The transformative power of participating in a women's history project:

The bridging of historical methodology and feminist organizing practice

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Abstract

Historians concerned with social change have used historical products, as well as historical methodology with the goals of transforming knowledge, academic writing, community, and self. Doing transformative history, however, is a complex endeavor, full of ethical and practical dilemmas related to structural power dynamics that can be understood and dealt with by borrowing from community organizing practice. Community organizers have developed analyses and honed strategies and tools that, when put into practice, pre-figure transformative process and result in social change at many levels. In this paper, I will attempt to show that the application of community organizing principles to historical methodology can lead to social change. I begin the theoretical section with a rapid overview of how history can be about social change. Next, I describe the principles of feminist, anti-racist community organizing practice, and then apply these to historical methodology. Using the example of a community history project that aims to document neighborhood organizing history via the life stories of women activists, I describe how community organizing principles apply, and discuss the transformations that have transpired to date, and that may still emerge.

Doing transformative history *with* communities

The bridging of historical methodology and feminist organizing practice

History can be about transformation. Some historians, and in particular feminist social historians, do history with the objective of changing the ways people's lives are interpreted, appreciated or understood by academia, but also by society in general, the community, and by the actors involved. There is an explicit attempt to make space for voices that are often barred from historical making structures because of class, race, gender; everyone, it is argued, be they famous or not, is a bearer of history (e.g., (Le Collectif Clio, 1982); (Susser, 1982); (Stansell, 1987); (Steedman, 1994)). Moreover, there is a rejection of the "universal being" and a recognition that people's visions of history differ depending on one's position in society ((Bulbeck, 1997)); thus, instead of producing one grand narrative, feminist historians work to release "multiple truths into the scholarly environment" ((Geiger, 1990), p.179). These historians therefore, are changing the historical landscape by diffusing a multiplicity of voices of people whose points of view are not often presented in history textbooks or the classroom, be they women, Aboriginal people, people of color, or working-class people.

Others aim to use history as a mobilization tool in the present, with the objective of effecting social change in the community. By bringing together past successes that seem insignificant when considered individually, we see that the bigger picture is one of social change over time; this realization can help people get over the defeatist "we never win, so why bother" attitude, and re-ignite interest in community action. Moreover, this

kind of picture of past action can stimulate a sense of belonging and pride, key ingredients to citizen participation in their community (e.g., (Shopes, 1986)). Also, by understanding the conjuncture and results of past actions, and by applying this learning to the present, lessons can be gleaned that can help present-day and future organizers understand what worked, and what didn't work, therefore reducing the chances of "re-inventing the wheel" ((Fisher, 1999); (Panet-Raymond and Mayer, 1997); (Shragge, 1999); (Mayer et al., 1996); (Piven and Cloward, 1977); (René and Panet-Raymond, 1984); (Wharf and Clague, 1997)).

History can also be about transformation of self, individual empowerment. Some scholars claim that the history-bearer, in telling her story, in interaction with the historian, is engaged in a learning process (e.g., (Pineau, 1986)). Others claim that simply having the opportunity to tell their lives, to "name their experiences", after having lived (self)imposed silences, can be empowering (e.g., (Clifford, 1995); (Rodriguez, 1998)). Lugone and Spelman claim that "having the opportunity to talk about one's life, to give an account of it, to interpret it, is integral to leading that life rather than being led through it" (cited on p.148 of (Patai, 1991)). Similarly, Haywoode argues that empowerment is being able to make change, to be aware that one is making change, to understand the politics of what one does, and *to see the ways in which what one does and has done is history* ((Haywoode, 1991)). Thus, social change in history is about more than outcome, it is also about process. The actual doing of the history can be an empowering process.

These social change goals however, are not as straightforward as they seem on the surface. The social historian, with these kinds of objectives in mind, is constantly confronted with complex ethical and practical dilemmas. Who are we, historians, to (arrogantly) believe that we can (and should) work to "increase the consciousness" of history-bearers and/or community ((Sangster, 1994))? How do we ensure that, in the name of social change, we don't fall into the trap of "trivia and nostalgia" ((Shopes, 1986)), of exaggerating the exotic, heroic, or tragic aspects of lives of people tagged as having little power ((Olson and Shopes, 1991))? If we aim for individual empowerment, are we not betraying the trust of history-bearers by doing unsolicited "savage social therapy" (e.g., (Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991))? How does the historian interpret the stories of history-bearers without objectifying them ((Geiger, 1990)) and without transforming their stories into commodities of privilege ((Patai, 1991))?

Social-change oriented feminist historians have concluded that the best way to deal with problematic power dynamics is to ensure that projects be community-based and community-run (e.g., (Patai, 1991); (Shopes, 1986)). For instance, Linda Shopes, in her critique of the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project, writes that

> my own experience with the (project) persuades me that unless such local history efforts are firmly rooted in the communities being studied and have well-developed links with local institutions and organizations, (community history projects) will be translated into a series of awkward public meetings, a collection of oral history tapes, or a photograph exhibit. Such efforts may for a time stir up some enthusiasm for the community's history, but they ultimately go nowhere. The project becomes a series of discrete events and products, not a process of enhancing the historical consciousness of the community's residents (1986, p.249).

It is one thing, however, for a historian to want to do a "community-based", "community-run" project, but <u>how</u> does one do so?

Feminist, anti-racist community organizing theorists and practitioners have a lot of experience dealing with social change in communities (e.g., (Callahan, 1997); (Dominelli, 1990); (Dominelli, 1995); (Gutiérrez and Lewis, 1994); (L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, 1998)). Not only have community organisers, and especially feminists, honed theoretical analyses, but they have also developed a rich set of practical tools and strategies on the *how to* of community-based social change work. These analyses and organising tricks, if applied to the doing of feminist life history, could help create the conditions of mutual respect that are necessary for social change, while dealing with the many ethical dilemmas that historians struggle with around power.

In this paper, I begin by describing the principles of feminist, anti-racist community organizing practice, and then apply these to historical methodology. Next, using excerpts collected during collective interviews and project evaluations of a community history project that aims to document neighborhood organizing history via the life stories of women activists, I describe how community organizing principles apply, and discuss the transformations that have transpired to date, and that may still emerge.

BUILDING THE BRIDGE WITH COMMUNITY ORGANISING PRACTICE

Anne Bishop and Starhawk would explain the dilemmas related to doing transformative history as directly related to the ethos of domination and subordination

that is inherent to western societies, a power relationship that they refer to as *power-over* ((Bishop, 1994); (Starhawk, 1987)). In what is an applied version of the ideas theorised by Floya Anthias (1998), each of us, as actors in different social relationships, by virtue of our positionality, plays, at different times the role of oppressor and of oppressed vis-à-vis others (e.g., man/woman; black/white, heterosexual/homosexual; rich/poor). Social change objectives, following this analysis, are to replace these *power-over* relationships with *power-with*. *Power-with* is the collective power that we gain as individuals working together to demand changes and to build emancipatory alternatives. This process, of replacing *power-over* with *power-with* does not happen from one day to the next; on the contrary, as actors we attempt to prefigure *power-with* in our process. Again, in a practical application of Anthias, this means creating democratic free spaces that pre-figure our ideal society; that is, putting *power-with* into practice in our interpersonal relationships, organisational structures and tactics.

However, it is one thing to *rationally* conceptualise a project as such, and another to put it into practice. The power-dynamics of *power-over* within organisations or groups are not erased because one is trying to pre-figure *power-with*. Structural inequalities on different dimensions (gender, class, ethnos, etc.) continue to exist within the organisations, as they do within the broader community and society. These inequalities, the result of the processes of differentiation and stratification, often lead to mixed and complex emotions. On the one hand is the anger of those on the "loosing end" of the stick, and on the other is the guilt of those on the "winning end" (on whatever

dimension). These kinds of emotions can, and often do, lead to painful paralysis, passivity or acquiescence ((Pheterson, 1990)). Anger is fed by feelings that the other person cannot understand their position because they have never lived it, that they benefit from their subordinate position, and that therefore they cannot help.

Paradoxically, the person on the "winning end" of the stick sometimes does not recognise that differentiation and stratification are collective processes as well, and take on too much personal responsibility ((Pheterson, 1990); (Bunch, 1990b)). When they are confronted with the anger of the person on the "loosing end" of the equation, often:

> they are crushed, unable to move. They feel powerless, and sometimes react angrily against the person or situation they think disempowered them by making them aware of the problem [...] Privilege is often invisible to the 'guilty' group, too, or if they see it, it adds to their immobilising guilt (insights from an anti-racist workshop, (Bishop, 1994), p. 94).

Guilt, however, is never productive. In fact, it often leads to a recreation of patterns of domination as those on the "winning end" seek forgiveness or reassurance from those on the "loosing end". This puts the latter in a uncomfortable contradictory situation, one in which they feel bad for having "hurt the other person's feelings" and therefore provide the sought after reassurance, but at the same time resent the fact that they were forced into that role ((hooks, 1995)).

In sum, because the structural inequalities of *power-over* are not erased by a will to do *power-with*, relationships across difference are often full of complex emotions. If anger and guilt are left unnamed, there is a risk of falling into a vicious circle of unhealthy emotional conflict that can eventually lead to a break in the relationship. The latter, I believe, is part of the dynamic that feminist historians struggle with around

power in relationships with narrators, especially when they are attempting to do transformative history. I believe that this vicious circle of anger and guilt cannot be broken unless spaces are created for dialogue; within such spaces, people are able to name and problematise these emotions, and the underlying social processes are not only better understood, but can also be broken down, thus enabling the experimentation with new kinds of relations. The methodology developed for the project discussed in this paper was an explicit attempt at creating such spaces for dialogue. I turn to that now.

A COMMUNITY-RUN HISTORY-MAKING PROJECT

The project aims to document the history of organizing in Point St. Charles, a Montreal working-class neighbourhood that that is widely heralded as a leader in the Quebecois community movement. It is a collaborative effort between myself, academic-activist, and "Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles", a neighbourhood organisation dedicated to the preservation of community group archives and to the use of history as a tool for mobilization in the present. The project has explicit social change goals:

> One of the objectives of this project is to recognise the often hidden contribution of women to community action, of which they are, most often, the backbone. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the movement of solidarity among neighbourhood women, and perhaps even entice younger women, as well as neighbourhood residents in general, to get involved. When we bring together all of our small victories, victories that often seem insignificant on their own, we see that we actually did, and can, have an impact – this realisation is energising. Moreover, the creation of a permanent record of community organising history will enable future generations of organisers and activists to learn from past successes and difficulties. This project will, of course, preserve the rich history of community action in Point St-Charles, and in doing so, it will go a long way

> towards recognising the leadership role that Point St-Charles played in the development of community organisations in Quebec. In fact, remaining true to tradition, we have chosen to break with conventional top-down historical methods to do our history – this history will be built up from the grassroots (excerpt from project description, September 2001).

Not only was this project build up from the grassroots, but it was conceptualised, from the beginning, as a feminist community organizing effort. The latter laid the foundations for the individual, interpersonal and collective transformations that ensued.

In a nutshell, two groups of five women[1], one from each of the two principal linguistic groups (French and English), have been meeting on average once a month, for over five years to document together a history of community action in their neighbourhood. All these women have been involved for over 25 years, were first motivated to activism by personal need, and still live in and around the neighbourhood. The participants, and-or community residents working[2] or volunteering at the Archives, have been involved in every step of the process, from the identification of the problem or issue of study, to the choice of participants, to the setting of goals, to the doing of the background research and analysis, to the interpretation of the narratives, and to the production and distribution of the final products. The quilt of stories has been transformed into a "coffee-table" book ((CourtePointe Collective, in press)), my doctoral dissertation ((Kruzynski, 2004), a number of academic articles ((Kruzynski, 2005)), popular education historical capsules, and will be used in the future as the basis for a documentary film, a manual for groups wanting to "do history" in this way, and workshops for new arrivals to the neighbourhood.

The actors

Instead of taking the raw historical material out of the community to be interpreted and distributed in academic circles, the history was built up from the grassroots, *by and for* the folks who lived and continue to live that very history. There was no need for me to convince neighbourhood folks of the importance of documenting the history of community organising, as the community had already given itself an organisation whose mission was to collect, organise, and distribute its history. The members of the Board have been involved in the project since its inception: from the choice of the feminist lens, to the objectives and action plan, to the selection of the project participants, to the ethics, to funding arrangements and to book content. The project was run out of the offices of the Archives, located in the community center which is run by the ten neighbourhood organisations that compose its Board. Moreover, the Archives are part of the community organising network – it is an active member of the local concerted-action round-table, and it has partnerships with local popular education centers and the local united church.

Moreover, instead of hiring university students, or traditional research assistants, many local residents worked on the project be it as paid staff, contract workers, or volunteers ((Shragge, 1994)). Isabelle Drolet, a neighbourhood activist, co-coordinated the project from the very beginning. Several women from the neighbourhood transcribed interviews, videotaped the process, provided simultaneous translation services, and translated written materials.

Finally, but most important, project participants were selected in keeping with the objective of creating a space for voices often barred from history-making structures, and the idea that one does not need to an expert be a historical actor, or a participant in the doing of history. Their extensive experience with community organising, as members and leaders, in this working-class neighbourhood greatly reduced the chances of falling into the trap of polite storytelling and nostalgic recounting of good times ((Shopes, 1986)) in that they were familiar with evaluations of action plans, as well as political analysis, and their memories were full of the inside conflicts of the movement.

Thus, the project is based upon self-identified local needs, its action plan is coherent with local activist tradition, and most importantly, did not bypass the key players in the community (in line with (Shopes, 1986)). This grounding in the neighbourhood, both organisational and ideological, not only increases the legitimacy of the project in the eyes of local organisers and residents, but also makes it such that the project fits more easily into a broader organising picture, thus increasing the chances of project continuity ((Shopes, 1986)). In addition, this grounding also increases the chances that the project does not take for granted existing academic knowledge and that questions asked are critical and liberating ((Geiger, 1990); (Jagger, 1989)). In line with this, and for the same reasons, there is less chance that the project will benefit the research at the expense of the narrator(s) ((Patai, 1991); (Sangster, 1994)).

The organisational forms

The organisational forms chosen for the project were also in keeping with the idea of pre-figuring *power-with*.

Co-workers, *as equal as possible*

Isabelle and I decided, from the very beginning, to work as a collective; that is, to share decision-making, power, as well as tasks. This organisational form, based on the idea of fostering the development of an "as equal as possible" relationship between us, and of building the conditions for respectful dialogue ((hooks, 1990); (Lorde, 1992)), is central to the elimination of border guards of difference. We had weekly team meetings during which we did brainstorming, conceptualising, planning and sharing of tasks. Moreover, we integrated into team meetings an official agenda item, "checking-in", during which we vented and discussed any frustrations we may be having with one another. In addition, Isabelle also kept a reflective log, which I had access too, as she did to mine. Finally, after each meeting with project participants, we had a de-briefing session.

Underlying these "tools to dismantle the masters house" is the idea that if we deal with small tensions early on, there is less chance that they will pile up and cause irreparable damage in the relationship ((Anzaldùa, 1990); (Bunch, 1990a); (hooks, 1993); (hooks, 1995); (Pheterson, 1990)). Moreover, creating formal spaces for this kind of discussion forces us to sit down and reflect on our practice and our relationships, thereby helping us to identify the underlying social processes, an important first step to their

eradication ((hooks, 1990)). That is, by "putting ourselves out there" emotionally, and dealing with conflict, we are not only engaging in self-reflection, but we are also helping each other see the "Other" for what she is. In our case, this transparency not only contributed to trust-building, and helped keep each of us accountable to the other; but it also helped us build a mutually respectful "as equal as possible relationship".

Small group, structured yet flexible dialogue

For our work with the participants, we chose the small group form, and we put in place a number of mechanisms to help foster dialogue ((hooks, 1990); (Lorde, 1992)), all pre-conditions for pre-figuring *power-with*, and for a transformative process that deals with ethical dilemmas related to power dynamic ((Geiger, 1990); (Patai, 1991); (Sangster, 1994)).

The small group. Applying the basic organisational form of organising practice to history, we chose the small group, as opposed to the individual interviews, not only because of the learning and sociological analyses that are facilitated by interaction ((Benmayor, 1991); (McCall, 1989); (Mercier and Murphy, 1991)), but also because we wanted to create a space within which we redistributed power as much as possible. In the small group, it is easier to "pivot the centre" ((Aptheker, 1989); (Brown, 1991)) than in the dyad because the authority of the facilitator is reduced (but not obliterated) by the presence of others, as other participants also take on the role of facilitator by asking questions, by summarising what has been said, by pushing the analysis, by playing devil's advocate. Also, the presence of other people allows for a level of discussion and analysis

that is much more difficult to attain in a dyad. In the group, each participant builds on

the other person's story, which rekindles memories, introduces new analyses, opens the

door to contradiction and debate, challenging one another to construct narratives of

belonging that break with processes of differentiation and stratification. In fact, one of

the concrete ways that we worked to break with these processes, was by making it clear

that instead of working towards one universal truth, we were working toward a

consensus that recognised differing positionalities ((Olson and Shopes, 1991)) – we would

agree to agree, or agree to disagree – and that our texts may be a bit "messy", but that

that was okay ((Atkinson, 1999); (Stacey, 1991)).

As facilitators, Isabelle and I made every attempt to ensure that each participant

had an *opportunity to speak* her mind. Because the process was over a long period of time,

we were able to build into it checks and balances which allowed us to pull less vocal

participants into the conversations ((Némésis, 2002)). The latter tended to speak up

during informal times, or even outside the context of group meetings, but because there

was always a "next meeting", we were able to bring to the table some of these discussions

by asking the least vocal participants to tell the others what they had shared outside the

meeting space. In the end, everyone agreed that we had managed to create a space where

voices were heard, respected, and listened to:

Frances   I think everybody made us comfortable. If one person was quiet, there was a way of somebody coming in and saying "how do you feel?" or something.

Donna   You weren't left out (...)

Frances   We seem to be working good together (...)

Donna   I think there was that respect. When someone was talking, we listened, and gave them a chance

Another condition for the doing of *power-with* is *transparency* ((Geiger, 1990)), and we made every attempt possible to be transparent about all aspects of the project. Much of the first group meeting was spent discussing expected outcomes, respective roles and responsibilities, ownership of the material, and confidentiality, and we had a standing item on the agenda of all the meetings to provide "updates" on the project. Because of this, the participants were aware of the work that Isabelle and I were doing, and the roles that each of us was expected to play were clearly laid out, all of which reduced anxiety related to the unknown, and paved the way for trusting relationships. Moreover, already at the first meeting we discussed, as a group, the potential for transformations, and, as we went along, we often reflected back on our experiences in the process; the transparency on this issue made it such that the participants were actors of their own transformations, instead of "objects" of "savage social therapy" ((Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991)), having their "consciousness raised" by the "enlightened" researcher ((Sangster, 1994)). In addition to all this, at all times, participants have access to audio-tapes and to transcripts ((Geiger, 1990)). All of these strategies contributed to increased trust, in that project participants were kept informed, and understood the intricacies of the process, bringing them into the "know" ((Yow, 1995)).

Another element that contributed, without a doubt, to the climate of comfort was the *surroundings*. We applied another principle of organising, "go to where the people are at, instead of trying to bring them to you", and held the meetings in spaces

where the women would feel comfortable, places they had often frequented, that were their own: individual homes, spaces in community groups. Moreover, following another organising principle, we also made time during the process for *social time*, for celebration ((Panet-Raymond and Lavoie, 1996)). Social time, which allows for human contact at the level of emotion, is central to motivation – people are less likely to sustain their involvement over the long haul if the interactions remain solely at the rational level. Thus, built into our meetings were little surprises, such as fun snacks, a bottle of bubbly, end and beginning of year dinners. As the project moved along, these little surprises were also being organised spontaneously by project participants.

The spiral in practice. All the elements above were essential to the success of the transformative process – without all the ingredients that create the conditions for social change, the popular education spiral ((Ampleman et al., 1987); (Ampleman et al., 1983); (Barndt, 2000); (Gilkes, 1980); (Gilkes, 1994); (L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, 1998); (Nadeau, 1996); (Ninacs, 1995)) cannot work its magic. The direction for story-telling taken at the very beginning was determined by the participants themselves, as at the first meeting each woman talked about her first involvements in community organising. This central principle of the popular education spiral, of *starting with experience*, was operationalised throughout and is in fact the backbone of the entire history making endeavour. On each of the topics discussed, each participant shared her experiences. Isabelle and I facilitated the discussions of these experiences in order to enable a *deepening of analysis*. Concretely, as we went along, through facilitation, we

make links between each person's experiences, checked this analysis, and when relevant, brought in *new information and theory*. In fact, other women in the group, as we went along, also took on this role, and in doing so, shared power with Isabelle and me.

We also enabled a deepening of analysis by bringing back to the group, at each meeting, the reading of the narrative that we had done in between meetings, and later, in the second phase, by going over, together, the vertical analyses of each folder. Isabelle and I read the narratives using an amalgam of methods, from listing themes, to chronology, to standpoint, to reading for silences and metaphors, sadness and contradictions ((Sangster, 1994)). This new information and theory, which always built on the analysis done in the group, again, was discussed, reflected upon, and analysed. It is through this process, during which we asked the women to reflect and analyse their own stories ((Anderson et al., 1987)), that we have detailed socio-historical analyses on such issues as renewal of membership, gender roles, insider/outsider relations, English/French relations, and on lessons to leave regarding community organising. It is also through this process that the feminist common thread became consolidated and central.

These readings, because they emerged from individual participants' positionalities, enabled us to weave a quilt of those positionalities that is rich with contradictions, transformations, similarities and differences. Also, these processes helped reduce the chances of nostalgic recounting of the past, because we went beyond the descriptive, into the explanatory. Each woman has knowledge and experience, has experience doing evaluations and planning in community groups, and therefore is used

to doing critical analysis. Moreover, given that we are all activists attached to our causes, and to the survival of our groups, we have a stake in ensuring that the picture of the past that we draw allows us to draw real lessons that will help organisers in the present day to effect change. These techniques made it such that project participants were active in the doing of history ((Echevarria-Howe, 1995); (Skeggs, 1997)). Because they knew what kind of spin we were giving their words and were given opportunities to modify and add to the analyses, the participants were constantly reassured of our good faith, thereby contributing to increased trust:

Maureen I think it was important for us to be part of (the analysis) (...) Well, like what you said, we could have done the analysis after, we might of been pissed off at your analysis. Being part of it, then it was *our* analysis as well

Evaluations of process: having a real say. Part and parcel of any popular education or organising methodology is the process of evaluation which allows for a critical reflection on the process itself ((Panet-Raymond and Lavoie, 1996)). Although the participants agreed to a project that was already conceptualised, they always had a "real say" as to functioning, above and beyond the content of the book. Concretely, they had the opportunity to evaluate the process at the end of each meeting, during the more formal evaluation process with an outside resource person, and during the evaluation-planning sessions several times throughout.

It is through these evaluations that the biggest leaps were made with respect to trust and responsibility. Out of these evaluations came many ideas for improvement of the project, as well as worries and unease. The participants wanted more visual cues to

jog memory, less talking space for facilitators and more for participants, a nicer meeting space, a bilingual book. They expressed fear of the unknown and asked to receive a hard-copy of the outline of the book and the topics of discussion ahead of time. They said they had no qualms telling us that we spent too much time on one subject or that our line of questioning was making someone feel uncomfortable. Following these evaluations, we followed through on their input in that we went over the objectives of the project once again, presented a draft outline of the book, and had a discussion about their concerns. After that, when we did our evaluation, the women expressed that they felt less insecure about the process, and that they had appreciated our rapid follow through on their suggestions. Had we not done evaluations, these kinds of concerns may not have been voiced. Still present, however, they would have interfered with the building of a trusting and respectful relationship between the project participants and Isabelle and I as coordinators.

Maureen   (The evaluation) are very important to do. It gives you right away feed back about what's happening. So there is nothing going over to the next meeting that you were pissed off about something, and that wasn't dealt with

Denise   and if any adjustments are to be made

Maureen   So you have that opportunity right then

Problematising my positionality

As co-coordinator of the project, and active participant in the story-telling process, I am part of the social text that has emerged ((Olson and Shopes, 1991)). In line with the literature on building mutually respectful relationships between researcher and

narrators, I have put into place mechanisms that have enabled me to name and analyse my own positionality within the project, the conflicts that emerged, and the shifting relations between all the actors and me. The reflective log, the interviews that a student[3] conducted with me on the methodology and many discussions with my supervisors and close friends, helped me to see through my emotions. All of these discussions led me to reflect, aloud, on difficult relational dynamics and on feelings of guilt that would sometimes flood over me. These tools, although seemingly insignificant, were extremely useful in reducing the chances of my denying my relative position of privilege, of my imposing my point of view, of denying the existence of difference among us, of seeking "forgiveness" from community residents ((Anzaldùa, 1990)), and importantly, in forcing me to "own my guilt" and reducing the chances of my becoming paralysed by my emotions ((Pheterson, 1990)).

To conclude then, through the various tools that we put into place, we succeeded in building a space for respectful dialogue. The small group, the use of the popular education spiral, of evaluations, and of various tools to problematise my positionality, were key ingredients for the doing of *power-with,* setting the stage for individual, interpersonal, and collective transformations.

Individual transformations

My shifting positionalities

When I first arrived in the neighbourhood, I was positioned, vis-à-vis many of the neighbourhood folks, as "professional" and "young feminist outsider". Since then however, my positionality has shifted, and continues to shift. During the first few years of the project, I worked out of the offices of the Archives, and to anybody looking in I could have been a staff person of the group. Moreover, I had moved into a housing cooperative in the neighbourhood and was active in many community organisations, positioning myself as neighbour and local activist. The university and its regulations were quite far away, and did not interfere much with our work on the project. Notwithstanding all this, I was still struggling to deal with an overwhelming feeling of guilt related to the power dynamics at play in the relationships I was living around the process. My previous experiences with local folks, and the awareness I had gleaned from the readings I had done on relations between researchers and narrators in the history-making process, were constantly in the background.

My positionality shifted once again during the thesis writing phase, work that I did out of my home. Also during this time, I submitted two academic articles I had written on the methodology, and specifically on the relationships between myself, as academic ally, and the people working on the project, to the participants and to Isabelle. Suddenly I had become the academic ally, not the local activist interested in community history. I had positioned myself, through my metanarrative, as someone who was not

only different, but who had more structural privilege than the people working on the project. This led to complex reactions, mostly from Isabelle. Isabelle told me that the Anna that emerged from the paper was an "academic, overloaded with structural privilege, sinking under her guilt, seeking forgiveness" (Isabelle Drolet, personal communication, July 2003). She went on to argue, in line with my own theoretical and ideological position on the matter, that it is not because one has privilege that one is automatically "oppressor", that one can choose to break down these schemas, these categories, in an effort to shift relations towards more egalitarian ones. She helped me realise that I had been talking about myself as being apart from the rest of the people I was working with, and about building bridges, but not explicitly about shifting these relations. She claimed that in practice, I *was* shifting these relations, that I had great respect for all the people in the project, and that in fact, when she had first started working with me, she had not positioned me as an academic, but as a feminist activist interested in the history of Point St-Charles. I was (re)creating, through the written medium, the very categories and binaries that we were successfully deconstructing in practice.

Isabelle and I then went on to discuss how I can be part of the university system, "while shaking up its structures, questioning and deconstructing them" (Isabelle Drolet, personal communication, July 2003). Isabelle had a number of ideas, including to find a way to write myself into the group, by talking in the "we" instead of the "I" (to include Isabelle), but also to recognise that we were shifting relations, not just building bridges.

Also, instead of talking about the people involved in the project, including myself, using generalisations (e.g., middle-class versus working-class), I should attempt to draw a portrait of each of us, grounding us historically. She said I should get over my guilt, break out of the categories that I was inadvertently imprisoning us in. All of these transformations at the experiential level, as I moved through the history-making process, have helped me understand my shifting positionalities, and importantly, guided the actual writing of my thesis and this very paper.

Gleaning new awareness

The entire process was a learning experience for all of us. Because we all participated in collective readings of the stories, the process resembles an extended participatory feminist history workshop, where each person contributes from her own experience, learns from the others, makes links, analyses, and draws lessons. Together we wove a patchwork of the past, and read it through a feminist lens, and each of us, individually, emerged with new knowledge about processes of community organising, cultural differences, and gender and class in organising:

Thérèse   I can tell you that I discovered many new things (...) The Anglophones, how far they pushed! (...) Sure, it wasn't completely unknown to me (...) I had always been around them. I would see them in the groups. But I never thought that they were so committed! I have discovered.

Similarly, Donna, being quite a bit younger than the other women in the English group, expressed an appreciation for the learning gleaned throughout the process:

Donna   As the youngest of the group, I really enjoyed the process. I got to hear stories of things that happened when I was a kid and to hear the forces that were behind it.

And it makes me very proud to be part of this process with all of you. And I feel, just a tiny bit too, part of what has happened before me. (...) It's just that this is my history and allot of these guys are my history! And that is for me was so wonderful to hear!

Becoming a historical actor

Often, during the process, individual participants thanked others explicitly for their past contributions. Several times, participants, in hearing new stories and in participating in socio-historical analyses, noted that their combined contributions had laid the foundations for current parent-involvement in schools, less oppressive welfare practices, relatively accessible health care services, etc. Notwithstanding this, there were times when one or another of the participants put into question her participation in the process, arguing that she had little to contribute. When this happened, the other members of the group chimed in, trying to build up the reticent member's self-esteem by breaking explicitly with the idea that only formal leaders are historical actors, and by placing value on "behind the scenes" work. In doing so, they were in fact recognising that "bridge-leaders" are central to organisations ((Robnett, 1996)). And, they came to realise that, as women, they were having difficulty accepting their roles in the making of history:

Michèle I am a bit reluctant to say that *we* are writing the history of women in Point St. Charles. It's embarrassing! I don't like that. I am a bit like that, I don't like being up front. It's like, "Who are you to be doing that?".

Marguerite It's like that for me too.

Michèle You know, we carry the burden of womanhood!

Marguerite builds on this:

Marguerite   Yesterday I was listening to a program. (...) It was the first time that I made a link with us. They were talking about history, on the radio, with Jeannette Bertrand who was really at the avant-garde, in terms of the couple and all that. She said « When we were doing that, we were learning as we went along ». I thought, here we were also learning, we were trying to take a stand. That was what we did, as women (...) It wasn't easy for us to take a stand as women. And Jeanette Bertrand was saying that for her it wasn't easy either. (...) What I mean is that women all over Quebec were learning to take a stand. And we were there at the very beginning. But it wasn't us. We were a wave amongst others. We were experimenting.

Marguerite shares with the group her realisation that they, like some of the more

"famous" agitators of the past, were part of a larger movement. That they were

experimenting with new ways of seeing the world, of playing out gender relations, of

organising. Still, in this excerpt, Marguerite seeks to diminish the importance of their

contributions, by refusing to admit that they were pushing the boundaries of the status

quo. Later in the discussion, however, Marguerite begins to recognise that their stories

are in fact history, part of a larger movement, part of the history of Québec:

Marguerite   This is a great thing that women did all over Quebec. And we were there right from the start. We paved the way. [...] If a woman lives in Centre-Sud neighbourhood or somewhere else, she'll recognize herself in this book! Because women in each of the working-class neighbourhoods went through a similar process. [...] Each woman lived through the history of her neighbourhood! [...] I find it interesting because it's such an evolution. We talk about Point St. Charles but it's the same history in other places. We're part of the history of Quebec!

The shifting in this series of excerpts shows how the participants came to make the

identity of "historical actor" their own. They moved from "we had to do it, so why

should we get special recognition", to arguing that they were "experimenting" and

weren't any more "avant-garde" than others, to putting their experiences into a broader context of effervescence and conjuncture, to noting that their journey as women is similar to that of women in other neighbourhoods, to a clear recognition that their experience *is* history.

<div align="center">*Interpersonal Transformations*</div>

Naming and resolving past conflict

All activism is fraught with tensions, and often, because of the high-paced reality of community organising, time is not taken to deal with the conflicts that ensue. In the context of this project, however, space was created for respectful dialogue, which allowed for interpersonal dynamics and social relations to be named, and sometimes resolved, on emotionally-laden topics such as the French/English relations, violence against women, and hard-line politics. I will illustrate this process using the example of the discussion we had in the French group about a painful public assembly about hard-line Marxist-Leninist politics and health services that had split the community into political factions over 25 years ago.

Marguerite, "ordinary citizen sympathetic-to-but-critical-of the Marxist-Leninist cause", had been part of many groups with Michèle, who had been in a way, her mentor. Michèle, part of the Marxist Leninist groups at the time, considered by many to be dogmatic and hierarchical, had been excluded from the consultation process on health services that Marguerite had organised with the "ordinary folks" from the

neighbourhood. During a public assembly, people from all the factions had their say,

calling each other names, "booing" each other. By the end, the process had broken

down. Marguerite shares how she felt after the assembly:

Marguerite   I thought that the people who had attended the kitchen meetings were pleased
              with the action. But after the assembly, everyone was still at daggers drawn.
              Then, I felt so sad. I lost friends... I'm glad we had a chance to talk about it
              tonight. I don't know about you (*speaking to Michèle*) but for me... It's the first
              time we talk about it so openly.

Michèle   Yes, yes ! (*silence*). My scars have healed. But there are things that I understand
              better now, having heard your explanation tonight.

At the same time, throughout the entire discussion, Thérèse, "ordinary-citizen"

remained quiet – which is quite unlike her. At one point, Michèle, expresses, with hurt

in her voice:

Michèle   I remember getting up to talk at the mike. And someone yelled « You, sit
              down! You don't come from the Point! You are a school teacher! ». I'd been
              living in the Point for 10 or 15 years... and I thought a grand total of three
              years!

Marguerite   That was the citizens! Nos us!

Michèle   Yeah, but they called us names! People would get up to speak and others would
              call out names and all kinds of stuff. It was dreadful!

Later, during the evaluation:

Michèle   It was you (*pointing at Thérèse*) who said to me « You are not from the area! »

Marguerite   Really? It was you Thérèse?

All   Really?

Thérèse   I'm not saying anything. I'm listening (*nervous laughter*). I'm reliving.

It only becomes apparent at the end of the meeting that Thérèse was the one who had

yelled at Michèle, calling her an outsider, telling her she had no right to speak on the

issues that concerned the folks from the neighbourhood. This was after Marguerite had

disassociated herself from this kind of behaviour by saying that it was not "us", but the

"citizens".

The excerpt below illustrates how Thérèse was feeling during this discussion, as

she was reliving the emotionally-laden moments of the past, 25 years later, with the very

woman that she had targeted:

Thérèse	I found the discussion difficult, the one that made us relive the tensions. Because I was still living with what had happened at the time. When Michèle was talking, I kept silent. I was listening. I was reliving. It was all bubbling up inside of me. So I prefered to stay silent. And then, at one point, I calmed down, and I said to myself « It's dreadful. It's frightening. But it didn't lessen our commitment ! » (…)
Michèle	It was a really big discussion tonight, but I am pleased.
Thérèse	I am pleased too (…)
Louise	(…) it gave you the chance to do what you haven't been able to do for 25 years, verbalise it.
Marguerite	We have never talked about it.
Louise	I think that everyone went off and discussed things with their close friends (*everyone agrees, laughing*).
Michèle	We talked about it with those who thought like us! (*laughter*) That's what we did, all of us!
Thérèse	Yes, yes (…)
Louise	Ultimately, back then, you didn't agree. Today, you have a certain maturity, and with the detachment you now have, you are able to talk about it without attacking each other. Sometimes we need the time to take a breather. <u>Of course, it hurts when we uncover these kinds of stories, but at the same time it seems that there is no more resentment</u>.
Marguerite	I don't have any, that's for sure.

Louise throughout this discussion, as outsider to the event, plays the role of mediator.

She helps name the issue – that three differing opinions had confronted each other – and

that now, with many years behind them – they are able to verbalise, confront and resolve the conflicts. Everyone agreed that although the discussion had brought back painful memories, and had been difficult to manage, it had been worth it, because now that they understood the other's point of view their latent resentment had subsided. Moreover, from this discussion emerged many a lesson for community organising practice, including a reaffirmation of the importance of spaces for dialogue, that allow people to name their emotions and resolve their conflicts.

Naming and blurring boundaries in the present

Not only did the process allow for the airing of conflicts that the participants had lived in the past, but it also provided a space for dialogue around social relations and processes in the present.

Between Isabelle and the Anglophone group[4]. Although Isabelle and I co-facilitated the French group, it was impossible to do so for the English group due to language barriers. Isabelle, however, participated in the process, asking questions, and adding ideas. Notwithstanding openness on all sides, several times during the process, Isabelle found herself in the contradictory position of playing a role, on the one hand, of "open-to-dialogue-co-coordinator" and eventually friend, and on the other hand, feeling frustrated, in the role of "member of the French community". This frustration was fed by tendencies toward victimisation in the English group, on the one hand, and by Isabelle's constant struggle against the ubiquitous and internalised processes of inferiorisation, on the other. Much of the discussion in the English group had centered

around their having felt pushed out by the French during the rise of Quebec nationalism in the 1970s, and about the ongoing consequences of that period, and inadvertently, Isabelle found herself in the uncomfortable position of "comforting" or even, metaphorically "forgiving" the Anglophones (Isabelle Drolet, personal communication, July 2003). Thus, along with the women in the French group, when faced with the discussions in the English group around linguistic tensions, Isabelle went from empathy, to frustration, to anger.

Because of the openness of the group, however, Isabelle was able to say things that brought some of the responsibility back to the English community. From this, emerged a very positive discussion about the responsibility of Anglophones, and solutions to the problem of lack of involvement and renewal, breaking the victimising tone that had been there since the beginning of the discussion. Moreover, there was a beginning of recognition of the fact that English people do benefit because they belonged to that linguistic group. By the end of the meeting, there had been a shift in positionalities, and a blurring of boundaries, as exemplified by the following:

Isabelle (*Francophone speaking in French*) I don't know what responsibility can be attributed to the Anglophones or the the Francophones. But what I find extraordinary is that tonight we are able to talk about all that. I don't think that happens very often.

Myrna (*Anglophone jumps in, in French*) Why not? I don't understand why we can't talk about these things, all together!

Anna (*I translate to English what Isabelle said above*) Isabelle wonders what Francophones can do, what Anglophones can do themselves, what is our responsibility. She thinks it's great we are talking about this.

Myrna *(in English)* To exchange. That we can do it together.

Isabelle *(in French)* I come from Chicoutimi. There are no English people.

Anna   (*I translate to English)* She comes from Chicoutimi, where there, nobody speaks English (...)

Isabelle   (*in French*) I often say to Anna that sometimes, when you say something, and I'm not too sure that I understand, I don't dare say anything because I'm not sure...

Anna   (*I translate to English*) She said she lived that situation here that you are talking about. In this group she doesn't understand everything and doesn't

Myrna   (*Anglophone jumps in to finish my sentence*) want to jump in cause she might have heard wrong

Isabelle   We have often talked about French/English relations. I have never experienced the notion of the "two solitudes" as much as I have in the last little while. I find it fascinating!

This discussion, during which Isabelle shared her fear of being "out there", was a turning point in her relations with the English group. In sharing with them that she lived in the English group what they, as English-speaking citizens had lived through in groups run solely in French, Isabelle was demonstrating empathy ("witnessing"). Myrna jumps right in, and opens up the dialogue even more by translating what Isabelle is saying, and by commenting before I even get the chance to translate! From this discussion emerges an almost-explicit agreement to increase opportunities for dialogue across linguistic boundaries.

Between Isabelle and I. Creative tensions also emerged between Isabelle and me, as we worked very closely together on this project. Although we have certain common experiences in the activist movement and we both grew up in middle-class families, Isabelle and I are different on many fronts. Isabelle's rich education comes out of her grassroots organising experiences, while mine is formally recognised by our society because it is stamped with B.A., B.S.W., M.A. and now, PhD. Our life experience is also very different, as Isabelle has been working to earn a living for many years, while I have

been "pampered" to a great extent throughout my studies, because of continued help from my mother and funding from the government. It is this difference in our educational levels and life experiences, *life chances*, *life conditions*, and the *unequal resource allocation* based on the latter that were the most challenging to deal with and overcome in our efforts to work together. It is in this context that tensions around "ownership" of the project, as well as around academic privilege emerged.

First of all, although the project was conceptualised as a participatory history project, and is about the collectivisation of knowledge, I was quickly confronted with what I have coined "internalised academicitis"; that is, a nagging feeling of possessiveness for the project. Although it was true that I had "given birth" to the project, in that I had come up with the initial idea, the latter would have been impossible had I not been involved, with the Archives, on the Board and on the previous projects. Moreover, immediately after I had introduced the idea to the team at the Archives, Isabelle and I began working together on the protocol, and from the beginning, out of the discussions we had, Isabelle "made the project her own", making the process a truly collective one (Isabelle Drolet, personal communication, November 2003). Notwithstanding the clearly laid out protocol, the collective team-work, and my ideological beliefs about ownership of knowledge, I was finding it difficult to share the project. This notion of possession or ownership, and of competition, is inherent to Western capitalistic societies, and academia is no exception: ownership through copyright, patenting of new ideas, protecting in order to become an "academic star". I navigate in this system. Moreover, given that my

thesis is one of the historical products of the project, I have a stake in the success of the project. As doctoral candidate, I had to defend the methodology and the results of the project in front of a jury of academics. I was in this self-reflective frame of mind when a crisis erupted.

Early on in the process, and without realising it, I began taking over some of Isabelle's responsibilities without her assent. At one point, Isabelle pointed this out, angry at the injustice, reminding me that the project was collective, and that I had to learn to share the responsibility with her[5]. I was startled and hurt by her anger. However, Isabelle's reaction led me to realise, through writings in my reflective log and discussions with people around me, that my practice was not in line with my discourse – that I had "internalised academicitis", and that maybe "I had deserved her anger" (Guylaine Racine, personal communication, October 2001). Because of Isabelle's anger, I was forced to notice that although my discourse was about collective teamwork, I had my fingers in almost everything. These realisations forced me to reflect on the tensions related to participatory research, and in particular the notion of accountability. Who is accountable to whom? Isabelle and I are accountable to the Board of the Archives and the members of the group, as well as to the participants. I am personally accountable to my doctoral committee and to the university.

At the next team meeting, I shared the reflections posed above with Isabelle, and we were able to discuss honestly the kinds of tasks and roles that she would take on and the kinds that I would do. Although the contradictions related to accountability are not

resolved, this dialogue enabled me to see that I should follow the agreed-upon protocol, that is participatory, and that it is this protocol that I will defend in the end. It also made it such that we saw more clearly on how to blur the boundaries between us.

Secondly, even though I spent a great deal of time problematising my position vis-à-vis all the participants in the project, and Isabelle, I still fell into the trap of "spurious identification with other" ((Patai, 1991)). This became apparent to me only after Isabelle and I had an extremely tense series of interactions around life chances/conditions and unequal resource allocation. At the time, I was working overtime on the project, writing, doing activism and teaching a university-level course. I had been complaining aloud, about my lack of time, and about the fact that I had to pay someone to transcribe the interviews out of my pocket, because I did not have the time to do it. The latter elicited angry reactions from Isabelle, fed by a visceral feeling of injustice (Isabelle Drolet, personal communication, November 2003), as she pointed out that I shouldn't be complaining because my material conditions are considerably higher than those of most people in the neighbourhood, and that my position as academic gives me more freedom and status than that of most of the working-class folks I was working with. On the spot, I had a "knee-jerk" reaction, trying to defend myself, while trying to tame a sinking feeling of guilt.

After much reflection, I realised that I *had* fallen into the trap of forgetting about our differing life chances and material conditions. I stopped complaining about my finances, clarified with Isabelle during one of our "checking-in session" that I had

committed to three days a week of work and held to that, and explained to her that I

hoped to take advantage of my life conditions as an academic to help groups document

their histories. Isabelle eventually apologised for the tone she had used. If we had not had

the space for dialogue, this kind of tension would have germinated, grown, and been

catastrophic for our relationship. I may have been unable to see how my comments had

been disrespectful given my positionality, taken it all personally, and been crushed and

paralysed by guilt.

During one of our team meetings, Isabelle and I discussed these conflicts. The

following excerpts show that Isabelle's role, as "critical guide" (Eric Shragge, personal

communication, July 27th, 2002), was fed by a feeling of injustice (operationalised as

anger) at unequal resource allocation – and life chances/conditions – that is, that people

with formal education are, in general, better off than those whose education and

knowledge comes from their life experience (non recognition of life experience as source

of knowledge). Our conflicts were related to the latter, myself being at the "winning

end" of the stick on this dimension:

Isabelle   There is a certain pride that comes from « picking on » academics (*laughs*).

Anna   What do you mean? (*laughs*)

Isabelle   I take a certain pleasure in that.

Anna   Are you talking about me?

Isabelle   Yes, well, I mean, one shouldn't always take things personnally. (...) I don't know if its the rebellion of the « little people » against the academics. You know, that side of things when you say « You think we need people like you to comme tell us how to do things?" There's a bit of that. The academic world, with its power. Versus the people who don't have any. It's a bit ridiculous. (...) But that's okay, I live with it! It's not just about me, it's like that for many people. (...) « You won't get away

with that! » There's a bit of a funny side to all that! (...) But at the same time, it's fun to try to conciliate the two worlds. When both worlds do a bit to go towards the other, to not close themselves off to others.

Anna   I feel that we have come a long way in terms of building alliances. Between you and me, but also between me and the participants, who were a bit warry. I think we were able to build trust.

Isabelle   Yes, yes. At the personal level too. (...) It is interesting to be able to live the conflict, class conflict. It is difficult, but interesting. (...)

Anna   I have learned so much. The alliances that you and I built. Working with people who are different than me. (...) I have found that very enriching. I think that this learning is largely due to the fact that you confronted me several times on different issues.

Although our journey was conflict-laden, we managed to build trust because of the "safer spaces" we had set-up for dialogue, as the following excerpt shows:

Isabelle   There were difficult times. What I always regretted was the tone, not the content... the manner in which I transmitted the content.

Anna   We managed to get through it. (...) We put certain mecanisms in place so that things would be named. It helped. But you are also a person who seems to be able to say what is on her mind!

Isabelle   (...) But it wasn't easy. You say that I am not afraid to say what I am feeling, but I was able to do that because the space was there for dialogue.

Between the participants and I. Although more subtle, similar underlying dynamics were present between the participants and me. Although in the domain of class, because of my formal post-secondary education and upbringing, I am advantaged in terms of life chances and conditions, the power imbalance is somewhat balanced out by our common gender, and by my age (and inexperience) – all of the women could be my mothers, and most my grandmothers – in this case, their long-term experience in

community organising makes of them "experts", and therefore increases their power in

this relationship.

Notwithstanding the fact that project participants expressed explicitly that we

read them well, that they felt listened to and heard, that they felt at ease to mention their

concerns, and that we followed through on their input, Isabelle and I still picked up on

certain messages, more or less explicit, that lead us to believe that they were are on their

guard. The most flagrant series of messages emerged from our discussions about

"insiders and outsiders" (to the community). At one of the meetings, we were engaged in

discussion about university-educated allies who come to work with neighbourhood

folks. In response to my question as to why they come, the following discussion ensued:

Maureen	Well they're certainly not going to go to Westmount (a rich neighbourhood). If you want to organise you're going to go to the poorest community you can find, who are having all these terrible things done to them.
Frances	*And believe they are getting help and they're not.*
Myrna	*People who are always working for a BA and.*
Anna	*Their thesis (laughing). What do you mean? I don't know what you're talking about? (tongue-in-cheek, laughing).*
Myrna	But it's true and they knock at your door and they want to ask you questions. Then you give them the answers or help them. Then you never see them again. (...) *But it was really hard. I think, well we know that's what you're doing, but it's not the same thing.* People were using Point St-Charles for many different reasons and many different things. Studies on this, studies on that. If you want to be silly, How to be poor? How not to be not poor? Learn how to budget. Who else would they do this guinea pig stuff on? People in Point St-Charles.

Wiser because of their past experience with university-educated allies who have done

research *on* them, never to be seen again, the women are sending me a subtle message,

that they will not accept that from me. Not yet confident in my role, and feeling a bit

targeted by the discussion, I wondered aloud if the allies were purely selfish in coming to the community. Although the participants admitted that there was a positive side to these alliances, that there was a certain amount of give and take, they reiterated that the allies needed to know their place and respect the citizens they are working with:

Maureen   I think both. (...) Their own personal politics plus they could help people. I don't think it's one or the other

Denise   Which is not a bad thing. *Like you. What are you getting out of this? We're getting a book out of this but you're getting something too, that's good. It's not always bad.* (...)

Myrna   If people know, I don't know what the word is... Know their place. (...) Because an organiser is an important person, but the citizen is an important person too. They can work together, which a lot of them did. It took struggle and it was hard but once people knew what was expected of each other, a lot of good stuff comes out of all this.

Too often, they argued, allies forget that they are in a position of privilege and end up alienating the people they are trying to help. At another meeting, the participants explained that they had been "burned" one too many times by outsiders in the past, and that now, any project coming from the outside was suspect, including mine :

Myrna   So you are very privileged Anna to have us meeting with you (*laughing*)

Anna   I see that, I see that. I got the point (*laughing*)

Myrna   And if I get burned, I know where you guys are

Anna   You know where we live.

These excerpts illustrate the dynamic that was present throughout – the paradoxical tension between *wanting* to believe in us, to trust us, and a nagging ever-present fear, worry, uncertainty. The latter is quite normal given the social relations in the mix, and because these feelings were vocalised and out in the open, the relationship

that developed was, and continues to be quite healthy, as exemplified in the following

interactions (October 2003):

Denise   I want to know, when you first came to the Point, and you first got involved in the groups. How did people accept you? If that would've been years ago, you would have been considered one of those people we talked about coming in and trying to take over, and leading the whole of us. But today, you are not seen as a person like that. Or are you? (...)

Maureen   *Most professionals coming into the Point need to get past the chopped liver stage!*

Anna   What do you mean?

Maureen   *You're hated.* When people come in, the first reaction is "you're not even from here, what do you know"? That's a given, right away.

Denise   *You have to earn your place.*

Maureen   Exactly

Anna   *What do you think Denise, do you think I've earned my place?*

Denise   *I'll let you know after the book is written! Depends on how many we sell. I'm joking! No, I think you fit in!* (*laughter*)

Frances   We wouldn't be here otherwise!

This is the tone of our current relationship. The women themselves ask me about my

positionality, and insinuate that I have passed the test, and tell me explicitly that I now

fit in.

     To conclude this section of interpersonal transformations, the dynamics described

above – between Isabelle and the English group, between Isabelle and I, and between the

participants and I – are but a sampling of the emotional tug-of-wars that we experienced

during the process. When one opens up space for dialogue on power dynamics, one

needs to be prepared for the emotions that will emerge. All of these discussions, to

differing extents, elicited complex and contradictory emotions – guilt, anger, fear,

uncertainty – most of which were related to processes of differentiation and stratification. However, had we not created these spaces, the emotions would not have been absent, only submerged, just waiting to explode and may have lead to paralysis.

Instead of remaining silent and feeding her internalised feelings of inferiority because of her position within the "colonised" linguistic group, Isabelle was able to push the participants to consider their position within our stratified society, and in doing so, strengthened their relationship. Instead of taking Isabelle's anger personally and being crushed by guilt, I was able to cry with Isabelle, discuss and un-tangle confusing emotions, building a relationship which has blurred the boundaries between us. Instead of putting the participants into the uncomfortable position of having to comfort me or by asking them to make me into an "honorary insider", I was able to name my positionality and therefore work to shift it. We were able to tease and joke about these issues during the meetings and, afterwards, I was able to talk about them with Isabelle. Our deepening understanding of selves, Other and the relationship gained through respectful dialogue has, without a doubt, fostered trust, and has contributed to a shifting of social relations, as we worked to blur boundaries and eliminate border guards of difference.

Collective transformations

As the participants glean new awareness, make the personal political, recognise their own role as historical actors, they strengthen their sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, and their pride, all essential ingredients for activism. Moreover, as we –

as English versus French, as "university-educated" versus "trained by the school of life" – blur and shift boundaries that divide, separate and stratify us, we not only forge stronger interpersonal relationships, but we are also engaged in translocational imaginings in dialogue. The latter takes us into the collective realm of transformation.

Drawing and sharing lessons for activism

The history-making project is more than an extended participatory history workshop that pre-figures *power-with* – it is in fact, an extended evaluation of several decades of activism done by ten women who have been involved in organising for most of those years. The space we created for the project allowed for the drawing of lessons that will serve in campaigns, in mobilisation, and in organisational development. More than that, however, this extended evaluation is all the more precious in that the participants initially got involved in activism because of their personal needs; although all of them eventually became workers of community organisations, they still define themselves in many ways as the "ordinary folks" who were active in the groups. To my knowledge, there are few such evaluations which are done – from beginning to end – with the "ordinary folks" active in the groups. The lessons drawn from this project therefore emerge from a series of points of views not usually known publicly.

From the beginning, the participants expressed the hope that the lessons drawn from their experience would serve the movement:

Louise   It is an inheritance for those who will read us. They will be able to take our ways of doing things, learn from them, apply them to current demands, demands that are different than those that we had at the time. We have hope

that people will be able to adapt things to the current needs. I think the younger people are going to appreciate what they read and they will say « That's how we can make changes to our society! ».

Marguerite   Currently, when we do our social animation, we talk about demonstrations and all that (...) With a book like ours, we will be able to say « Yes, we can do something. It's possible. Look, they did it in the past and they won!" This book will serve us, it is worth it. (...) When I go to Action-Watchdog (the Concerted-Action round table), the people there are not the ones who were there in the 70s. They always say "We are not winning as much any more. How come it worked back then? How come it doesn't work any more? » It is because, at the time, it was the citizens who were active. Today it is the staff. That is what we are saying in the book... we need to start with the citizens.

These excerpts are but a sampling of the kind of comments that abound in the narratives about wanting to transmit the stories of the past to the younger generations. The participants want to make sure that younger folks realise that the groups and services that exist today were not served on a silver platter. That they recognise that they need to fight today to preserve the gains of the past, and to fight for still better conditions. The participants also argue that the lessons they – "ordinary citizens" – will draw, will serve organisers who were not around in the earlier years.

In line with the latter, the lessons will be transported into the larger community formally via the multiple products, but also informally as each of us participates in different local organisations – all struggling with the problem of renewal.

Stimulating renewal

This project has a lot of potential for stimulating renewal, and has, in fact, already begun to do so. At one point, I noticed that one of the camerawomen hadn't moved her

camera for over half an hour. During the break, I said to her, "you know, we would like you to take some close-ups, focus-in on the women". She said, "Oh, I'm sorry! I was so caught up in what they were saying that I forgot to film"! The most exciting example however, was this comment by one of the camerawomen that ensued at the final meeting:

Catherine   I think people feel really helpless in relation to what happens to them, in relation to current political choices. You don't feel you have any power or impact. And you don't feel you can join up with other people to do anything. You look for ways to join up with others to say no to this or that. We don't know how to get together, put our energies together. We don't know. There are a lot of things that seemed super obvious to me. Suddenly, I understand that a lot of people fought for those things! Ordinary people! René Lévesque didn't do it all! It would be great if what you've done could be shown in the schools. Because we don't always realize that people struggled. And they got results …

Maureen   Hearing that is very encouraging, you know, that they want to learn. They want to be empowered, they want to be able to do things. The feeling of not being able to do that, I think is our job, to start making that happen.

Jump-starting public recognition of women's contribution

Finally, but not least importantly, is the collective recognition of women's contributions to community activism. One of the objectives of the project was to release the voices of the women into history, and in doing so, recognise their roles in the community, and in broader social change. The book, as well as all the products that will emerge from the project will without a doubt take these realisations to another level, but already, we can see that the community is starting to recognise these contributions.

The Archives' first project, "from the kitchen to the neighbourhood", an exhibit on women and activism displayed during the World March of Women of the Year 2000, laid the foundations for today's activities. We had, at the time, taken the exhibit into various community groups and facilitated discussions around it. During these discussions, it was not rare to hear people say that they hadn't really thought of the fact that the women were the backbone of organisations, and some even publicly thanked the women in the room. Later, the exhibit was up for a week during International Women's Day celebrations at the Carrefour d'éducation populaire (the popular education center). Members of the group were invited to tell their stories of involvement in the neighbourhood during the well-attended celebrations. The exhibit was shown for several months in the foyer of the Maison St. Charles, the space that regroups ten local community organisations. In addition, the Women's Centre invited us to come to talk to their members about the book; Marguerite, also founding member of the Centre, represented the group.

In addition, the newly incorporated Maison St. Charles[6] decided to recognise the contribution of women activists by putting-up commemorative plaques in the building. A wine and cheese was held in June 2003 to unveil the plaques. The room was packed with the women honoured, their families and friends, and neighbourhood activists. The slogan, which is without a doubt inspired by our project, "Les femmes sont l'épine dorsale de notre société" (slogan difficult to translate: "women, the spinal cord of our society") now adorns the foyer with the commemorative plaques.

Moreover, the fact that we have been reading the history of community activism through a feminist lens, since the second activity of the Archives, has now coloured the other projects and even the guiding line of the Archives. The guided-tour of the Lachine Canal, "des manufactures au quartier ouvrier", about the factories and the gentrification of the neighbourhood, included oral histories from women who worked in those factories, as well as feminist analysis throughout. The impacts have also extended beyond the immediate neighbourhood, as we have attended a number of conferences, academic and activist.

CONCLUSION

Out of the history-making process, transformations at the individual (experiential), interpersonal (intersubjective) and collective (organisational and representational) levels emerged. Each participant came out of the process transformed – with new knowledge, having made the personal political, having strengthened a sense of belonging and pride, and having identified as historical actor (in line with (Pineau, 1986);

(Clifford, 1995); (Rodriguez, 1998); (Patai, 1991); (Haywoode, 1991)). That is, at the experiential level ((Anthias, 1998)), each of us, in interaction with others, re-constructed her narrative of belonging, as women, as activists, as knowers, and in doing so, broke with processes of differentiation and stratification ((Anthias, 2001)). In recognising that they are knowers, and actors of history, these women were in fact breaking with the stereotype that only "great men" are historical actors and that only formally-educated people write history.

Moreover, when the tensions around unequal resource allocation related to differing life conditions and life chances reared their ugly heads, we were able to name the relations and processes that underlie these inequalities, and through respectful dialogue, resolve the conflicts. That is, at the intersubjective level ((Anthias, 1998)), through a deepening understanding of selves, Other and the relationships ((Anzaldùa, 1990); (hooks, 1990); (Lorde, 1992)), we were engaging in "translocational imaginings in dialogue", blurring the boundaries that separate and stratify us, thus building stronger relationships, that will serve us in common struggle ((Anthias, 2002)).

Finally, all of these transformations have begun, and will continue to lead to collective transformations. That is, at the organisational and representational levels ((Anthias, 1998)), the "translocational imaginings in dialogue" ((Anthias, 2002)) that emerged during the process have already begun to have their effect. Already, lessons drawn are being talked about in the neighbourhood ((Fisher, 1999); (Panet-Raymond and Lavoie, 1996); (Panet-Raymond and Mayer, 1997); (Piven and Cloward, 1977); (Shragge,

1999); (René and Panet-Raymond, 1984); (Wharf and Clague, 1997)), a few younger women have learned from the stories of the participants, and women are being recognised in the community as historical actors ((Geiger, 1990)). That all of this is emerging out of the work of ten neighbourhood women, (re)constructed as historical actors, is forcing a shifting of the collective narrative. That is, as the stories and analyses circulate, women are being written into the latter, which may, in a way, shake others into questioning, shifting, blurring and reconstructing their own narratives of belonging, and of those around them.

These transformations were made possible because of the methodology that borrowed tricks from feminist community organising practice ((Callahan, 1997); (Dominelli, 1990); (Dominelli, 1995); (Gutiérrez and Lewis, 1994); (L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, 1998)) to put into practice *power-with* ((Bishop, 1994); (Starhawk, 1987)), and in doing so, allowed us to pre-figure relations that broke with processes of differentiation and stratification ((Anthias, 1998)). That is, through the community grounding, the choice of actors, the collective dyad, the small group, the application of the spiral of change to the doing of history, and all the tools we put in place to help "dismantle the master's house within each of us" ((Lorde, 1984); (Némésis, 2002)), we built the conditions for respectful dialogue across difference ((Geiger, 1990); (Gregg, 1991); (hooks, 1990); (Lorde, 1992)), and in doing so, dealt with many of the ethical dilemmas faced by historians attempting to do transformative history.

It is because of this organisational form and process that we were able to build conditions of trust that are essential to dialogue across difference. This trust made it such that we were able to negotiate shared authority, process, and products. My authority, as well as that of Isabelle, as coordinators (researchers) was diminished without being obliterated because of group facilitation and the review of readings, in a constant "va-et-vient" ((Aptheker, 1989); (Brown, 1991)). The stories are seen as "social texts" between different positionalities – and Isabelle and I are both written into this text ((Olson and Shopes, 1991)). Witnessing was present throughout – empathy gleaned from interaction and dialogue on similar and different lived experiences, taken at an emotional level ((Burns, 2000)). I have owned up to my interests, be they academic or activist – as local activist I am proud of this project, and am learning a great deal. I have included my emotions in the writing – I have brought in confessional aspects – thus breaking with the "authorial rational voice", the rational, objective investigator ((Atkinson, 1999); (Church, 1995); (Haug, 1992); (Jackson, 1990); (Weedon, 1987)). My own positionality was and continues to be (re)constructed by the "field work" – through interactions with people, groups and institutions ((Burns, 2000)).

Thus, instead of becoming paralysed with guilt ((Anzaldùa, 1990); (Bunch, 1990a); (hooks, 1993); (hooks, 1995); (Pheterson, 1990)), "objectifying" the participants ((Patai, 1991)), benefiting on their backs ((Patai, 1991); (Sangster, 1994)), engaging in "savage social therapy" ((Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991)) or "arrogantly attempting to increase participants' consciousness" ((Sangster, 1994)), each of us was an actor of her own

transformation, that of the group and of the collective. And, we have but seen the tip of

the ice-berg as to the transformative potential of this project.

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Footnotes

[1] Denise Boucher, Thérèse Dionne, Louise Lanthier, Donna Leduc, Marguerite Métivier, Madeleine Richardson, Myrna Rose, Maureen Ryan and Frances Vaillancourt. Michèle Soutière withdrew from the project in February 2005.

[2] Isabelle Drolet, staff member of the Archives and long-time activist, co-coordinated the project with me from the beginning.

[3] Thank you to Megan Bochner.

[4] Isabelle read an earlier version of this analysis which I wrote based on discussions, both formal and informal, that we had had in the past. Thus, this version includes Isabelle's insights on the analysis that were shared with me at a team meeting on November 4th, 2003.

[5] These series of interactions occurred at the Archives, in and around team meetings. I am not including verbatim accounts of our discussions because Isabelle has asked me not to. She told me that she regretted the words she used against me in anger, and preferred that they not be reproduced; that, instead, the gist of our conflict be described.

[6] The Archives have contributed to the process by working on a subcommittee charged with the activity and by providing consultative services with respect to interviewing and production of historical products.