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FEMINIST ACTIVIST STORYTELLING:
TRANSFORMING IDENTITY AND BUILDING
RESISTANCE

Annie Chau

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FEMINIST ACTIVIST STORYTELLING: TRANSFORMING IDENTITY AND BUILDING RESISTANCE

Annie Chau

Abstract

I came to recognize the importance of story over the course of my master's degree. With the intention to diversify feminism, I explored the storied journeys of Indigenous and racialized immigrant women in Canada becoming activists. 'Becoming' is imperative to feminist activism; as Ahmed (2017) stated, "Feminism is DIY: A form of self-assembly" (p. 27). Politically, understanding how women have learned about and resisted against sexism, racism, and colonialism through their narratives has informed my praxis of feminism, decolonization, and allyship. Personally, my studies brought me to my own stories and storytelling, as a feminist activist and daughter of Vietnamese refugee 'Boat People'. I share how I came to read story, listen to story, and tell my own story.

Résumé

Je me suis rendu compte pendant ma maîtrise de l'importance du récit. Avec l'intention de diversifier le féminisme, j'ai exploré les récits riches de femmes autochtones et d'immigrantes racisées au Canada qui sont devenues militantes. Le « devenir » est essentiel au militantisme féministe; comme le dit Ahmed (2017), « le féminisme, c'est le bricolage : une forme d'auto-assemblage » (p. 27, traduction libre). Sur le plan politique, la mobilisation de ces récits pour comprendre comment ces femmes se sont renseignées sur le sexisme, le racisme et le colonialisme et y ont résisté a façonné ma praxis de féministe, de décolonisation et d'alliée. Sur le plan personnel, mes études m'ont dirigée vers mes propres histoires et mes propres récits comme militante féministe et fille de « personnes réfugiées de la mer » du Vietnam. Je présente comment j'en suis venue à lire les récits, à écouter les récits et à raconter mes propres récits.

Questioning my Stories

I was weary when I started my Master of Adult Education. Doing feminist, anti-violence community organizing with the Sexual Assault Centre Kingston in Ontario and then the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre in Nova Scotia had taken a toll. I was asking myself

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whether I was feminist enough or whether feminism was enough for me. I questioned my belonging to the feminist community, a community that was my 'motherland'.

I first understood feminism through my mother. One of my favourite stories about her was when she, as a young woman with limited schooling, was imprisoned with other women workers for striking against bad working conditions at a factory in Vietnam. Over much of our lives, we have acted as feminists without giving ourselves that name (hooks, 1992). Our feminist 'theory' was about sharing lessons on daily life. Our feminist 'practice' was about strengthening skills in resourcefulness.

During this time, I was working with the Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation in Nova Scotia. The Indigenous sovereignty movement Idle No More inspired me to learn about the struggles and strengths of Indigenous women. With this learning, I sought to understand my belonging to Canada as a Canadian-born daughter of Vietnamese refugees, leading me to issues of migrant justice and the organization No One Is Illegal. I remember reading some news about their work and being struck by the comment: 'Besides Indigenous Peoples, everyone is illegal!'

My questions shifted. They were no longer about whether I belonged to feminism or to Canada, but whether I wanted to belong to either. I began to question the complicity of Canadian feminism to the struggles of many othered women in Canada and elsewhere. I wanted my feminism to work towards Indigenous sovereignty and migrant justice. I refused to think that the differences between Indigenous and racialized immigrant women meant that there was no way they could resist together. I began to think about decolonized feminisms as pathways towards connection and reconciliation.

I wanted to both better feminism and my own 'living' of feminism by interrogating how feminism is constructed and what feminism means for a diversity of marginalized women—Indigenous and racialized immigrant. Ahmed (2017) posed that "living a feminist life...mean[s] asking ethical questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world" (p. 1). These were my questions at the beginning of my studies. In answering these, I learned to read story and listen to story.

Reading Story: Reviewing the Literature

Through reading, I learned that many marginalized women of colour had questioned feminism as I had (Ahmed, 2017; Ang, 2003; Anzaldúa, 2012; Bannerji, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Gay, 2014; hooks, 1984; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Lorde, 2007; Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 2003; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Thobani, 2009; Yee, 2011). Like me, they questioned their belonging to a community where they did not see themselves. By writing to include and centre themselves, they reclaimed their identities in the margins and at the intersections of gender, race, Indigeneity, citizenship, sexuality, class, and so on, pushing open the borders of feminism and revealing the interconnections between identity and oppression (Hanson, 2009). As oppressed identities work to be seen, oppressions can also be seen (hooks, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015).

Audre Lorde (2007) elaborated on and celebrated black female identity, commenting on sexism, racism, heterosexism, and classism through explicitly emotional poetry. Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) drew on experiences growing up along the Mexico/U.S. border and wrote her poem-prose, semi-autobiographical *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Trinh Minh-ha (1989) blurred the theoretical with the intimate, observing the boundaries that

define and contradict identities, like woman and artist. In essays, Sara Ahmed (2017) and Roxane Gay (2014) contemplated the complexities of living feminist lives in academia and popular culture. In Jessica Yee's (2011) edited collection *Feminism for Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism*, a diversity of Indigenous and non-Indigenous contributors critically reflected on feminism via essays, poems, and interviews.

By bridging “poetry and history, memoir and argument” (Castro, 2010, p. 3), their works not only helped me recognize my experiences and my emotional responses to those experiences as real and important, but also shared with me resonant ways to be feminist. hooks (1992) asserted that writing is “most meaningful when it invites readers to engage in critical reflection and in the practice of feminism” (pp. 81–82). Tierney (2000) suggests, “When we write vulnerably, we invite others to respond vulnerably” (p. 549).

The theoretical and artistic dimensions of their stories offered me possibilities to understand, articulate, and re-imagine my self-in-relation to feminism, to oppression. This makes feminist transformation possible— “[the] efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences... To critically intervene in my life and the lives of others” (hooks, 1992, p. 82). For marginalized people, ‘making sense’ of everyday experiences means ‘making sense’ of oppressive and emotional experiences. Paradoxically while emotions are necessary to transformative learning, they also impact the ability to learn transformatively (Irving & English, 2011). Creativity can help ‘make sense’ of emotions and move women towards learning (Irving & English, 2011).

Understanding emotions is where identity can begin to be reclaimed. As Castro (2010) noted without emotion, we “cut ties with parts of ourselves” (p. 6). Indigenous and feminist understandings of the self speak to the holistic nature of our identities—that our emotional selves are connected to our physical, mental, and spiritual selves. Anger is an emotion to be reclaimed, particularly by racialized women, as a site of knowledge (Ahmed, 2017). To ‘make sense’ of painful emotions, hooks (1992) offered an account of ‘coming’ to theory for her healing practice: “I came to theory because I was hurting... Living without a sense of home, I found a sanctuary in ‘theorizing,’ where I could imagine possible futures” (p. 80).

Stories might be the emotional ‘home’ of theory, particularly feminist theory. hooks (1992) argued, “Personal testimony, personal experience, is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory” (p. 82). Further, the Personal Narratives Group (1989) stated, “Women’s personal narratives are essential primary documents for feminist research” (p. 4). Our stories are the origins of our theory. hooks demanded we bring theory back to ourselves, bring theory back ‘home’.

Listening to Story: Conducting the Research

To hear narratives of decolonized feminisms, feminisms that address sexism, racism, and colonialism, I sought non-academic, women of colour participants—Indigenous and racialized immigrants. In emails to my networks, I recruited participants to take part in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews under narrative inquiry to reflect on their experiences of learning and resisting sexism, racism, and colonialism. I situated myself as a woman of colour activist concerned about Indigenous sovereignty and migrant justice, and posed some considerations for participants, such as practices of self-awareness, self-care, and allyship. Interviews were completed in the summer of 2016.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry is “first and foremost a way of thinking about experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375). It is valuable in understanding the social constructions surrounding storytellers and their stories (Hunter, 2009). “Stories can evoke the personal lived meanings behind concepts and theories as activism...Extending our holistic understanding and capacity to ‘bring alive’ those concepts” (Hanson, 2007, p. 4). Stories also illuminate how oppressions operate, interlock, and reinforce one another (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Razack, 2014; Smith, 2009). This is especially true of stories from marginalized storytellers. “Personal narratives of non-dominant social groups...[are] effective sources of counterhegemonic insight because they expose the viewpoint embedded in dominant ideology” (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 7). Rather than seeing their stories as too particular (Haraway, 1988), stories that perpetuate the dominant ideologies of a powerful few are exposed as such (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

Throughout the interviews, I was questioning myself: Have I asked enough? Have I asked too much? Have I asked the right questions? Doubt is a feeling that Clandinin and Connelly (2000) associated with narrative inquirers: “Doubts come from understanding that they need to write about people, places, and things as becoming rather than being... The narrative research text is fundamentally a temporal text—about what has been, what is now, and what is becoming” (pp. 145–146). I began to think of my participants not as self-actualized activists, but as women ‘becoming’ activists in perpetuity. As Kark, Preser, and Zion-Waldoks (2016) stated, developing “feminist identities and activism is not a linear progression nor a dialectic process, but an experiment, disruptive, unexpected, circular, unsettling, haunting, enriching, and gratifying practice. It is a paradoxical laboratory” (p. 312). If narrative inquiry explores how life experiences are constructed into a coherent sequence of remembered events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Linde, 1993), then paradox introduces the concept of incoherence. Incoherence acknowledges that experiences of trauma affect how events are remembered and told (Haskell & Randall, 2009), aligning with concepts of nonlinearity and contradiction in feminist pedagogy (Kark et al., 2016). As women’s experiences are multi-issued, feminism emphasizes this messiness (Cooley, 2007). Both Indigenous and feminist ontologies (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1988; Kovach, 2010) suggest paradox and incoherence in attending to multiple truths or ways of knowing and being (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Because incoherence might initiate transformative learning (Concepción & Eflin, 2009), the re-construction towards coherence implies the imperfect and continual journey in reclaiming power over trauma, over oppression.

Participants

All names are pseudonyms. Lara is a 38-year-old Indigenous woman who is an educator, author, and artist. Anne, a 47-year-old Indigenous woman, works in healthcare. Mina is a 42-year-old Asian immigrant woman from South Korea who is an adult educator and community organizer. Kirah, a 27-year-old black immigrant woman from Ghana, works in post-secondary education. From them, I heard diverse stories of what it means to be a feminist activist (Kark et al., 2016).

Findings

Building Relationships and Resistance

Lara, Anne, Mina, and Kirah said that ‘making sense’ of and learning from their experiences took connecting with others in person and in text (Cooley, 2007). They began to understand their experiences not as isolated, but as necessarily related to the experiences of others like them. “My oppression stories are the evidence of structural, institutional racism,” Mina reflected. Similarly, Wunker (2017) commented about #BeenRapedNeverReported, a viral hashtag that drew women together on social media to share their stories: “They were teaching us how violence is both individualized and systematic—it happened to me, it happened within patriarchal culture...They were teaching us, these women. We were teaching each other” (p. 107). For women, sharing life narratives is “at the heart of their transformative experiences” (Irving & English, 2011, p. 307). Sharing stories is our collective, critical pedagogy.

“I know in telling my story, I am empowering other people to tell theirs,” Lara shared. Stories beget stories and communities of resistance are built (Plummer, 1995). As Mina said, “We can learn from each other’s stories and experiences to build resilience and support.” Story helps us ‘make sense’ of our lives through developing our political knowledge and enhancing our sense of belonging and allyship (Anzaldúa, 1990). Ahmed (2017) asserted, “Individual struggle does matter; a collective movement depends upon it” (p. 6). Individual stories are the very backbone of collective movements and transformative learning can bridge the individual with the collective (Irving & English, 2011).

In sharing stories, there are tellers and listeners, relating to one another and co-constructing knowledge. Reciprocity, experience, and perspective in this knowledge exchange speak to intergenerational learning and feminist pedagogy (Boström & Schmidt-Hertha, 2017; Purvis, 2004). Relationships are centred—formed and changed because of learning (Boström & Schmidt-Hertha, 2017). Kirah explained the cultural importance of returning to the “water fountain” as “going back to these black women. Going back to the mothers, to the aunties, to all my relations when I need to.” Anne talked about sharing what she has learned from her parents with her children: “I am trying to bring some of this to my kids’ attention now, so that they know how different they are.” Storytelling is not only an act of resistance for the storyteller herself. It imprints her activism in time for activists before and after her; this is the relational work, which is essential to feminism’s continuity (Chovanec & Benitez, 2008).

Transforming Emotion and Identity

Recalling oppressive experiences, Lara, Anne, Mina, and Kirah described their initial emotional responses. Emotions are essential to women’s activism (Kark et al., 2016). Further, “drama and extreme emotional distress” are part of women’s learning” (Hamp, 2007, p. 176). Lara, Anne, and Kirah shared experiences they had as young children. They knew only that these experiences were painful, not why they happened. Mina spoke about experiences at her university and workplace as an adult immigrant to Canada. Without a community to share those experiences, she “internalized shame.”

For marginalized women, tragedy and violence can instigate the initiating experiences of transformative learning (Irving & English, 2011). “Being forced to consider, evaluate, and revise assumptions can be an emotionally charged experience” (McGonigal, 2005, p. 2). The

unlearning of dominant assumptions, even for people who are dominated, is a mental and necessarily emotional endeavor (Concepción & Eflin, 2009).

Evoking emotions for education can unsettle dominant assumptions (Fook, 2010). For Lara, using emotions has been critical to her teaching:

It has to hit your heart! I literally want to rip your heart out of your chest and make you look at it. Watching it beat, thinking about how that feels... When people hear my story, people feel it. We need to get back to those emotions, to feeling things not only about ourselves, but also about each other. I've seen it transform people—people who have never thought about violence and people who have experienced violence.

hooks (1992) asserted that feminism should “speak directly to the pain within folks, and offer them healing words, healing strategies, healing theory” (p. 82). Mina recognized the significance of hearing stories from those like her to heal: “Hearing stories from other racialized women, other immigrant women, Indigenous women, and African Nova Scotian women...That helped me understand my stories. That helped me heal. That saved me. They saved me.” Identifying with stories of a community can heal wounds to identity. Lara talked about reconnecting with her Indigeneity. For Kirah, being proud is using an Afrocentric approach that honours blackness. It also means that she asserts her own black identity, as a black immigrant to Canada, not an African Nova Scotian. Anne spoke about an Indigeneity that is self- and Indigenous nation-determined, not Canadian state-determined. Transformative learning presumes agency (Concepción & Eflin, 2009), even among marginalized people; this agency can mean being proud of an identity they are not meant to be proud of.

Much of the activism that Lara, Anne, Mina, and Kirah shared is about reclaiming their identities and communities in a dominant context that marginalizes and oppresses them. This act of self-determination can be through the stories they tell about themselves, who they are, and where they belong. Self-definition gives voice to personal knowledges drawn from diverse experiences of marginalization (Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

Coming to Story: Reflecting on the Research

Throughout my research, I was reminded that social, economic, and political realms are only understood through the prism of personal experience and reflection (Fook, 2010). Reflection is a revolutionary act in understanding our selves and our dominant context. As I intended to better feminism and my own ‘living’ of feminism, critical self-reflection was necessary. Spivak (2012) asserted that unveiling habits and exposing dominant ideologies within our own thinking is the foundation of critical pedagogy. This is also essential to decolonization. Decolonization is both the unlearning of colonizing ideologies and the re-learning of self-in-relation (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), which is radical praxis for diverse individuals and communities in the assimilating context of oppression (Minh-ha, 1989). Mina shared her work in unlearning internalized racism, unpacking her feelings of “not being good enough” as a newcomer to Canada.

Between identity and activism is a “dynamic space characterized by circular movement” (Kark et al., 2016, p. 308). For activists, transformative learning is recursive, simultaneously confirming and contradictory, making it a process (Cooley, 2007). The participants’

understanding of themselves as ‘becoming’ shows power and vulnerability as paradoxically co-existing (Kark et al., 2016). This disrupts binary thinking about oppression, for example, in assuming that the oppressed and the oppressor are mutually exclusive (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Kark et al. (2016) asserted that working with paradoxes is how women experience transformational learning. Further, Cooley (2007) implied critical identity work is about both validation and accountability. Referring to ecofeminist Starhawk and her work on power, Hanson (2009) stated that paradox refers to concurrent exercises of power—oppression (power-over) and resistance (power-within)—signifying complex ways of knowing and being. Mina and Kirah shared the kinds of power they have over other women, specifically Indigenous and African Nova Scotian women, and the ways they reconcile with their privilege. The ongoing work of positionality and subjectivity or how we ‘do’ critical reflexivity (Hanson, 2009) is consciously understanding and addressing shifting positions of power (hooks, 1994).

Stories are about connections; as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, “We need to make sure that when we say ‘I’, we know that ‘I’ is connecting with ‘they’” (p. 123). There is a symbiosis in listening and in telling. I felt a great deal of responsibility to hear my participant storytellers and get their stories right. They called for me to understand and share my own stories in return, to become a storyteller myself, to surface my own pain, doubt, and vulnerabilities (hooks, 1994) and expose my own paradoxes.

Learning to Tell My Own Story

In this time, I was asked to share how I came to my activism with groups of young people. I described experiences in my early life. In kindergarten, a boy teased me about what he thought girls could not do. He said that girls could not punch, that I could not punch. I took that as a dare and socked him squarely in the face, knocking a tooth out. I surface this story as a story of my resistance, knowing that I hold other stories more deeply, stories that show my inability to resist. This is the paradoxical nature of our selves as powerful and powerless. In grade 3, a substitute teacher forced me to go to English as a Second Language classes even though I was one of the best readers in my grade. I stopped objecting after I was threatened to have my mouth washed out with soap. In grade 6, I took the city bus home and overheard two university students talking about my neighbourhood as we were approaching it. They spoke about the crime and violence happening there, remarking on how ‘ghetto’ it was. Stepping off the bus, I told them that they were rude, yet soon after I stopped inviting friends home. In grade 7, I spoke about women’s rights in a class speech to confront the young men who were sexually harassing me on a daily basis. Around this time, I developed a habit of scratching my arms and legs until they bled and scabbed. I did this for a year and hid my limbs under long sleeves and in pants, feeling ashamed of my body. I selected only parts of these stories to share.

I also became a mom during my studies. In the haze of newborn life, I read Sapphire’s (1996) *Push*. The novel follows Precious, an illiterate, impoverished young black woman, who lives with her abusive mother and is pregnant after being raped by her father. She attends an alternative class to learn how to read and write. At the end of the novel, Precious and the other women students create an anthology of their autobiographies. Precious learned to re-imagine herself and her future by becoming her own storyteller. This novel inspired me to think of other ways to tell stories, ways that do not require

language. Language has been a difficult topic for me, as my parents, intentionally or not, had successfully assimilated their children into Canadian society. I never learned my mother tongue and this continues to divide my parents and me.

As I was writing my final paper, I came across the graphic novel *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui (2018). In it, Bui illustrated stories of her family's experiences as Vietnamese refugee 'Boat People', creating new identities and lives in the United States. She commented on the intergenerational effects of violence and trauma and reflected with sadness and hope on the relationships in her family. With the arrival of her baby, Bui offered both the stories she was born into and the stories she has birthed: "Má leaves me, but I'm not alone and a terrifying thought creeps into my head. FAMILY is now something I created—and not just something I was born into" (p. 21). This reverberated in me.

Telling my Stories

My mother had a stroke just before I began my master's studies. A seamstress who could no longer do sewing work, she took up painting. I was also exploring art via graphic design for community organizing. Grushka (2010) asserted that visual learning as 'becoming' is about seeking "meanings about self and society...To address questions about who they are and how they have come to be this way and what they wish to become" (p. 20). In exploring our own creativity and identity as individual women, I hope we can open towards one another and 'become' what we need.

Six months after I completed my master's degree and upon my boss' suggestion, I was interviewed for a book project of the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS). ISANS' (2019) *Making Waves* highlights the lives and contributions of children of immigrants through experiences that have shaped them. I know now that the stories I tell about my experiences are not only about me, but also about others who have made me and are making me a feminist activist, daughter, and mother. While story opens us to pain, doubt, and vulnerabilities, it also opens us to healing (hooks, 1994). On my next visit home, I brought a copy to my mother as an invitation to heal together. My studies led me back to myself, and back to my mother.

Over my 'becoming' journey to feminism, to story, I am reminded that there is "no correct way to be a feminist, no seamless narrative to assume and fit into" (Walker, 1995, p. xxxi). There are many narratives to reflect on, to act on, critically. Like feminists, feminisms are perpetually 'becoming' (Purvis, 2004) and the storied journeys—multiple, complex, and contradictory—of individual feminists are collectively carried and moved forward by feminisms. The praxis of my life is the praxis of our lives together. hooks (1992) states, "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice" (p. 80).

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