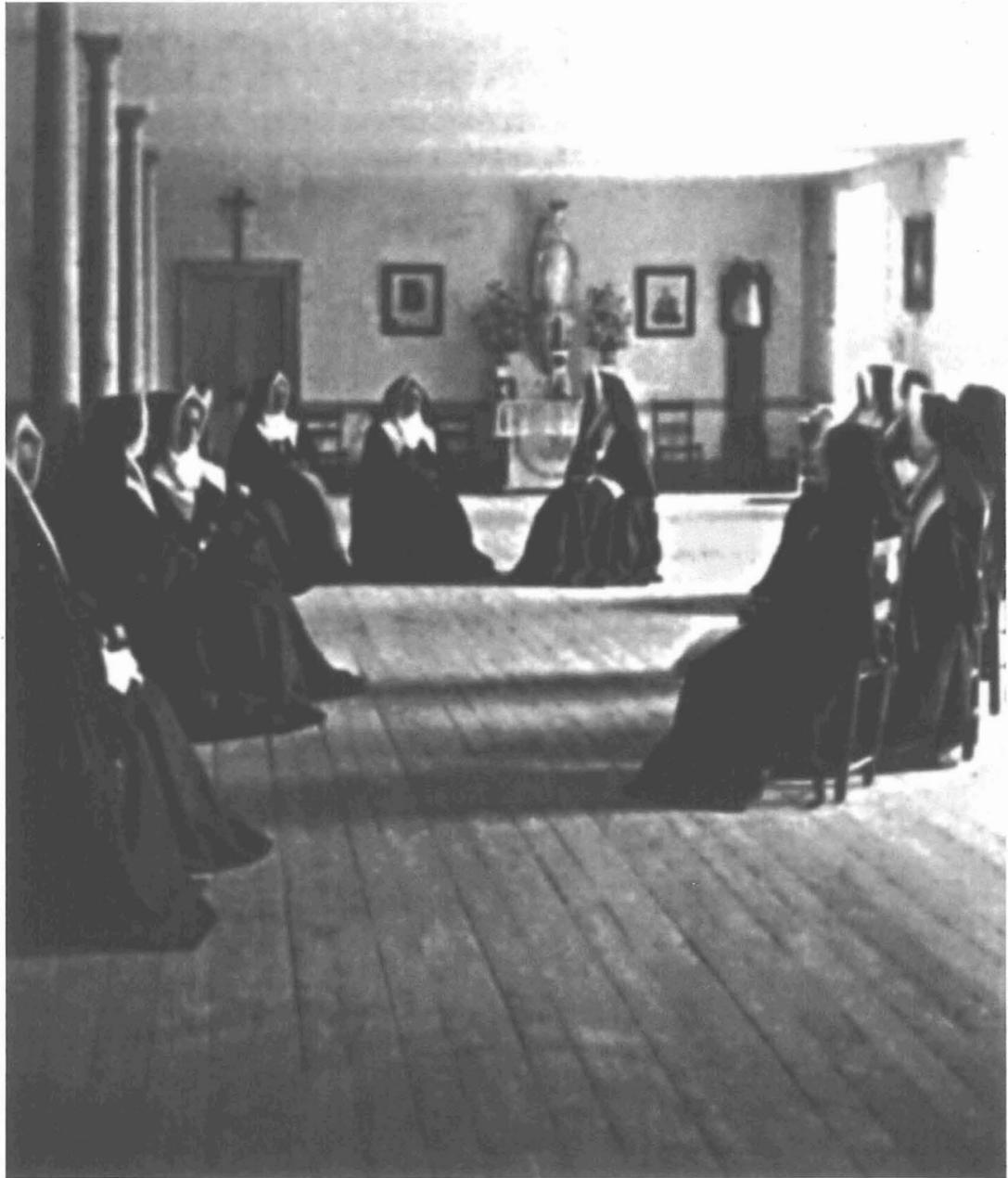
a definitive analysis of this moment but rather to revisit some of the rich historical questions, contradictions and insights it proffers.

In 1969, Quebecers weathered one hundred and forty-one strikes that affected one hundred thousand workers. In the fall of that year, Montréal was experiencing the Expo hangover with 10 percent unemployment and a crippling municipal debt. Law and order were no longer transparent agencies of the state as police officers and firefighters had to be legislated back to work by the National Assembly. Along with strikes, public demonstrations were unrelenting: taxi drivers demonstrated against the Murray Hill company; massive protests in Montréal and Québec against bill 63 (the freedom to choose the language of instruction); huge rallies were mounted demanding the liberation of political prisoners Pierre Vallières and Charles Gagnon. Faced with the cacophony of democracy, on November 12th the Mayor of Montréal, Jean Drapeau implemented the infamous and unconstitutional anti-demonstration bylaw 3926, forbidding public assembly, demonstrations and even parades. This law was to be in effect for an indeterminate period to ensure that the parade of parades — the Grey Cup parade — would unfold without interruption. The bylaw was intended to cover that two day period when two hundred thousand tourists would descend upon Montréal to spend approximately twenty-five million dollars.

It is this atmosphere that would see the spontaneous formation of the *Front Commun des Québécoises* (the Common Front of Québec Women), initiated by several women active in The Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) and the Québec Teacher's Central (CEQ). While no public demonstrations had taken place since the anti-demonstration bylaw was passed, on November 29th the Front Commun called upon the women of Québec to make a common show of protest, to appear in public as the silent majority. It called upon women who had never had a place in public to come forward and affirm their historical absence from the public sphere, an affirmation made all the more dramatic by the fact that it occurred at a time when even the normative parameters of Québec civic life — however sexist — were themselves under siege. That evening, two hundred women appeared in public chained together, they called themselves “slaves of slaves.” One hundred and sixty-five women were arrested.

Two weeks later a group of anglophone women from McGill University (The Women's Lib of Montréal) approached several francophone women active in the labour movement to form the *Front de la libération des femmes québécoises* (the Québec Women's Liberation Front — FLF). The FLF was founded by twelve women and developed into at least seven different cells that grew to over sixty members in a three year period. The resemblance to the FLQ in name was no accident. It reflected a desire to strategize a radical resistance similar in form to Vallières' and Gagnon's *Le front de libération populaire* and the militant politics of third world liberation movements. The FLF mandates mirrored and included a separatist politic to create what they described as revolutionary feminism. This was evidenced in their slogan, “Pas de Québec libre sans libération des femmes! Pas de femmes libres sans libération du Québec.” (No liberated Québec without women's liberation, no liberated women without Québec's liberation.) The *Québec Women's Manifesto* was published eight months after the FLQ manifesto in 1971 by L'Étincelle. Authored by an anonymous group of militant feminists who worked with the FLF, it reproduced the style and tone of FLQ communiqués. The manifesto maintained that it was time for women to invent their own political strategies: “... we are victims of two systems, capitalism and patriarchy ... our liberation supposes the end of these two systems ... something no social revolution has ever accomplished.” The manifesto reflected the influence of Albert Mammi, Franz Fanon and most importantly the Marxist publication *Parti pris*. The FLF would focus on three aspects of liberation: women's liberation, national liberation and liberation from capitalism through socialism. The challenge





they confronted was how to negotiate these mandates simultaneously. A starting point was social reform and the everyday lives of women: universal and free daycare, abortion on demand, equal pay for equal work, access to birth control and to higher education, wages for housework, an end to sexual exploitation through the media, redefinition of the nuclear family through sexual liberation. The FLF recognized that such reforms would not touch the roots of women's oppression which would require a much more militant attack on capitalism. Social reforms constituted a first step in bringing women together. The group's aim was to create a solidarity between all Québec women, to create a discursive space in which a community of women might negotiate the meanings of total liberation.²

In its early stages, the FLF supported a feminist plurality that would enable locally defined struggles to be informed by a global perspective. They sought anglophone and francophone women, immigrant women, native women, university students, working class housewives and non skilled labourers. They looked to the struggles of women from other colonized countries engaged in the fight against imperialism, capitalism and patriarchy. Vietnamese, Chinese and Algerian women were seen as comrades fighting similar kinds of oppression. In order to maintain the plurality of the organization, the group supported a decentralized structure with seven different cells working on a variety of projects across Montréal: daycare (which set up a cooperative in east Montréal); "O as in vulva cell" which lobbied for abortion rights, clinics and health education; "x-action cultural shock" (which protested the absence of women jurors at the FLQ trials, staged occupations of taverns, and stormed a commercial show of women's cosmetics); "cinema-animation-formation" (produced feminist consciousness raising films); and "cell 1" and "cell 2" (ideology and research). Working autonomously, the cells were suffering from a lack of communication and thus, a seventh cell was formed to produce a journal *Québécoises Deboutte!* (Québec Women Stand Up!), the first socialist feminist journal in Québec. Between the various cells, the difficulty lay in finding a common language and experience from which to begin to theorize a unified action and direction.

For the first six months of its life, almost half of the FLF membership was comprised of bilingual separatist anglophones. They brought to the group the influence of American radical feminism which, inspired by third world national liberation struggles, could easily accommodate a feminist national liberation front. Indeed, as Véronique O'Learly and Louise Toupin have pointed out, the FLF identified with the separatism of the Black Panthers; Pierre Vallières' *Nègres blancs d'Amérique: autobiographie précoce d'un "terroriste" québécois* was taken quite literally. Indeed, one finds across the pages of *Québécoises Deboutte!* and other FLF communiqués, the use of the term racism far more frequently than sexism.

The conflation of race, ethnicity and gender was in many ways superseded by another categorical term. Social class became the privileged analytical tool for understanding the historical determinations of Québécois national identity. Sherry Simon has pointed out that the *indépendantiste* inspired sociology of the 1960s had little use for the term ethnicity. A telling series of documentaries produced by the National Film Board of Canada in the forties had shown the 'French Canadians' taking their place among recent immigrants to Canada. Sociologists perceived a structural relativism in ethnicity; instead relations of difference and identity were therefore typically understood as inflected by deeper economic structures of power. With ethnicity, the specificity of 'French Canadians' had been defined through cultural indicators only, impeding rather than clarifying québécois reality. Social class, the study of what Fernand Dumont called la *société globale*, had far vaster and revolutionary implications for delimiting *l'identitaire québécois*.³ As we shall see, it is a lesbian and not a racial or ethnic identity that would come to challenge and reinvigorate Québécois feminism in the eighties.



Despite the desire to be plural and open to differences, the FLF's conflation of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality and social class led to a narrowing of the body politic. Not surprisingly, the anglophone women were expelled from the group after the first six months. The expulsion was controversial and several francophone women resigned calling the ejection racist, not least because the anglophone women were mostly Jewish.⁴ Given that they had greater access to the theoretical writings of the period published in English, it was felt that the anglophones were dominating the group. Francophone women needed to devise a political strategy that would correspond to the historical specificity of their oppression.

As the group developed, this formulation would come to turn on two theoretical axes. On the one hand, a Marxist-Leninist analysis would provide the tools for understanding capitalism and the family. On the other, an American radical feminism would supply the group with a discourse of difference and identity without reducing oppression to a division of labour. While the Marxist-Leninist position stressed a science of politics, class analysis and collective struggle, radical feminism offered a more culturally directed, individuated and utopian politic. These opposing political models soon created antagonisms within the group, antagonisms which boiled down to politics versus culture. This was reflected in the different cells of the FLF who could not agree on tactics: "x-action cultural shock" was perceived as confused and spectacular; the abortion and daycare cells along with the cinema cell were more in line with an international liberal feminism, while cell 2 was seeking a more radical class based intervention. The mission statements that each of the cells produced served only to further hostilities and hasten the group's complete disintegration in 1971.⁵

The group was reformed by four women under the banner *Centre des femmes* (1971–1975). The new Women's Centre was divided into three sectors: research (into theoretical issues and empirical facts about the experiences of Québec women); propaganda which was concerned with the dissemination of information both through health pamphlets and the quarterly *Québécoises Deboutte!* (ten issues were produced over two years, as was a subscription list of over two thousand); and an abortion and contraception counseling clinic initiated with a Youth Employment grant. The clinic and the journal became the central activities of the militants. These provided access to women from a variety of different backgrounds and allowed the group to consider a plurality of political questions while carrying out important social work. Though critical of the liberalism of The Montréal Feminist Association which they refused to join, the *Centre des femmes* remained unclear about how their revolutionary feminism would move beyond simply providing a service to the community.⁶ In fact, to some extent the clinic and the journal had become just that.

The group eventually fragmented and by 1975 the *Centre des femmes* was closed. Its epitaph read: "the Women's Centre is dead, long live autonomous women's groups."⁷ The Committee for Free and Legal Abortion and Contraception, *Théâtre des cuisines* (the all women agit-prop troupe), The Women's Health Centre of the Plateau Mont-Royal, the Feminist Documentation Centre, les éditions du remue-ménage all formed a loose feminist infrastructure that staged events and demonstrations together. As the groups multiplied into more cultural collectives, other journals: *Les Têtes de pioches* (1976–1979), *L'Autre Parole* (1976–), *Pluri-elles* (1978–1979) and *Des luttes et des rires de femmes* (1978–1981), and other community service organisations, this loose inter-grouping disappeared completely.

This marks the end of a very important relationship between marxism and feminism in Québec. Indeed there would be a very serious rupture between various Marxist-Leninist groups and women's groups around the abortion lobby. By the mid-1970s, radical feminism would play an increasingly strong role in reasserting the importance of women's culture, of a feminine language and art. The explosion of women's cultural collectives across Québec in the



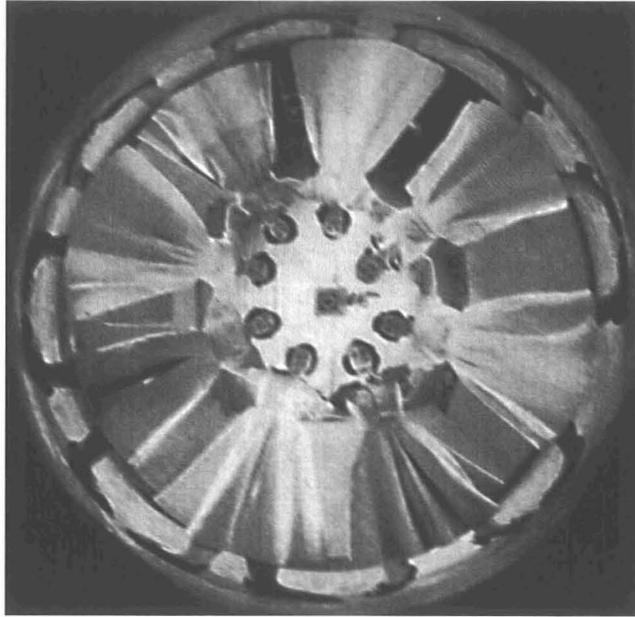


mid-seventies was also sustained by a variety of federal grants which allowed many feminist collectives to become permanent services. The Parti Québécois (PQ) would foster and support a vast array of cultural collectives and community services for women. As is well known, cultural development was and continues to be a central priority for the PQ which promised to give citizens access both to the expression and creation of culture.

The shift from militant social action to cultural development that we can discern in both Québec's feminist and nationalist movements is perfectly commensurate with the identitarian lexicon they share. For identity needs a culture, and culture must have its space. Diane Lamoureux argues that nationalism reinforced and strengthened the spatial logistics in Québec feminism's drive to liberate the body and later, its energetic creation of cultural spaces for women. It is just such an energy that would pave the way for the explosion of feminist collectives across Québec between 1974 and 1981. For Lamoureux, the close ties between nationalist and feminist movements in Québec might also explain the presence of more women in institutional positions of power than anywhere else in Canada.⁸ The FLF almost joined the PQ party, who promised the women of Québec a revised social charter — a promise that many feel any party has yet to fulfill in Québec. Certainly, as far as culture goes, there are by far more women working in the popular media as critics and journalists, and more women in executive positions in the cultural sectors. However, Lamoureux adds, an institutional feminism has also diluted the rich discursivity of Québec's social feminism. For when militant feminists become salaried workers, they have an interest in maintaining an essential and static version of female identity as status quo.⁹

Historically, critiques of an essential and institutional feminism came from, and continue to come from, a lesbian and queer body politic. The critique of feminism and specifically the construction of gender and desire was carried out by Pol Pelletier at Le Théâtre expérimental de Montréal in the mid-seventies and later through the Théâtre expérimental des femmes. Théâtre des cuisines would reproach the invisibility of lesbian experiences in the feminist public sphere with "*As tu vu? les maisons s'emportent*" (1980); writers like Marie-Claire Blais, Jovette Marchessault, Lise Vaillancourt and Nicole Brossard continue to separate out a lesbian desire from a feminist cultural identity in Québec. The collective *Amazones d'hier, lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui* has provided perhaps the most hostile critiques of the heterosexist norms supported by liberal and social feminism alike. The collective produced a video, *Amazones d'hier, lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui* (79–81) and throughout the eighties, a journal of the same title. Both the video and the journal are for lesbian eyes only. While maintaining radical feminism's utopian aspiration for nation, the *Amazones* collective refused to connect their struggles with Québec nationalism. They remained open to all lesbians of different races and languages in and outside Québec. As Lamoureux argues, the relation between feminism and lesbian sexuality in Québec is important. Feminism created a public space enabling the politicization of lesbian experience, while a queer politic has served to counter the assimilation and institutionalization of feminist politics.¹⁰

Despite her earlier criticisms, Pol Pelletier's play *Joie* mourns the death of the feminist collectivities that were so strong in the seventies. Although some of the spaces, festivals and publishing houses from this period have carried on, they are filled with individual women rather than political collectivities.¹¹ The move to change Théâtre expérimental des femmes to Espace Go reflects a shift in the feminist body politic that is perhaps less specific to Québec as it is an indication of the larger rifts and fragmentations that have been reshaping feminist communities for over a decade. Nevertheless, it is clear that the utopian aspiration for political coalition and cultural voice in Québec continues to sustain feminist communities.



Notes

- 1 Collectif Clio, *L'Histoire des femmes au Québec depuis quatre siècles* (Montréal: Éditeurs Les Quinze, 1982). Translated by Roger Gannon and Rosalind Gill, *Québec Women: A History* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1987), 173–176.
- 2 Véronique O'Leary et Louise Toupin, *Québécoises Deboutte!: une anthologie de textes du Front de libération des femmes* (1969–1977) et du Centre des femmes (1972–1975), Vol. 1 (Montréal: Éditions du Remue-ménage, 1982–1983), 67.
- 3 Sherry Simon, "Représentations de la diversité culturelle dans le cinéma et la vidéo québécoise," Research Document produced by the Groupe de recherche sur la citoyenneté culturelle (GRECC), 3. See also, Sherry Simon, "Espace incertain de la culture," in *Fictions de l'identitaire au Québec*, eds. S. Simon et.al (Montréal: YYY Editeurs, 1991).
- 4 *Québec Women: A History*, 360. *Québécoises Deboutte! Volume One*, 101.
- 5 *Québécoises Deboutte! Vol. 1*, 176.
- 6 *Québécoises Deboutte! Vol. 2*, 136.
- 7 *Québécoises Deboutte! Vol. 2*, 156.
- 8 Diane Lamoureux, *Fragments et collages: essai sur le féminisme québécois des années 70* (Montréal: Éditions du remue-ménage, 1986), 110–112.
- 9 *Ibid*, 60.
- 10 *Ibid*, 153.
- 11 Pol Pelletier, *Joie* (Montréal: Éditions du remue-ménage, 1995), 89.

