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Introduction [The Journal Project: Dialogues and Conversations Inside Women's Studies]

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INTRODUCTION

I KEEP A JOURNAL and often take time to write in one of Vancouver's many cafés, restaurants or parks. I am seldom alone — the city must be home to thousands of journal writers, most of whom are women. Among the many media of expression that women have been seizing, it is perhaps the most affordable. With only a notebook and a pen, and the time for an extended coffee break, many of us are now taking the nooks and crannies of public space to make "rooms of our own." And while contemporary women's journal writing is an extension of the diary or personal letter of women of earlier generations, many women now use the medium, as Virginia Woolf first espoused, to birth thoughts and feelings long denied in public discourse (Woolf, 1945).

In June 1994, a number of this book's contributors got together for a series of discussions about their use of journals and the value of journal writing inside and outside the classroom. (A version of this discussion is included in Chapter Five.) Several began by remembering the plastic-covered diaries with tiny lock and keys that they had kept as young girls. Most had continued to write in some kind of diary or journal as they got older, using it as a private space to bring to life some of their most intimate feelings and thoughts.

Many felt they didn't have anyone else to talk to. For Leah, her journal was the only place she had in which to say anything. For Terry, her journal was the only means of communication during two years in which she didn't speak. Both Debbra and Sima took their diaries to bed with them at night: Debbra described hers as a friend, "someone who would always be there," while Sima described hers as a lover, to whom she could "say everything" and not have to "hide any part of me."

The forms their writing took ranged from letters to monologues, to poetry and short stories. Many, such as Laura, wrote only during times of great transitions. Others would write when they were confused, or to sort things out. As Debra said:

When I was little there used to be a point where I couldn't go to bed at night until I'd written 'cause I was so — I don't know — words are really awkward for me and writing on paper has always been very safe.... If I'm having a hard time with something and I do write, I can feel the difference in the situation, like it's less stress. I'm more kind of in tune with myself.... I really enjoy writing and I find that it's really therapeutic.

And Daphne:

I'm very nervous talking to people, and I guess that's why I've kept journals on and off for a very long time, because I always felt that when I talked to people I would never get the true sense of who I was. I always preferred how I sounded when I read what I'd written. It just makes more sense. My personality, when it's down on paper, is tangible.

BEGINNING THE COLLECTION

This volume of journal writing emerged from the Women's Studies Program at Langara College in Vancouver, British Columbia. We began to collect the material in 1992 as the result of a joint initiative of students and teachers. As one of the co-editors, Dana Putnam, recalls:

Halfway through my first Women's Studies class, I realized that some of the most important stuff was getting put down in my journal. At first I felt that I was the only one going through this really heavy stuff, but soon realized others were too. And I wanted access to how the other women in the class were coping.

I didn't think it was fair that only the instructors got to see the journals. There wasn't enough time in class to discuss many of the issues in any depth and I wanted to hear what the other women really thought. So I began to talk to others and we all felt that it would be great if we could read each other's journals.

◆ INTRODUCTION ◆

At the same time as Dana Putnam was talking to her classmates, Patty Moore and I were discussing how to share some of the writing we were reading as Women's Studies teachers. Each week when we'd take an armful of notebooks home to read, I would feel I was privy to some very important "stuff." I was often stilled with sadness at the stories being told or by the clarity of thought or feeling. Patty and I would regularly talk about the fresh insights expressed by women who were connecting their own experiences to the perspectives and analyses we were discussing in the course.

We came together out of those two parallel conversations to compile this collection. Three years later, the editorial group comprises two students and two teachers, and several student and teacher volunteers who perform specific tasks. As with many other feminist projects, we have tried to work with our differences in vision, skills and experience, ever conscious of one another's commitments to children, school and other paid and unpaid community projects. Our combined experience as students and teachers has given us, as Elaine has said, "a real strength that has been instrumental in our ability to improvise and work with the challenges that continue to arise." In a recent discussion, Dana and Elaine suggested that, "while we never explicitly discussed the traditional power imbalance between students and teachers, we seem to implicitly have shifted towards a healthier and more egalitarian group dynamic."

We decided to publish the work for several reasons. Dana commented:

I didn't really know what I was supposed to be doing when I was asked to do a journal. I thought what we could do would be to show all the different ways journals were being done, not like a model, but to give students several examples to help them get started.

Elaine remarked:

My journals were a place I could work on ideas and emotions, giving me the confidence to ask some of the really hard questions. When I became involved in this project it was an inspiration for me to find out what other women's reactions were, to know that it wasn't just me thinking these things. I thought a book would allow me to take their comments and respond in my own way.

Patty said:

We wanted to give students examples, to show how other women have worked at the same assignment.... One of our goals in Women's Studies is to encourage women to reflect, to look at the new information they are learning in light of their own experience and values.

LOCATING OUR PROJECT

All of us agreed that it was important to document both the journal writing process and the content of what women were writing. I was continually shocked and inspired to read again and again how women were still experiencing and challenging many of the same daily conditions — violence in the home and outside, poverty, racism, heterosexism — that had propelled me twenty years earlier to get involved in the women's movement. There was also a rawness and vibrancy in the writing that mocked the myth that contemporary women have no need for women's movements. We all thought that the value of journal writing, and of the issues and ideas that women were bringing to these pages, was not limited to our college on the west coast of Canada.

As we discovered the large numbers of people and programs using journal writing, and the growing controversy about their use within Women's Studies, we realized how important it was to describe the very particular context in which we as students and instructors produce this work. As part of Langara College, the Women's Studies Program draws from a wide cross-section of Vancouver's population. (During a recent strike, it was reported that fully one-twelfth of Vancouver residents have attended the school at some time.) The Women's Studies Program itself was born in the heady days of 1970s feminism and we still emphasize our women's movement origins, underscoring grass-roots activism in the hiring of instructors; in course design, content and teaching methods; and in complementary film and lecture series.

The program offers two introductory courses and two second-year courses — on Women and Sexuality and Women and Social Change — for classes of twenty to thirty-five students, most of

whom are women. Through guest speakers, group projects and fieldwork assignments, we encourage students to apply the experience and connections they have brought with them, or to find new ground for working together with others at the college and with organizations in the wider community. I am regularly reminded of the way the program is fed by, and, in turn, feeds the larger women's movements: not a week goes by that I do not meet an ex-student at a community meeting, event, demonstration or cultural performance, or staffing a women's organization.

Journals are one way that students are encouraged to reflect on the life experience they bring to the class. Unlike the practice in many other programs, the journals are completion assignments and are not graded. Four to five times a semester journal entries on topics chosen by the student, not prompted by instructors, are submitted. The instructor's response is intended to encourage students to keep writing in the first person, and to reflect on what they bring from their own values and experiences to their process of learning and construction of meaning. Elaine describes the journal's value as providing "a safer space for dialogue with myself and the instructor"; for Dana, journals provide a place where "we can say things that there isn't time, space or safety to say in class."

In part, as a consequence of both our community orientation and the heterogeneous composition of the college, women choose to write about a number of different issues, from a wide base of life experience. Ranging in age from eighteen to sixty-five, back to school after thirty years' absence, or on their way to university directly from high school, contributors had taken at least one, and perhaps up to four, of our courses. From many different family and cultural backgrounds, the contributors currently live in a variety of heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual households.

Many had kept diaries before: however, few had thought of themselves as writers, and fewer still had ever been published. While some were long-time activists from a variety of social movements, most were new to feminism, or to critical social analysis of any kind. The pieces range from testimonials to essays to poetry. None was written for publication; all were solicited and submitted after the completion of the semester in which the piece was written.

NEW IDENTITIES AND NEW LITERARY FORMS

While compiling this collection, we read several commentaries by contemporary writers who have also valued the potential of journal writing as a social and political act (see Bibliography). These included teachers such as Elouise Bell (1985), who noted that “everyone has a story to tell.” However, while women have almost always written, they have seldom been published. Another instructor, Susan Waugh (1985), describes how

writing and reading about the lives of “ordinary people” can be occasions for learning and teaching, for imagining a better world, for respect and love. Autobiographical writings can also be forges in which new identities and new literary forms are shaped (152).

Critics have also commented on the role of autobiographical writing in oppositional social movements. For bell hooks (1989), diary-keeping has had a special place in female experience, as

a writing act that intimately connects the art of expressing one’s feeling on the written page with the construction of self and identity, with the effort to be fully self-actualized.... [It] has been crucial to women’s development of a counter-hegemonic experience of creativity within patriarchal culture.... In many cases where such writing has enhanced our struggle to be self-defining, it emerges as a narrative of resistance, as writing which enables us to experience both self-discovery and self-recovery (72).

In a similar vein, Nancy Saporta Sternbach (1991) has commented on the tradition of testimonials in Latin America, noting the importance of retrieving, reconstructing and recovering women’s history in the development of a “new consciousness as political subjects” (92).

With the recognition of their importance, journals have increasingly come into use within formal and non-formal education. Many teachers of Women’s Studies, English as a primary and secondary language, basic literacy and other social science and humanities courses now use some form of journal assignment. These vary widely,

from journals such as ours that are not graded, with topics chosen by each student, to graded commentaries on course material such as readings or presentations.

Many teachers have adopted an approach similar to ours and use the journal as a tool for critical thinking and self-evaluation. Journal keeping can encourage students to recognize, appreciate and reflect upon their personal interpretations, helping them develop an awareness of how meaning is constructed (Wollman-Bonilla, 1989). Duke (cited in Zacharias, 1991) notes their use in aiding students in decision making, encouraging them to discuss controversy, committing themselves fully to positions and becoming autonomous thinkers. "It is a means — perhaps the best means — to make knowledge personal, connected and accessible to the self" (Strong, cited in Zacharias, 266).

*DEALING WITH THE MESSINESS:
CONTROVERSY OR REASSESSMENT?*

As journal keeping as a classroom assignment has become more prevalent, a controversial reassessment is being made of their use and value, particularly within Women's Studies programs. Keith Louise Fulton (1992), for example, has written about the need to consider "power differentials and ethical guidelines for conduct" in using journals in academic institutions. In most colleges and universities, where more power resides with the instructor, and where the authority of academic discourse still largely undervalues Women's Studies and women's autobiographical writing, Fulton says "the journal then becomes either an extensive writing project directed to another person, or writing performed as though it were confidential when it is not" (430).

Ellen Berry and Elizabeth Black (1993) have suggested modifying journal writing and creating another kind of assignment, intended to transcend both the "true confessions" of their students' journals and the "cold knowledge of traditional academic discourse."

In the Women's Studies Program at Langara College, the four instructors have often discussed these problems. We recognize that, like "safe" sex, the safety that we can provide in journals cannot be absolute. We try to acknowledge both the social power we all have

as instructors and also that some women might respond to each of us differently because of our individual identities as white or Black, lesbian or heterosexual, younger or older women. As instructors, we have encountered the stickiest situations when we have acted as readers of personal confessions or, even more problematically, of the expressions of racism, classism or homophobia.

Patty Moore suggests that the “messiness” of journal writing may well be inherent in the blending of personal voice and experience with social analysis, in an institutional setting. As teachers, we have chosen to not back away from the complexity of the problem, but rather have experimented with different kinds of journal-writing assignments and with different ways of responding that can be both supportive and useful for learning.

*ANOTHER CONTROVERSY :
INCLUSION IN THE COLLECTION PROCESS*

The editorial group decided to explore the controversy about the use of journals in Women’s Studies classrooms in a dialogue with contributors (see Chapter Five). Long before reading some of the recent commentaries, we had become familiar with how power differences between women can literally line up on the page. Contributing a piece to this volume was voluntary, and in the first round of submissions we noticed some serious gaps in who and what was included. Initially, we received many fewer entries expressing the point of view of women of colour and/or immigrant women, fewer still from that of lesbians and almost none from the perspective of poor or working-class women. As a result, we attempted to widen the representation and to evaluate the composition of our editorial group — while almost all of us are mothers, some working class and/or poor, and some lesbian, none of us is a woman of the First Nations or of colour. This evaluation also pushed the two instructors to reassess course content and classroom practice. In the succeeding rounds of submissions, we encouraged more women to submit pieces that spoke from these experiences.

In the process, we came to better appreciate how risky it still is to write, and more specifically to submit for publication, from the perspectives of women not usually represented by the dominant

culture. This very large group also includes women who are survivors of violence, and past or present sex-trade workers. In the end, we have tried to ensure that the collection is representative of a diversity of women writing about a wide number of concerns and not just about the specific components of their identity that they see as the most targeted and/or vulnerable.

In our classrooms, we discuss feminist perspectives on social location, emphasizing the importance of speaking for oneself, naming one's identities and issues. The choice offered contributors of using their own names or a pseudonym, or remaining wholly anonymous, has made this issue even more complicated, as one of the obvious markers of difference may be absent. As a result, while biographical notes on contributors are provided at the end of this book, we want to issue a caution to the reader: be aware of the assumptions you make. You may not know much about the identity of a contributor, whether she's of First Nations, European, Asian, African or mixed heritage; lesbian or heterosexual; living with a chronic illness; a sex-trade worker; or a member of any group with a visible or non-visible characteristic.

THE FRAMEWORK

This collection includes entries from a cross-section of the women enrolled in our classes during the last five years. Many entries fell very easily into thematic groupings. However, no section says it all; there are still several gaps in representation and perspective, and much that is still unsaid. It will not give you a definitive idea of what Women, with a capital W, are thinking today.

There are many other books available that provide that kind of account, detailing different women's perspectives on a wide range of specific issues. Other books tell readers how to write journals. Our aim is to combine elements from both genres: to demonstrate some of the ways that women use journals as instruments to name and make sense of their own everyday experience and of the women and men and larger world around them.

What you'll see in the following pages is the raw material from the journals of more than fifty women. The individual entries often sound like conversations. Our challenge has been twofold: to

maintain the integrity of each piece and allow each woman to speak clearly and to show the richness of connection and variation among and between women. To do this, we have kept the copy-editing to a minimum, retaining some of the idiosyncrasies of spelling and punctuation. All of the introductions to the pieces were written later, when each contributor was asked to provide her own brief introduction to her entry or entries; nothing else substantive has been added.

As an editorial group we've played with the order of pieces, organizing them by subject matter within sections and chapters, and also by the rhythm and tenor of their expression. As these conversations are often intimate and can be intellectually and emotionally challenging, we have included introductions to each section, to provide some background in climate and context. Keeping with our general rule that each of us must speak only for herself, the co-editor who wrote each section introduction is identified.

Our first draft not only grouped the pieces thematically but also tried to suggest movement from individual reflection and naming to collective action, ending with future visions. However, we realized that we were imposing a rigidity on pieces and thinking processes that were still in flux. Our framework now is less linear and grew organically out of the submissions themselves. The collection begins with women's first reactions to Women's Studies and to journal writing, then progresses through women's locating of their personal identity issues to their experience as students in the Women's Studies Program or in other aspects of their lives. Finally, we include a partial transcript of a discussion among some of the contributors of journal writing and the project.

In Chapter One, *Beginning Women's Studies*, the contributors relate their first impressions of Women's Studies, an experience one woman describes as having "a door opened," another as looking at things in entirely new ways, or beginning to ask questions for which there are no ready-made answers. Several also discuss the reactions they got from old friends and family to news of their "discovery" of Women's Studies.

The other theme of this chapter is *Holding Forth*, in which women reflect on the uses they make of writing. A number note how early influences from family and school continue to have a grip on them, keeping their internal censors very powerful. Others discuss

how they are learning to use their journals as places to note their sadness and anger, or as friends, or as the first steps towards speaking out loud.

The second chapter, Naming, focuses on themes of personal identity: Who and What Is Family? Body and Imaging, Sexuality, and Violence Against Women. Each entry documents the impact of these larger forces on the individual's make-up. Taken together, the entries in each section form a rich mosaic of women's experience. For example, while each contributor who writes about family relates the significance of her own individual family, the section as a whole gives us a very clear reminder of just how broad the meaning of "family" is today in Canada.

The three other themes in Chapter Two — Body, Sexuality and Violence against Women — form a triangle of female experience. Individual entries document women's experiences of their physicality, and their accounts of how that experience was shaped, and often mangled, by close and distant forces in the larger society. Together these three sections show the dynamics of women's continuing resistance to external pressures and violence, and their gradual reclamation of their bodies and sexualities.

Chapter Three, Warning: Feminist Content to Follow, contains two major themes. Site: Women's Studies is about the Women's Studies classroom and the larger college environment. Our school, like many other educational institutions, has become a site where women have converged, hungry to apply what they already know and to learn more. They write of the ways their points of view have shifted and how their beliefs have been challenged, reaffirmed or altered. They also write about those difficult moments when they have realized that "we" who have been told we are equal are not all the same. Speaking out from subject positions as women, and specifically as mothers, older women, women of colour, First Nations women, lesbians and sex-trade workers, can feel like a constant battle. The second section Changing the Terms, documents some of the reflections contributors have had after speaking out.

In Chapter Four, Bringing It Home, women write of the ways they are integrating their new learning with their lives outside the classroom, at home, in their paid work and in their community activities and organizing.

Chapter Five, *Afterwords*, shifts the perspective from solo voice to chorus. In June 1994, we convened a series of meetings with contributors and asked them what the process of journal writing had meant to them.

Most contributors felt that the *Women's Studies* journals had a different quality from their earlier diaries. For one thing, under severe time pressures, as Karen, balancing both studenthood and motherhood, said, "they created the space and time for me to write because I wouldn't have done it otherwise." Laura commented that her journal-writing experience fostered trust in "feminists working for change [and] in myself. Not because I was a brilliant scholar or philosopher, but because I am me."

Many said that they had, much more so than in their earlier diaries, used their journals to question everything they were learning, and to challenge themselves, both emotionally and intellectually. Leah used each entry as an opportunity to write about a specific topic and said that the experience was beneficial "in that I got a voice but I also was learning. So it actually did more for me than just personal writing. It made me look at issues that I might either avoid or just didn't know existed."

Margaret commented:

Women's Studies has been my sum total of post-secondary education and I haven't been able to continue with it. I've always been deeply ashamed of being uneducated. In my job as a secretary, you can imagine how many decisions I get to make and how many judgements I get to produce, and who cares what I think.... I haven't been able to continue with any more courses, but I don't think it's a coincidence that, during the time that I was concentrating hard on writing the journal, it felt like I was moving into a whole additional level of responsibility and authority within my life. My god, I may be qualified to have an opinion.

Several had experienced betrayal with earlier journals, the privacy of their writing having been violated by brothers or sisters, mothers or other guardians, and, as they grew older, by lovers. After such a betrayal, Sima had

decided to never again write my feelings on paper, and I didn't

◆ INTRODUCTION ◆

do it for years ... the first time that I did was in my Women's Studies course and I had to struggle with myself so much to let things come out. But then I found it very interesting, I loved the comments. Now whenever I write, I just want to give it to someone to read!

All the contributors said that they were very conscious of writing to another person, an instructor. For Debra, "being in a Women's Studies class and also writing in the journal was like finally finding somebody to walk with after going through my whole life always feeling I was different." Leah compared this dialogue quality of journals to women writing letters to one another, a practice that was widespread in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in this country. Several other women described a more spiral type of communication where they spoke, with both their earlier selves and the instructor, about what they were learning.

In her written submission for the book, Terry talked about how valuable the experience had been, and that she believes that journals can assist "in guiding women to autonomy." She also acknowledged that her trust in the process had sometimes wavered: she was concerned about whether the instructors were able to handle any of the serious emotional crises that might be presented. For her, sometimes the replies were more like bandages "very skillfully placed over the wounds ... (using) mildly mirrored formula."

Terry raised concerns that many other students and teachers have voiced, as the use of journal writing in classrooms has grown exponentially. We asked participants to respond to some of the problems that can arise when journal assignments are institutionalized, used in formal settings where instructors maintain a great deal of power over students. What did they think about the idea that the encouragement of students' "authentic voice" in journal writing might be little more than a new technique for shaping women's thoughts and discourse? In Afterwords, contributors discuss this issue in more detail. For now, the last word is Margaret's:

It was a contract kind of thing between teacher and student... I felt that if it was okay for me to hand in either as finely crafted a piece of work as I could possibly sweat out in two weeks, or something else that I wrote five minutes before the class

◆ INTRODUCTION ◆

started, that I was going to allow the instructor the same privilege....

Perhaps I flatter myself, but I figure I had just as much of a chance of influencing the instructor as vice versa.... I really felt it was a correspondence.

— *DOROTHY*