

DU SILENCE À L’AFFIRMATION  
WOMEN MAKING HISTORY IN POINT ST. CHARLES

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## Abstract

Women made, and continue to make history in Point St. Charles, and in doing so, transform selves, groups and community.

Building on the literature on class and gender in community organising, read through the conceptual lens of “translocational positionality” (Anthias, 2002a), I tell a story of the journeys of a group of ten women activists through four decades of neighbourhood organising. I show that although all the women were first involved in citizens’ committees around practical needs such as housing, welfare, urban renewal and education, most of them, stimulated by feminist *agitators* in their midst, came to *new awareness* about gender inequalities, to new and deepening *analyses*, and to individual and collective *actions* around strategic gender needs. Part and parcel of this *spiral of change* (Nadeau, 1996) were the *tensions* that emerged with their families, friends and neighbours, and even with the agitators themselves. Out of these tensions came *transformations* at the macro level – community, public opinion and government, at the meso level – organisational structures and cultures, and at the micro level – family and selves.

Next I do a metanarrative on the methodology that underlies the project upon which my thesis is based, one that borrows from feminist community organising practice (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1994) to deal with the many ethical dilemmas inherent to feminist life history methodology (Geiger, 1990). In line with the notion of “translocational imaginings in dialogue”, the project was conceptualised to pre-figure *power-with* (Starhawk, 1987) in order to construct narratives of belonging that break with processes of differentiation and stratification. The project is about doing community history *with* the people who make that history. Because of this, when tensions emerged around power relations, instead of paralysis, individual, interpersonal and collective transformations emerged.

Through this work, I am not only releasing new voices into the collective narrative, but I am also contributing to debates on life history methodology. And, my thesis, and the other historical products that will emerge from this project, will enable organisers and activists to learn from the past, and will, hopefully, entice younger people to get involved in community activism.

## Résumé

D'hier à aujourd'hui, à Pointe-Saint-Charles, les femmes font l'histoire. Ce faisant, elles se transforment, ainsi que les groupes, et la communauté.

Partant de la littérature traitant de classe et genre en organisation communautaire et utilisant les lunettes de la « translocational positionality » (Anthias, 2002a), ma thèse relate le cheminement de dix militantes au cours de quatre décennies. Bien que toutes aient d'abord été impliquées dans des comités de citoyens sur des questions pratiques (logement, assistance sociale, rénovation urbaine, éducation), je démontre que plusieurs d'entre elles, animées par des *agitatrices* féministes, sont parvenues à une *nouvelle conscientisation* à propos des inégalités entre les sexes, à des *analyses* nouvelles et approfondies, et à des *actions* individuelles et collectives quant aux questions stratégiques liées au genre. Des *tensions*, survenues entre les femmes et leurs familles, amies et voisines, et les agitatrices elles-mêmes, ont fait partie intégrante de cette *spirale du changement* (Nadeau, 1996). De ces tensions ont surgit des *transformations*, tant sur le plan macro (communauté, opinion publique, gouvernement), méso (structures et cultures organisationnelles) et micro-socioéconomique (famille et individus).

Je propose ensuite une métanarration de la méthodologie qui sous-tend le projet sur lequel repose ma thèse; il s'inspire de la pratique féministe en organisation communautaire (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1994) pour composer avec les nombreux dilemmes éthiques inhérents à la méthodologie historique féministe (Geiger, 1990). Inspiré de la notion des « translocational imaginings in dialogue », la conceptualisation du projet permet de préfigurer le *pouvoir avec* (Starhawk, 1987) de manière à construire des récits d'appartenance qui rompent avec les processus de différenciation et de stratification. Il s'agit d'écrire l'histoire communautaire *avec* les personnes qui la font. Ainsi, ce n'est pas la paralysie mais plutôt des transformations individuelles, interpersonnelles et collectives qui sont nées des tensions.

Par cet ouvrage, je permet non seulement à de nouvelles voix de participer au récit collectif, mais je contribue également aux débats entourant la méthodologie historique. Ma thèse, et les autres fruits qui découleront du projet, permettront aux organisatrices et militantes d'apprendre du passé et motiveront, je l'espère, l'implication de plus jeunes gens dans l'action communautaire.

## Acknowledgments

The project upon which my thesis is based, “Tissons une courtePointe: L’histoire de l’action communautaire à travers les histoires de vie de femmes de Pointe St-Charles” is an on-going collaborative effort between the “Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles” and myself. The Archives contributed physical space, material and human resources, community networks, as well as long-standing local activist experience. I thank present and past Board members, as well as staff members, who have been extremely supportive of the project over the years. I would like to express my particular appreciation to Jean-Guy Dutil and Jocelyne Bernier, local leaders, who have taught me a great deal about the neighbourhood and its activism, and who were always available to answer questions, and to share anecdotes.

Many people have worked on this project. Isabelle Drolet, staff member of the Archives and long-time activist, co-coordinated the project with me from the beginning. Isabelle and I worked as a team on all parts of the project, from the initial and continued contact with project participants, to the elaboration of the proposal, to the planning, organising and facilitating of all interviews, to the reading of the narratives, to the conceptualising of the historical products. Isabelle also edited all the French excerpts in my thesis. Moreover, through our many de-briefing, conflict-resolution, checking-in sessions, and exchanges on previous versions of my thesis, Isabelle challenged me into clarifying and developing my thinking and practice, and contributed many ideas and analyses that have fed the metanarrative on the history-making process that is central to my thesis. Isabelle’s pride in the neighbourhood, and her heartfelt commitment to the project, have always been palpable. I thank her for all of this.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My thesis is one of the products of a collaborative history-making project<sup>1</sup>, between myself and a local community organisation, “Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles” (“The Archives”). The Archives was set-up in the mid-1990s by local activists to preserve the archives of community organisations, to collect oral histories, and to use history as a tool for mobilisation in the present; I have been involved with the Archives, as member and activist, since 1998. In addition to treating the archives of several local organisations, the Archives has been actively involved in popular education activities over the years, including a film festival using videos from the 1960s-1970s; a scrap-book style document on an Anglophone welfare rights coalition (1970-1975); an exhibit on women and community organising (1950s-2000); “Know your neighbourhood” activities with school children; a guided visit on the exodus of factories due to closure of industrial canals and issues of gentrification; local history workshops for local folks and new people arriving in the neighbourhood; and the project that is the subject of my thesis.

### BIRTH OF THE PROJECT

I first came to Point St. Charles in 1998 as an activist interested in community action. One of my social work professors (I was doing my BSW at McGill University) had invited me to attend a meeting of what was at the time the Archives in the making. I was taken in by the stories and experiences of some of the older local activists who were concerned with the preservation of the rich history of community action in their neighbourhood – and I joined the team. At the same time, I decided to do my social work field placement at the Point St. Charles Community Clinic in the organising team. During my year as

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<sup>1</sup> Tissons une courtePointe: L’histoire de l’action communautaire à travers les histoires de vie de femmes de Pointe St-Charles.

“stagiaire”, and later as paid organiser, I was responsible for the local organising efforts for the World March of Women of the Year 2000. My involvement at the Archives continued, and my interest in the history of Point St. Charles and in the idea of using history as a popular education tool in the present, was growing. By the end of 1999 I had finished my BSW, at which point I was accepted into the McGill-Université de Montréal joint doctoral program in Social Work based on a proposal to document the history of community organising in Point St. Charles.

The idea for the project emerged from the exhibit the Archives had prepared on women in organising for the World March of Women activities, “Du foyer au quartier: L’histoire de l’action communautaire au féminin”. This exhibit was part of the Montréal Agora of the World March, an outdoor space organised downtown for a week in October 2000, that was filled with kiosks and popular education activities. Although some local activists came to the Agora to see the exhibit, most of the people who attended were not from the neighbourhood. In the following year the exhibit became a roving one, as we installed it in different local organisations, and facilitated discussions on the topic. When we did the “bilan” of the project, we noted that the women interviewed had a lot to say, and that the nature of the exhibit made it such that we had to choose punchy excerpts, thereby often losing the complexities and nuances of the storytelling. In light of this, we recommended that the next product be one that would allow the stories to remain complete – a book perhaps.

During this period I was beginning my doctoral program, and was having to decide on a dissertation topic. I decided to join my activist with my academic interests, and in doing so chose to focus my studies on the history of community organising as told through life stories of women activists. I spent several months reading and synthesising the literature on the intersectionality of class and gender, and on feminist oral history for my comprehensive exam,

and my literature review. It is this academic work, coupled with my experiences with the Archives that led me to propose to the Board a collaborative project. I proposed that I work with the Archives to do a participatory history project with two groups of women, one English-speaking and one French-speaking. From this I would garner data for my thesis, and we would also create historical products for the neighbourhood. The Board accepted.

From the initial idea, however, the project was developed, consolidated, and run, from beginning to end, with community residents in general, and specifically, with Isabelle Drolet<sup>2</sup> who co-coordinated the project. Concretely, the project consists of two groups of women (one English, one French) who have been involved in community activism for over 25 years, who have been meeting for almost three years to document together a history of community action in Point St. Charles. During these monthly meetings, the women have been telling the stories, and doing the readings (interpretation and analysis), with the ultimate goal of weaving their different voices into a quilt of stories that represents a picture of their experiences. The participants, and community residents working 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. In addition to my thesis, the quilt of stories will be transformed into various products for multiple audiences: a “coffee-table” book as a “gift” to the neighbourhood, a documentary film to use as a popular education tool, an academic book for students of community organising, academic articles, a manual for groups

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<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to break with traditional academic protocol, to use the names of the people who have worked on the project in order to recognize – publicly – their invaluable contributions to the project. Every person whose name appears in the text has signed a consent form (Appendix 1).

wanting to “do” history in this way, workshops for new arrivals to the neighbourhood, to name a few.

My thesis is based on this participatory project. I have two main objects of analysis. First, I explore the journeys of these ten women – as women – through their involvement in community activism. Second, I do a meta-narrative on the history-making process that we used to garner these stories, one that applies principles borrowed from feminist community organising practice to feminist life history methodology.

### OBJECTIVES

Underlying my thesis are explicit social change goals. In exploring the spiral of change of women’s journeys through history I aim to release different voices into the academic landscape, voices that are often barred from history-making because of gender and class. In doing so, not only do I bring in different information, and analysis, on different areas of memory, but I also contribute to the recognition of women’s important contributions to community activism. Moreover, in exploring the transformative potential of this innovative project, that borrows many tricks from feminist community organising practice, I aim to contribute to the literature on oral and life history methodology, in general, and specifically to the discussions on the many ethical dilemmas related to power-dynamics in history-making. Finally, but not least important, in collaborating with neighbourhood activists on this project, I share the social change goals that they have identified, including drawing lessons to help organisers and activists learn from the successes and failures of the past, and using history to entice young people to get involved in community activism.

### WHY DO THIS PROJECT?

The project upon which my thesis is based is important and innovative in many ways. It is important in that it is about documenting the history of community organising in a working-class neighbourhood, and innovative

because this story is being constructed by and for the very people involved in the making of that history – in this case, women.

### WHY DOCUMENT COMMUNITY ORGANISING HISTORY?

Documenting community organising history is an important undertaking, in and of itself. First, a permanent record is created of organisations and of lessons from the past, essential not only to the research phase of the organising process, but also for legitimising social change work vis-à-vis funding agents, the government and public opinion (Fisher, 1999). More than that, however, it enables organisers to draw lessons from past successes and failures, which, when applied to the contemporary context can help increase the chances of success of organising strategies, and reduce the chances of “re-inventing the wheel” (Fisher, 1999; Panet-Raymond & Mayer, 1997; Shragge, 1999; Mayer, Lamoureux, & Panet-Raymond, 1996; Piven & Cloward, 1977; René & Panet-Raymond, 1984; Wharf & Clague, 1997). This record of organising can be used, very concretely, by new organisers and activists arriving in community organisations to learn about their groups before attempting to intervene, by groups in their recruitment of members, and by teachers and students of organising. Second, by bringing together many little successes into a larger whole, activists and organisers are better able to recognise that their work has an impact over time, a realisation that can help reduce feelings of powerlessness, and can even stimulate new energy and hope in the potential outcome of activism. Often, this collective memory can lead to a rekindling of interest in older activists, and a birth of interest in the younger generations. In fact, celebration around cumulated successes, be they large or small, is part and parcel of a successful organising strategy, given that recognition of work well done – work that is often done on a volunteer basis and in the shadows – is an element that helps sustain people in their activism over the long haul (Fisher, 1999; Panet-Raymond & Lavoie, 1996).

Notwithstanding all this, community groups rarely take the time to preserve their archives and to record the stories of their activists because of very real front-line pressures to act immediately (or “yesterday”). Not only are the groups constantly “in the heat of the action”, but their limited financial and human resources make it such that simply doing *all* the day-to-day work of the organisations is often impossible, and the past, although recognised as essential to current organising, is relegated to boxes in the basement. In line with this, Robert Fisher claims that:

while the importance of history of community organising seems obvious, it has not overly impressed most social workers or community organisers. It is not that social workers and community organisers don't know the importance of history. They've just had little time for it, always overwhelmed as they are by contemporary events and have not valued it as much as other research or organisational tools (Fisher, 1999, p.335).

History that is not preserved or documented is lost with time, and although historians have documented the histories of certain communities elsewhere (see Brecher, 1986; Mercier & Buckendorf, 1992; Millar, 1982; Osmond, 1998; Sitzia, 1998), rarely do they focus on community organising. In fact, to my knowledge, in Québec, although there are several records of community organising in general (e.g., Bélanger & Lévesque, 1992; Doré, 1992; Doucet & Favreau, 1991; Favreau, 1989; Hamel, 1991; McGraw, 1978; Panet-Raymond & Mayer, 1997; Shragge, 1999) there are no *comprehensive* socio-historical records of neighbourhood organising that detail the experiences of activists at the grassroots level.

### WHY POINT ST. CHARLES?

Point St-Charles is a working-class neighbourhood in the South-West of Montreal with a vast network of resident-run community organisations. Prior to the 1960s, “the Point” was very much an “urban company town” during the industrial boom of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with most folks working in factories and living in squalor, and under the control of the Church and local elite. With

the changing context of the 1960s, many factories fled, causing massive lay offs, increased unemployment, economic decline, and structural poverty. It is in this context that citizens, strong of their long-standing sense of belonging and pride in the neighbourhood, and of an overall feeling of solidarity and mutual aid, began organising, with the help of organisers and progressive priests, to set-up community groups, in an effort to improve their quality of life and to fight for social justice. These resident initiatives led to the birth of a community health clinic, a community legal clinic, several popular education groups, numerous advocacy groups, housing cooperatives, a women's center, and a community pharmacy, to name a few.

All of this has contributed to the Point's reputation in the wider community movement in Quebec, as a leader in innovation and action. Not only did the imagination and creativity of local residents and allies lead to the development of new direct action and lobbying tactics, new forms of organisation, mobilisation strategies, and popular education techniques, but many of the community organisations set-up in the Point became models for the development of state services (e.g., CLSCs, legal aid clinics). Currently, with increasing professionalisation and the shift away from action-mobilisation toward service provision in the community movement, Point St. Charles groups remain among the most confrontational and autonomous.

These traditions, from the 1950s to the present, need to be preserved, and rendered alive and accessible to local residents, to organisers, and to the society at large. Although many articles have been written on one group or another, the latter are scattered and generally inaccessible to organisers and activists. And, even though, through the Archives, the neighbourhood has begun to amass the archives of local groups, these primary sources need to be sifted through, summarised and transformed into material that can be used by people wanting to learn from the past. Because of all this, and because the neighbourhood already boasts a group interested in preserving and rendering



accessible the history of its community organisations, the Point is a very logical place to begin the work of documenting the history of community action from the bottom-up.

### WHY WOMEN?

It has been demonstrated, time and time again, that women are the backbone of community, and that they form the majority of members in community organisations in the western world (e.g., D'Amours, 1985a; Andrew, 1985; Price-King, 1994, cited in Brown & Ferguson, 1995; Castells, 1983; Cockburn, 1977; Dabrowski, 1983; Community organiser, Marie Nahikian, from Weaver, Wheeler, & et al., 1978; Payne, 1990; Pope, 1990), and this, across time (e.g., Rabrenovic, 1995), and, irrespective of ethnicity/race or class (e.g., DeSena, 1998; Dixon, Johnson, Leigh, & Turnbull, 1982; MacDonald, 1996). Guida West, after having documented the history of the National Welfare Rights Organisation (NWRO) in the United States, wrote: “I became aware that, while the NWRO was officially labelled by all as a poor peoples’ movement, it was in fact a movement of poor women, mostly black” (West, 1981, p.xiii).

Notwithstanding this overwhelming evidence, it is only recently that scholars from different disciplines have begun recognising and problematising the gendered, classed, and racialised “nature” of activism and community organising. In fact, Doug McAdam, admitted that social movement theorists, in their concern with

teasing out the *generic* dynamics of individual activism [...], have almost totally ignored gender’s impact. In doing so, [they] have perpetuated a fiction: that recruitment to, participation in, and the consequences of activism are somehow experienced in the same way by all participants. Clearly, this is false (McAdam, 1992, p.1214, 1234, emphasis mine).

Moreover, social movements’ theory, in focussing most of its attention on formal politics or broad-based social movements located outside the community sphere, has also perpetuated the myth that women, especially those positioned

as low-income, whose politics are often of the community sphere (as I will discuss below) are not “political”. Finally, social movements’ theory has tended to ignore the fact that community organising, and the work done by women in the community, often provide the networks which form the bases of social movements by tying them to the grassroots (see Cloward & Piven in West, 1981; Krauss, 1989; Robnett, 1996; Stall & Stoecker, 1998).

Community organising theory has perhaps fared better than social movements’ theory in recognising the complex social relations and processes active in community. However, although a number of scholars deal specifically with gender, class and ethnicity/race in community organising (e.g., Callahan, 1997; Dominelli, 1990; Dominelli, 1991; Dominelli, 1995; Gutiérrez, Alvarez, Nemon, & Lewis, 1996; Hyde, 1989; Mayo, 1977; Ng, Muller, & Walker, 1990), the approaches and models still prevalent today are either gender-blind or gender specific, dealing with women-only organising. Gender, class and ethnicity/race relations are ubiquitous in society, and by default in community and community organising, and need to be problematised at all times, not only when women or people of colour are at issue (Callahan, 1997; Dominelli, 1990; Hyde, 1996; Muller, 1990). Feminist theory has perhaps had the most to contribute to the analysis of the gendered community, and more recently to the intersectionality of gender, class and ethnicity/race in community and community organising (Afshar & Maynard, 2000).

Québec is no exception, and apart from a few magazine articles written mostly in the 1980s (e.g., D’Amours, 1985b), a couple of articles problematising the role of women in groups in Québec (e.g., Panet-Raymond, 1981), most of the writing on women’s activism has been about the women’s movement per se (e.g., Le Collectif Clio, 1982; Dumont & Toupin, 2003; Darsigny, Descarries, Kurtzman & Tardy, 1994; Descarries, 1997; DeSève, 1994). Moreover, most of the historical literature on community organising has been written by men, mostly organiser-academics, and from the perspective of the

organisers/animators. To my knowledge, there is no comprehensive review of the experiences of women activists in mixed-gender community groups in Québec.

Documenting the point of view of women in community groups, is important, however, because the experience of members may be different than that of organisers or that of women in the “feminist movement”. Sharing these stories will not only lead to new and perhaps different avenues for organising, but these different voices, released into the historical landscape, will also change the collective narrative that is history. Moreover, in documenting the experiences of these women, whose voices are often barred from history-making structures because of gender *and* class, they come to identify themselves as *historical actors* and others who read this history, are reminded that everyone is a maker of history, irrespective of class, gender, race/ethnicity.

#### WHY PARTICIPATORY LIFE HISTORY METHODOLOGY?

Because personal biography is intricately related to women’s experiences in community organising, as I will show in the next Chapter, the methodology of choice for the documenting of women’s experiences in community, is life history. And, because the objectives of the project in general, and of my thesis specifically, are about social change, it makes sense to involve the women who are participating in the project in every step of the history-making process. Like many other feminist scholars, I believe that women, in telling their stories, in interaction with the historian, are engaged in a learning process (e.g., Pineau, 1986). Moreover, 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, 1991a, my emphasis). Thus, social change in history is about more than outcome, it is also about process. The actually doing of the history can be empowering.

Notwithstanding the latter, however, inherent to the history-making process are many ethical dilemmas related to power-dynamics which, if unproblematised, can lead to objectification and to the “taking advantage of” of narrators and community by researchers (e.g., Geiger, 1990; Patai, 1991; Sangster, 1994). Many 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). Feminist anti-racist activists and community organisers (e.g., Bishop, 1994; Dominelli, 1995; Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1994; Nadeau, 1996; Starhawk, 1987) have developed and honed strategies and tools that facilitate the pre-figuring of social processes and relations that break with differentiation and stratification (Anthias, 2001a). These strategies and tools, when applied to the doing of life history in community, help mitigate the ethical dilemmas and can lead to real social change.

Thus, in choosing to build a methodology which bridges organising practice and historical methodology, we (the Archives and I) are, in fact experimenting with pre-figurative historical methodology, one that is based upon the spiral of change, and the notion of power-sharing, or *power-with* (Starhawk, 1987). That is, this methodology creates the conditions of mutual respect (Geiger, 1990; Gregg, 1991) that are necessary for “translocational imaginings in dialogue” (Anthias, 2002a), in plain organising language, for transformations at the individual, interpersonal, and collective levels (Rouffignat et al., 2001).

## THESIS OUTLINE

In light of this, I begin, in *Chapter 2*, with a quick overview of the theoretical concepts that guide my work and with a comprehensive review of the literature. After explaining the notion of “translocational positionality”, a concept that guides the entire thesis, I discuss the intersectionality of class and gender in community organising. Next, I explore the literature on feminist history-making in general, and on life history methodology specifically. I then bring in community organising concepts and principles, and finish the chapter by showing how the latter, when combined with feminist life history methodology, has the potential to bring many solutions to the ethical dilemmas inherent to the transformative history-making process. Following the latter, in *Chapter 3*, I begin by describing the methodology that we developed based on our experiences at the Archives, and on the bridging of historical methodology with feminist organising practice. Next, I demonstrate how the latter is truly feminist, and truly community run, by discussing who the actors were, the organisational forms used, and my own positionality.

In *Chapter 4*, I attempt to provide the reader with the socio-historical context that is necessary to then understand the participants journey’s – as women – through that history. After having painted a picture of the neighbourhood prior to 1963, I describe the birth and genesis of community action in Point St. Charles, put into larger Montréal and Québécois context. I have chosen to stop in 1980, because as of this year, the movement made a qualitative jump, out of the “period of awakening” (Shragge, 1999; Panet-Raymond & Mayer, 1997). Into this history I weave each participant’s first involvements, and in doing so, avoid the essentialist trap of presenting their biographies as disconnected from the socio-historical context. In *Chapter 5* I show that although all the women were first involved in citizens’ committees and community groups around practical needs such as housing, welfare, urban renewal and education, most of them, stimulated by feminist *agitators* in their

midst, came to *new awareness* about gender inequalities, to new and deepening *analyses*, and to individual and collective *actions* around strategic gender needs. Part and parcel of this *spiral of change* were the *tensions* that emerged with their families, their friends and neighbours, and even the agitators themselves. Out of these tensions, however, came *transformations* at the macro, meso and micro levels, which are about shifting positionalities, perforating borders, and eliminating guards of differentiation and stratification.

In *Chapter 6* I illustrate how in the telling, reading and writing of these journeys, through a similar *spiral of change*, the story-tellers, the other women who worked on the project, myself, our interpersonal relations, and community were transformed. That is, I show that because of its participatory methodology, that bridges feminist organising principles with historical methods, the project resulted in transformations, which also emerged out of a series of tensions, at the individual, interpersonal, and collective levels. In *Chapter 7*, I conclude by summarising the lessons drawn from the women's experiences in the groups and from our collective experience during the history-making process, and I introduce a number of ideas for future perspectives.

#### CAVEATS

There are a number of caveats that need to be identified at this point. First, the interdisciplinary nature of my dissertation is at the same time one of its greatest strengths and one of its greatest weaknesses. While the rich pastiche of knowledge from the oftentimes isolated fields of social work, social movements, sociology, geography, urban studies, women's studies, history, anthropology, political science, to name a few, is what makes the project so unique, the caveats are important. The major weakness is that, as a PhD student, it is impossible for me to have an in-depth understanding of all these fields. As I read mounds of literature, I constantly discovered new and interesting areas that I had not yet seen – at one point, I had to stop reading

more material – and therefore, there are certainly pockets of literature that I have missed.

Second, history building based on life history is non-linear, full of contradictions, omissions, and themes that cross-cut chronology. This kind of history is inherently “messy” – thus, although I have attempted to make this “mess” as legible as possible, in an effort to break with the linear scientific paradigm, I have organised my material into categories that are best read as part of a spiral. My thesis does not follow the traditional “methodology”, “results”, “discussion” form, in that each part is intimately related to the other. In line with this, and because of the participatory nature of the methodology, the voices of project participants are present from the presentation and discussion of the methodology, to the conclusions. Because we were all involved in every step of the process, all of our voices are intertwined. *We all* have things to say about methodology, about the spiral theme, about the transformations, about the lessons to be drawn, and these collective readings are present in the excerpts. Because we were, in effect, “writing” the text, using the oral medium, the long excerpts found throughout the thesis need to be considered as texts of analysis in and of themselves (and not as proof of my analysis). Therefore, although, for sake of readability, I do highlight the main points and add my metanarrative where relevant, I have tried to limit the paraphrasing of their words. And, although I have made every attempt to make the excerpts the most legible possible, they are still “messy”, because when people tell stories and analyse together in a group, rarely is the process linear. The reader of my thesis should try to break with expectations of logically aligned, rational text. Instead, the reader should try to imagine her or himself at a jazz concert, listening and reacting to all the individual instruments, as they blend and contradict each other to form a melodious musical piece.

## CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING WOMEN AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISM, AND THE DOCUMENTING OF THEIR HISTORY

Women make community. And this, irrespective of class, race or ethnicity. Community issues are women's issues. Many feminist researchers, of different schools of thought, and generations, have discussed and sought to explain this phenomenon, and I draw on their work for my thesis. In Part I of this chapter, I look to the theoretical insights of Floya Anthias to help me frame my thesis. She develops a theory of social stratification based on the notion "translocational positionality", a concept that allows for difference, but also for social change. In Part II, I review what theorists have to say about class and gender in community organising. Specifically, I review what scholars have written about gender and class with respect to form, bases, issues, roles, and impact of community organising in the current North American context. Or, in other words, I discuss how social relations and their underlying social processes, in differing and intersecting realms, played out under certain ideological, material, and historical conditions, impact women's experiences of activism. And, how, out of these differing experiences, do differently positioned women generate their worldviews, and their styles of activism. In Part III, after a quick overview of the different trends in feminist history, I discuss the complex ethical and practical dilemmas of life history methodology along the following dimensions: objectives, questions, authority, narrator/researcher relationship, audience and interpretation, "who benefits" and truths/transformations. I do the latter in order to discover how women, out of their differing positionalities, can participate in the construction of their own history, and how I, as researcher and activist, can participate in the construction



of this history while remaining true to my political beliefs about the construction of knowledge, and of history<sup>3</sup>.

## PART I: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### WOMAN: A CONCEPTUAL IMPASSE

Feminism is above all about the emancipation of *women*. Descarries and Roy claim that, « pour nous être féministe veut dire d'abord et avant tout avoir un préjugé favorable à l'égard des femmes » ({Descarries-Bélanger & Roy 1988 936 /id}, p.2). Linda Alcoff agrees, arguing that that the concept of “woman” is central for feminists because it “is the necessary point of departure for any feminist theory and feminist politics, predicated as these are on the transformation of women’s lived experience in contemporary culture and the re-evaluation of social theory and practice from women’s point of view” (Alcoff, 1988, p.405). The concept of “woman” was central to the Western feminisms of the 1960s and 70s (see Descarries-Bélanger & Roy, 1988 for a comprehensive overview of American and French feminisms), as slogans such as “sisterhood is powerful”, “war of the sexes”, and “the personal is political” proliferated (Anthias, 2000)<sup>4</sup>. In the 1980s, however, the feminist liberation project, in its liberal, radical and socialist forms, was put into question by critics (e.g., hooks, 1984, Lorde, 1992) who pointed out their essentialism,

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<sup>3</sup> In reviewing the literature, in search of the answers to my questions, I have chosen to organise and synthesise the research findings using an amalgam of two organisational principles, which Lofland refers to as “the cumulative research findings” and “themes” principles (Lofland, 1997). I began by systematically reading the literature in an attempt to cumulate the findings on aspects of community organising and historical method relevant to my research questions that emerged, in great part from those very readings. Lofland claims that the latter is the best approach to take in that it brings social science closer to a “linear, cumulative undertaking [...] controlled and directed by deductive systems” (Gusfield, 1978 cited in Lofland, 1997). However, following post-structuralist critique, I don’t believe that I must seek one foundation for all theory or one grand narrative. Thus, although I borrow Lofland’s useful suggestions for reading the literature, I have a different goal in mind. Instead of scientific proof of causality, I seek to explore the contradictory and multiple truths about the different aspects of my research questions.

<sup>4</sup> I realize that this is an oversimplification and that there were many tendencies within the movement, including liberal feminism and radical feminism (with its different forms).

ethnocentricity, biological and/or economic reductionism (Anthias, 2000). “Woman”, they claimed, is highly problematic in that it is constructed in opposition to “man”, creating a binary that reproduces patriarchal relations (Alcoff, 1988). Moreover, how can anyone claim to know what woman is about when

every source of knowledge about women has been contaminated with misogyny and sexism? No matter where we turn – historical documents, philosophical constructions, social scientific statistics, introspection, or daily practices – the mediation of female bodies into constructions of woman is dominated by misogynist discourse (Alcoff, 1988, p.406).

And, to claim to talk about “woman” is fallacious, argues Anthias, because “woman” is fissured by class, ethnicity/race, age, and sexuality (Anthias, 1998). Thus, since the 1980s, a major contradiction has been emerging – between the need to preserve “woman” because of the feminist project, and the necessity to “deconstruct and de-essentialise (the concept) in all its aspects” in order to break with the patriarchal categorisation of women (Alcoff, 1988, p.406)<sup>5</sup>.

Writing in 1988, Linda Alcoff claimed that most feminists responded to this contradiction in either of two ways<sup>6</sup>. Feminist authors, that Alcoff regroups loosely as “cultural feminists”, chose to deal with the problem by defining, describing and evaluating women themselves (see Echols, 1983 for a detailed explanation; Alcoff cites Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Susan Griffin, Kathleen Barry, Janice Raymond, Florence Rush, Susan Brownmiller and Robin Morgan), while those she calls “post-structuralist” feminists worked to deconstruct and eliminate the very concept (Alcoff cites Biddy Martin, Julia Kristeva). The former

argue that the problem of male supremacist culture is the problem of a process in which women are defined by men, that is, by a group who has a contrasting point of view and set of interests than women, not to mention a possible fear and hatred of women. The result of this has been a distortion and devaluation of feminine characteristics, which now can

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<sup>5</sup> In order to limit the scope of my thesis, I have but skimmed the literature. This brief overview does not, by any means, do justice to all the work of feminist thinkers since the 1960s.

<sup>6</sup> For a debate between these two tendencies, see Kamuf, 1982 and Miller, 1982.

be corrected by a more accurate feminist description and appraisal. Thus the cultural feminist reappraisal construes woman's passivity as her peacefulness, her sentimentality as her proclivity to nurture, her subjectivity as her advanced self-awareness, and so forth (Alcoff, 1988, p.406-407).

The major contribution of cultural feminists, according to Alcoff, has been their questioning of the emphasis placed by liberal feminists on attaining the male sphere (public) by taking on "male" attitudes and characteristics. They have done so by describing and analysing "female" characteristics and domains (private), leading to a recognition and celebration of women's spaces and of community. However, the underlying assumption of a *universal* "feminine or motherhood essence" (thus ahistorical, with no consideration of context) reinforces the divide between men and women, and therefore, does not lead to an emancipatory project for women, and even takes the movement one step back (Alcoff, 1988).

At the other extreme, are feminists borrowing from French psychoanalytic and post-structuralist critics such as Lacan, Foucault and Derrida:

Feminists who take this tactic go about the business of deconstructing all concepts of woman and argue that both feminist and misogynist attempts to define woman are politically reactionary and ontologically mistaken. Replacing woman-as-housewife with woman-as-supermom (or earth mother or super professional) is no advance. Using French post-structuralist theory these feminists argue that such errors occur because we are in fundamental ways duplicating misogynist strategies when we try to define women, characterise women, or speak for women, even though allowing for a range of difference within the gender. The politics of gender or sexual difference must be replaced with a plurality of difference where gender loses its position of significance (Alcoff, 1988, p.407).

Thus, not only is there no "universal woman", but there is no "woman". Post-modern gender theory contributes immensely by discussing ethnicity/race, class and gender as social relations, by allowing more room for difference, for complexity and arguably, for agency (versus the deterministic side of grand

narratives that conceptualised the root problem as uniquely structural). The flip side, however, is that eternal deconstruction, the proliferation of difference, and the impossibility for individual subjects to act on social institutions since they are “undecidable”, as is the Subject, make it impossible to build a common project for emancipation (e.g., hooks, 1990a). Also, in focussing uniquely on identity politics and celebration of eternal difference, post-structuralist feminists have tended to ignore that there are real power relations (of subordination and domination), and real inequalities (Anthias, 1998). Alcoff, wonders:

What can we demand in the name of women if ‘women’ do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do? How can we speak out against sexism as detrimental to the interests of women if the category is a fiction? How can we demand legal abortions, adequate child care, or wages based on comparable worth without invoking the concept of ‘woman’? (Alcoff, 1988, p.419).

As the theoretical and political impasses of essentialism on the one hand, and nominalism (and fragmentation) on the other, become more and more evident, feminist thinkers in various fields are attempting to develop alternative concepts (e.g., Alcoff, 1988; Butler, 1993; de Lauretis, 1984; Irigaray, 1977; Riley, 1983; St-Hilaire, 1994). These critiques are the foundations upon which feminists have been reinventing their field (Anthias, 2000). It is the recent work of Floya Anthias, however, that is most relevant to my thesis. Anthias avoids the traps of both essentialism and nominalism. She does this by theorising the concept of “translocational positionality”, a notion that includes both difference and stratification. The sociological underpinnings of her extensive theorising are extremely useful to my attempts to analyse the social relations and social processes that relate to life chances, life conditions and therefore to social change.

### TRANSLOCATIONAL POSITIONALITY

Floya Anthias develops a theory of social stratification around the concept of “translocational positionality”. “A translocational positionality is

one structured by the interplay of different locations relating to gender, ethnicity, race and class (amongst others), and their at times *contradictory* effects” (Anthias, 2002b, p.275, her emphasis). Positionality “combines a reference to social position (as a set of effectivities: as *outcome*) and social positioning (as a set of practices, actions and meanings: as *process*)” (Anthias, 2001b, p.634, her emphasis). That is, positionality is the space at the intersection of structure (social position/social effects) and agency (social positioning/meaning and practice) (Anthias, 2001b, p.635). The notion of “location”

recognises the importance of context, the situated nature of claims and attributions and their production in complex and shifting locales. It also recognises variability with some processes leading to more complex, contradictory and at times dialogical positionalities than others: this is what is meant by the term ‘translocational’. The latter refers to the complex nature of positionality faced by those who are at the interplay of a range of locations and dislocations in relation to gender, ethnicity, national belonging, class and racialisation (Anthias, 2001b, p.634).

In order to understand the concept of translocational positionality, one must understand the domains, processes, contexts and outcomes that interact to construct it:

Gender, ethnos (ethnicity and ‘race’) and class may be seen as crosscutting and mutually interacting ontological spaces which entail social relations and social processes (*having experiential, intersubjective, organisational and representational dimensions*) that coalesce and articulate at particular conjunctures to produce differentiated and stratified *social outcomes*. Any analysis at the level of social outcomes cannot look at each social division in isolation from the other, therefore. The analogy of a *grid* may be useful which can be overlaid onto individuals. The different grids are experienced contextually and situationally as sets of simultaneous and mutually effective discursive instances and social practices (Anthias, 1998, p.531, her emphasis).

What this means is that people are located in relation to social relations of gender, ethnicity/race, class, associated with different domains, sex, origin, and economic, respectively. People differ from each other and are also positioned differently in the pecking order. People’s positioning in the pecking order

depends however, on the context. One person may be positioned in one way vis-à-vis another person's positionality and in yet another way vis-à-vis another person's positionality (e.g., my positionality vis-à-vis a white, middle-class man is different than that vis-à-vis a single-mother living in poverty). Moreover, positioning also changes depending on context (my positionality in Québec, with its welfare state and large middle class, is different than my positionality in Honduras, with its lack of health and social services and enormous gap between the rich and the poor). Positionalities are constructed by people, through narratives of belonging (of collective identities), by constructing differences (boundaries) on the one hand, and social positions (hierarchies) on the other. Positionality, however, is more than identification within a narrative of belonging – this identification is lived, in real life – it is practised (performed) via a multiple of social processes in the experiential, intersubjective, organisational, and representational realms (Anthias, 2001b). Through the processes of differentiation -- relationality/dichotomy, naturalisation, and collectivisation -- boundaries are constructed. Through processes of stratification – hierarchisation of difference (a pecking order of places, symbolically and materially), unequal resource allocation (concrete access to economic, political and symbolic cultural resources), and inferiorisation – hierarchies (or social positions) are constructed, operationalised as unequal life conditions. Because these social positions are always subjected to processes of differentiation, they become dichotomised, naturalised and collectivised, leading to “structural” life chances (which become then, predispositions).

I will now go into the different concepts that are discussed above in order to untangle their complexities. I begin by defining class, gender and ethnos, then I discuss the social processes and relations that are involved (differentiation and stratification), as well as the outcomes of these processes. Next, I turn to a discussion about the experiential, intersubjective, organisational and representation levels of class, gender and ethnos, to finish

with a discussion about how translocational positionality allows for agency while resisting the tendency to essentialise.

#### DEFINING CLASS, GENDER AND “ETHNOS”

Anthias claims that gender, class and ethnos are the main social divisions in Western societies. *Class* is linked to the domain of “production and reproduction of material life” (economic resources), *ethnos* (ethnicity and race), “to production and reproduction of bonds, sentiments and solidarities relating to collective origin and belonging, and *gender* is “linked to the production and reproduction of sex and biological reproduction” (Anthias, 1998, p.513, 523). Although the domains of class, gender and ethnos “work with different elements relating to different domains of social existence”, they “have certain common features in terms of the construction of differentiation and positionality” (Anthias, 1998, p.514).

#### DIFFERENTIATION

Differentiation is about the construction of difference (and of belonging), through the processes of relationality/dichotomy, naturalisation, and collective attributions. *Relationality/dichotomy* “constructs difference and identity in terms of a dichotomy or binary opposition between those within and those outside the boundary” (e.g., Black/White, man/woman, rational/emotional) (Anthias, 2001a. p.844). People construct narratives of belonging to define these boundaries (self-attribution and attribution by others):

These boundaries are shifting and changing; some are more a product of external constraints, like political, legal, national rules relating to membership. Others are inscribed in the body through the stigmata of absence and notions of incapacity/deformity via gender or disability. They may also be inscribed through body style (such as in class relations) or through colour physiognomy and the bodily and personal style/gait associated with ethnic difference (Anthias, 2002b, p.277).

(e.g., women are expressive, men are rational). *Naturalisation*, refers to the process by which these “categorical formations naturalise social outcomes (by

treating them as generic and fixed” (Anthias, 2001a, p.844). (e.g., women are “naturally” expressive, and men are “naturally” rational). Finally, the principle of *collective attribution* “functions to homogenise” (Anthias, 2001a, p.844). (e.g., “all” women are expressive, “all” men are rational). Collective attributions function by way of stereotypes and of “We-ness” or the self-construction of a collective identity (Anthias, 1998).

## STRATIFICATION

The second set of social processes which function in tandem with processes of differentiation are those of positionality or stratification. Thus, not only do the social divisions function to differentiate (and make similar), but through the processes of hierarchisation, unequal resource allocation and inferiorisation, they produce *inequality*. The principle of *hierarchisation* refers to the idea that social divisions (categories) are not value free, but in fact, “construct places or positions in the social order of things. Sometimes this involves the allocation of specific social roles as occupational (caste and class) or familial (gender) but more often than not these are accompanied by a pecking order of roles and places” (Anthias, 1998, p.520). None of these “systems of domination” function “in a coherent manner nor are they mutually exclusive. All individuals occupy places in each of them. But how they are attributed, the claims that they themselves make and their own psychic identifications may vary greatly” (Anthias, 1998, p.520)<sup>7</sup>. The principle of *unequal resource allocation* implies that people positioned differently have differential access to economic, political and cultural resources (Anthias, 1998)<sup>8</sup>. Finally, the notion

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<sup>7</sup> These social processes “are also implicated in the development of particular types of social relationships. These range from forms of closure where the group has resources it wishes to protect, to exploitation which is a form of subordinated inclusion (although this also entails closure in terms of the denial of access to the resources of the exploiting group). Relations of avoidance are found in the case of racism (such as apartheid), in the case of class stigmatisation and in the case of women in some cultures at certain times of the month and in certain contexts (during the menstrual cycle for example)” (Anthias, 1998, p.515).

<sup>8</sup> Instead of separating resources into the categories “symbolic” and “material”, Anthias argues, quite convincingly that all resources, be they political, economic or cultural have material and



of *inferiorisation* refers to the creation of a “norm” or a standard on one side of the binary against which all is compared, and is considered “Other” of “pathological”, and the consequent claim for the advantages of the “norm” (e.g., of men, of Whites) (Anthias, 1998).

#### LIFE CONDITIONS AND LIFE CHANCES

These sets of social processes, differentiation and stratification (or positionality) interact in a dialogical sense in that hierarchisation and unequal resource allocation become naturalised and collectivised (becoming “structural”). That is, not only do these processes lead to the formation of life conditions, but also to life chances (Anthias, 2001a). *Life conditions* “describe how a person is positioned in social relations in terms of structured social *outcomes* relating to resource allocation and social placement” (Anthias, 2001c, p.383-384, her emphasis). *Life chances* can be seen as a “set of *predispositions* and opportunities structured by the placement of individuals within different ontological realms: of production (class), sexual difference (gender) and collective formations (ethnicity)” (Anthias, 2001c, p.384, her emphasis). Thus, people have different life chances depending on their class, gender and ethnos – these are the structural effects, which form advantage and disadvantage, and which therefore “provide the *context* for the achievement of life conditions” (Anthias, 2001c, p.384, her emphasis).

#### EXPERIENTIAL, INTERSUBJECTIVE, ORGANISATIONAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL FORMS

All of these processes and outcomes are not determinate in that they all have experiential, intersubjective, organisational and representational forms (these factors crosscut differentiation and stratification). The *experiential* element (personal) “focuses on the experiences of persons (within specific

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symbolic elements. For example, when a person has much more money than is needed for his or her subsistence, the extra money becomes a status symbol, and is therefore no longer of the material realm.

locatable contexts, say in the school, in the workplace, in the neighbourhood) of being defined as different, identifying as a particular category”. The *intersubjective* (action) element includes “the actions and practices that take place in relation to others (including actors such as the social security system)”. The *organisational* factor (institution/structure) “focuses on the institutional and other organisational ways in which the ontological spaces are played out: for example, family structures and networks, educational systems, political and legal systems, the state apparatus and the system of policing and surveillance”. Finally, the *representational* (symbolic, discursive) element asks: “what are the symbolic and representational means, the images and texts, the documents and information flows around the ontological spaces?” (Anthias, 1998, p.512). The example of gender, detailed here by Anthias, illustrates the processes at these different levels:

Gender relates to the way in which sexual difference (itself discursively constructed) is experienced, practised/performed, organised, and represented (...) Gender is not only manifested in such facets as dress, habits, personality, attitudes, behaviour and sexual preference. It is not only about norms, representations and attributions. Gender is also about positionality and placement (...) The experiential dimensions of gender relate to constructions of identity as well as attributions by others, the intersubjective dimensions relate to the sphere of interactions and how these establish meaning and identities, the level of organisational relates to the range of social forms and institutions within which it is enacted and the level of the representational relates to the symbolic and discursive constructions that surround it. (...) For example discourses around sex and gender are embedded in juridical relations, state policies and the actions of social actors finding expression at all social levels, from the economic to the familial or personal. Gender manifests itself in society in a range of social processes and outcomes and involves social relations of subordination and inequality. In other words, the difference of gender is embedded in a range of social relations, including economic, political and juridical that produce differentiated outcomes along with the other constituent elements of the positioning of individuals (such as class, ethnicity, and racism). (...) Gender relations have material effects on human subjects as they are inserted into a broader range of social relations (Anthias, 1998, p.523-524).

Thus, women's place is not a sphere or domain (public or private) but a position within social existence. Positionality (from which we understand our lives) is a function of a set of social processes and outcomes (versus structures). And social institutions are the product of interaction of processes over time – there is a dialectic between the construction of identity and the construction of institutions.

#### ADVANTAGES OF THIS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The major advantage of this conceptual framework is that it takes us beyond the theoretical and political impasse of post-structuralist and cultural feminist theorising, and beyond the fragmentation of identity politics. It does so by bringing inequality back into the discussion of difference: differences are positioned in the pecking order of things, which lead to advantage and disadvantage (life chances and conditions), via a series of social processes. The latter allows us to go beyond the celebration of “difference” or the eternal delineation of difference (via deconstruction), as if there were no structural power relations, to naming the very processes that create hierarchies of difference. Because difference and inequality are conceptualised as a set of processes, and not possessive characteristics of individuals, it breaks with the “essential woman” and with deterministic structural theories, therefore opening the way for change. People participate (individually and collectively) in the construction of their identities, and can choose to utilise these very identities as resources in the struggle against inequality. That is, groups construct “ideas of class, gender or ethnic solidarity” (Anthias, 2001c) based on “collective allegiances” (Anthias, 2001a). They “deploy (resources) in terms of their positionality”; that is, they engage in “struggle around resource allocation” (Anthias, 1998, p.513). For example, women in the welfare rights movement might use their positionalities as “mothers” to legitimise their demands for increases in social security benefits by claiming that “their children are hungry”.

And, although the concept allows for agency, it does not fall into the trap of ignoring situational and contextual constraints that limit the way that people can be. As Maynard insightfully argues, it isn't true that everyone is equally able to choose identity in a free-market culture, as some post-structuralists' would argue; people's experiences are also mediated through material relationships and structures (Maynard, 1995). Anthias concurs, arguing that this concept allows us to "interrogat(e) discourses, practices, and structures at the more 'macro' level of analysis" (Anthias, 1998, p.531). Moreover, it helps explain why the intersections of social relations can be both mutually reinforcing (e.g., minority, poor, single mother lives in the worst social space, in many different political, economic and cultural contexts) and contradictory (e.g., poor man is in a relation of subordination to his boss, while in a relation of domination with his wife) (Anthias, 1998). In the first case, "social divisions articulate to produce a coherent set of practices of subordination", while in the second, social divisions "lead to highly contradictory processes in terms of positionality and identity" (Anthias, 1998, p.532).

#### RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The concept of translocational positionality, and all the processes that are involved, pave the way for a radical conceptualisation of equality, and for political strategies that could help build a new society. The underlying objective is to build "a participatory anti-racist and multicultural society which dismantles the preconditions for the reproduction of social locations and positions that are generally disadvantaging and limiting of human capabilities" (Anthias, 2002b, p.284). That is, since difference is not the problem (the objective is not to seek "sameness" or even to attain the same status as men), and the problem is seen as the unequal outcomes that flow from social variability (difference), the feminist project is to name and destroy the social processes that underlie the latter. Those social processes – naturalisation, collective attribution, hierarchisation, unequal resource allocation and

inferiorisation – are the “border guards of difference” (to use Anthias’ metaphor), and are at the heart of the problem.

Following this, in their theoretical and political work, feminists should attempt in every possible way to “denaturalise (...) difference and identity by showing the ways they are located historically and as social constructs” (Anthias, 2002a, p.41-42). Feminists should, at every moment recognise the “differences within individuals in terms of the interaction between the ways in which they are constructed and construct themselves situationally and contextually: therefore an emphasis (...) on gender, class and other forms of categorisations” (Anthias, 2002a, p.41-42). “Hierarchical otherness” needs to be deconstructed; that is, one kind of difference is not better than another, in as much as one or the other does not lead to unequal resource allocation (Anthias, 2002a).

Concretely, this means acting at all levels, the experiential, intersubjective, organisational and representational. At the experiential level, in the construction of narratives of belongings, feminists need to pay heed to the processes above. This involves, for example, being aware and problematising one’s own positionality, and shifting beliefs and practices. At the intersubjective level, through popular education or classroom teaching, for example, feminists can challenge each other to construct narratives of belonging that break with processes of differentiation and stratification. There is a need to recognise that although everyone is an agent in the construction of their own positionalities, there are also situational and contextual elements that constrain people differently depending on their positionalities (e.g., it may not be as easy for someone who has grown up on welfare to find a job as someone who’s father is an entrepreneur). Feminists also need to problematise the fissures inherent to any collectivity (e.g., feminist movement, who does it represent?). They can engage in transformative dialogue across positionalities, to breakdown the boundaries and categories, to shift them, to transform them into something

new, which in turn can help build movements based on common struggles to transform systems of domination. At the organisational level, feminists need to scrutinise and question the underlying assumptions, and mechanisms of accountability of “legal and political systems”, the “unequal resource distribution (of various institutions) across various social categories”, the violence inherent to the systems, and demand changes in policies and practices (e.g., harassment of women via policy of *bouboumacoutes*). At the representational level, feminists need to work to deconstruct and reconstruct the ways in which people are portrayed in media, popular culture, academic writing, teaching, etc. It is through these kinds of practices that “the terms of the agenda move away from the hailing of equality as the social ideal to something more akin to building a transformed imaginary of social relations where equality may go hand in hand with other ideals about solidarity and transformation of the social” (Anthias, 2002b, p.284).

#### A NOTE ON DIALOGUE

Given that our broader fight is one “against the *border guards* of difference and identity” (Anthias, 2002a, p.43, my emphasis), those processes that create social divisions, activists should also work to destroy these guards within their very organisations. This suggests a

politics of multiple identifications (rather than identities); a politics of identification with subordinated others/selves. This opens up the possibility of more reflexive forms of political struggle and avenues to greater dialogue and collaboration between groups organising around particular kinds of *struggles* rather than particular kinds of *identities* (Anthias, 1998, p.532, her emphasis).

This also suggests a pre-figurative politics that works to bring down the social divisions within organisations. Anthias argues that it is through dialogue – or the translocational imaginings in dialogue – that a society without domination will be enacted:

It is in the concept of dialogue, the focus on interaction and communication, and the shifts in position that become possible through

this process, that a potential may be found in revealing the fluidity of boundaries and their social rather than natural construction. Such a process can encourage notions of a self which is multiple, not just in terms of an accretion of different identities but one that can encompass otherness. In such a model, the self and the other are no longer experienced as eternal binaries but are aspects of each other (Anthias, 2002a, p.23).

Collette St-Hilaire develops a similar idea and applies it to the traditional practices of the feminist movement, that of “consciousness raising”:

Comme féministes nous avons jusqu’à maintenant privilégié une approche humaniste : éduquer, c’est libérer la conscience, la modeler pour qu’elle coïncide avec le réel (...) Pourquoi pas modifier la perspective ? Viser la déstabilisation du sujet plutôt que sa consolidation ? Analyser les processus de création de la différence sexuelle plutôt que de chercher à découvrir la vérité des femmes ? Ainsi débarrassée de l’objectif de production d’une conscience globale unifiée, la pratique de l’éducation féministe permettrait de résister aux diverses formes de domination tout en évitant la tentation identitaire et totalitaire (St-Hilaire, 1994, p.100).

Dialogue, asserts “the role of talk and voice, the right to be heard and the responsibility to listen. Such basic intersubjective competencies are important to structure the framework of debate at all social levels (...) : modes of persuasion, tolerance, understanding, empathy, shifting in position and recognising the multiple nature of the intersubjective encounter at the individual and group level are all important facets of this” (Anthias, 2002a, p.42).

Dialogue, however, is not immune to power dynamics. Anthias claims that the premises upon which dialogue is built are central, otherwise the relationship can reproduce patterns of domination.

Effective dialogue requires social conditions which maximise equal intersubjective and representational power: this can only happen effectively when incumbents of positions are able to meet on equal terms. For dialogue to be possible there must be a common framework of meaning and ability to establish equal positionalities from which to speak. Indeed, effective dialogue requires an already formulated mutual respect, a common communication language and a common starting point in terms of power. It also assumes the good will of partners in

dialogue (...) The notion of dialogue involves a notion of intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity assumes the possibility of dialogue as it denotes being oriented to another, and the practical accomplishment of communication and articulation. In dialogue you show who you are to yourself as well as to others (as meaning is emergent and only found in process, in the speech and in the action) (...) Difference and otherness may be transcended by dialogue (...) (However), it is clear that issues of power are raised. For dialogue becomes monologue in the colonial or hegemonic/hierarchised encounter (..) In such a case, dialogue is a way of enabling power, i.e., it is a legitimisation tool and there is constrained or enforced dialogue. (...) The premises upon which it is built are central. Going beyond merely seeing the other person's point of view must entail going beyond one's own point of view so that both parties shift their position, not coming closer to each other but developing an alternative vision which is transformative (Anthias, 2002b, p.282).

Thus, dialogue, although necessary, is not sufficient. That is, it “cannot begin to attack some of the processes that actually structure positions taken by groups and their members when they are located unequally in the social structure” (Anthias, 2002b, p.282). Anthias argues that activists and scholars “need to tie it to wider structural processes and resource claims also involving forms of politics around class and nation and democratisation more generally” (Anthias, 2002a, 43):

Such performativity, of orientations to the other, of goodwill, of the ethical encounter must be located within the rule of symmetry where access to resources of both a material and a symbolic nature involves effective participation and the autonomous self, i.e., this requires an emphasis on processes of equalisation at levels that include those of gender and class as well as ethnicity/race. However, *such processes can only become possible under conditions where the dialogical imperative has been enabled* and therefore we can reassert the notion of dialogue here in terms of a dialectical moment between establishing practices where dialogue is performative and working towards social arrangements which reinforce these processes (Anthias, 2002a, p.43, my emphasis).

Thus, although dialogue cannot be the solution to all relations of domination (e.g., there is no dialogue possible – in the current context – between a Palestinian living in a refugee camp and George Bush), it is a necessary ingredient to the development of another kind of society, one without



domination. It is by working with people who are open to dialogue, and by creating the conditions for mutual respect, that allow for the pre-figurative experimentation with social processes that allow for difference, but break with stratification, that a new society will be imagined and put into practice.

## PART II: WOMAN AND THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF GENDER AND CLASS IN COMMUNITY ORGANISING

*Women led the way in the fight against oppression, in spite of,  
and because of their race, gender and class  
(Barnett, 1993, p.177)*

People, both individually and collectively, generate their worldviews, their styles of activism, and construct selves, homes, community and state, depending on their positionalities, and on the context within which they are located. In this section, I show that out of the literature on women in community organising emerges the pattern that women, especially those positioned as low-income, often motivated by caring and nurturance, are at the heart of progressive community activism. Although this kind of activism is built upon the informal community work of women, in the organisations, they tend to do housekeeping tasks while the men or expert activists do the public representation (i.e., organisations tend to reproduce patterns of domination). I will also show that out of this activism, social transformation is possible, be it at the individual or collective level. Thus, ironically, within organisations that often reproduce oppressive social processes and therefore lead to unequal outcomes based on gender and class, women are able to carve out niches of activism, and even emancipation. It is this contradiction that I will explore next. But first, what exactly is “community”, and why are women over-represented in its activities?

### FORM OF ACTIVISM: COMMUNITY POLITICS

Community is fraught with contradictions. The notion itself originates, as an academic concept, from a critique of the social relations of capitalism by philosophers and sociologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bullock, 1990). With the industrial revolution, and the “capitalist chaos” that ensued (Tonnies’ “Gesellschaft”), family, and by extension, the community, came to be

considered the space for refuge, the intimate, warm, supportive haven (Tonnie's "Gemeinschaft") (Côté, 1995). It has been seen as the space within which those unable to care for themselves are cared for and where individuality is created and lived (Walker, 1990). Habermas refers to this space as the 'life-world': the space of daily life in which symbolic structures of society are reproduced through communicative processes (e.g., culture, tradition) (cited in Clark, 1994). Taking this a bit further, Murray Bookchin refers to this space as the living cell that forms the basic unit of political life, arguing that everything emerges from this local cell, including citizenship, interdependence, and liberty (Bookchin, 2001).

This 'life-world', however, is inflected with ethno-national, gendered, racialised, and sexualised meanings, and is specific to place and historical context (Bookchin, 1987; Bullock, 1990; Castells, 1983; Clark, 1994; Côté, 1995; Creese, 1996; McDowell & Massey, 1984; Muller, Walker, & Ng, 1990; Hayden, 1981; Matrix, 1984; Stimpson & Dixler, 1981; Wekerle, 1985; Wilson, 1981). Thus, the very construct of "community" is laden with complexity of meanings. Who is part of the community? Who is excluded? Communities can be extremely intolerant of difference and of change. Thus, through processes of differentiation and stratification, individuals and groups can and are excluded (and included), tolerated or marginalised (and celebrated). Above and beyond constructs of belonging, however, local institutions as well as activities of the everyday, reproduce, in a very concrete way, relations of domination. Many feminists have explained this by arguing that because the community is but an extension of the family, it often reproduces the private, hierarchically organised patriarchal form (Bullock, 1990; Burnonville, 1992). Women are often positioned as feminine, as mothers, and wives, with caring and nurturing responsibilities within the private sphere. They are constructed as trusting, kind, loving, and positioned as "man-servant", while men, positioned as breadwinners, leaders, and "go-get-hers" are assertive and confrontational (Finn,

1998; Hanmer, 1977; Panet-Raymond, 1981). Thus, paradoxically, “community” can be at once the cell of life, and that of oppression.

Women are at the centre of this contradictory “community”, leaders of this life world (following Habermas, cited in Clark, 1994). Because the community is considered to be an extension of the private home, of women’s social reproductive roles, community action is constructed as a ‘woman’s sphere’, as women’s area of expertise (Finn, 1998; Gallagher, 1977; Hamilton, 1990; Hanmer, 1977; Lawson & Barton, 1980). It no longer needs to be demonstrated that women are over-represented in the “informal” sphere, the community, while men are more likely to do politics in the “formal” realm, in electoral politics or in the workplace (Ackelsberg, 1988; DeSena, 1998; Dominelli, 1990; Dominelli, 1995; Smith, 1987). Women are often positioned as the guardians of the moral and social order, and as watchdogs of economic stability, be it within the family or the community (Finn, 1998).

Mixed into the grid, along with gender, however, are the ways in which processes of differentiation and stratification work within the domain of class. Research shows that middle- and upper-class women, although less likely to do their politics in electoral or workplace organising than men, are more likely to be involved outside their immediate geographical community than women positioned as lower-income. Women who have the financial means are able to pay other women to take care of their children, and/or to take care of household chores, giving them more free time to do politics outside of the community sphere (Marouli, 1995). Moreover, historically, the separation of spheres into private and public has always been more of a reality for middle- and upper-class women; lower-income women have more often had to bridge home, community and workplace in order to survive (Morgen & Bookman, 1988; Stansell, 1987). Often, the community is both living space and work space for these women (Pardo, 1998), therefore they suffer (or benefit) directly and more immediately from community conditions (Cockburn, 1977; Gallagher,

1977). Perhaps this explains why, in the 1960s, with the women's liberation movement, middle-class women moved to build woman-only spaces for liberation, rejecting the domestic experiences of their mothers and grandmothers. Many women positioned as low-income, on the other hand, chose to get involved with citizens' groups in the community (e.g., Adamson, Briskin, & McPhail, 1988; Berg, 1978; Bernal, 1998; Feldman, Stall, & Wright, 1998; Gluck, Blackwell, Cotrell, & harper, 1998; Haywoode, 1999; Kaplan, 1982; Kennedy, 1979; Marouli, 1995; Morgen & Bookman, 1988; Naples, 1991; Stansell, 1987; Smith & Valenze, 1988; Susser, 1986). Thus, the processes of differentiation explain why women, especially those positioned as low income, are over-represented in the community – they do community work because they are positioned as feminine, as wives and mothers, and/or as caring benevolent charity workers. They also help to explain differences in bases of organising, motivation for action, roles in organisations, and impacts of organising, as I will discuss below.

Coupled with these processes of differentiation however, are the processes of stratification (or positionality). People's differing experiences, in this case women positioned as low income, are not only differentiated by splitting the "private" (family, sexuality, intimacy, female) from the "public" (government, politics, workplace, male), but also stratified. It may not be a problem in and of itself that men and women do different kinds of politics; the problem emerges when the different kinds of politics and activities are stratified (and the social outcomes that ensue, are unequal). That is, the type of politics that women do are less valued than the kind that men do (processes of hierarchisation) (also see Lerber, 1997; Steedman, 1994; Brownill & Halford, 1990; Staeheli, 1995). The latter then become the norm against which all else are is compared (process of inferiorisation) and resources tend to be allocated unequally (formal politics, of the male domain, tend to lead to a better income, more cultural recognition, etc.).

Within the differentiated and stratified space that is community, women can, however, carve out spaces for shifting and reconstructing their positionalities. And, in fact, research shows that many women, positioned in the community sphere, do seize on its ambiguities to transform themselves, their groups and their communities. According to Haywoode:

Community is not a static concept, but rather is constantly in process. It is either being build, affirmed, and strengthened by people's participation, or weakened, torn down, and negated by their indifference (Haywoode, 1999, p.122).

In line with this, Ng and colleagues claim that community is "a product of people's activities and creations as people group together to struggle for *or* against domination" (Ng, Muller, & Walker, 1990, p.312, my emphasis). Thus, within community, people can construct narratives of belonging that break down the border guards of difference and stratification. And, people can build collective allegiances and engage in struggle around resource allocation.

When community becomes community struggle, the boundaries between the "public formal" and "private informal" domains of politics become blurred. Community concerns are brought into the public eye, the "personal" is made "political" (Haywoode, 1991b). Politics, therefore, is more than simply the formation of, or affiliation with a political party, or voting at election time. Ackelsberg defines politics as "attending to the quality of life in households, communities and workplaces" (Ackelsberg, 1988, p.308). The latter, however, equates politics with almost any activity under the sun. I prefer Nancy Naples definition; she defines politics as any struggle

to gain control over definitions of self and community, to augment personal and communal empowerment, to create alternative institutions and organisational processes, or to increase the power and resources of their community (Naples, 1991).

In line with this expanded notion of politics, Evans and Boyte coined the term "free spaces" to refer to

public spaces [in the community] in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills

and values of co-operation and civic virtue [...] settings between the private lives and large scale institutions [...] with a relatively open and particular character (Evans & Boyte, 1992, p.ix).

Therefore, although women, especially those positioned as low-income tend to do their politics in the community, and because of social stratification processes, their politics are less valued than that of others active in the formal political sphere, there is space, amongst the ambiguities to effect social change. Before outlining the transformative potential of community activism, however, I now turn to how processes of differentiation and stratification play out in other realms of community activism: bases, issues and motivations, and roles within organisations.

#### **BASES OF ORGANISING: WOMEN'S INFORMAL COMMUNITY WORK**

Studies have shown, time and time again, that women's informal community work, central to the life of neighbourhoods (Bookman & Morgan, 1988; DeSena, 1990; Dominelli, 1995; Haywoode, 1983; Lofland, 1975; McCourt, 1977; Seifer, 1973; Susser, 1982), often serves as the bases for community organising (e.g., Marouli, 1995; Naples, 1998a), and provides the sustaining bases of democratic social movements (Evans & Boyte, 1992).

Women's informal community work includes the creation and maintenance of networks (family, neighbours, schools, friends), mediation activities (with schools, with social services) and caring activities (children, friends, elderly, neighbours) (Brown & Christiansen-Ruffman, 1985 cited in Côté, 1995).

#### **MEDIATION AND CARING ACTIVITIES**

Women mediate everyday between families and the outside world (Bell & Ribbens, 1994). Women have the responsibility for the well being of their families, therefore they are forced to learn how to negotiate resources, financial and otherwise (services, etc.), especially if they are poor (Gallagher, 1977), with the State, and with husbands. Women tend to be the ones who negotiate with welfare officers regarding family benefits; who negotiate with landlords

regarding housing conditions or rent payments; who answer the door to the bailiff; who negotiate day care services; and who are the contact person for children's schooling (Delhi, 1990). Thus, women learn mediation skills in the home, watching their mothers and grandmothers mediate family dynamics and survival.

Related to the latter, is women's informal community caring. Women tend to do the unpaid caring in the neighbourhood (Dabrowski, 1983), caring that is essential to the welfare of families, neighbours and community (Bell & Ribbens, 1994). Women cook in order to nourish, clean and wash to ensure sanitary conditions and health, care for babies, children and the elderly to ensure life. These caring activities, and the skills women learn in engaging in them, are central to the construction of a successful community organisation, as I will show in the section on roles in organising. Women's positionality as carers and mediators, moreover, gives them credibility and the basis for them to have a strong voice and upon which to build a movement (Piven, 1984), as I will demonstrate in the sections on issues and motivations and on contradictory impacts of organising.

## NETWORKS

Central to the success of community organisations in low-income communities are women's neighbourhood networks. Though the activities of their everyday lives, women, whether they work outside the home or not, build, maintain and use neighbourhood networks. Terry Haywoode describes this process:

As [women] make their daily rounds of errands, shopping, escorting children, they weave and reweave the dense tapestry of social interactions which constitutes neighbourhood life. Women sitting on their front steps, looking out of their windows, chatting on the street corner or in the hallways of their apartment buildings, women sharing afternoon coffee or a friendly game of cards are all engaged in activities which construct the social reality of community (Haywoode, 1991b, p.172-173).



Social activities and parties are also part of this neighbourhood networking (Feldman, Stall, & Wright, 1998). These kinds of networks are especially prevalent in lower-income communities, where mutual aid is often a survival mechanism against poverty (Susser, 1982). Moreover, women positioned as low-income are more likely to spend time together doing tasks, as they meet up in the neighbourhood – at the grocery store, the Laundromat, the food or clothing bank, the park; middle- and upper-middle class women, on the other hand, are more likely to have their own washer and dryer, a babysitter, car, etc. (Kaplan, 1982).

Evans and Boyte refer to these female networks as “female spaces” at the complex intersection between the “private” domain of home and family and the public domain of work and politics (Evans & Boyte, 1992). They caution, however, that these female spaces are not, by definition, “free”. On the one hand, they can be seen as quite conservative, as they stem from traditional family roles and responsibilities. On the other, they constitute “the process of building a network of social exchange, information sharing, informal contacts, and the creation and affirmation of social integration and cohesion” (Haywoode, 1999, p.122-123). Within these networks, women can help each other out with caring responsibilities, share information on job openings, on how to work the welfare system and the other services of the welfare state (Susser, 1986; Dominelli, 1995). In these small groups, women can develop patterns of co-operation, communication and analysis (Susser, 1986), skills that are essential to coalition building (Castells, 1983; Neuhauser, 1998). As women share life experiences, they transform the personal into the political, and are therefore constantly re-positioning themselves; thus, these networks are central to the formation of political consciousness (Bell & Ribbens, 1994; Susser, 1982). These networks also create a certain structure, a stability, that is necessary to mobilise action (Finn, 1998). Overall then, these kinds of networks or “female spaces” are fundamental to grassroots organising (Feldman, Stall, & Wright,

1998; Weaver, Wheeler, & et al., 1978). Thus, community organisations that build on these “female spaces” have the potential to construct “free spaces” by contributing resources and an ideological framing (Costello, 1988).

For better or for worst, in the current historical context, the community is the domain of women, especially women positioned as low-income. Thus, community organising, or the “different ways in which groups of people [...] constitute themselves in various historical contexts using the notion of community” (Muller, Walker, & Ng, 1990, p.14), is necessarily gendered and classed. Community organising, however, often “*assumes* the presence of women in the family as available providers of care, nurture, services and particular forms of organisational labour” (Delhi, 1990, p.47, emphasis mine). Or, women’s informal community work is simply not recognised, and therefore not built upon in community organising. Worse still, women’s informal community work is “pooh-poohed” as “soft”, and discounted and tossed aside as parochial and conservative (Dominelli, 1990; Haywoode, 1999). The gendered and classed nature of community, and community organising must be recognised, and problematised. Doing so will not only allow scholars and activists to better understand how to best do community organising, but also how to struggle against the border guards that create and protect the status quo.

#### ISSUES AND MOTIVATION: FEMININE, MOTHERS CARING AND NURTURING

Women get involved in activism for different reasons, influenced, again, by their positionality. A ubiquitous finding, across the different disciplines, however, is that many women get involved in community organising and activism to protect their children, families, homes and community. They get involved to improve schooling for their children, to reduce car speeds, to reduce crime, to improve access to local services, housing and sanitation (Dabrowski, 1983; Gilkes, 1980; Krauss, 1998; McCourt, 1977; Naples, 1992; Susser, 1988). Cockburn writes that a woman is always doing whatever she does

because she loves the people whom she looks after (Cockburn, 1977). More recently, theorists in different fields have named this phenomenon activist mothering (Naples, 1992); maternal thinking and practice (Ruddick, 1995), housewife movements (Smith, 1987), the ethic of responsibility and connection (Delhi, 1990), female consciousness (Kaplan, 1982). Sandra Ruddick has written extensively on the subject of “maternal thinking and practice”, arguing that women’s gender-differentiated commitment to the centrality of preserving and nurturing life, is the major motivation for activism for *all* women (Ruddick, 1995).

The issues women choose to address, and their motivation to act, however, depend not only on gender, but also on class and racial/ethnic positioning within a particular historical context (Naples, 1992). Studies show that women of differing positionalities developed and participated in different kinds of activism in the historical context of the 1960s and 70s. The social movements of that period, shifts to neo-liberal government policies, changes with respect to gender roles, although common to all, were experienced differently depending on positionality. During this period, lower-income and working-class women tended to get involved in community-based organisations, motivated by a sense of urgency about a local problem (McCourt, 1977; Seifer, 1973; Weaver, Wheeler, & et al., 1978; West, 1981). Low-income and working-class communities were more often than not the ones to bear the brunt of industrial growth, highways, zoning changes, redevelopment, urban renewal, real estate speculation (Hamilton, 1990; Haywoode, 1991b; Seifer, 1973). Johnnie Mikulski, a neighbourhood activist, sums it up well:

we looked at our communities, the ‘old neighbourhoods’, not eligible for federal aid and abandoned by the private sector, with schools over 50 years of age, and far less priority than expressways to help the urban deserters. So we organised” (in introduction, p.ix of Seifer, 1973).

For many of these women, their activism was an extension of their traditional work in the community (networking, mediating, and caring). As mothers and wives, they considered it their duty to protect their communities, homes and families from poverty, destruction, ignorance (Rose, 1998; Strange, 1990; Susser, 1986), and to maintain and manage their community (Marouli, 1995). Moser applies the concept *practical (gender) needs* to these gender needs “which are formulated from the concrete conditions women experience, in their engendered position within the sexual division of labour and deriving out of their practical gender interests for human survival” (Moser, 1989, p.1803).

Middle- and upper-middle class women may also formulate needs out of their practical gender interests for human survival. They differ, according to Moser, in that human survival is often less immediately present in the women’s everyday lives than in the case of women fighting locally for survival. Researchers have found that middle- and upper-class women often engage in “good works” motivated more by “noblesse oblige” (Abrahams, 1996; MacDonald, 1996), or by patriotic duty (as in the case the “peace mothers” discussed by Ruddick, 1995) than by self-preservation. They may also get involved in an effort to improve socialising and educational experiences for their children (Blumberg, 1990) or by an interest in public education and action on more macro issues, like global warming or globalisation (Marouli, 1995), motivated by social justice concerns or ideology.

Moreover, studies have shown that many middle- and upper-middle class women, are motivated to activism by *strategic (gender) needs*. Strategic gender needs are needs

which are formulated from the analysis of women’s subordination to men, and deriving out of their strategic gender interest [...] for an alternative, more equal and satisfactory organisation of society than that which exists at present, in terms of both the structure and nature of relationships between women and men” (Moser, 1989, p.1803)

Some feminists claim that when they get involved in feminist organising, many middle- and upper-middle class women do so by breaking with the wife and

mother roles (Haywoode, 1999). Often, it is argued, they are motivated by a want for self-fulfilment and individuation, by the goal of eliminating discrimination in work and home, and/or the fight for the end of violence against women (Poster, 1995).

Although strategic and practical gender needs are not mutually exclusive, many researchers have found that middle- and upper-class women, for whom class oppression may not be part of their positioning, choose to focus on individual liberation (on strategic needs); while lower-income women, for whom class is an important part of their social position, choose to focus on family survival (practical needs) (Poster, 1995). Researchers claim that, in many cases, for women positioned as low-income, survival outweighs gender-related issues and abstract theorising (Barnabé, 1987; Beneria & Roldan, 1987; Cassidy, Lord, & Mandell, 1995). Sacks concurs, claiming that women living multiple oppressions have to fight many “enemies” (husbands, welfare bureaucracies, whites, attitudes of general public), and therefore tend to focus more on broad-based needs (Sacks, 1976). Better-off women, on the other hand, perhaps more concerned with issues related to dependency on men, tend to focus more on autonomy and individuality. These different formulations of gender needs are central to the gulf between the “women’s liberation movement”, with its focus on strategic needs (body and women specific issues), and lower-income and working-class women, whose needs are more often formulated as practical (“bread and butter issues”) (Gluck, Blackwell, Cotrell, & harper, 1998; Naples, 1998b; Gittell & Naples, 1982; Luttrell, 1988; Beneria & Roldan, 1987; Cassidy, Lord, & Mandell, 1995; Dujon, Gradford, & Stevens, 1992; Evans & Boyte, 1992; Seifer, 1973; Weaver, Wheeler, & et al., 1978; West, 1981). Similarly, middle-class New Left activists, men and women alike, in their rejection of tradition and bids for complete freedom, often clashed with low-income and working-class activists who were fighting to preserve community life while

emphasising elements such as family, kinship, religion and community life (Haywoode, 1991b).

Although it may seem like women active in community are simply reproducing the social processes that “limit them” to that sphere – the private sphere, many women actively utilise their positionality as mothers, wives, and as protectors of community, to further their own ends and to construct community. In line with this, Naples argues that activism motivated by wifedom and motherhood is inherently contradictory; in that it can be both essentialising and strategic (Naples, 1998a). Women actively position themselves as wives and mothers, and use this position as resource to gain credibility as political actors and public support for their cause (Clark, 1994; Naples, 1998b; West & Blumberg, 1990). Women also use the social construction of women as docile and weak to their advantage, often catching their “enemy” off guard (Finn, 1998). Similarly, in confronting authorities, women often use resources and tactics linked to traditional gender roles, such as threats, pots and pans, silence (West & Blumberg, 1990).

Krauss describes how white, working-class women used and manipulated wifedom and motherhood in their battle against toxic waste (Krauss, 1998). These women used their expertise as mothers to counter arguments in the public sphere – they *knew* their children were sick. They used their traditional role as “protector” of family to justify their actions, to themselves and to others – it must be done, for the protection of my children. “Mother Power” also infused the National Welfare Rights Organisation. Valk reports how women channelled Mother Power into boycotts, sit-ins, lawsuits, lobbying, and how hundreds of women became involved because the discourse around motherhood drew them in (Valk, 2000). Middle- and upper-middle class “lady” social reformers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century also positioned themselves as protectors of family and community. In doing so, they were able to take on important leadership positions and contribute to neighbourhood

improvement, legislative changes, and advocacy for people living in poverty (Brandwein, 1981; Cohen, 1997; Hayden, 1981; Haywoode, 1991b; Sklar, 1985; Weil, 1986). Social reformers fought for the recognition of women's informal community work (Sarvasy, 1997), as well as for the granting of full citizenship rights to "mothers" (Cohen, 1997).

In all three examples, that of the social reformers, the toxic waste activists, and the welfare rights activists, women transformed conservative ideologies of motherhood into political resources. They used their expertise as "feminine", wives and mothers to bolster their own moral authority on issues related to everyday life and they drew attention to the plight of women, children, and communities.

#### ROLES IN ORGANISATIONS: CENTER-WOMEN OR BRIDGE LEADERS

The role people take on in community and other organisations, also depends on positionality. In community organisations (not women-only organisations), men tend to be the formal leaders, while women tend to do the organising work, irrespective of class or ethnicity/race. Many studies have shown that men tend to do tasks related to decision-making, representation, negotiation with authorities, and public speaking, while women tend to do tasks related to the construction and maintenance of the movement, such as mailings to members, phone calls, publicity (see McAdam, 1992; Panet-Raymond, 1981). For instance, the NWRO was a movement of poor women, many black, led by men, mostly white and middle-class (West, 1981). In the civil rights movement, while Black men were the official spokespeople of the movement, black women worked behind the scenes ensuring organisation at the community level (Bernal, 1998). The tenant movement in New York City reflects these trends as well; most of the membership was low-income women, while high-profile leaders were almost always men (except during the war years) (Lawson & Barton, 1980). In anti-globalisation groups in Montréal, women staff

the office, organise social events, maintain everyday contact with members, while men do much of the public representation (Némésis, 2002).

The concept of “leadership” automatically connotes a male middle-class prototype: assertive, confrontational, public negotiator (Sacks, 1988). Feminist scholars, however, have questioned this andocentric notion of leadership, and have described leadership of movements as a mutually reinforcing dynamic relationship between women as “centre-women” or “bridge leaders”, and men as spokespersons (Sacks, 1988; Robnett, 1996; Robnett, 1998). Centre-women or bridge leaders are those members of organisations who take on the tasks of bridging potential constituents and adherents as well as potential formal leaders of movements (Robnett, 1996; Robnett, 1998). In movements, they make bridges with informal community networks, they draw on their mediation skills to manage internal conflict, they draw on their caring experience to add a human dimension to the movement (they make people feel part of the movement by setting-up social activities, among other things), and they do the routine work upon which most things depend (office organisation, communication with membership, etc.).

The sexual division of labour within community organisations and social movements reflects the differentiation between public and private spheres discussed above. The role of centre-woman or bridge-leader is an extension of the role of wife and mother (Gallagher, 1977). As I showed above, women are the builders of community networks in everyday life; Hanmer argues that men lead formal organisations shadowed by women’s informal community networks (Hanmer, 1977). The skills women learn in their informal community work better prepares them for tasks of recruiting, mobilising, mediating, and networking (Lawson & Barton, 1980) and they have direct “ins” to informal community networks that they themselves often helped to build (Susser, 1986). Because of this, women more “naturally” take on, and/or are assigned the “housekeeping” tasks in organisations. Some feminists have termed



the values and practices underlying women's organising, "women values" (Clark, 1994).

While women generally tend to be quite skilled in "housekeeping" organisational task, and have confidence in these skills, they tend to lack or believe that they lack the skills constructed as necessary to more "formal" leadership. The latter is perpetuated by ideological beliefs, such as "women can't be spokespersons" and by actual material barriers, such as glass ceilings in organisations that restrict access to learning experiences. In some movements, however, especially welfare rights' movements, more women tend to take on "formal" leadership roles (see Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999; Lawson & Barton, 1980; Stout, 1996). Some theorise that this is because women positioned as low-income are fighting for survival and are constructed on the lowest social rung and therefore they have "nothing left to lose" (Seifer, 1973). Perhaps lower-income women have had to develop more assertive behaviours in face of authority given their everyday struggle for the welfare of their families. Or, perhaps the explanation is more pragmatic; in welfare rights' movements there are very few men – maybe they have to take on those roles. Even welfare rights' movements, however, are not immune to ideological, material and historical constraints: Guida West claims that the NWRO fell apart, at least in part, because when women took over its leadership, the NWRO lost its bases of support (West, 1981).

Thus, because of processes of differentiation, women are not only over-represented in community activism, but also, in organisations, they tend to do the "housekeeping" tasks, and because of processes of stratification, women's activism in community is less valued and leads to less resources than other kinds of work in the "public" sphere. Often motivated to activism by caring, they actively use the networks and mediation skills that they develop and hone in their tasks and activities as women, carers, mothers, wives. These "female

spaces”, however, can and are transformed into “free spaces”, leading to contradictory and complex impacts at many levels, as I will show next.

### CONTRADICTIONARY IMPACTS

Women, in and through their community activism actively utilise their position(s) to construct selves, family, community and society. They are, however, “limited” in their re-positioning because of social processes of stratification, and the ideological, material and historical conditions that surround them. In line with that, struggle is likely

to give rise to political identities and practice which are ‘fissured’ and ‘fractured’ in contradictory ways; in some respects, helping to empower women and workers to contest oppressive material conditions of life and in other ways helping to disempower, fragment and silence (Chouinard, 1996, p.1488).

It is this contradiction that I wish to explore in more detail in this section. How can/do women construct narratives of belonging that break down the categories that they are differentiated into? And how can/do they break down the hierarchies that lead to unequal resource allocation and therefore to lesser life chances and life conditions?

Women are positioned as providers of caring services both in the state apparatus, and in the community, as informal community workers and mothers/wives. The community work of middle-class social reformers was central to the expansion of the state’s role in social services (Sarvasy, 1997; Berg, 1978; Boris, 1993; Kaminer, 1984; Sklar, 1985, 1995). In doing so, these women positioned themselves as workers (Sklar, 1995), and as policy-makers within the state (Katz, 1986). Women positioned as low-income, on the other hand, in the 1960s and 70s, knowing that their chances were limited in the productive sphere, used their position as mothers to demand, from the welfare state, income supports, services and government employment (Piven, 1984; Valk, 2000). In line with this, many women exploited the legitimacy granted to them by the state, by using funding in creative ways, to help build community

(Naples, 1998b). In ebbs and flows, governments across North America have hired low-income women, either directly as community workers on federal grants or indirectly via funding to community groups. In articulating demands to the welfare state, low-income women altered state relations; they constructed recognition of people living in poverty, and especially of poor mothers and in doing so, redefined gender-specific responsibilities (Susser, 1986). That is, in demanding that public funds be used for traditionally domestic duties, such as childcare and health care, they were blurring the boundaries between the private and the public, and re-constructing gendered responsibilities.

But, because these relations embody differing amounts of power, and stratification, tension is always present. Although women's lives are greatly improved by State services and programs – the gains are really a “double-edged sword”. Because of the division of labour in the family and their class insertion, women who are positioned as low-income enter into relationships with the state (and therefore with middle-class women) every day, as “clients”. They are positioned as clients of welfare agencies, health institutions, food banks, and schools (Haywoode, 1991b; Wilson, 1977). For low-income women, very little of private life is actually private (Susser, 1982). These daily interactions with the State reflect differing power relations among actors; although the conditions are altered with changes in the welfare state practices and policies, low-income women confront both gender and class discrimination everyday. Welfare policies and practices in the 1960s and 70s allowed for discrimination based on gender, as women's houses were raided by agents searching for “a man in the house”, for signs of hidden wealth, for sexual favours (Barnabé, 1987; Cockburn, 1977; Leboeuf, 1987; Valk, 2000). Today, although many of these practices have been eradicated because of ongoing struggle by community organisations (Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999; Pope, 1990; West, 1981), low-income women continue to bear the brunt of unfair welfare policies.

Moreover, in using state funding for community struggle, there is the constant pull towards greater bureaucratisation and fragmentation. For instance, as women gained legitimacy in their mother role in Quebec, relations shifted; women's role as "organisers of family" and "community organisers" was recognised, but the price was high (many restrictions, and precarious work), and thus paradoxically, reinforced women's positions within the home, the private sphere (Côté, 1995). And, with funding often come strings attached: forms to complete, performance indicators to meet, yearly reports to produce, and strict requirements related to the bureaucratisation of organisational structures (e.g., Naples, 1998b; Ng, 1990; Taylor, 1996). The power relations among actors, full of give and take, leads to ebbs and flows in the life of community organisations, as they slide along the continuum from autonomy to integration with government (Shragge, 1990).

Given all this, how is women's activism in community feminist? How does it contribute to the emancipation of women? Although women gain, as women, from State services such as daycares, they also lose because of increased State control over their lives. Although women are sometimes paid to do the caring (community and family) that they previously did on a volunteer basis, their organisations become more bureaucratic and often move away from their advocacy and mobilisation missions. And, as I showed above, women's choice of community activism, their motivations to action, and the roles that they play within organisations are the result of processes of differentiation and stratification that limit them to the "private" sphere, the "sphere of women". This kind of activism, critics argue, is simply an extension of the female caring role into older age (when children are in school or leave home) or when the husband dies (MacDonald, 1996).

However, a ubiquitous finding is that low-income women involved in community organising re-position themselves, as they re-construct relations of community and home.

Whatever the issue, the more successful the activist women's organising efforts, the greater the threat they pose to more traditional families, more conventional neighbours, and even to local political structures. Inevitably, the more self-confidence they gain, the less likely they are to accept the status quo (Seifer, 1973, p.21).

Studies of activism among women positioned as low-income unanimously report a significant shift in psychological, social and political positioning. Women, through their involvement in community organising, develop and hone skills: public speaking, planning, evaluation, analyses of power (DeSena, 1998; O'Malley, 1977; Pope, 1990; Rabrenovic, 1995). In the process, they transform shyness and intimidation into increased self-esteem (Abrahams, 1996; Clark, 1994; Cockburn, 1977; Collectif d'écriture du Centre des femmes des Cantons, 1987; Krauss, 1998; McAdam, 1992; McCourt, 1977).

Specifically, there is often a shift in understanding of the root causes of their problems (Lacourse, 1984; Morgen & Bookman, 1988; Rose, 1998; West, 1981); as women shift the blame for their plight from themselves to the multiple oppressive forces of the system (Barnabé, 1987). That is, they reposition themselves as active members of their community, who have the right to a safe, secure, healthy and economically sound existence for themselves and community; in doing so, they are resisting the stereotype of poor women as lazy and apolitical (Naples, 1998b; Valk, 2000). In doing so, they redefine the gender- and class-biased notion of "citizenship" which traditionally refers to rights acquired in a linear fashion, from property, to political, to social (Sarvasy, 1997; Staeheli, 1995). Thus, in claiming a voice within the State and community, women positioned as low-income expand their own political and social citizenship (Naples, 1998b). That is, they assert their rights as citizens – people living in poverty have the right to make demands of the state and women have the right to be involved in the public realm. Thus, in this process, women transform the private ideologies of motherhood into more politicised, public ideologies (Krauss, 1998).

As they reposition themselves in this way, women learn to have confidence in their own abilities, and learn that they can analyse situations, and effect change (Marouli, 1995; Pope, 1990; Seifer, 1973). With this often comes a loss of faith in the protection of government, and in democracy, leading to the development of a critical and autonomous stance (Krauss, 1998). Women begin to see the world with a different lens; they apply their understanding of political, social and economic factors and structures to new situations in their everyday lives (Finn, 1998; Flacks, 1988; Rabrenovic, 1995). Often this repositioning also means new political status in the community, as knowers, as experts and increased political activity (DeSena, 1998; McAdam, 1992; Pope, 1990; West, 1981) and new jobs in community organisations (Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999; West, 1981).

Women's involvement in community organisations also strengthens their informal neighbourhood networks, thereby allowing for more redistributive activities, local control, and sociability. Lasting friendships with peers tend to enrich traditional neighbourhood networks with a sense of "communion" (D'Amours, 1985a; McCourt, 1977). In these networks, activists continue to share personal experience, but women positioned as community activists bring new analyses to the circles, leading, quite often to a repositioning of members of these networks with respect to their gender roles and responsibilities (Marouli, 1995). Women exchange on experiences with conjugal violence, they exchange stories about being treated as "irrational, uninformed and disruptive" by males powers-that-be, about losing a contested board seat to a man with less experience, about being fired from a job because of an unexpected pregnancy. The sharing of these kinds of stories leads to anger at the injustices of patriarchy in practice, and that leads to action (Brown & Ferguson, 1995; Hamilton, 1990; Naples, 1998a; Pomerleau, 1984).

This particular form of “consciousness raising” in politicised neighbourhood networks, often leads to women re-positioning themselves with respect to their husbands, and their domestic duties.

When a wife comes home after testifying at a City Council hearing, from a meeting of the local school or hospital board, or from helping to out-manoeuvre a local politician or win a vote for day care in her union, she is changing the balance of power in her marriage in the most fundamental way, often without realising it (Seifer, 1973, p.45).

When women reposition themselves as knowers, as experts, as activists, they are challenging gender roles in the home. Often, noticing contradictions in their married and home life, they begin to act on them (Seitz, 1998). Their discourse may have changed, their willingness to obey orders may be lesser, their guilt at not having time to do household tasks may have been transformed into anger at having sole responsibility for them (Valk, 2000). Moreover, they often become less dependent on their husbands financially, because of new opportunities resulting from their involvement (Seifer, 1973). Husbands react in different ways to new positionings of their wives; some tolerate the changes, some resent them and don't accept them, and others gain a new respect for them (Blee, 1998; Brown & Ferguson, 1995; McCourt, 1977; Seitz, 1998). Studies have shown high rates of wife battering, and divorce, as women reposition themselves as activists (Brown & Ferguson, 1995; Cockburn, 1977; Dixon, Johnson, Leigh, & Turnbull, 1982; Krauss, 1998; Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999; Seifer, 1973). Studies have also shown, however, that following women's repositioning as community activists, partners gained a new respect for them, and a new division of labour in the home ensued (Hamilton, 1990).

This synthesis of impacts of community organising involvement demonstrates that community activism is full of contradictions and complexities. Agency is not a given, it is not fixed (Luttrell, 1988). Instead, it is built on multiple and contradictory positionalities in constantly changing multiple and intersecting sites of struggle (Hart, 1991). As women position themselves with respect to class, ethnicity/race and gender, state, community

and home, they are constructing themselves and the sites of struggle. In demanding improvements to their communities, and to their living conditions more generally, these women are engaged in the process of building society by posing a direct challenge to patriarchy and capitalism (Marouli, 1995). Women are challenging patriarchal gender boundaries by doing politics, by standing up, by taking on their husbands. Women are also challenging capitalism by showing that poor people are not going to remain hidden, by shouting out that “it isn’t true that everyone has equal access to decision-making”, and by demonstrating that they CAN build community.

From this literature on women in community, stems the overall conclusion that with collective transformation comes individual transformation. It shows

how impossible it is for a woman to split off her outward action from her domestic life and relationships [...] if she gets involved in class struggle, it drags her unwittingly onto a new courses as a woman, affects all that she is as woman (Cockburn, 1977, p.69).

Krauss concurs, arguing that women’s

single-issue community protests led them through a process of politicisation and the broader analysis of inequities of class and gender in the public arena and in the family. Propelled into the public arena in defence of their children, they ultimately challenged government, corporations, experts, husbands, and their own insecurities as working-class women (Krauss, 1998, p.130).

The famous feminist dictum – the personal is political – is clearly demonstrated by this analysis of women’s community activism. Therefore *personal biography* is intricately tied up with community activism (Blee, 1998). Follows from this that the continuous (re)construction and (re)positioning of activists, and therefore of their community, can best be captured by listening to the actors speak of their experience. Feminist oral history methodology is a method of choice in that it creates a space for people who are actors in the construction of their own narratives of belonging (and of their identities), and in the construction of home, community, and society, to share their experiences.



### PART III: DOING TRANSFORMATIVE HISTORY

In this section, I explore what feminist historians have to say about how women can participate in the construction of their own history, and, by extension that of their community. I begin by sharing an abridged story of feminist history, touching on *herstory approaches*, *gender history* and a *hybrid approach*. The bulk of the analysis, however, is on building a life history methodology that is compatible with my conceptual framework. The issues I address are: objectives, questions, authority, narrator/researcher relationship, audience/reading of narrative, who benefits, and truths/transformations.

#### A STORY OF FEMINIST HISTORY

Women's history in many Western countries was born out of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s, and out of its critiques of traditional history's positivist, andocentric tendencies (Strong-Boag, Gleason, & Perry, 2002; Voldman, 1983). Feminist history in France and Québec, however, did not take off until the late 1970s and early 1980s, and never did attain the same institutional, political and cultural status as that of the United States and Britain (for further explanation, see Lévesque, 1997; Virgili, 2002; Schwartz, 2002)<sup>9</sup>. For this reason, much of the literature reviewed emerges from Britain and the United States.

Feminist history, from its inception, has had a political agenda: "to denounce sexism and discrimination against women, to expose the origins,

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<sup>9</sup> This debate, mostly an American and British one, although translated and used in different European countries, did not take the same turn in France. Virgili writes that this is because the term "genre" does not grammatically connote belonging to masculinity or femininity (Virgili, 2002). Schwartz explains that this distinction also has structural, ideological and cultural roots (Schwartz, 2002). She claims that universities in the United States were more open to the field of women's and gender studies than their French counterparts, allowing for an academic consolidation of the field. Moreover, she argues most people in the United States will readily recognize that their feminism has a liberal democratic humanist wing that claims equality, while for most French citizens, "feminist" connotes "extrémiste", activist and therefore threat. The latter, coupled with the greater openness of academic institutions in the United States to feminism, she claims, has led to the furthering of thinking on the issues around gender categories.

foundations and workings of patriarchy, and subsequently to formulate and implement strategies for its eventual demolition” (Thurner, 1997, p.122). According to Strong-Boag and colleagues, in describing and analysing the forces that shape women lives, feminist historians are suggesting that relations of domination are explained by other, “more damning explanations than biology” (Strong-Boag, Gleason, & Perry, 2002, p.1). More specific goals of women’s history are to: “rewrite history ‘from the bottom up”, “make visible those ‘hidden from history””, and to “rectify images of women as promulgated in ‘male-stream’ studies of American history” (Thurner, 1997, p.123). In a sense, feminist history is about revising the past. In line with this, Strong-Boag and colleagues argue that “a vision of history devoid of women is at least half wrong” (Strong-Boag, Gleason, & Perry, 2002, p.1).

The story of feminist history, however, is historically specific – since the 1960s, the field has grown, changed, altered within changing historical conjunctures. Feminist history was born, changed and continues to change with the debates among feminist thinkers in the social sciences and humanities, and therefore follows a similar course to that discussed at the beginning of this chapter (see woman: a conceptual impasse). Nevertheless, there are three historically specific approaches to doing feminist history; all three however, continue to exist today, but the popularity of each waxes and wanes with time. I will now present a brief overview of these three approaches to feminist history: herstory, gender, and hybrid approaches.

#### HERSTORY APPROACHES

Herstory approaches emerged in the late 1970s as feminist historians realised that the methods they had been using to “write women into history”, during the previous decade, simply reproduced traditional andocentric historical methods (e.g., Gordon, 1972; Kelly, 1976; Lerner, 1975; Rowbotham, 1974). This realisation led historians away from the “great women” and “great movements” approach to “Herstory” and the development of new research

questions and objectives. True to the times, Herstory approaches celebrated women's actual lived experience and language or "women's culture" (Lerber, 1997), and were used both inside and outside the academy for consciousness raising purposes (Steedman, 1994). Thurner writes, "wherever women lived and worked together, whether at home, work or church, under ordinary or extraordinary circumstances, a specific women's culture was seen to form and function" (Thurner, 1997, p.124).

These herstories were groundbreaking in the field of history. The detailed descriptions of the "female sphere" led to analyses of the private and public spheres within which women and men were relegated respectively, and to landmark redefinition(s) of politics (Thurner, 1997). Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars developed analyses of the productive and reproductive spheres, while cultural feminists or feminists of difference described the inner life of these spheres, building on Carol Gilligan's feminist critique of Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Thurner, 1997). However, during the wave of critique of the "women's liberation movement" and its "women's studies", this kind of feminist history was hit hard by critics who argued that herstories took for granted a universal, ahistorical woman, ignoring shifting relations among ethnicity/race, gender and class (Kahenrakwas Greenleaf, 1993; Wise Harris, 1991; Sangster, 1995; Thurner, 1997). Moreover, critics argued that herstories tended to romanticise women's culture by naming any agency as resistance; they tended to ignore the fact that this culture is positioned within a patriarchal society and that woman's consciousness is multi-layered, full of complex contradictions (Sangster, 1995; Thurner, 1997).

## GENDER HISTORY

In the 1980s, influenced by post-structuralist and psychoanalytic insights, dissatisfaction with separatist Herstory approaches and integrationist social history approaches, Joan Scott came out with her groundbreaking

*Gender, a useful category of historical analysis* (Scott, 1986). Explaining her point of view, Scott writes that

the story is no longer about things that have happened to women and men and how they have reacted to them; instead, it is about the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity that have been constructed (Scott, 1986, cited in Thurner, 1997, p.128).

So, feminist history moved away from *description*, and into the *analysis* of the production of knowledge, and into the questioning of the very category of *woman* (see Dubinsky & Marks, 1995; Iacovetta & Kealey, 1995).

The gender history approach was central to the redefinition of the universal woman, and analyses of class, ethnicity/race and gender as social relations. However, gender history fell into the same trap as post-structuralism – taken to its logical end, the argument eliminated women, agency, and feminist politics (Sangster, 1995). In line with this, the real, material inequalities that contribute to women’s oppression were lost in endless (inaccessible) debates about discourse, language and gender as a metaphor of difference (Thurner, 1997).

#### A HYBRID

Many feminist historians, as did Floya Anthias and colleagues in sociology, faced with the conceptual and political impasse of both “cultural” or “women’s studies” and “post-structuralist” or “gender studies” approaches, decided to explore other avenues (e.g., Sangster, 1995; McPherson, Morgan, & Forestell, 1999). Sangster, one of these historians, argues that historians should move beyond the argument that Herstory approaches are “theoretically naïve” and that gender approaches are “politically irrelevant”, and instead borrow the useful insights from each in attempting to build a critical history (Sangster, 1995). Sangster builds her historical approach on the following assumptions: (1) you can get at the materiality of the past; that is, you can record experiences and activities of men and women (the past is not all discourse, text and

representation); (2) individual and collective action is based in concrete, material experiences (action is not just a 'discursive effect'); (3) language and discourse are important, but must not be emphasised to the detriment of issues of power, oppression and discrimination; and (4) gender needs to be understood, not only as a metaphor of sexual difference, but also as a system or structure of oppression. These assumptions cadre well with Anthias' notion of translocational positionality and the social stratification theory that she works with.

If woman is conceptualised as "translocational positionality", logically, historians cannot aim to produce one grand narrative, but instead to generate *multiple truths* (Geiger, 1990). Obviously, if being "woman" stems from her positionality then it is impossible to tell one story that will reflect the experience of "woman", following Hall, Brown and Hewitt. Hall writes: "rather than seeking some new 'centred structure', I would call for an historical practice that turns on partiality, that is self-conscious about perspective, that releases multiple voices rather than competing orthodoxies and that, above all, nurtures an 'internally differing but united political community'" (Hall, 1989, p.908). For Brown:

history is not a clearly and orderly structured textile, a classical concert, or an isolated monologue that requires and awe-struck, passive audience; rather, it is comparable to a quilt, jaxx or 'gumbo ya ya', a Creole expression for the simultaneous talking of various people (Brown, 1991).

According to Brown, we can understand history by overlaying it :

with jazz, for gumbo ya ya is the essence of a musical tradition where "the various voices in a piece of music may go their own ways but still be held together by their relationships to each other. In jazz, for example, each member has to listen to what the other is doing and know how to respond while each is, at the same time, intent upon her own improvisation (Brown, 1991, p.85).

Putting a gumbo ya ya or a jazz concert into written form is an incredible challenge. How can one write about history that is non-linear, with multiple

truths, multiple voices, all calling out at the same time and not end up with complete fragmentation? Hewitt struggles with this question:

Each time we sit down to write, total anarchy (sic.) looms just beyond our peripheral vision. So how are we to regroup? How are we to regain a handle on history that is inclusive and engaged? The answer is not in stabilising gender; not in rendering past lives more coherent and less conflictful (sic.) than they were; not in reasserting the equivalence of race, class and gender and their primacy over sexuality and ethnicity. Rather than retreating, we must keep moving; we must recognise the instability of all categories, the contested terrain of all historical sites, the dangers in all political projects, and then shape a human history that captures both the messy multiplicity of lived experience and the power relations within which those lived experiences are played out. This vastly complicates our task, indeed, at times promises to undo it entirely. (Hewitt, 1992, p.317).

Seeing history in this way forces us:

to recognise the integral relations among all dimensions of experience and the impossibility of studying any element in isolation without distorting the whole. To take an example from my current research, the life of an Afro-Cuban woman tobacco stripper in 1900 cannot be separated out into distinct African, Cuban, female, and working-class elements, because the Africanness of this woman is shaped by her Cubanness, her class-consciousness is modified by her nationalism and her sex; and her femaleness is moulded by her Africanness, Cubanness and class.” (Hewitt, 1992, p.318).

In writing, Hewitt argues, historians must talk about difference, pay attention to language, problematise different models of analysis, play with presentation style (Hewitt, 1992). Hewitt recognises, however, that the risk of fragmentation remains:

For if each race/class/sex/sexual/regional/generational/national/religious subgroup forges its own peculiar identity, then how do we analyse patterns or make comparisons, much less analyse change over time among and within various groups that cohabit any particular historical setting? (Hewitt, 1992, p.319).

She answers her own question, arguing that poststructuralists can help us here:

“When a person moves around historically, or materially, the elements that make up her identity aren’t necessarily eliminated or added to”, but “a different

reading of the existing compound (becomes) necessary, with elements once repressed now more visible, and vice-versa” (Hewitt, 1992, p.320). So, identity “is composed of a multiplicity of references, and as one (moves) across time and place, they (resonate) in different ways” (Hewitt, 1992, p.321). Using the analogy of a chemical compound, she writes that between people with differing identities in the same historical moment, these fluid identities at times create

isolation and division, but such fluidity also allowed for a continual reworking of connections and alliances. As historians, we are obliged to move beyond literal utterances, beyond seemingly singular experiences, in order to draw out continually reworked patterns. In this way we act as coroners do when they use chemical traces to track causes of death. Just as the same chemical traces will be left by similar physical circumstances, however distinct the individuals involved, so the same experiential traces may be left by similar historical circumstances (...) As historians, we attempt to recover the traces left by people, things and events; but we actively trace as well, not only by following the path beaten out but also by imprinting designs on the past. (Hewitt, 1992, p.321).

In doing so, she concludes, we must not attempt to re-create a grand narrative, one be-it-end-all conclusion:

There is something seductive about constructing grand theory, writing a grand narrative, capturing the center. But each of these pursuits detours us, leads us down a dead end, for each re-establishes hierarchy, each accepts too much of the dominant definitions of value and power, each re-creates in a modified form the institutions we seek to undermine and overthrow. The key to negotiating current collision courses, then, is not to retreat into debates over gender-race-and-class versus ethnicity-sexuality-and-region, over post structuralism versus materialism, over first world feminist versus Third World liberation. Rather, it is to explore the critical insights provided by advocates of each of these perspectives as well as the power relations that inhere in them and to play with their interconnections as well as their points of conflict” (Hewitt, 1992, p.323-324)

This kind of history is complex, non-linear, messy. Next, I attempt to untangle some of this complexity by taking the discussion down from the field of feminist history to the sub-field of life history methodology. I begin with the argument that life history is a methodology of choice for feminist history, and

for the exploration of community activism, and follow this up with a discussion of how to apply the hybrid approach to history in practice. Doing history within this framework is about more than the final writing, it is also about objectives, questions, authority, narrator/researcher relationship, and transformations.



## LIFE HISTORY METHODOLOGY

*The questions of methodology underpin all theoretical productions:  
Questions of who we hear, how we listen, who we are accountable to,  
who we address, and how we address them  
are central methodological and political issues.  
-- Skeggs, 1997, p.167*

I define life history, following Daniel Bertaux and colleagues as follows: oral, autobiographical narratives generated through interaction with a social actor (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984). A social actor, in this context, is a thinking and acting individual belonging to a particular group at a certain point in her history (Desmarais, 1986a). Academic use of life history has a long history, originating in Poland and in the United States prior to the second world war (Desmarais, 1986a). After a period of decline due to a shift towards positivism, life history came back in full force with Mai 1968 in France and the social movements of the 1960s in the United States (Desmarais, 1986a; Voldman, 1983). Life history methodology is intermeshed with feminist history in general, and has been taken up, modified, re-constructed by feminists since the 1970s (e.g., Sacks, 1989; Naples, 1991).

Life history methodology, however, is not, by definition, feminist or liberating, nor does just any kind of life history follow my conceptual framework. Particular attention needs to be paid to the objectives of research, the questions underlying the research, issues of authority, the relationship between the narrator and the researcher, who the audience of the work will be, who benefits from the research, and finally, thought must be given to the transformative potential of the work (Geiger, 1990). All of these issues pose important theoretical and ethical dilemmas that cannot necessarily be resolved, but must be reflected and decided upon before embarking in research. I turn to these now.

## OBJECTIVES

Life history methodology cannot be feminist if it doesn't strive towards one or all of the objectives of feminist history in general (see above) (Geiger, 1990). Many feminist historians have chosen life history methodology because of its usefulness in attaining those very objectives. In life history methodology, there is an explicit attempt to make space for voices often barred from history making structures because of class, gender, and race – everyone, it is argued, be they famous or not, is a bearer of history (Le Collectif Clio, 1982; Susser, 1982; Stansell, 1987; Steedman, 1994). In order to write women into history, historians need to turn to oral sources because women, especially those positioned as low-income, are generally absent from traditional (written) historical sources (Voldman, 1983). Moreover, oral sources allow historians to tap into new areas of memory, that of “des groupes (solidarité familiale, appartenance féminine...), des réseaux (de quartier, d'entraide...) et de sociabilité (le lavoir, le square...) jusque-là trop délaissés par l'histoire officielle” (Voldman, 1983, p.28). Oral sources take the historian beyond the “public” into the “private”; that is, into peoples' personal lives, into their intimacy, providing historians with material to talk about mentalities, history of families and of childhood, “know-how”, the transmission of knowledge from mother to daughter (Voldman, 1983). These kinds of sources allow feminist scholars to shed light on topics previously discussed by oftentimes male academics, from their perspective, such as women's bodies, women's sexuality, women's work, women's politics, and to discover new topics that might not have been identified as important in the past (Voldman, 1983).

Life history methodology is also very useful, and arguably essential, to any attempt to explore and enact “women” as historical agent who is constructed by, and participates in the construction of economic, cultural, national and ethnic/racial realities (Geiger, 1990; Ferrarotti, 1981, cited in Bertaux & Kohli, 1984). The latter sounds very similar to studying “woman” as

“positionality”; that is, the exploration of how different positionalities in different, changing contexts politicise women, and elicit transformation, similarly and differently. This is different from feminist (herstory) standpoint which considers that knowledge emerges from women’s experiences of oppression, as if identity were occupied as fixed (Skeggs, 1997). Instead, this kind of life history methodology allows Subjects to speak for themselves, and to ascribe meaning to their own lives (Glucksmann, 1994; Mercier & Buckendorf, 1992), but always with an underlying premise of women, as “positionality”, as opposed to a unitary, universal category. This allows for women’s political subjectivities to be based on their own self-understanding of their location. This is essential if one believes that people are actors in the construction of their own identities and of their society. In order to get at the political subjectivity of women, it makes sense to start from their own descriptions and interpretation of their positionalities. The latter permits for the construction of positionalities, and of histories that derive not only from gender, but also from class, ethnicity/race, or other aspects of their subjectivity. Oral sources permit us to “capture some of the complex relationships between socialisation and social organisation, between process and social order, or between institutions and the person” (Atkinson, 1999, p.191). Thus, doing history in this way, instead of forcing one grand narrative, provides insights into the intersections of social relations (Rodriguez, 1998) and social processes as they are lived, experienced and constructed, which, as I demonstrated previously, are central to community organising, and to the exploration of gender as an analytical concept (although not the only one).

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. In fact, in recognising that all these people have ideas, ideas that are worthy and constitute knowledge

(Rodriguez, 1998), life history challenges the sexist, racist and classist bases of epistemology and history (Harding, 1991).

## QUESTIONS

For life history methodology to be liberating and feminist, the questions posed must not take for granted existing knowledge. If the questions are constructed on andocentric, racist and/or classist theoretical frameworks or assumptions, the rest of the research process, and the answers that emerge will not be feminist. That is, in constructing questions for study, it becomes important to understand, scrutinise, and problematise the benchmarks upon which they are based. From her reviews of feminist life history projects, Geiger has identified two concepts, *marginality* and *representativeness*, central to most historical or anthropological studies of people, that illustrate this problem clearly. Questions formulated on either of these concepts assume, before embarking into interaction with the Subjects of study, that their experience is “marginal” and/or “representative”.

For instance, a researcher might assume that low-income women on welfare are marginal, and construct questions based on this assumption that might alienate or simply bypass completely low-income women on welfare who have positioned themselves otherwise. Similarly, researchers cannot assume representativeness *a priori*, without using, as a benchmark, pre-existing academic research. The latter demonstrates the usefulness of the concept of positionality – researchers cannot assume, in formulating questions, that the Subjects will be positioned as marginal or representative, otherwise they are imposing their own pre-conceived notions on the process, and are silencing certain voices while privileging others. This is not to say, Geiger cautions, that one cannot construct notions of marginality and representative *out of* the life history narratives (discussed below in *audiences/interpretations*) – at issue here is the use of these concepts in the construction of the research questions.

## AUTHORITY

Given that life history methodology consistent with my conceptual framework does not take for granted the “authority”, or in other words, the “validity” and “reliability” of traditional knowledge or benchmarks, life history narratives do not garner their validity from comparison with these kinds of evidences (Geiger, 1990). Tongue-in-cheek, Susan Geiger asks, “why isn’t the written work, the received understanding, or the ‘latest’ in analytical virtuosity tested against women’s oral testimonies instead of the other way around” (Geiger, 1990, p.174)? Because feminist historians recognise that all historical sources, be they written or oral, are narratives constructed by positionality, and that people tell stories differently depending on their positionality (e.g., Bertaux-Wiame, 1986; Bulbeck, 1997; Etter-Lewis, 1991), they claim that any attempt to find “validity” or “reliability” in comparing with expert (andocentric, classist, racist) knowledge is doing injustice to life history (Geiger, 1986; Sangster, 1994).

In fact, traditional historical sources not only exclude many areas of memory that are of the “private” or “Other” sphere, and focus more on “reason” than on “emotion”:

from Plato until the present, with a few notable exceptions, reason rather than emotion has been regarded as the indispensable faculty for acquiring knowledge [White middle-class men are constructed as rational and cool, anyone not in that category is irrational to different degrees. These categorisations] function, obviously, to bolster the epistemic authority of the currently dominant groups [...] and to discredit the observations and claims of the currently subordinate groups including, of course, the observations and claims of many people of colour and women. The more forcefully and vehemently the latter groups express their observations and claims, the more emotional they appear and so the more easily they are discredited. The alleged epistemic authority of the dominant groups then justifies their political authority [...] In our present social context, therefore, the ideal of the dispassionate investigator is a classist, racist and especially masculinist myth (Jagger, 1989 p.145, p.158).

Because different knowledge(s) emerges from non-traditional historical sources, such as life history methodology, traditional knowledge, and especially the grand narratives, are put into question. When solid foundations (based on andocentric, classist, racist knowledge) are shaken up, it is not surprising that there are attempts to put the pieces of the foundations back together. Feminist historians must not fall into this trap. It is not about finding one truth, but of discovering multiple realities:

When people talk about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a little, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths [...] the guiding principle for [life histories] could be that all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where and for what purpose (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p.261).

This does not mean that we do not set life stories against other historical sources, comparing, contrasting, problematising the differences. The problem ensues when life stories are discounted because they do not fit with other sources.

#### NARRATOR/RESEARCHER RELATIONSHIP

The question of the relationship between the narrator and the researcher is one that has plagued historians doing life history since the beginning. How can researchers build a mutually respectful relationship with the narrator that allows for dialogue across difference without reproducing relations of domination? In line with this, the relationship one aims to build is a political choice. On one end of the continuum is the complete obliteration of the Subject (the narrator) by a researcher who takes the narrative and interprets all words in the third person as text, a situation that Patai refers to as the “masculinist model of manipulative distance” (Patai, 1991). At the other end of the continuum, is the false erasure of all differences between researcher and narrator, resulting in a kind of faux merger or “sisterhood” that eradicates differing positionalities, what Patai refers to as the “feminist model of spurious

identification with Other” (Patai, 1991). Susan Geiger admits that there is no easy solution to the longstanding ethical dilemmas inherent to the narrator/researcher relationship, but proposes paths for reflection and action. Many of her insights cadre well with Floya Anthias’ theorising on dialogue – on how to make sure that the encounter between researcher and narrator does not become a “colonial encounter”, and that attempts to dialogue do not become monologues.

First, and foremost, are the recognition of differing positionalities, and an explicit attempt to build conditions of mutual respect between the narrator and the researcher (Geiger, 1990; Gregg, 1991). This involves both a negotiation of how to share authority, what the process and product will be, and honesty about the limitations of the endeavour (Geiger, 1990). The ethical dilemmas inherent to these laudable goals, however, are difficult to resolve. In trying to created a more co-operative, equal relationship, as proposed by Ann Oakley (Oakley, 1981), are researchers not simply masking their own privilege as ultimate producers and owners of the product (Sangster, 1994)? Can a researcher, necessarily of differing positionality from the narrator (they can try to come as close as possible, but how close is okay?), interpret other women’s experiences past or present (Sangster, 1994)? Is the researcher compromising the Subject, in that she enjoys the research and reaps the benefits of the work by winning prestige, publications, tenure (Patai, 1991)? Patai is pessimistic; she writes:

Is it possible – not in theory, but in the actual conditions of the real world today – to write about the oppressed without becoming one of the oppressors? In an absolute sense, I think not [...] In addition to the characteristic privileges of race and class, the existential or psychological dilemmas of the split between subject and object on which all research depends [...] imply that objectification, the utilisation of others for one's own purposes [...], and the possibility for exploitation, are built into almost all research projects with living human beings (Patai, 1991, p.139).

Yow, arguing along the same lines as Patai, writes that there is always going to be a power differential, because the researcher “knows” how the data will be analysed while the narrator does not, even if the narrator is in on the methodology used (Yow, 1994).

Nevertheless, even Patai, one of life history’s most vocal critics, uses the methodology herself claiming that all research methodologies are full of ethical dilemmas that are ultimately non-resolvable. Researchers can, however, do their very best to build a mutually respectful research process. Danielle Desmarais refers to this dilemma as a continuous tension between the researcher’s formal framework, and the meeting of two subjectivities (Desmarais, 1986a). Daniel Bertaux and colleagues (e.g., Desmarais, 1986b; Bertaux, 1986) talk about shifting the centre of gravity of the interview from the interviewer to the interviewee, arguing that when this happens, the narrative is being quilted by the narrator. Thus, the researcher sets the agenda, but once started, the narrator takes over. Similarly, Grell talks about the inversion of authority, the narrator taking the “position haute” and the researcher the “position basse” (Grell, 1986).

The risk of conceptualising the relationship in this way, however, is that the researcher’s positionality as an actor in the interviewing process will be lost. Because of this, I prefer Bettina Aptheker’s idea of “pivoting the center” (Aptheker, 1989). Pivoting the centre means working to centre another person’s (or groups or societies) experience (or positionality) while recognising the worth of one’s own experience (or positionality) (Brown, 1991; Geiger, 1990). However, in doing so, it becomes important to recognise that the product of the life history process is not (solely) a record of fact or truth, but also a social text, a record of an interaction between two “positionality”.

Olson and Shopes claim that

thinking of interviews in this way allows us to avoid a too-facile assertion of the levelling created within an admittedly intimate interaction. Perhaps more important, it prevents us from so objectifying



the interviewee as an 'other' that we ignore the dialogic nature of the interview itself (Olson & Shopes, 1991, p.198).

Stacey concurs, urging researchers to fully acknowledge and own up to the “authoritative authorial self”, include more of one’s own voice, and highlight and problematise the contradictions, instead of glossing them over (Stacey, 1991). This implies the “rejection of monologic textual forms in which a single authorial voice is privileged, in favour of more ‘messy’ texts” (Atkinson, 1999, p.193).

In line with this, Atkinson talks about “reflexivity”, or the need for the researcher to write herself into the text, to pay attention to her positionality in relation to that of the others in the project, including attention to : “complexities and ambiguities of engagement and strangeness, intimacy and distance, identity and difference” (Atkinson, 1999, p.193). In fact, Atkinson claims that the “confessional aspects of writing (should be) treated as central”, as selves (positionality) are situationally created in the field; it is too easy, he claims, to simply claim that the researcher has become an “insider” (Atkinson, 1999, p.193). This means that the researcher delves into the emotional. However, the interaction between the rational and the emotional, the public and the private, often goes unnamed in academia, in that the writing in of oneself, a being with feelings, is rarely considered “legitimate” content for scholarly work (Church, 1995). Some, however, have argued that the inclusion of feeling is not “irrational”, instead, the subjective or personal is objective and public (Church, 1995; Weedon, 1987; Jackson, 1990; Haug, 1992). In line with this, Burns talks about the notion of “witnessing”, of “sharing (the researchers) experience as similar to (the narrators)”, as a form of empathy, of being heard and believed (Burns, 2000, p.4). She argues convincingly that “positions of researcher and researched can be resisted if the boundaries between the two are blurred in the information gathering process” (Burns, 2000, p.5).

Thus, to not fall into the trap of “false sisterhood” or “masculinist distance”, researchers should make every attempt possible to build conditions

for mutual respect and dialogue across difference. To do so, it is best to conceptualise the historical text as a social product of differing positionalities, including that of the researcher, whose voice is not only written in and problematised, but whose “self” is active in the construction of the actual narrative. That is, in line with Floya Anthias’ notion of translocational imaginings in dialogue, the researcher’s role is not only to “listen to” but also to “interact with” the narrator, enabling a blurring, shifting and reconstructing of boundaries between narrator and researcher.

#### READING OF NARRATIVE

Feminist life history must also pay close attention to the choice of method for interpretation of the narrative (I will call this process “reading the narrative” to avoid confusion). I have identified from the literature four different ways of reading life history narrative: biogram, analytic, interpretative, and standpoint. The *biogram* method of reading the narrative is simply a summary of the narrative, written up in linear form, a sort of curriculum vitae of the narrator (e.g., Theodore Abel, cited in Chanfroult-Duchet, 1991). The *analytic* method, also referred to as “deconstructing the narrative” or “topical analysis”, is the search for themes in the narratives with the goal of identifying facts and actions (e.g., Bertaux, 1986; Desmarais & Grell, 1986; Panet-Raymond & Poirier, 1986). The *interpretative* method, borrowing from narratology and textual analysis, is a socio-symbolic method of reading a narrative (e.g., Chambon, 1995; Chanfroult-Duchet, 1991). The task of the researcher using this method, is described by Chanfroult-Duchet:

on the basis of a precise description of structural features at work in the narrative [key phrases, key patterns, narrative model used – Epic, Romanesque, Picaresque, and use of myths], [the researchers task is] to outline and analyse the complex social problematic that the interviewee has developed in the life history (Chanfroult-Duchet, 1991, p.82).

While the latter is associated with the “gender history” approach to feminist history, the *standpoint* method is closer to the “herstory” approach. Standpoint

method of reading narrative, at its most basic, is a reading that preserves the subject as the knowing actor, as an “embodied” subject located in a particular actual local historical setting; therefore, no attempts are made to interpret or analyse the material.

Personally, none of these four methods of reading a narrative, alone, appeal to me, for various reasons. First, I agree with Dorothy Smith’s critique that both the interpretative and analytic methods, that

in such a process, the standpoint of the women themselves is suppressed. The standpoint becomes that of the discourse reflecting upon properties of the study population. Characteristics of the study population become the object of the knower's gaze (Smith, 1987, p.183).

Second, the interpretative model, in particular, suffers from the same pitfalls as post-structuralism and pure gender history discussed above – in focusing solely on discourse and text, Subjects become disembodied voices (Luken & Vaughan, 1999). This is particularly problematic, in that it goes against one of the very premises of life history and feminist history, the goal of capturing people’s voices, of recovering social actors and it dismisses the “real and knowable” experiences of women (Tilly, 1989; Sangster, 1994). On the other hand, I am critical of the standpoint method because of its tendency towards essentialism and determinism, as discussed in critiques of cultural feminism and Herstory approaches above. Moreover, in pure standpoint method, the voice of the researcher is completely obliterated.

In order to remain consistent with my conceptual framework of “woman” as positionality, and my preference for a hybrid (gender/herstory) feminist history, I think that the method of choice is one that borrows from the different approaches to reading the narrative. From interpretative methods, I will borrow the insight about the importance of form and structure of the interview. That is, I will read the interview on many levels to find more than one “discursive theme and multiple relations of power based on social relations (metaphors, tones, silences)” (Sangster, 1994). Following post-structuralist

insights, I will also write myself into the reading of the narrative. From standpoint methodology, I will borrow the idea that women live real material existences and that their “naming of their lives and struggles” is evidence of the past and present; that is, in reading the narrative, I will “believe” the descriptions women make of their positionality, and I will ground the narrative in a historical context. I will pay attention to the social relations of power in the family, society, and community. I will consider the material, ideological and historical constraints that impact women’s ability to BE. And, I will consider women’s own interpretations of their experiences within these changing contexts (see Borland, 1991 and Geertz, 1983 on the latter). Overall, I agree with Joan Sangster’s message that peoples’ experience is:

not created out of many possible discourses, but out of a limited range of discourses which are the product of the power relations of class, ethnicity and gender, as well as people's resistance to those relations. Moreover, women's narratives do reflect certain knowable experiences, always *mediated* by cultural codes, which may in turn come to shape their interpretation of experience in a dialectical sense (Sangster, 1994, p.23, emphasis hers).

Perhaps the best way to read a narrative, however, is via dialogue between researcher and narrator (Skeggs, 1997; see also Echevarria-Howe, 1995). If the reading is co-constructed, there is less chance of objectifying the narrator, irrespective of the approach chosen to read the narrative. In fact, in asking women to reflect not only on experience, but on the meaning of experience, narrators can be involved in the reading of their own narratives. Anderson argues that “oral history should explore emotional and subjective experience as well as facts and activities” and “oral historians should take advantage of the fact that the interview is the one historical document that can ask people what they mean” (Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 1987, p.112). In fact, as I discuss below, in the section on “truths and transformations”, collective reading of narratives is a method of choice, especially when one is doing history with social change goals in mind.

## AUDIENCE AND WHO BENEFITS?

The discussion of how one reads a narrative is fundamental to the decision about the final products of the life history and to the related question of audience. The audience of the product (the results) of the life history process is often the same authority one seeks to challenge in using life history methodology; that is, faculty, publishers, colleagues, supervisors. Susan Geiger argues that for life history methodology to be feminist and liberating, multiple products needs to be construed for multiple audiences (Geiger, 1990). Audiences can, and should include, at least narrator's community and the scholarly community, especially feminist scholars and other academics sympathetic to the cause. In developing a product for the narrator's community, it seems logical that the narrator would have something to say on what would be useful or not.

Related to the latter, is the question "who benefits"? Although an ethic of caring and concern for the Subject of the research and use of the product is not, by any means, unique to feminism, it is a mandatory aspect of feminist methodology (Geiger, 1990). Susan Geiger argues that feminist historians need to be flexible and creative in negotiating the sharing of benefits from the research process. In practice, this may mean providing narrators with copies of transcripts, or taking time to continue conversations on issues that may have been unresolved in the narrator's mind. This, Geiger argues, must not be considered time and energy wasted, as it is integral to the feminist ethic of caring and concern for the narrator's experience of the research process.

Any methodology informed by feminism, most probably aims to shine the spotlight on women's history. Women benefit from this presentation of their interpretations of their lives in a public arena to which they may have little access under regular circumstances. The ethical dilemma here, discussed already above, is the tension between celebrating women's history, thereby benefiting all women, and transforming life stories into commodities of privilege (e.g., tenure) thus benefiting the researcher (Olson & Shopes, 1991;

Patai, 1991; Sangster, 1994). Related to the latter is the ever present danger of exaggerating the exotic, heroic, or tragic aspects of lives of people tagged as having little power (Olson & Shopes, 1991), a pitfall which can be avoided by ensuring on-going dialogue with narrator(s) on the reading of the narrative.

#### TRUTHS AND TRANSFORMATION

*Historical amnesia is “an important social tool for any repressive society. If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all-important question, ‘Why?’ This gives rise to a historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread”*  
-- Audre Lorde, 1992, p.497.

Feminist life history is necessarily about social change. In line with this, Sandra Harding argues that the quality of research should be evaluated in terms of its potential for emancipation; that is, researchers should aim to replace the value-neutral stance (male, classist, racist) of knowledge for one that is explicitly value-oriented (explicitly emancipatory, for the elimination of oppression) (Harding, 1991). As I showed above, at the heart of feminist life history are the objectives of including women’s voices in history and of breaking with universal or grand narratives. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 1, doing history can also lead to individual and collective transformations.

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” (Panet-Raymond, 1987), of exaggerating the exotic, heroic, or tragic aspects of lives of people tagged as having little power (Olson & 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)?

The best way to deal with these ethical dilemmas is to do history *with* the people who make that history. Even Patai, one of the harshest critics of feminist life history writes that: “the only projects that avoid [the problems posed above] are those that are at all stages genuinely in the control of a community, with the community assuming the role of both researched and researcher” (Patai, 1991, p.147). On this topic, historians can learn a great deal from community history projects. Linda Shopes, in her critique of the Baltimore Neighbourhood 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 organisations, (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 (Shopes, 1986, p.249).

Community-grounding, Shopes argues, increases the chances that historians will find the people who are “in the know”, and that precious political, economic and historical information on the community will be forthcoming. Moreover, having local ties increases the legitimacy of the project while nourishing a lasting connection to the community, making it easier to integrate the history projects into a broader local organising efforts (e.g., workshops in local schools). In addition to this, community-grounding can reduce the chances of objectification of community residents and of transforming their stories into commodities of privilege; the local residents involved in the project often play a “watch-dog” role ensuring that they are not losers in the partnership.

Moreover, some historians choose to collect life histories from a group, as opposed to a narrator/researcher dyad, and by doing so increase the chances

of individual and collective empowerment. Benmayor and colleagues participated in a community-based program of action research initiated by the Centre for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College (City University of New York). This project, whose participants were mostly Puerto Rican women, aimed to “promote empowerment through native-language literacy training and education of Spanish speaking adults”, using life history, testimonial and participant observation methodologies (Benmayor, 1991, p.159). They argued, and showed that, “when generated in an organised group context, [life histories] have the potential of impacting directly on individual and collective empowerment” (Benmayor, 1991, p.160). In a similar vein, Mercier and Murphy report on a project of life histories collected from 40 women activists during a special conference organised for that purpose, “Moulders and Shapers” that resulted in individual and community pride in past and present achievements (Mercier & Murphy, 1991). Similarly, Michal McCall describes a study in which he organised a series of group storytelling evenings; each member of the group shared her or his life story depending on the topic of the day with the others in the group, and discussion ensued. McCall writes that:

As they did that – told and listened to stories, and talked to each other about them – they learned other people’s interpretation of common experiences and tested their own, thus developing shared understandings of the problems and possibilities people in their position in history have in common (McCall, 1989, p.43).

All of these projects resulted in re-positioning of participants, had a revitalising effect on the community and/or on community work, and many participants gained a new respect for history and its import. Thus, researchers, based in the community, were able to develop the trust needed for the social change potential of the projects to give fruit<sup>10</sup>. However, those historians who have

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the “Catching Stories” project, spearheaded by QueenSpark Books, a non-profit community writing and publishing group, produced a tape/transcript archive and illustrated oral history book on Brighton’s fishing community (Osmond, 1998; Sitzia, 1998). Jeremy Brecher and a team of historians set-up the Brass Workers History Project in a working-class community. Many other community history projects exist, many are not documented in



reflected on the methodology of these community history projects have also faced certain difficulties. For some, they found that the local history project was low on the priority list of local folks, that they had difficulties dealing with being an “outsider” to the community, and faced problems related to volunteer and narrator burnout (e.g., Brecher, 1986). In line with this, it is one thing, for a historian to want to do a “community-based”, “community-run” project, but *how* does one do so?

Rarely do historians write about the micro-processes involved in the doing of community history projects (see Shopes, 1984 for a critique), therefore it is difficult to gage how feminist the process was. Feminist community organisers and activists 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. I believe that by bridging organising practice with feminist life history methodology, historians have the most potential to effect social change at the individual, group and community levels, while, at the same time, dealing with many of the ethical dilemmas related to power dynamics<sup>11</sup>. I turn to this now.

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academic literature, and are therefore difficult to find. Here are some (all cited in Mercier & Buckendorf, 1992): Homewood-Brushton: A Century of Community-Making (Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania); Mountain-Drive Santa-Barbara Project (1987, Ava Kahn’s Advanced oral history class at Santa Barbara Regional Oral History Clearinghouse, students did interviews); the Minnesota Iron Range (Velma Ostman and Iron Range Research Centre); El Barrio Popular Education Program (Benmayer and colleagues, empowerment using history for literacy, mostly with women in NYC, Puerto Ricans); Homesteading women in Owyhee County 1900-1920 (Idaho, Linda Morton, museum director, and Jerry Cunningham, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Idaho Native); Koloa: An oral history of a Kaua’I Community (Hawaii, 1984-1985, 1987, Library and University of Hawaii). There are many examples of worker and local oral history projects in Québec and Canada (see Millar, 1982 for a review).

<sup>11</sup> My thesis was not conceptualized as an official “action-research” project. As an activist and organizer I applied my feminist community organizing knowledge to the literature I read for my comprehensive exam on women in community activism and on feminist life history methodology. The process that ensued however is very similar to that of an action-research project, and does, in fact meet the 8 criteria enumerated by the Québec team of the *Revue internationale d’action communautaire* in the preface of the special issue on action-research (*Revue internationale d’action communautaire*, 1981). And, it cadres well with work on participatory research (e.g., Potts & Brown, 2002; Whitmore, 1994).

#### PART IV: BRINGING IN COMMUNITY ORGANISING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Community organising is the practice of effecting social change at the personal and community level, via individual, group and collective empowerment (Rouffignat et al., 2001). 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 (e.g., Callahan, 1997; Dominelli, 1990; Dominelli, 1995; Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1994; L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, 1998). 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. I begin this section with a brief overview of some of the concepts that underlie feminist organising practice. Next, I discuss the organising process itself, the obstacles that organisers face, and the tools they have developed to “dismantle the masters house”.

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, 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 (eliminating the border guards of difference).

### THE ORGANISING PROCESS

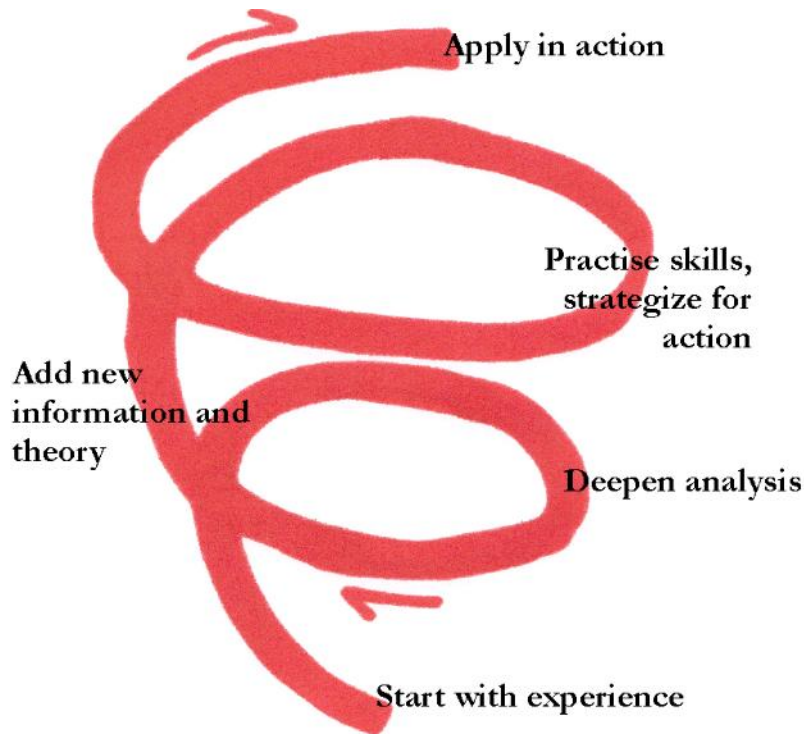
The role of the community organiser, according to this model, is to “help people help themselves” (e.g., Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1994; Lamoureux, Lavoie, Mayer, & Panet-Raymond, 2002; L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, 1998). The organiser uses her skills and knowledge to *work with* people (and not *for*) to effect change. That is, *people who are involved in every step of the process*. Underlying the latter is the basic principle that for social change to work, we need to go towards the people, to where they are located, and start from their self-identified needs. Lasting change will not ensue if the people who are most concerned with the problem or issue at hand do not agree on the identification of the problem, the solutions, the analysis, the action plan or the tactics. In line with this, value is placed on knowledge gleaned from lived experience (not only on formal education), and it is recognised that people don't have to be experts on an issue to have an opinion. Always integrated into community organising process, however, is some form of popular education; that is, there are people facilitating dialogue on various issues with the objective of making links between personal experiences and political structures. To illustrate this process, often it is said that the “activity is a pretext for political education” in that group members, be it of a food cooperative, a housing organisation or a welfare rights group, above and beyond working towards providing a service or defending the rights of individuals, are actors in their own political education. From this collective reflection, it is argued, action can emerge. In other words, process is as important as outcome.

These principles are operationalised in different ways (e.g., Lamoureux, Lavoie, Mayer, & Panet-Raymond, 2002). First, the organiser works with a *core group* of community residents, whose members are involved in every step of the

process. Interested residents are recruited, in the best of situations through one-to-one contact with existing networks, such as community organisations, religious institutions, local unions, historical societies, or if need be through door-knocking, distributing flyers or other forms of publicity. In attempting to pre-figure *power-with*, there is a conscious attempt to create a democratic space in which all voices are heard and listened to, participation is facilitated for all, irrespective of race, gender, class, and tasks are shared. This requires a conscious effort to put into place strategies and tools such as regular checking-in sessions, evaluations and follow-up, daycare facilities, speakers lists, etc. The small group is a preferred organisational form (e.g., Côte & Couillard, 1995), because it fosters the formation of personal bonds among participants as everyone feels integral to the process, thus they can laugh, have fun, but also deal with difficult issues as they emerge. The latter contributes greatly to sustaining individual participants through hard times and conflict which are inevitable in any social change process. Second, instead of hiring experts, or professionals, local residents are often hired to work in community organisations. The underlying premise being that everyone has lived experience, and knowledge, irrespective of formal training or education (Shragge, 1994).

The spiral image helps illustrates this popular education process. Denise Nadeau, in her popular education guide, describes the process. She argues, following Paolo Freire (Freire, 1970), that the spiral reflects this process in that it starts at the bottom, the process is continuous, and that action is not the final step, because the latter always then stimulates more reflection, which is now more sophisticated given the journey so far through the spiral (Nadeau, 1996). Specifically, the spiral-like process always begins with *peoples' experiences* and knowledge (see spiral image, below). Then, through discussion and facilitation, people come to see similarities of experience, make links, and push their *analyses*. New pieces of *information*, concepts, and theories come in to build on people's experience. All this leads to *experimentation*, planning, and eventually

application in *action*. This model has been used and written about by many community activists and academics over the years (e.g., Ampleman et al., 1983; Ampleman et al., 1987; Barndt, 2000; Gilkes, 1994; Gilkes, 1980; L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, 1998; Ninacs, 1995).



Thus, above and beyond the social change outcomes that result from the community organising process (e.g., improved services, new groups), empowerment of individuals, group and the collective (Ninacs, 1995; Rouffignat et al., 2001), via the pre-figuring of democratic structures is sought. Again, applying a spiral analogy, individual, group and collective (or community) empowerment result from and cause the other. Empowerment is about people understanding that their individual, seemingly un-solvable, problems are often shared by others, and are related to structural inequalities (making the personal, political). Empowerment is about acting on this understanding with others in collective actions – from demanding rights from the state, to setting up democratic community services, to sharing personal stories of conjugal violence. Empowerment is about people taking control over

their own lives and communities, lives often dominated by others (State, men, Whites). Empowerment is about learning from errors, and living the successes, be they large or small, private or public, and celebrating them (Panet-Raymond & Lavoie, 1996). In sum, in community organising, transformative processes leads to “new consciousness” or empowerment and transformation of self, of group, and of community.

### ANGER AND GUILT: OBSTACLES TO DOING “POWER-WITH”

However, it is one thing to *rationaly* 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 core group, 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<sup>12</sup>. On the one hand is the anger of those on the “loosing end” of the equation, 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. bell hooks, referring to the dynamics between Black people and their White allies during the civil rights movement, talks about the “bitterness and hatred toward white people (...) that has lingered in the collective psyche of Black people and poisons our relationships with one another” (hooks, 1993, p.165). These complex feelings, hooks claims, stem from

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<sup>12</sup> My reflections are greatly influenced by my readings of Black, Chicana, Aboriginal and lesbian academics and activists, and of feminist community organizers, whose writings not only confirm (or “normalize”) and expand on my personal experiences with paralyzing emotions in alliance building, but also propose concrete solutions.

the historic inability of white allies to recognise their position as member of the privileged white majority.

Paradoxically, the person on the “winning end” of the equation sometimes does not recognise that differentiation and stratification are collective processes as well, and take on too much personal responsibility (Pheterson, 1990; Bunch, 1990). 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). Audre Lorde writes that this process is “an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns” (Lorde, 1984, p. 113). Gloria Anzaldúa relates her personal experience:

There is always some, no matter how minimal, unease or discomfort between most women-of-color and most white-women. Because they can’t ignore our ethnicity, getting our approval and acceptance is their way to try to make themselves more comfortable and lessen their unease. It is a great temptation for us to make white-women comfortable [...] some of us get seduced into making a white-woman an honorary woman-of-color – she wants it so badly. But it makes us fidget (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 222).

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. Next, I discuss dialogue, and the tools that have been developed to deal with these kinds of dynamics. 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.

#### DIALOGUE AND TOOLS TO “DISMANTLE THE MASTER’S HOUSE”

Dialogue fosters understanding. Understanding fosters trust and responsibility. Responsibility fosters action. Trust and responsibility fosters dialogue. It is through this spiral-like dialogical process, including the conflict that often ensues, that one gleans a clearer understanding of the position of others around us, of one’s own, and of the social processes underlying those relationships. This is only possible if there is burgeoning trust, and a mutual commitment to the success of the relationship<sup>13</sup>. If the latter is present, when emotionally-trying conflict emerges in the group, the emotions – very visceral – can be named and problematised. If the latter is not present, the complex emotions will remain latent, and will continue to be obstacles to real social change. When these emotions are made “public”, often rational explanations emerge that help understand the social processes that are at the origin of painful emotions. Often, this kind of discussion can lead to new consciousness about the border guards of difference that are present, and operationalised in hurtful

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<sup>13</sup>Liberation theologians, and certain feminist thinkers from the United States have used the notion of « loving dialogue » to refer to the this dialogical relationship (e.g., Freire, 1970; Bunch, 1987). I prefer not use this terminology because the judeo-christian under-tones do not sit well with my own spiritual and political beliefs.



behaviours in relationships across difference. Not only can this process help one person understand another's positionality, but it can also engender individual self-reflection, identification of one's own positionality, and of the social outcomes tied to it. hooks argues that this identification is a crucial part of the process of social change:

This individual commitment, when coupled with engagement in collective discussion, provides a space for critical feedback which strengthens our efforts to change and make ourselves new (hooks, 1990b, p. 188-190).

This process, of identification and analysis of the border guards of difference is a necessary step to their transformation.

It is not enough, however, to be committed to dialogue. One cannot assume that with the naming of dilemmas, and the decision to engage in dialogue, very real inequalities, and their underlying social processes, will suddenly disappear:

We have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 1992, p. 123).

The processes of stratification of difference are ingrained in our very being, and we need tools to help us identify, deconstruct and eliminate them. In fact, unless we consciously choose to structure our dialogic space to allow for the doing of *power-with*, we will simply be reproducing the hierarchical and undemocratic relations of *power-over*. Gloria Anzaldúa, points out this fact:

All parties involved in coalitions need to recognise the necessity that women-of-color and lesbians define the terms of engagement: that we be listened to, that we articulate who we are, where we have come from (racial past), how we understand oppression to work, how we think we can get out from under, and what strategies we can use in accomplishing the particular tasks we have chosen to perform. *When we don't collectively define ourselves and locations, the group will automatically operate under white assumptions, white definitions, white strategies* (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 225, my emphasis).

Because the processes of differentiation and stratification are so ubiquitous, each of us can easily fall into the trap of taking on dominating behaviors and of reproducing oppressive structures that interfere with the construction of relationships across difference; for instance: talking loudly and often in order to win the debate; hoarding information to maintain control of a situation; holding a meeting at 5pm when most mothers are picking up their children, feeding them, and helping them with homework. Unless an alternative structure is discussed and applied, people with less political, cultural or economic resources are rendered “voiceless” and are often forced to adjust themselves to the oppressive structures. People with better life conditions and life chances will have greater influence and will set the tone, the pace and the content. These dynamics are fertile ground for explosive conflict due to unnamed latent emotions.

Thus, it is not enough to say we will engage in dialogue. This dialogue, because it is occurring within a stratified society, must be consciously organised to include strategies and tools that pre-figure a truly radical democratic space. Examples of such strategies include regular “checking-in” at the beginning of each meeting as well as an evaluation at the end to create a space for input and follow-through, and for the naming of emotions related to power dynamics; speaker’s lists based on gender, race, number of interventions to encourage people to speak; based on Aboriginal tradition, a talking stick that ensures that when a person has the stick she will not be interrupted, fostering real listening; daycare and translation always available to foster participation; the naming and explicit attempts at valorisation of “private” or “housekeeping” roles in an organisation, roles that are traditionally those of women in organisations (Némésis, 2002).

Overall then, community organisers and activists have developed and honed many strategies that deal with micro-processes of groups and organisations. The organising process, conceptualised as doing *power with* a core

group of people, who are actors of their own transformation (and that of their community), because they are involved in every step of the process, can be applied to the doing of feminist life history. That is, in borrowing from organising practice, many of the ethical dilemmas related to power dynamics in history-making can be resolved (as much as is possible). And, by creating spaces for respectful dialogue, armed with tools to help dismantle the master's house that is inside every person, feminist historians can create the conditions that will facilitate the naming, problematising and understanding of complex emotions that often interfere with relationships across difference. History-making that is conceptualised in this way, in allowing for the underlying social processes to be “made public”, has the potential to be truly transformative at the individual, interpersonal, and collective levels.

#### **PART V: BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER**

In this Chapter, I illustrated that women, and most particularly those positioned as low-income, tend to do their politics in the community, at the complex intersection between the ideological, material and historical “public” sphere of work and electoral politics, and the “private” sphere of home and family. Their informal community-work – mediation, caring and network building and maintenance – forms the bases of community organising and ties social movements to the grassroots. Many women, positioned within a stratified society – feminine, mothers, and wives – are motivated to action because they wish to protect, care for and nurture family and community. Many of these women actively utilise these positionalities to gain credibility and support in their struggles. I have argued that many women, positioned as feminine, wives and mothers, apply the skills they learned in the home and in their informal community work to “housekeeping” tasks in community organisations in their roles as center-women or bridge-leaders. Through their struggles, women construct themselves, home, community and state, to, paradoxically, both constrain and liberate.

Women's personal biography, their experience of their positionality over time, is intricately tied to community organising. In order to capture this dialectic between biography and community, feminist life history methodology, consistent with my theoretical framework and the hybrid approach to feminist history, seems the most appropriate. Many feminist historians have chosen to build history not by creating a grand narrative, but by releasing multiple voices of difference, voices often barred from history-making structures. They have made political choices in their methodologies, by "believing" and documenting women's voices, thereby questioning the authority of the traditional knowledge base. In refusing to reproduce relations of domination in the researcher/narrator relationship, they have problematised and tried to resolve many of the ethical dilemmas related to power differentials in that very relationship. They have chosen to read narratives in such ways as to reduce the objectification of the narrators, and have released the products of their work into domains other than academe, seeking to "give back" some of the history to those who make it. Finally, they have struggled with the dilemmas associated with their attempts to transform individuals, communities, academe and society through their work.

Individual, group and community transformation is the "raison d'être" of community organisers and activists. Feminist community organisers, activists and theorists have developed and honed many skills that can help deal with the micro-processes of doing feminist history projects. By pre-figuring *power-with* in an attempt to eliminate the border guards of difference, individual, groups and communities can become empowered and can effect real social change. The dynamics related to *power-over*, inherent to relationships across difference in our stratified society, anger on the one hand, and guilt on the other, are not erased because one is doing *power-with*. Through dialogical spaces, structured to pre-figure a radical democratic space, we allow for tensions related to these emotions to emerge, to be named, problematised and acted

upon, leading to increased understanding of oneself, of others, and of the relationship. The latter leads to increased trust and responsibility. This then can lead to concerted efforts to eliminate the border guards of difference, and to experiment with other forms of social relations. In my thesis, I am doing just that, applying organising principles to history-making to develop a participatory life history methodology that pre-figures a society without borders guards of difference, and that aims to effect social change at the individual, group, and community levels.

### CHAPTER 3: BUILDING THE BRIDGE BETWEEN HISTORY AND ORGANISING

In this chapter, I present and discuss a methodology that borrows theoretical and methodological insights from the review of the literature on intersectionality in community organising, on feminist life history methodology, and on feminist organising practice. In the first part, I present the project's objectives, as well as the selection and initial contact with project participants. Then, I present in detail each of the five phases: Gathering and initial reading of the life stories; analysis and review of the themes; amalgamation and writing of the book; publication and, finally, the book launch. Because my thesis and personal journey are so intricately related to the genesis of the project, I weave reflections on the latter into the presentation of the project<sup>14</sup>. While the first part is purely descriptive, in the second part, I explain the reasoning behind the choices we made, and analyse the latter following the literature in an effort to demonstrate that the project bridges feminist life history methodology and organising practice. First, I detail how community actors are involved in the project, then I analyse how the organisational forms chosen for both teamwork with staff, and for the work with project participants, are coherent with feminist anti-racist organising practice, and with feminist life history methodology. I also discuss the tools that enabled me to problematise my own positionality throughout in an effort to eliminate the border guards of difference. I conclude by making explicit links with the feminist and organising literature, and by illustrating the commitment of community residents to the project, which clearly demonstrates that they have made the project theirs.

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<sup>14</sup> The “va-et-viens” between the detailing of the project per se, and of my thesis, makes the reading of the chapter less “smooth”. Notwithstanding, I have chosen to sacrifice flow for a truer representation of what occurred; a spiral-like process in which theory, data, project, thesis, personal journeys, etc., were intertwined, and always influencing each other.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Based on my initial proposal to the Board, Isabelle and I, who coordinated the project from the beginning, developed a detailed proposal, which was adopted by the Board in March 2001, and named the project “Tissons une courtePointe: L’histoire de l’action communautaire à travers les histoires de vies de femmes de Pointe St-Charles”. “CourtePointe” is a play on words, “Pointe” being the nick-name of the neighbourhood, and a “courtepointe” being a quilt or patchwork. We then fine-tuned the objectives, elaborated selection criteria for the participants, organised the actual selection with a team from the Board, drew up a consent form (appendix 2), and did the initial ice-breaker individual interviews with chosen participants. I now discuss each of these elements in turn.

### OBJECTIVES

Here is the description of the project, including the objectives, as written by Isabelle and I in the spring of 2001:

The project consists of two groups of women (Francophone / Anglophone) from Point St. Charles who will meet regularly over a 6 to 12 month period<sup>15</sup> to talk about their involvement in community action, via their life stories. After each meeting, the coordinators of the project will transcribe these stories, and do an initial "reading" of these transcripts. The themes that emerge from these readings will form the basis of discussion of the following meeting. This cycle will repeat itself until we have woven, together, these lives, this involvement, this history of community action into a quilt of stories. This quilt, woven from patches of consensus and contraction identified during the process, will represent the history that we will have constructed together.

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

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<sup>15</sup>The project is taking much longer than 12 months. We are now into the third year and the book launch is planned for March 8<sup>th</sup> 2005!

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.

Once woven, the team of the Archives will transform the quilt into a book. This book will be produced, from beginning to end, in close collaboration with the participants, who will have a say as to its content and form. Moreover, the book, along with an analysis of the process surrounding its creation, will constitute the doctoral dissertation of one of the project coordinators, Anna Kruzynski, student in the School of Social Work, McGill University and Université de Montréal.

Thus, from the very beginning, my thesis has been intricately related to the project. In fact, as is indicated above, originally, the collective “coffee-table style” book, was to be included in my thesis integrally. As the project moved along, however, this was to change, as I discuss below.

## PARTICIPANTS

Based on our objectives, Isabelle and I delineated a number of selection criteria for project participants, which were accepted by the Board in March 2001 (excerpt from project proposal, March 2001):

1. Implication depuis 30 ans et plus (pour aller chercher l’histoire du communautaire depuis le début des groupes);
2. Autant que possible mais pas obligatoirement, des femmes qui habitent encore le sud-ouest et/ou qui sont encore impliquées dans le sud-ouest;
3. Femmes qui ont commencé à militer autour de leur propre réalité;
4. Par secteur (par exemple : éducation, justice, santé, aide sociale, garderie, etc....);
5. Selon leurs disponibilités pour participer à l’ensemble de la démarche



The first two criteria reflect our desire to find women who have lived through the birth and genesis of community-based organising in the Point from the 1960s-70s to the present. Because of the socio-economic similarities of the different neighbourhoods in the South-West of Montréal, and the parallels in their organising history, we thought that it would be an acceptable alternative to recruit women who were now active in other South-West neighbourhoods, if they fit the other criteria but were no longer active in the Point specifically. The third criterion is in line with our goal of documenting the voices of women who are usually barred from history-making because of class. That is, we decided that we wanted to hear from women who were “organised”, instead of women who were “organisers”, since the latter have more often been documented than the former. The fourth criterion was included in an attempt to cover different areas of organising, and the fifth speaks for itself.

Based on these criteria, Isabelle drew up a list of potential participants (35 French and 12 English) from a bank of potential candidates gathered for the project *Du foyer au quartier* and from suggestions from local activists. In May 2001, the selection committee (composed of three Board members who were also local activists, myself, and Isabelle) met to complete the list of candidates and to rank them in order of priority following the criteria above. A couple of the chosen candidates decided not to participate in the project, two for health reasons and the other for lack of time<sup>16</sup>. The final group of participants is, on the French side: Thérèse Dionne, Louise Lanthier, Marguerite Métivier, Madeleine Richardson (passed away at the end of Phase I), and Michèle Soutière; on the English side, Denise Boucher, Donna Leduc, Myrna Rose, Maureen Ryan, and Frances Vaillancourt.

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<sup>16</sup> The entire selection procedure is described in the document « méthode de sélection des participantes », updated March 2003, available at the Archives.

## PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

Although each woman's journey through history will be discussed in detail in the chapters to come, I include here a brief biography for each, based on a questionnaire that most of the women filled out in December 2003<sup>17</sup>. Whenever possible, I cite the participant's own words. Because each woman decided what she wanted to include in her biography, the kind of information presented varies from participant to participant. For some, it was important to discuss their childhood, others their education, and still others their pride in the neighbourhood.

### Thérèse Dionne

Thérèse, born in 1933 in Point St. Charles, is the youngest of a six children. Her father was a day-labourer ("journalier"), and her mother a volunteer mid-wife. Although as a child, Thérèse stopped going to school in Grade 5 to go work in a factory, she was awarded her high school equivalency at the age of 40, her CEGEP at the age of 70, and is currently studying at the "Université du 3e âge de Montréal". Her husband, Germain, was a factory worker, and they had two children. Thérèse has always been proud of her working-class roots, and of her active involvement in community: « J'ai toujours eu une très grande fierté de mon appartenance au quartier. Ma plus grande valorisation c'est mon engagement à la vie communautaire de mon quartier et surtout ma fidélité. À 70 ans je suis toujours active et présente à cette vie ».

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<sup>17</sup> Frances, Denise and Madeleine did not fill out the questionnaire. Frances chose not to fill out the questionnaire, and instead provided me with the relevant information over the phone, to which I added excerpts from the regular interview meetings. Due to health and time constraints, Denise was unable to fill out the questionnaire in the required time-frame, so I have constructed her biography based on information she shared during the interviews. Madeleine passed away in June 2002. Her biography is also constructed based on information she shared during the interviews, and I have included the text read by Thérèse at her funeral, because it really reflects the kind of person Madeleine was.

Her very first involvement in community activism was in the early 1960s, when a local priest convinced her to join a campaign for a swimming pool in the neighbourhood. After that, she was involved everywhere, she was: an active member of the “school” subcommittee of the “Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles” in the mid-1960s, she was a “community worker” at the Point St. Charles Community Clinic in the 1970s, she was the coordinator of the “Services Bénévoles du 3e âge de Pointe St-Charles in the 1980s, and, today, as a local “elder”, is now actively involved with the “Conseil des aînés. Thérèse’s activism stems from, and has always been sustained by her faith : « Ma foi fait que je continue à militer. La foi c’est pas seulement croire à quelque chose, mais c’est de faire quelque chose. C’est de s’engager ». Spurred on, as a child, by her religious upbringing and, as a wife, by her participation in the « Service d’orientation aux foyers », she became active in the 1960s with the « Action Catholique » (Mouvement des Travailleurs Chrétiens), and since the mid-1970s has participated in the popular masses of the base community.

### **Louise Lanthier**

Louise was born in 1946 in Verchère, but arrived in the Point a year later, and has been there ever since. Louise has two sisters, and writes that « nous avons toujours été dans la classe moyenne. Mon père a toujours eu un bon emploi et il travaillait à la brasserie Dow (...) Maman commence à travailler à 40 ans ». Louise has a Grade 10 education, and « je me suis marié en 1968 à Serge Lanthier de Pointe St-Charles, il est facteur. En 1970, avec son frère Pierre ils ont acheté le bowling sur la rue Centre jusqu’en 1982 ». She writes that « je suis une femme à la maison de 1970 à 1983. Je travaille à l’école Jeanne Leber sur des projets spéciaux de la CSDM. En 1984, je deviens le premier agent de milieu dans les écoles ». Louise has been active in many groups, including in her younger years the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique, but she is most remembered for her work in the schools, for the setting-up the collective kitchen « La cuisine des parents » and for her contribution to the founding of the « YMCA

daycare ». Today she works at the “Garde-manger pour tous”, a community organisation that works on food security issues.

### Marguerite Métivier

The following is a biography written up by Isabelle following a discussion with Marguerite on her background.

Née à Sherbrooke le 8 mars 1940, dans un milieu familial ouvrier, pauvre et violent, Marguerite est la cadette d’une famille de 5 enfants (2 frères et 2 sœurs). Enceinte de Marguerite, sa mère quitte le foyer conjugal et place ses 4 enfants à l’orphelinat. Marguerite a une enfance difficile, trimballée de famille d’accueil en pension, de pension en famille d’accueil, dès l’âge de 6 mois. Elle rencontrera son père pour la 1<sup>ère</sup> fois à l’âge de 18 ans, le reverra quelques fois ici et là seulement mais ne reprendra jamais vraiment contact avec lui. De son côté, sa mère sait à peu près toujours où se trouve Marguerite mais ne semble pas avoir de grandes aptitudes maternelles. Elle la reprend avec elle à l’âge de 9 ans mais comme elle travaille de nuit, Marguerite doit s’occuper d’elle-même.

Son mariage, en 1962, la sort du pataugeage dans lequel elle a vécu depuis sa naissance. Les premières années sont toutefois passablement difficiles, Marguerite devant s’occuper des 6 pensionnaires de la maison de chambres de 2 étages où elle vit avec son mari. Neuf mois et 1 semaine après le mariage, une 1<sup>ère</sup> fille vient au monde. Marguerite aura 4 filles en 6 ans, dont la 3<sup>e</sup>, Marie-Claude, est décédée de façon tragique à l’été 2003.

Jusqu’à ce qu’elle commence à s’impliquer dans des organismes du quartier Hochelaga-Maisonneuve où elle habite, Marguerite vit une vie de femme d’intérieur. Pour elle, c’est une routine où elle s’enlise et qui l’éteint...Le curé de la paroisse approche le couple pour qu’il s’implique au Service d’orientation aux familles, à titre de couple meneur. Suivront le comité des citoyens, le comptoir alimentaire, le comité d’action politique. Nous sommes à la fin des années 1960. Ces activités stimulent fortement Marguerite. Mais un grand moment dans la vie de Marguerite se produit lorsque le couple vient s’installer à Pointe St-Charles, en 1972. Pour elle, c’est une renaissance, un retour aux sources (elle a passé 5 ans dans une famille d’accueil de la Pointe). Elle se sent accueillie et, très intéressée, elle ne tarde pas à s’impliquer un peu partout, en cette période d’effervescence communautaire. Le comptoir alimentaire, le Bureau d’Information Scolaire, la garderie, les camps familiaux, le Carrefour...sont quelques-uns des lieux où elle s’est impliquée. Marguerite a été présente d’une manière ou d’une autre dans presque

toutes les luttes importantes pour l'amélioration des conditions de vie des gens de Pointe St-Charles.

Aujourd'hui séparée, Marguerite travaille dans le quartier depuis 1973. Depuis 1998, elle travaille comme animatrice au Club populaire des consommateurs et participe toujours aux activités sociales et politiques des groupes du quartier.

### Madeline Richardson

« Moi, chu née sur la rue Manufacture ». Born in 1946, in a large family living in poverty, Madeleine never left the Point. Although her family did not have much money, and lived in cramped quarters, Madeleine remembers that her mother always kept the house very tidy, and was very generous with the people around her. Madeleine's pride and sense of belonging to the neighbourhood has always been palpable, and she often said that her activism stems from her religious upbringing, and the values of mutual aid and sharing that her mother always upheld and transmitted to her children.

Ça fait 55 que j'habite à Pointe St-Charles. Je suis une mère monoparentale. J'ai un fils, Marc-André, qui a 20 ans. Aujourd'hui je fait encore bien du bénévolat. Je suis très active à ma communauté, dans la paroisse, au Carrefour. Marc-André aussi, il a fait beaucoup de bénévolat. Je pense que ça déteint ! Il a l'exemple, il est partout. C'est ça ma vie. C'est mon quartier, ma communauté. J'essaye d'aider.

In addition to her involvement in the parish, and the Carrefour d'éducation populaire, Madeleine was also active in the school committees while her son was in school, as well as in the founding of her housing cooperative, "Les Naufragés" and in many other activities and actions of the "Projet St-Charles". Madeleine continued to be active in the neighbourhood until she passed away in June 2002. The following is the text that was written and read by Thérèse for Madeleine's funeral<sup>18</sup>:

Il fût un temps qu'on là nommait la quêteuse du boutte, mais attention, c'était toujours pour venir en aide à des organismes du quartier.

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<sup>18</sup> « Un aurevoir à Madeleine », read by Thérèse Dionne at Madeleine Richardson's funeral on 17 juin 2001.

Madeleine reflétait très bien la femme engagée dans son quartier qui l'a vu naître.

Elle participait autant à sa paroisse que dans le milieu communautaire, toujours pour les plus défavorisés.

Son dernier engagement est son testament de solidarité dans notre milieu en participant au projet de l'histoire populaire du quartier qui raconte par cinq femmes dont le titre sera « la courtePointe ».

Son dernier vœux a été de me demander de vous dire de ne jamais oublier de fêter les victoires obtenues par les citoyens et citoyennes de notre quartier pour l'amélioration de la qualité de vie.

Madeleine aimait sa famille, son fils Marc-André, ainsi que ses frères et sœurs qu'elle est allée rejoindre, et tout les militants et militantes disparus qui ont fait de ce quartier un modèle de solidarité.

Ce n'est qu'un au revoir Madeleine comme nous l'avons si souvent chanté avec nos aînés du Services de bénévoles du 3<sup>e</sup> âge de Pointe St-Charles.

### Michèle Soutière

Born in 1945 in St-Jean sur Richelieu, Michèle arrived in St-Henri with her parents and two sisters in 1955. She obtained her teaching diploma in 1964, and taught primary school in the South-West for a short time before deciding to leave that career to devote her life to social change, stimulated by her experiences in the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (JOC). After her marriage, she and her husband decided to settle in the Point for political reasons – to work in a working-class neighbourhood to improve people's quality of life. During the 1970s, Michèle had two children, and was very active in many groups, including the setting-up of the daycare "Les Enfants de l'avenir", the community pharmacy, the pre-natal centre at the Community Clinic, the Maison de Quartier, the Projet d'Organisation Populaire d'Information et de Regroupement (POPIR), and the "Club populaire des consommateurs". After « un petit clin d'œil vers les groupes communistes (que) je quitte en 1978 (car) ça ne colle pas à mes valeurs », Michèle worked at the Clinic as community worker and organiser in the 1980s. It is during this period that she set up, with other groups in the neighbourhood, the « Programme économique de Pointe St-

Charles » (PEP), the precursor of RÉSO (Regroupement pour la relance économique et sociale du Sud-Ouest de Montréal).

Until just recently, Michèle worked at the RÉSO. Here is what she writes about her motivations and approach to organising:

Mon intérêt a toujours été et cela depuis la JOC, à faire en sorte que les personnes se prennent en charge. En ce sens ,la participation active des principaux intéressés est de loin pour moi la chose la plus intéressante. Si on se bat pour une cause quelconque et que les personnes touchées par le problème ne s'y sont pas engagées à fond...ce sera à coup sur une défaite ou une victoire de très courte durée.

En ce sens le comité de participants du RESO fut une des réalisations de ma vie des plus satisfaisante, ces participants ont toujours été impliqués au développement des services offerts aux sans-emploi du RESO. Aujourd'hui, plusieurs de ces hommes et de ces femmes sont impliqués dans la société parce qu'enfin ils travaillent et nous ont prouvé à maintes reprises leur désir de redonner à la société ce qu'ils ont reçu. Pour moi, sans cette dimension, mon travail aurait été vain.

### Denise Boucher

Denise, born in the Point in the early 1950s, grew up “wild” in the streets of the neighbourhood. After a stint as a fashion model, and a few “crazy years” in the circuit, she married, had children, and divorced. The following excerpt is very “Denise”:

I was different from day one. Since I can remember. I was pissed off at the world. At men, at the way they treated the women. And I had to take care of all the kids, and work, and it was too much. I didn't want to get married, or to have kids. I did anyways. I'd see all these things going on around me. I didn't want that type of life. I went on this wild spree. I had my days of Bonnie and Clyde (...) I came back to the Point in the late 60s (...) by then I was divorced with two kids, I was looking for something to do. But I didn't want to go work in a company and do the same old thing, and be bored with everything, and be a number. And the Clinic had an opening. And, that's when I really started to get interested, realising that they were shit disturbers! I'm going to like it there. They are doing something, they are making a difference. This is the place I want to work. And I went to work there. I just sat back for a few years. I was in the background. (...) All the fighting of the Left, the Right, all the community groups, it was exciting! And I said, “shit, finally in the Point there is going to be action”. It was really exciting.

Now I couldn't go back to modeling, or to an ordinary office job. I also had to face the fact that if I did this, I would never be rich either. (...) I would never retire at Freedom 55, it'll be Freedom 95! But, there was action in my life. *My life had meaning*. And that was important to me. And I figured, I'll stay at the Clinic, I'll get involved in all sorts of things, then I'll move on to something else. Cause that is the way I was before I got into all this. I figured I would move on, but I never did. I just stayed. Because you made a difference, you were part of it! I didn't want to get screwed! I rather screw the government! (...) People I know, who are not involved, they don't know nothing about politics, they don't care about politics. They take everything as it comes. They get shit on. They work 9 to 5. Or they stay home. Everything is routine. And I despise that. (...) I didn't want that kind of life. (...)

Denise has been the secretary of many a coordinator at the Clinic for over 30 years, and is today, one of its pillars. In her own words, "as a worker I played a part, but as a citizen I owned part of the Clinic".

### Donna Leduc

Born in Point St. Charles in 1958, Donna grew up with five brothers and sisters, and graduated from high school with a grade 11. She has been married for over 20 years, and has three children of her own, and a granddaughter. Her involvement in the community began when she brought her children to Alternate School, a bilingual head-start program, which gave her the opportunity to get involved in the education of her children:

It empowered the parents. It gave us the right to say, "we have the right to have a say in the education of our kids!" It was to say, "this is your child, they're in school, don't leave it up to the big wigs up there, filtering down. You have a right to say what your children get to learn. And you have a right to say what's going on in the school".

From there, her involvement branched out to many groups within St-Columba House: the Women's Discussion group, the Worship group, the Pointe in Print newspaper, the Parent's group of Westmount Park School, the Afterschool programme, the Women's Collective<sup>19</sup>, and the workers cooperative Point At

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<sup>19</sup> Donna and Myrna were members of the Women's Collective that wrote "Hope is the Struggle" (Chamberlain, Garbish, Leduc, Rose, & Wakeling, 1996).



Work. Donna was a key player in the struggle to get an English popular education centre in the Point, winning the Point Adult Center for Education in the mid 1980s. Here is what Donna writes, looking back on her community involvement:

Through the Women's Collective of St. Columba House, I had the once in the life-time opportunity of traveling to Mexico and Guatemala. To visit these countries and see them through the eyes of the Native people was very moving and an eye opener. Despite the extreme poverty and lack of government support, these people are full of hope. Also, through the Collective, I had the opportunity to co-author the book "Hope is the Struggle".

My husband has supported me in his own way. He gave me the space to be my own person.

I do not see myself as a community activist. Where there is a need is where I would like to be. Unfortunately, there are many needs and I cannot support them all. I trust and leave some of them for our next generation.

### Myrna Rose

Myrna was born in the 1943 in Valleyfield, Québec, and although she was raised in New Brunswick with her eight brothers and sisters, she has spent most of her adult life in the Point, arriving in the 1960s. Myrna married at the age of 17, had five children, divorced in the 1970s, and today has five grandchildren. Her first exposure to community activism was through St-Columba House. Living on welfare at the time, she had come to St-Columba House for the food bank, and quickly got involved by helping out in the kitchen for the lunch service. When asked why she got involved in the first place, Myrna answered "I did it out of need really, and survival. I found it very hard, I still find it hard at times. But I'd never go back. I'd never go back to being this mousy little person I was". While she was a cook in the kitchen, she was "forced" to listen to the "crazy" activists that were agitating in and around St-Columba House at the time, who eventually convinced her that community activism was important. From there, she got involved in many groups, and was

on the Board of many organisations, including the Clinic, the Legal Aid Services, PACE, PEP, the St-Columba House Women's Discussion Group, the St-Columba House Worship Group, and Hand in Hand, a group for intellectually handicapped adults that she founded with two other mothers:

Myrna (Hand in Hand) started with 3 parents at St-Columba house, who had intellectually handicapped adults. They wanted to know what was going to happen to their adults when they finished school. It happened to be the year of the handicapped, so we were allotted a government grant. So, people came to me, Maureen, and Chris Levan, and asked if we'd like to start a group to work with the adults. And I said, "don't be so crazy! I couldn't do something like that!" (...)

Maureen Chris Levan had faith in the people in the Point like you couldn't believe. He would push! "Myrna, what's the matter with you?! Of course you can do it!" But, she would say, "I only cook here!". "It doesn't matter! Haven't you had experience with your son?"

Myrna I was so scared

Maureen "You have experience with your son. All you have to do with the others is what you do for your son."

Myrna And I only had a grade 9 education. And I was terrified. And I said, "well what about all these government forms, and all that?". "I'll help you with it!". (...) Government forms! I mean, they used to come in, and when the post was coming, I was terrified!

Today, Myrna is coordinator of Hand in Hand, and leads the Women's Discussion Group, from which she gets much support and inspiration. Here is how she concludes her biography:

I find my work each day a challenge and a joy. It helps to see what life is all about working with intellectually handicapped adults. And I have always tried to make my community a better place for women and children.

### **Maureen Ryan**

Maureen was born in 1933 in the Point, had four sisters, and went to high school as a teenager, but got her diploma as an adult in continuing education. Although Maureen was raised in the north-end of the city, she

returned to the Point to live with her second husband, a labourer, also from the Point, in 1957. She had six children, three of which had handicaps, which kept her extremely busy, along with her various clerical and office jobs. She first got involved in community activism in the 1970s when she got tired of hitting dead ends with the mainstream school committee, and decided to put her energy into the Point Improvement of Education Committee (PIEC) which was getting results using more confrontational tactics.

The latter opened the door to many jobs in community groups; Maureen worked on education at the People's Library in 1971, then she was hired as organiser at St-Columba House to work on the setting-up of the Point Action Citizens' Council (PACC), which she did until the late 1970s. Maureen also worked to set-up Alternate School, and when she became program coordinator at St-Columba House, she not only participated in local concerted-actions, but she was also responsible for the lunch program, the day camp, the clothing room, food distribution, Hand in Hand, the job search program "Working Out", and the "Pointe in Print". By the mid-1990s, because of her deteriorating health, Maureen retired with her husband to St-Gabriel de Brandon for a much deserved rest. They "moved back home" in 2000, Maureen's husband died shortly thereafter, and her health continued to deteriorate. Maureen concludes her biography in the following way:

My partner in life is gone. I live quietly in Point St-Charles with my son James, daughter Sharon and son-in-law Peter. I am contacted in 2001 about the project "Tissons une courtoise". I agree to participate. I start to feel alive again. I become a Board member of the Archives, and participate in community issues when health allows.

### **Frances Vaillancourt**

Frances was born in 1936 in Québec City, raised in the North-end of Montréal, and arrived in the Point with her husband in the late 1950s. Frances had nine children, and today has 15 grand-children, and three great-grand-daughters. In the late 1960s, Frances participated in a pilot project of what was

to become the Head-Start programme, set-up by the medical students at the Clinic<sup>20</sup>. From this, she went on to the Board at St-Columba House where she had gotten help during rough times, and the Board of the Clinic:

Frances I remember the Clinic was having a general assembly and certain people – no names mentioned (*laughing, pointing at Maureen*) said, “Well Frances why don’t you go on the Board? You’re an Anglophone, you know, there are not that many Anglophones”. So I did, and they all got behind me, and I got on! So I was on the Board for about 3-4 years. (...)

From there, Frances became a pillar of the optometry clinic, and volunteered there for several years before getting hired – for pay and for life – in 1976.

Frances I was working at the Clinic, with the mobile Clinic, and the eye Clinic. I was doing about ten hours a day (...) I still get a few people come over and ask me if I still have the screwdriver that I had in those years! Then after that, I took somebody’s place in the front as a secretary, but not being educated, and not knowing written French, I wasn’t very good. So, I was sent back to school. And for French. I took a year and a half in French immersion through the Clinic. It was either do that, or I didn’t have a job no more. And then after that, the girl I’m replacing (at the front), she retires. So I decided I’d go there instead of being the secretary and have been there ever since. And I love it.

She was also involved in actions of different citizens’ committees and community groups, including the fight to reduce car speeds in the neighbourhood, and the mobile health clinic to test children for lead poisoning. Today, Frances works at the intake at the Clinic, and is very appreciated by the local folks in her roles as “greeter”.

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<sup>20</sup> Personal communication, Carol Welp, founder of the daycare “Les Enfants de l’avenir”, October 9<sup>th</sup> 2003.



**The “gang”.** *From left to right, top row:* Donna Leduc, Maureen Ryan, Thérèse Dionne, Myrna Rose, Michèle Soutière, Marguerite Métivier, Madeleine Richardson; *in right corner,* Frances Vaillancourt  
*Middle row:* L'Iris Morissette (translator), Louise Lanthier, Denise Boucher, Jocelyne Bernier (translator, Board member)  
*Bottom row:* Two technical assistants, Anna Kruzynski, Isabelle Drolet, two camerawomen

#### THE INITIAL CONTACTS WITH PARTICIPANTS

Once the participants had been selected, Isabelle and I decided to meet each of them individually before the first group meeting. During this individual meeting, we first explained the project in detail and answered any questions they had about it. Then, we presented and discussed the consent form (Appendix 2). After having obtained their commitment to the process, we did an individual “ice-breaker” interview, which we audio-taped, on their first involvement in community activism. We did this because most of the women had never been audio-taped, and we felt that this “practice session” would help reduce any anxiety they may be feeling, and would also provide us with material to prepare the first meeting. Moreover, we bet that having them talk about their experiences prior to the first group meeting would give them the

chance to think about their activism in the interim, which would lead to a resurfacing of memories and also to a “reflection” on their past, all of which would lead to a richer group discussion.

In the meantime, I was working on a thesis proposal in the cadre of my courses. Out of this emerged two methodological tools that were conceptualised to provide me with material to write my metanarrative on the process. First, a Social Work student, Megan Bochner<sup>21</sup>, interviewed me, specifically on the methodology, before, mid-way, and after Phase I of the process. Supervised by Jean Panet-Raymond, my co-director, she developed three interview guides (appendix 3). In the first interview, Megan focused on the background information, the advantages of doing a community-based project, and the tensions between academia and community, around collective work, and with the complex roles that I play. Building on the latter, in the second interview, Megan asked me to reflect on what I had said at the previous interview, to evaluate how things were going at this point in the process, focusing more specifically on the tensions between the different people working on the project, and myself, issues that I had been struggling with throughout. Finally, at the last interview, Megan asked me to reflect, again, on comments I had made previously, to evaluate the first phase in its entirety, and to imagine future perspectives. In addition to the interviews, I decided to write regular reflective logs, that I would not only make available to Isabelle, but that I would also send (by email) to one of my committee members, Guylaine Racine, to read. In reading and responding to these logs, Guylaine not only challenged me to clarify my thinking on certain difficult issues, but she also supported me through tense moments.

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<sup>21</sup> Megan did these interviews in the cadre of an independent study at the School of Social Work, McGill University.

## PHASE I: GATHERING AND INITIAL READING OF THE LIFE STORIES

During the first phase of the project, *the gathering and initial reading of the life stories* (September 2001 to June 2002), we had 9 meetings with the French group and 8 with the English group, as well as a bilingual meeting on renewal in organising and on lessons to be drawn. At the first meeting, after each of us had told the others where we were at in our life journeys (all the women knew each other, some more intimately than others, some acquaintances), we talked about “involvement and responsibilities”. Specifically, we explained that there would be continuous evaluations of the process, the kind of consensus we were working with, and the issue of confidentiality. Here is an excerpt from the interview guide of the first meeting (English Group, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001):

This project is our project, collectively... so we all have our say on how the project works : the content of the book, the form of the book, on the meetings, the time, the dates, on the facilitation, on whatever else you want...

### **Evaluation**

It is everyone’s responsibility to ensure that we have a good time, and that we feel good about the project and the way we run the meetings... if we don’t like the way things are going, or feel uncomfortable about things, we need to say so, so that we can make changes as we go along.

We are going to take the last 10 minutes of every meeting to do a quick evaluation of the meeting so that we can share the positive things, but also the things that should change to make the meetings better.

We will also have the opportunity to do a more detailed evaluation three times during the project... just before the holidays, some time in the winter, and at the end of the project. (An outside resource person) will come in to facilitate the evaluation... the first 20 minutes without Isabelle and I, and the second part with us.

Of course, Isabelle and I will do our best to heed your comments, and to make the changes suggested so that the project will be a pleasure for all...

### **Consensus**

The project is called « Courtepointe », which means « quilt »... a quilt is a bunch of different pieces of material sewn together... that is the idea for our project too: the book that we write, will be composed of

consensus and contradiction... what that means is that we might agree to include one version of a story, or two or three.

We don't need to agree on one version of history... we are a group that is working together toward a common goal... to build a history of community action in the Point... (...)

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is important because it ensures that we respect each other in what we say...

Each of us is responsible for ensuring that we respect the space that we create for ourselves in our meetings... that we try to make sure that we keep certain kinds of information confidential... also, that we are responsible for what we say.

As we said in the form you signed, one of the goals of the project is to recognise your contribution to community action... so, it might be pertinent to associate your name to your words in the publications...

But, in the end, this kind of decision is up to you to take, each of you individually.

What we are going to do now, is to give you four scenarios that could occur during the year... and we will use these examples to reflect on what the consequences could be of what we say (...)

- ❑ At one of the meetings, we have a discussion about a group that had a lot of internal conflict, especially with the coordinator of the group. Peoples' names come up, including the name of the famous coordinator. How do we deal with that?
- ❑ At one of the first meetings, I say something... the next day, I regret having said that, so I ask Isabelle and Anna to destroy that part of the tape. But, a few months later, after having spent many meetings talking with the other women, I feel strong enough to take responsibility for what I said, and I regret having destroyed the excerpt. How could we deal with this situation?
- ❑ At one of the meetings, I talk about having lived violence in my marriage. My name is associated with my words. There is a high chance that my words will be heard or read by my ex, by my children, by other people who know me. How could we deal this situation?
- ❑ At one of the meetings, we have a discussion about a really controversial issue... the debate becomes quite tense... one of the participants in the group leaves the meeting angry at one other woman in particular. She vents her frustration to someone outside



the group... as rumours tend to do, the story circulates in the Point...  
How could we deal this situation ? (...)

### Confidentiality forms

All the people working on the project are going to, or have already signed a confidentiality form. There are two types of forms :

- ❑ One for the participants and Isabelle and I, that says that we will not divulge confidential information (because we are participating fully, we can judge).
- ❑ The second one is for all the other people working on the project more peripherally – this form says that they will not share any information from the project (the camerawoman, the transcribers, the resource person who will do the interviews).

After that, we began the telling of the life stories with the following question:

« How did you come to get involved in the groups in the very beginning? »

(here is an excerpt from the interview guide of the English group, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001):

We are starting the discussion with a question that you have all answered before... but when you answered the question, it was with me and Isabelle, not with the group...

The goal for this discussion is to share with the other women in the group, the beginnings of our involvement in the groups of the Point...

Isabelle and I asked ourselves, when we were preparing this meeting, where do we start? On what theme? We decided in the end that it is up to you to decide from where we start... we are going to start from the stories you share with us tonight to organise the next meeting... and so on.

So, I am going to invite each of you to tell your story, the story of your first involvement in the groups, if you have more to add, after you hear the others talk, I will come back to you... next time, we will have a more interactive process.

All the meetings were audio and videotaped, and immediately transcribed. In general, after each meeting, Isabelle and I did an initial reading of the transcript, and the emergent themes were used to launch the discussion at the following meeting (see below “co-construction”). For the French interviews, Isabelle and I read them separately. Given that Isabelle has difficulty reading English, we proceeded differently for those transcripts; I read them

first, noted emergent themes, and Isabelle read them afterwards to add her impressions. Then we met to compare notes and to decide how to facilitate the next meeting.

The themes that emerged from the first meeting were our starting point. Since each of the two groups started from different places, the themes and the rhythm followed was different for each group. Nevertheless, there was symmetry, in the sense that a typical meeting started with an update of the project (e.g., funding, staff changes, publishing house, etc.), then a review of the previous meeting with main themes and any interpretations we had done, followed by a discussion spurred on by the review, then a discussion based on the introduction of new themes. Each meeting ended with an evaluation, and after the participants had gone home, Isabelle and I would meet to debrief.

At the second meeting, we reiterated the feminist guiding line, and had a discussion about it. Here is an excerpt from an exchange in the French group that occurred after an explanation of the current state of affairs with respect to the recognition of women's involvement in community action in Québec (or lack thereof to be more exact!):

Anna Êtes-vous d'accord avec le fil conducteur qu'on a identifié ? On essaie de documenter la voix des femmes ? La façon dont les femmes ont vécu l'action communautaire ? Si vous dites que vous êtes d'accord avec ça, moi et Isabelle on va guider les discussions pour que ça soit ce thème-là qui se développe au fur et à mesure qu'on travaille, parce qu'on ne veut pas s'éparpiller n'importe où et que ça ne se tienne pas à la fin. On veut produire quelque chose qui se tient. Ce que ça veut dire c'est que pendant que vous, vous racontez vos vies, vos expériences dans le mouvement communautaire, moi et Isabelle, on va enchaîner, on va vous demander des questions qui mènent vers ça.

Michèle Moi, je suis prête à me lancer. Je suis d'accord avec le fil conducteur. (...)

Marguerite Moi, je suis contente parce qu'on va voir dans notre façon de s'impliquer que ça peut être pas mieux que les hommes, mais différent. (...) Je ne vous cacherai pas j'ai beaucoup aimé la soirée. Ce que j'ai aimé, c'est qu'on puisse voir la démarche des femmes,

faire l'histoire. Ça, ça me plait.

A similar presentation was done with the English group. The latter immediately embarked on a discussion about women's roles in community groups. They talked about how it was mostly women who participated in kitchen meetings, how paid organisers were often men, about how women were terrified to break with traditional gender roles, and about the lack of recognition of the women's community work by "men in general". One of the women came up with the term "women's stuff" to refer to community work as an extension of women's household responsibilities:

Maureen "This is women's stuff! This is not important stuff!"

Anna In what senses was this "women's stuff?" "Not important stuff?"  
Who would be saying that to you?

Maureen School! Husbands! The men in general! (...) It was the women who got it all started and got it going. Throughout the whole thing, my husband never got involved once. You know, in the end, instead of saying, "well I guess it's all right if you go", he would say, "go get them girl!". But still, he did not want to participate. That was because it was for the children, anything pertaining to education, the children, health, all that concept, that was women's stuff. And I'm positive that was thought out there in the Point, that it wasn't just our household.

From this point on, women in both groups, at different times, analysed their experiences from a feminist perspective, and Isabelle and I facilitated meetings with our feminist glasses on. The questions we asked were meant to stimulate feminist reflections, and we also tried, as much as possible, to bring the discussions beyond the descriptive into the explanatory.

Mid-way through Phase I, Isabelle and I came up with a plan for the book which we presented to the Board, and to the participants. Later, we prepared a "skeleton" of the book with the main themes identified to date organised by sector and gave it to each of the participants. At the end of Phase I, Isabelle and I did our own evaluation of the process to date, and then

facilitated one with the participants. At this meeting, we also presented two process options for the following phase. If they chose the first option, the participants would give us the mandate to write the manuscript after having agreed upon a sample chapter. To our surprise and pleasure, the participants chose the second, more labour intensive option, but also the most participatory:

Faire un chapitre à la fois et vous le soumettre pour validation du texte seulement (parce qu'avec des rencontres mensuelles, nous n'aurons pas le temps de choisir des photos, faire de la mise en page, etc.). Dans ce cas, ça veut potentiellement dire un chapitre à lire et une rencontre de validation par mois. Il faut compter au moins une dizaine de chapitres, donc, en incluant les vacances, il faudrait prévoir des rencontres mensuelles de décembre 2002 à novembre 2003 (excerpt from interview guide, « bilan »).

They argued that they wanted to meet to discuss the readings of the narratives, to put their critiques in common, and they noted that if they did all this at home, alone, they would not have the chance to hear other peoples' opinions, which could influence their own decisions about the editing of the texts. Moreover, they claimed that they were looking forward to the interesting discussions that would no doubt come from these exchanges:

Marguerite Ça va faire une belle expérience quand on va échanger (...)

Thérèse Un moment tu le lis mais tout à coup tu entends l'autre et...

Marguerite Oui, c'est enrichissant.

Thérèse On a toutes dit qu'on était capable un moment donné de dire « Oups! Je l'ai mal vu au moment où je l'ai lu .»

Michèle Dans le fond, ce serait la solution 2.

Anna Je suis contente d'entendre que vous voulez faire l'option 2. C'est l'option la plus participative, c'est de la lecture chaque mois, c'est des corrections. (...)

Thérèse On a bâti un bateau. On est embarquées dedans, alors ramons!

## PHASE II: ANALYSIS AND REVIEW OF THE THEMES

Phase II is the *analysis and review of the themes* (June 2002 to March 2004). During the summer of 2002, I did a horizontal analysis of all the narratives; that is, I organised excerpts according to theme, into “folders” (the neighbourhood, period of “awakening”, women, housing, education, food security; health, welfare, urban development, lessons, and methodology). I placed excerpts that dealt with multiple themes into multiple folders. As I did this, I did a preliminary vertical analysis, organising the excerpts within each folder into sub-themes (by chronological order and/or by socio-historical theme). It is also during this period that I wrote two academic articles on the methodology, one on the bridging of community organising practice and historical methodology, and the other on community-university alliance building.

As of the fall of 2002, Isabelle and I prepared one folder for review by the participants per month. Although we adapted our approach as we went along (learning as we go), overall, the steps we followed were as follows. First, based on my initial vertical analysis, I did a much more comprehensive vertical analysis of the folder, which included the identification of an emergent common thread or “fil conducteur”. Then, Isabelle would read the vertical analysis, and we would meet to discuss, modify and clarify the common thread, and decide what sort of archival material we would need to support the excerpts and to complete the missing details on context, chronology, and origins of the relevant groups.

Then, the archivist, Isabelle and I would comb through the documents of local community organisations. At the beginning, since the only treated “Fond” was that of St-Columba House, I did most of the research by combing through boxes and boxes of unsorted materials that had either already been donated to the Archives or that were still in the basements of local groups. Later, however, when the Fond of the Carrefour d’éducation populaire, of the

Community Clinic and more recently that of the Regroupement Information Logement, were treated, the research became much less labour intensive. Any archival material that was deemed relevant to the folder at hand (e.g., photos, newspaper articles, excerpts from minutes, flyers, position papers) was scanned and inserted into the folder at the relevant place.

At this phase of the process, Isabelle and I made an effort to write as little text as possible ourselves, by limiting any add-ins to explanatory notes and questions of clarification aimed at the participants. Moreover, judging that it was best if the participants saw all the excerpts, and could therefore make an informed decision as to which ones to keep in the final version, no excerpts deemed related to the theme at hand were removed from the folder. Isabelle would then re-read the folder, edit the French excerpts, and I would modify the folder again to integrate her comments, and edit the English excerpts. When we first began editing, we made every attempt possible to remain true to the spoken form, correcting errors, and reworking sentences only to make the excerpts readable. However, quickly, the participants asked us to further rework the excerpts not only to increase legibility, but also to increase the chances that the ideas not become submerged in colloquial language; they gave us the mandate to reorganise sentences so that they were grammatically correct, while remaining as close as possible to the spoken language<sup>22</sup>. By the end of this process, each folder resembled a scrap-book, with excerpts from the narratives in “play” (theatre) form and archival material interspersed. This is the version that was delivered to the participants five to seven days prior to the “review meeting”.

At these meetings, either Isabelle or I would facilitate, to get first an overall impression of the folder (common thread, flow, etc.). Then, we would work our way through the folder, sub-theme by sub-theme. When there were excerpts or archival materials in the opposite language, I would provide a verbal

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<sup>22</sup> This editing method is in line with Frisch, one of the leading oral historians (Frisch, 1990).

summary of the contents. The participants would then clarify their stories, add any relevant information, decide to remove certain citations, and decide whether or not they wanted to remain anonymous on certain thorny issues. These meetings were audio-taped, and the folders were modified to reflect the decisions taken at these meetings.

Mid-way through Phase II, we updated the outline for the book and calendar of meetings (appendix 4), as well as the work plan for the phases to come, which we submitted to the participants, as well as to *les Éditions du remue-ménage*, a feminist publishing house that has already agreed to publish our book in both French and English.

In parallel, I began working in earnest on the writing of my dissertation (as of July 2003). As I discussed above, my thesis was originally conceptualised in two parts; the first would reproduce, integrally, the “coffee-table style” book, and the second would be my metanarrative on the process. At one point, however, before the actual meetings with participants began, I discovered that Faye Wakeling, Minister of St. Columba House in Point St. Charles for over ten years, had written a doctoral dissertation based on a collective book (“Hope is the Struggle”) which had been produced, using a very similar methodology to the one we used (although not on the same topic, and her focus was on individual liberation using religion), by the women’s collective of St-Columba House. In fact, the very structure of her dissertation was identical to the one I had envisaged (Part I, the book, and in part II the metanarrative). This crisis, related to the originality of my thesis, led me to reflect on the nature of my dissertation. This reflection, in the end, took me beyond the form, into the ideological and practical realms. First, how could I remain true to my convictions about collectivisation of knowledge and recognition of life-based-education, and at the same time stamp the collective book with “Anna Kruzynski, copyright 2004” while the other participants, and Isabelle, get no formal recognition? Second, I began to realise that for the book to be truly

collective, it was going to take many years to write, which was too long to wait for my thesis.

These reflections led me to the conclusion that I would create a different socio-historical product aimed at an academic audience, using parts of the “data” collected in the project to write about women and organising, and about the methodology. In line with this, the analyses that I do in my thesis, are based on the excerpts from the transcripts from regular meetings with participants during both the first and second phase of the process, the formal evaluations, the evaluation of Phase I with participants, the evaluation of Phase I with Isabelle and I, minutes of team meetings, interview guides, as well as on the interview done with myself by Megan Bochner, and on the reflective log notes that I wrote throughout the entire process.

### PHASES III, IV AND V

Phase III, *amalgamation and writing of the book*, will begin in March 2004 once the review of the folders is completed. Isabelle and I will take all the folders, and organise them into book chapters. We will revise, edit and cut material, complete missing information, and write in linking and explanatory text, with the goal of completing a draft of the entire book by the end of June 2004. This draft will then be translated and submitted to the participants so that they can read it over the summer. We will meet with the participants in fall 2004 to review the contents, and will integrate their comments to create a final version. Phase IV of the project is the *publishing phase*, at which point *les Éditions du remue-ménage* will come into the picture. We will organise an activity with neighbourhood girls who will be asked to draw a picture that reflects for them their community, and we will do a patchwork with the latter for the cover of the book. Finally, Phase V is the *book launch*, planned for International Women’s Day 2005, with all the neighbourhood activities that come with it.



## BRIDGING FEMINIST HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY AND ORGANISING PRACTICE

The project described above was conceptualised to bridge feminist historical methodology and feminist anti-racist community organising practice (Callahan, 1997, Dominelli, 1990; Dominelli, 1995; Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1994), and to “break with conventional top-down historical methods to do our history – this history will be built up from the grassroots” (“objectives”, above). 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. The project was truly community-run (Patai, 1991), as community residents were 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. These final products target multiple audiences (Geiger, 1990), both academe and the community itself.

In this section, I explain how, through the doing of history in this way, we were in fact pre-figuring *power-with* (Bishop, 1994; Starhawk, 1987). I first discuss how all the actors involved in the process resulted in a real grounding of the project in the neighbourhood. Next, I analyse the organisational forms chosen, the small group in the case of the participants, and the “collective dyad” in the case of Isabelle and I, and show that they are in line with feminist organising practice (L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, 1998), as are the tools we put into place to help “dismantle the masters house” (Lorde, 1984). in our efforts to build conditions for respectful dialogue (Geiger, 1990; Gregg, 1991). Then, I discuss my own positionality, and the tools that I used to name and analyse social processes of differentiation and stratification that were

underlying my own behaviours and relations with other people working on the project (Atkinson, 1999; Burns, 2000; Stacey, 1991).

### THE ACTORS

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, as I described above, 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. The Board supervised the implementation of the project via a standing item on the agenda of monthly board meetings – they discussed, modified, and approved the consent form, the funding arrangements, and the various outlines of the book. Thus, the project is based upon self-identified local needs (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1994; Nadeau, 1996), 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). The expertise of long-standing community activists on the Board, on local political, social and economic issues, was invaluable for ensuring that we weren't missing important elements of content or analysis, and that the resulting products would be useful and relevant for mobilising purposes (Shopes, 1986). 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 is 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). Several women from the neighbourhood transcribed interviews, videotaped the process, provided

simultaneous translation services, and translated written materials. The contributions of Isabelle were and still are, invaluable. Her continued participation in the coordination of the project greatly influenced the entire process. Our combination of experiences (and positionalities) made for challenging, but extremely pertinent reflections on our practice, as I will discuss in Chapter 6. Although Isabelle grew up in a middle-class family, her teenage and adult life experience were quite tumultuous, and very different from mine (see “my positionality”, below)<sup>23</sup>. Isabelle started, but did not finish CEGEP, and when she arrived in Montréal, having left behind her rural hometown, she found herself living in poverty in Montréal, and went on to do different kinds of blue and white collar jobs. “Parallèlement à l’exercice de ces jobines, de la misère et du sentiment de révolte qui les accompagnent”, Isabelle became active in the Action Catholique, and through the « révision de vie », opened her eyes to structural injustice, and to feminism. Mandated by the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique to organise workers into a union in Verdun, she arrived in the South-West of Montréal in the mid-1980s, and moved to the Point in 1987, after having worked in home care services for the PEP. From there, her involvement in community groups took off, including the women’s centre, Madame prend conge, her housing cooperative, the Community Clinic, and the Legal Aid Services. In parallel, she worked in a battered women’s shelter, at intake at the Clinic, and she was a founding member of the local activist café, “La Petite Gaule”. The presence of Isabelle, with her extensive activist and life experience, was central to the grounding of the project, as I will show throughout.

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

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<sup>23</sup> This is based on Isabelle’s biographical information. I include this information here because it is central to understanding the dynamics that emerged between Isabelle and I, and between Isabelle and the English group (discussed in Chapter 6).

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. In fact, they explicitly expressed their will not to fall into nostalgia in that they wanted the process to result in useful lessons for future generations of organisers (excerpt from evaluation, French group, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001):

Ce sont des souvenirs marquants qui ont donné une poussée pour aller plus loin.. Ce n'est pas purement nostalgique. Des fois quand on parle de souvenirs c'est comme si on voulait revenir dans ce temps-là. Moi j'ai senti qu'on était toutes contentes d'être en 2001... Qu'on vivait avec notre temps.

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). This was accomplished because of constant discussions with Isabelle about the interview guides and about readings of the narratives, and because of the dialogue with participants whose experience and knowledge was most often quite different than that of academe. 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 latter is exemplified by the fact that we had no difficulty getting ten very busy women to agree to participate in an admittedly time-consuming process, and by the interest that other groups in the neighbourhood express towards the project. At the evaluation of Phase I, we asked the women about this, and this is what they said:

- Anna Do you guys feel that the fact that the project was a project of the Archives as opposed to me arriving from McGill, by myself – ‘cause I could of come by myself, I could of decided that for my Ph.D. I'm coming in to the community and I'm going to do a project with people without having had a community organisation locally to work with – Do you think that that made a difference in terms of you trusting the project?
- Maureen For me, yes. ‘Cause if it was just a student from McGill, to tell you the truth, it would have been, “Oh, get lost!”
- Denise It wouldn't of been the first time we've been approached! So, yeah, it had an importance (...)
- Donna If you would of been someone outside just coming to do a project, I probably would of responded differently. Participate, maybe, but it would have a different feel to it.
- Maureen Depends on your approach too. If someone came in saying, you know, “I want to do a project. This is what I'm going to get out of it, this is what you're going to get out of it” Then it might be different. But often the approach has been, “this is all for you”, and it doesn't take to long to figure out “no it isn't!” (...)
- Anna You see that would be hard for me to do, because if were to do that, you could call up the Archives and bitch at them!
- Maureen Hey! I'm on the Board.
- Anna Donna is too
- Maureen Oh, we'll fix it!

### THE ORGANISATIONAL FORM

The organisational forms chosen for the project were also in keeping with the idea of pre-figuring *power-with* (Bishop, 1994; Starhawk, 1987). Isabelle and I developed an organisational form which was “collective” and we consciously put in place certain mechanisms to help us eliminate border guards of difference (Anthias, 2002a). Similarly, but at a different level, we made every attempt possible to share power with project participants (within certain limits), and developed the organisational form of the “structured yet flexible

small group dialogue”, which included a number of concrete mechanisms for power sharing (Némésis, 2002).

#### 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, 1990b; 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 (Anzaldúa, 1990; Bunch, 1990; 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, 1990b). 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 identify the underlying social processes which helped us de-construct them to build a mutually respectful “as equal as possible relationship”, as I will detail in Chapter 6.

## SMALL GROUP, STRUCTURED YET FLEXIBLE DIALOGUE

The organisational form that we conceptualised to work with project participants can best be represented by the popular education spiral discussed in the literature review (Nadeau, 1996). We chose the small group form, and we put in place a number of mechanisms to help foster dialogue (hooks, 1990b; 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). Thus, we made every attempt possible to integrate organising principles into our work, and this is reflected throughout. We played attention to physical space, to facilitation, to time, to transparency and to the inclusion of social moments. We went to where the participants were instead of attempting to draw them into our offices. In keeping with the popular education spiral, we started from their experience, provided constant information in an atmosphere of transparency, and co-constructed the history. Finally, change was built into the process through the evaluation mechanisms that we put into place. The latter ensured that there was a formal space for the airing of concerns, worries and suggestions for improvement, and without a doubt greatly contributed to the building of a relationship of trust in the project. Because all of these ingredients were mixed together, we were able to move through the popular education spiral, and effect social change as we went along.

### The small group, “à l’image des participantes”

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 & 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 (this happened often, as the excerpts in Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate). 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 & 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. For example, part of the reasoning behind the initial ice-breaker interview with each woman individually, before beginning the group meetings, was that the participants would be less anxious about the process if we took the time to discuss it in detail with each of them. And, as I discussed above, the short interview provided an opportunity for the participant to experience first-hand what interviewing was like so that she could be mentally prepared for the content and questioning at the first group meeting. Moreover, 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. We chose, for the French group, the Carrefour d’éducation populaire, and for the English group, the Point Adult Centre for Education. Moreover, following another organising principle, we also made time during the process for *social time*, for celebration (Fisher, 1999; Panet-Raymond & Lavoie, 1996). Social time, which allows for human contact at the level of emotion, is central to motivation – people will not 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. By the beginning of the Phase II, these little surprises were also being organised spontaneously by project participants. At the evaluation of Phase I, Isabelle and I discussed the importance of the physical surroundings, and the spaces for informal discussion in any effort to build solidarity and effect change:

Isabelle Quand je dis un groupe de femmes ça prends du temps, il faut qu’il y ait une dynamique qui se crée, des liens d’amitié. Qu’à un moment donné on sente qu’on est un groupe, qu’on n’est pas juste 4-5 autour de la table pour parler de la vie de chacune. D’abord, on est un groupe. Plus ça va, plus on avance, plus on sent qu’on est un groupe.

Based on this evaluation, we decided that for Phase II we would have the meetings at our kitchen tables. This has definitely created an interesting dynamic, and has contributed to the warmth and trust necessary for this kind of project.

### 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 (Nadeau, 1996) 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 principle, of *starting with experience*, was operationalised throughout and is in fact the backbone of the entire history making endeavor. 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 experience, 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 I.

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, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 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 women has knowledge and experience, has experience doing “bilan et perspectives” 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.

Here is what the French, then English groups had to say about this process:

Louise      On peut parler deux heures de temps et qu'on ne réfléchisse pas!  
Dans le sens où on se rappelle des souvenirs, on se rappelle des faits,  
des choses. Toi, tu les identifies à d'autres choses

Michèle    Tu les colles à d'autres choses.

Louise      Tu les colles à d'autres choses et tu as des raisons pour le faire.

Anna        Sauf que vous les faites, vos réflexions! C'est juste que je vous les  
ramène.

Michèle    En tout cas, on voit comment c'est compris. Et moi, je me suis bien  
reconnue dans ce que vous avez ramené.

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

Denise      it wasn't just yours (...) which is important

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. The following excerpts reflect the relative success of this technique (Evaluation, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001) :

(Anna et Isabelle), elle cernent très bien. Quand elles reviennent avec les questions, c'est vraiment sur quelque chose dont on a parlé. C'est des gens qui ramassent très bien.

Moi je trouve que c'est un bel encadrement.

It is through and within this spiral that much transformation occurred and was stimulated, at the individual, group and community levels. The space we created for confrontation of opinions and the emergence of new information, sometimes resulted in a repositioning of participants, the (re)constructions of narratives of belonging, and the blurring of boundaries between differing positionalities. All of this has already impacted the broader community, as I will show in detail in Chapter 6.

### 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 & Lavoie, 1996). Although the participants agreed to a project that was already conceptualised (by Isabelle and I, adopted by the Board), 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 “bilan et perspective” at the end of each phase. The following is an excerpt from the facilitation guide of the formal evaluations (Evaluation facilitation guide, p.1):

The aim of this evaluation is to revise or adjust the « Tissons une courtePointe » project in order to improve the process according to the participants' perspectives (their enjoyment in participating, the atmosphere, etc). As participants in the group, you have the responsibility to propose improvements or modifications to both the method of constructing your history and the general working of the group.

These more formal evaluations were done in two parts: the first 20 minutes with the participants only, during which questions were asked; the second part with the facilitators during which the resource person presented the main

points discussed (anonymously)<sup>24</sup>. The “bilan and perspectives” meetings allowed us to reflect together on the previous phase (to draw lessons for the future), and to plan together the process for the next phase. Isabelle and I did a bilan in October 2001 based on a questionnaire I had prepared, that was conceptualised as a potential tool for the bilan to be done later with the participants. Based on this, we prepared a questionnaire for the participants that was sent out ahead of time, which included a series of questions to help draw out lessons on Phase I of the project, and proposals for Phase II (appendix 5).

Without these evaluations, the process would not have been one of *power-with*. 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. Here are excerpts that detail one such series of interactions of the English group<sup>25</sup> regarding the final product. At the first evaluation (02/12/02), they expressed that although they trusted us, they were worried<sup>26</sup>:

We (...) signed an agreement, if I remember rightly, that said that if there's stuff that we don't want printed, they won't be printed. And I think that if it really came down to that, that I really disagreed with what the final – It wouldn't be printed!

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<sup>24</sup> With respect to general group process, the following themes were addressed: form of meetings (facilitation, time, content); whether or not participants felt respected and wanted to continue in the process; whether they felt there were tensions or conflicts that were unresolved; confidentiality, impact on lives. For the method of constructing history, questions centered on: doing history “from the bottom up”; producing a patchwork of stories instead of trying to come to one truth; clarity of the goals and process; and the production of the book.

<sup>25</sup> A similar pattern emerged in the French group.

<sup>26</sup> Because the formal evaluations were anonymous, there are no names associated with the statements here.

That's what they said. I fully trust that. My gut instinct is : I fully trust that

Sometimes, I think we've been burnt in the past. Our expectations haven't been what the turnout has been. I can't speak for anybody else but I know for myself there's a little bit of hesitancy there. Ok, everything is going fine up to date but I'll reserve my final opinion 'til the end product.

At the second evaluation (03/26/02), they expressed increased worry vis-à-vis the unknown:

I'm enjoying it but, to tell you the truth, in all honesty, it's six meetings of what? Two hours, three hours? I believe in what Anna says, and Isabelle, and what they want to do. For the love of me, though, I'm sitting here trying. (...). I can't see the kind of information that they're talking about giving in this itty bit of time. I'm not saying it's wrong. I'm just saying that they must be going to put in a lot of their own point of view or some history they've read or something

They're going to have to add a lot to it because I don't think that there's going to be enough content, with all the meetings that we've had.

When they're done and we see a rough copy, I guess, as they say, « Seeing is believing. » I just find it very hard to comprehend this, OK?.

Well, we're going to see it and we'll have a say. We can say, "We don't think it's complete yet. It's not good enough yet to be printed. There's not enough information." *And we do have a say. We're sure about that.*

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 kind 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.

In fact, participants expressed, many times throughout the year, that they really appreciated the evaluations, that felt that we were open to critique, that their voices were heard and that their input would be acted upon. When

we asked the English group, at the evaluation of Phase I, whether or not we should keep evaluations, both the regular and the formal ones, here is what they said:

Maureen Very important to do (...) First of all it gives you right away feedback 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

Donna I think the fact of having somebody from the outside, Jill, who is not involved to do the interviews, and she is coming with no opinions.

Anna So you guys felt that that was useful to have an external person come in?

All Yeah!

Maureen And she did ask a couple of questions. I can't remember what but they were, but things that came out at that meeting that we expressed that we hadn't expressed before

Anna Right So you found that there were things that you could bring up in that context

Maureen Sure yeah

The French group, although they agreed on the importance of constant evaluations, did not feel that it was necessary to bring in an external resource person. They argued that there was enough trust in the group to say what needed to be said:

Marguerite Même si on n'était pas toujours d'accord, il y avait du respect.. Il n'y avait pas de rejet de personne. Parfois, on ne comprenait pas des situations de la même façon mais il y avait le respect et la confiance. Moi en tout cas j'ai confiance et je dis « Si je ne comprends pas, je vais leur demander ». Ça fait assez longtemps qu'on se connaît pour savoir qu'on peut avoir de la confiance et du respect sans toujours être d'accord.

To conclude then, through the various tools that we put into place, we succeeded in building a space for respectful dialogue. The small group, “à



l'image des participantes”, the use of the popular education spiral, and of evaluations, were key ingredients for the doing of *power-with*.

### 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 & 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 myself. This awareness, coupled with all the mechanisms for doing *power-with* discussed above, is essential to any translocational imaginings in dialogue – to the elimination of border guards of difference – and their replacement with processes that enable *power-with*. Following Atkinson (Atkinson, 1999), and Burns (Burns, 2000), in this section I share my reflections on the latter, which provide the foundations for the “confessional” discussions on individual and interpersonal transformations that I share in Chapter 6.

Although I was born in 1971 in Montréal (and baptized at the Polish Church in Point St. Charles!), I grew up in Northern Ontario, in the comfort of a middle-class family. I left my hometown to go to university, and have since been in school – I have two Bachelors degrees, one in Psychology and one in Social Work, and a Masters degree in Psychology. Although I worked on and off during my studies, I have always been supported financially either by my mother or by government scholarships. Because of this, I have never experienced financial difficulties, have never worked in a demeaning workplace, and have had the opportunity to engage in activism throughout my entire university career. Most of my learning, in fact, comes from the latter. After having spent a few years in student activism, I became an active member of SalAMI, a non-violent direct-action group that was a leader in the anti-globalisation movement in Québec for several years. As a founding member of

its women's committee, I worked on developing two workshops, one on women and globalisation, and the other on radical nonviolence and feminist action. I also helped organise the women's action against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas at the Summit of the Americas in Québec City in April 2001. This was my experience and training when I arrived in Point St. Charles, in 1998.

My profile, when I first arrived in the neighbourhood, was one that residents are not generally impressed with. The neighbourhood is a self-contained space, and because of its village-like feel, people know their neighbours and tend to help each other out, but at the same time tend to be mistrustful of outsiders. This mistrust however, is not entirely chauvinism, as residents talk of having "survived" the tensions caused by middle-class professionals and radicals, who sometimes lacking tact or respect for local activist culture, took it upon themselves to shake things up with radical ideas, then left when local residents either shunned them or kicked them out. Although many local leaders, including the project participants, as I will demonstrate later, admit that the presence of these "movers and shakers" had positive impacts in that a new politicisation almost always emerges from these tensions, the emotions on both sides, the anger of local residents and the guilt of the ally, have become, time and time again, paralyzing. Many such allies, having acted in good faith, were crushed emotionally by the anger of the local residents *for* and *with* whom they were fighting. And, many local residents, remembering the tensions, are extremely mistrustful of outsiders who claim that they want to help. Positioned at the time as "professional" and "young feminist outsider", and having experienced over the years some mistrust of local residents, I knew that if I wanted to develop lasting relationships with project participants, I would have to continuously problematise these dynamics.

The latter is the reasoning behind the many tools that I put into place to help me work through these complex issues. The reflective log, the interviews

with Megan Bochner, and many discussions my supervisors and close friends helped me to see through my emotions. All of these discussions led me to reflect, aloud, difficult relational dynamics. When, during the process, I became overwhelmed with guilt, feeling that maybe I was, in fact, taking advantage of local residents, I would make a list of all the elements I was bringing to the collaboration: skills in history methodology and organising, my labour, helping groups do what they never have the time to do but see as important. 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 (Anzaldúa, 1990), and importantly, in forcing me to “own my guilt” and reducing the chances of my becoming paralysed by my emotions (Pheterson, 1990). All of this, I think, led to the discovery of each other’s differences, and to the dismantling of hierarchies between us (see Chapter 6).

## CONCLUSION

The objectives of the project are clearly feminist (Geiger, 1990). The underlying premise, that history is about the juxtaposition of differing positionalities in differing contexts, is operationalised by explicitly aiming to weave a quilt or patchwork of multiple truths (Brown, 1991; Geiger, 1990; Hall, 1989; Hewitt, 1992; Thurner, 1997). The method allows for the confrontation of positionalities of participants, and for their continuous reflection on the meanings of the narratives (Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 1987), as well as on the voices of other actors, including those of animators or organisers, outsiders, men, animators-turned-academics, activists, documented as written sources, written in the past and in the present. In planning the project in this way, we are breaking with traditional notions of authority (validity and reliability) (Bulbeck, 1997; Jagger, 1989; Sangster, 1994). The project is also conceptualised to deal with the many ethical dilemmas that

historians attempting to do feminist life history are often confronted with (Geiger, 1990).

Ethical dilemmas related to relationship with narrators, audience and interpretation, “who benefits”, and transformations, are dealt with (as much as possible) by integrating the lessons on micro-processes of change gleaned from years of practice and theorizing in organising practice in general (Mayer, Lamoureux, & Panet-Raymond, 2002), and feminist anti-racist organising specifically (Callahan, 1997; Dominelli, 1990; Dominelli, 1995; Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1994; L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, 1998). Following organising principles, the project is run out of a local organisation, and community actors are involved in every step of the process. In this project, as researcher, I am not the ultimate owner of the material, in that the audio-tapes and transcripts belong to the Archives, the coffee-table style book is of collective authorship and belongs to the community. Although, without a doubt, my accession to tenure will be facilitated by the existence of this project (Patai, 1991), the historical products that will emerge out of this project will benefit the community, as well as the individuals involved for years to come, via local activities and publications.

Moreover, our organisational forms are conceptualised to pre-figure, as much as possible, the doing of *power-with* (Bishop, 1994; Starhawk, 1987), necessary ingredient to social change. To do so, Isabelle and I chose to work in a collective dyad, sharing tasks, and setting-up a number of tools to help us dismantle the masters house within each of us (Anzaldúa, 1990; Lorde, 1992). For the work with the participants, we chose the small group, “à l’image des participantes”, and paid close attention to physical space, to facilitation, to time, to transparency, to the inclusion of social moments, and to obtaining constant feedback via evaluations. We used the popular education spiral (Nadeau, 1996), starting from the experience of participants, deepening analyses together, and bringing in new information and concepts. In co-constructing the history, in

the small group, putting into practice *power-with*, we greatly reduce the chances of objectification (Patai, 1991) and nostalgic recounting (Shopes, 1986), while increasing the chances of social change. For my own work, around my shifting positionalities, I gave myself tools to constantly problematise, understand and name the social processes underlying the relations with others working on the project (Atkinson, 1999; Burns, 2000; Stacey, 1991)

The community grounding, coupled with the tricks borrowed from feminist, anti-racist community organising practice, not only helped deal with the ethical dilemmas related to power-dynamics that are inherent to the history-making process, but they also set the stage for individual, interpersonal, and collective transformations. I will discuss the latter in detail in Chapter 6. I now turn to the actual stories that the women told, and the analyses that we did, on their journeys through history. The next chapter, on the Point before, during and after its “period of awakening” provides the backdrop for the analysis of the women’s journeys through that history, as women (Chapter 5).

#### CHAPTER 4: “THE POINT” BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER ITS “PERIOD OF AWAKENING”

In this chapter, I brush a portrait of Point St. Charles, as it was prior to the 1960s, and of its community activism from 1963 to 1980<sup>27</sup>. In keeping with my theoretical framework and with the hybrid approach to history-making, in this chapter I attempt to ground each participant in a socio-historical context (Borland, 1991; Geertz, 1983; Sangster, 1994). As I tell the story of the neighbourhood, and the birth and genesis of its community activism (as it evolved within the Montréal and Québécois contexts), I will introduce each participant, from her first arrival in the Point, to her childhood and/or young adult life, and to the story of her first involvement. In discussing each woman’s experience instead of making broad generalisations about “status” (as if it was fixed), I reduce the chances of essentialising and objectifying them, but at the same time, because these experiences are grounded in a socio-historical context, I avoid the trap of complete relativism. In doing this – in locating each participant historically – I am working to denaturalise difference and identity (Anthias, 2002a).

I begin by describing the working-class neighbourhood through its economy, housing stock, leisure activities, its religions, and its services. Then, I explore the elements that make this neighbourhood into an “urban company town” – mutual aid and solidarity – that together with the other characteristics of the neighbourhood made for fertile ground for the growth of community activism in the 1960s. Then, I discuss how the neighbourhood went from being controlled by its local elite and the Church, to a symbol of active citizenship in Québec. From the faith-based organising and the “apolitical” citizens’ committees of the early 1960s emerged the “power to the people” movement in

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<sup>27</sup> This chapter is based on the folder of analysis « The Point through the decades : Before, during and after its period of awakening », reviewed by the participants in October and November 2003.

1968. Citizens, with the help of progressive university-educated allies, set-up alternative services run “for and by the people”. At the same time, activists in French groups began doing political organising in community groups and unions, claiming that social change was not possible unless the workers formed a political party. By the mid-1970s, the political radicalisation that was taking form all over Québec was also impacting the groups in the Point, paradoxically, at the same time tearing them apart and politicising them. During this period however, groups were still innovating. It is during the latter part of the 1970s that the English groups began block organising in earnest, and that women in the Point and all over Québec began organising around their strategic gender needs.

## THE SILENCE (PRIOR TO 1963)

### AN URBAN COMPANY TOWN

The written history of Point St. Charles extends back to 1662 at which point Governor de Maisonneuve, the “founder of Montréal”, conceded a large part of the territory, located the South West of Montréal, to the “Sulpiciens” who then proceeded to exploit the land for agricultural purposes<sup>28</sup>. Rural until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with 831 people living in the area in 1665 (56 women!)<sup>29</sup>, the population did not increase until 1820, when Irish men arrived to work on the construction of the Lachine Canal<sup>30</sup>. By the turn of the century, in the context of the development of industrial capitalism and urbanisation, and as a result of the enlargement of the Lachine Canal, the construction of the railway, the opening of the Grand Trunk workshops, the construction of the

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<sup>28</sup> Le Projet St-Charles (July 1984). Des logements pour les gens du quartier : Le Projet Saint-Charles, construction et renovation au cours des trois prochaines années de 500 logements coopératifs. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2003.04.07.27.

<sup>29</sup> (March 1984) Dépliant de Pointe St-Charles,. Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>30</sup> Le Projet St-Charles (July 1984). Des logements pour les gens du quartier : Le Projet Saint-Charles, construction et renovation au cours des trois prochaines années de 500 logements coopératifs. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2003.04.07.27.

Victoria Bridge and the birth of numerous factories, the neighbourhood became the industrial urban hub of Canada<sup>31</sup>.

Because it was, in large part, Irish and Scottish immigrants who laboured on these construction sites<sup>32</sup>, and because many Irish children were adopted into French-Canadian families after their parents died from typhus (potato famine of 1840), the neighbourhood has always been composed of both French and English speaking citizens<sup>33</sup>. During the industrial boom, there were three major groups in Point St. Charles, the English-Protestant, Irish Catholic, and French Catholic<sup>34</sup>. In 1860, only 10% of the population was French-speaking<sup>35</sup>, although by 1961, out of approximately 25,000 people, about half were French-speaking and the other half English-speaking<sup>36</sup>. Thérèse and Madeleine remember the legendary fights that were common occurrence between the French and the English at the underpass that delimited the geographical boundary between the two linguistic communities:

Thérèse      Dès que tu passais le viaduc, tu avais des petites gangs qui se rassemblaient et quand ils te voyaient venir de l'autre bord de la track « Do you speak English? – Qu'est-ce qu'il a dit? » (*She imitates a punch*). Ça fait que tu apprenais à dire « Yes! Yes! » C'est comme ça qu'on a appris l'anglais. Et c'est comme ça que j'ai appris que l'autre bord de la track, il fallait être bien organisé pour traverser. (...)

Madeleine    Quand j'étais petite, j'avais une amie anglaise, de l'autre bord et ma mère voulait jamais que j'traverse parce qu'on se faisait toujours

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Archives Nationales du Québec & Fédération des Sociétés d'Histoire du Québec, 1988.

<sup>33</sup> In 1871 the population of Point St. Charles was 25% French-Canadian, 28% Irish Catholic, 8% Irish Protestant, 15% Scottish, and 23% English. According to the 1981 Census, out of 14 044 citizens of Point St. Charles, 55% were Francophone and 40% Anglophone (Archives Nationales du Québec & Fédération des Sociétés d'Histoire du Québec, 1988, p.16-17). The 1996 census data report that 60% of the 13 115 citizens speak French, 33% English, and 7% other languages (EPDC, 2000). Today, it still a very White neighbourhood, with only 12% of the population claiming to be part of a visibility minority group (EPDC, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles (2002). Outil d'animation « des manufactures au quartier », visite guidée du Canal Lachine.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Frank, D. (October 1968). Contact, 1. A publication of the McGill Student Health Organisation Fonds de la Clinique communautaire, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.



battre! Ç'a toujours été comme ça... J'avais des poques!

In Point St. Charles, as elsewhere in Québec at the time, life revolved around the parishes, for English and French alike, as well as for the Polish and Ukrainian families that immigrated to the Point in later years<sup>37</sup>. The schools, (charity) social services, and many of the leisure activities, were run by the Churches: "Vos prêtres sont parmi vous, à l'école, aux maladies, aux oeuvres, à la visite de paroisse, dans vos deuils, aux réceptions de mariage et en toutes occasions, dans les lieux publics comme dans la rue (...) le centre de la paroisse est l'église »<sup>38</sup>. Most of the participants grew up in families that went to Church every Sunday, and the teachings of the Church were part of their education.

Myrna I think for people the Church was an important part of their lives (...)

Frances I'm both Catholic and Protestant! (...) I practiced my prayers at night and went to Church once a week, with the kids.

Myrna Talking about the Protestant women. They went to Church and did their fundraisers, their meetings. That was a place for them to go. As long as they were going to Church, they were "good little women". They went to Church! To gossip!

Frances What they did Saturday night didn't matter if they went to Church on Sunday!

Myrna It was a place for them to go, to get together. Their sewing bees, their quilting.

Maureen It amazes me. It is so ingrained in us. Going to Catholic school. Being brought up by the nuns, going to Church!

Prior to the 1960s, a majority of folks from the South-West of Montréal worked in the factories located on the bank of the Lachine canal. Unlike other working-class neighbourhoods in North America, Point St. Charles has never

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<sup>37</sup> Société d'histoire de Pointe-Saint-Charles (1997). Les églises de notre quartier : Un chemin d'histoire.

<sup>38</sup> Schetagne, G. (1958). Article in 75<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la fondation de la paroisse Saint-Charles : Consécration de l'église, p.47-48. Société d'histoire de Pointe-Saint-Charles

boasted a wealthy population<sup>39</sup>. Although union organising was quite strong in the area and many strikes were organised during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, men and women alike continued to work long days in oftentimes oppressive conditions in order to make a small wage<sup>41</sup>. The following excerpt from an interview done with a woman who worked in a local factory depicts the dire conditions that people had to work in, day-in and day-out<sup>42</sup>:

In 1941, Northern Electric hires women to work with military material. I lie about my age because I'm still a minor. They put me on switchboards. I remove the bad welds inside the switchboards with carbon tetrachloride (today a recognised carcinogenic product), and after I reweld the joints. The fumes begin to affect me. I don't wear any mask and the ventilation isn't sufficient. I become sick, vomit, and lose weight. My personal physician prescribes rest because of bad working conditions, while the company doctor says it's a nervous breakdown.

Given the overall need to contribute to family income, children were not encouraged to go on to high school, and many of them stopped their studies during primary school to go work in factories. In 1961, 76% of the population either had no formal education or had only attended elementary school, while only 1% had attended university<sup>43</sup>. In fact, at the time, there was no high school in the neighbourhood, the quality of schooling in the grade schools was quite limited<sup>44</sup>, and there was an 80% drop out rate in high school<sup>45</sup>. Although in the Point, boys and girls alike worked in the factories quite young,

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<sup>39</sup> Beauchemin, Beauger, Beaugard, Boutin, & Perron, 1973.

<sup>40</sup> Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles (2002). Outil d'animation « des manufactures au quartier », visite guidée du Canal Lachine.

<sup>41</sup> Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles (2001). Du foyer au quartier: L'histoire de l'action communautaire au féminin.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with G.H., Point St-Charles worker, by Luc Carey for the project « Du foyer au quartier » of the Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, February 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Dominion Bureau of Statistics (1961). Census of Canada, 95-519, published by the Authority of the Minister of Trade and Commerce.

<sup>44</sup> Project participants.

<sup>45</sup> Frank, D. (October 1968). Contact, 1. A publication of the McGill Student Health Organisation Fonds de la Clinique communautaire, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

girls, with a few exceptions, were still raised to become good housewives, as was the case elsewhere in Québec<sup>46</sup>:

Thérèse J'ai dû laisser l'école très jeune (...). Je suis allée sur le marché du travail à 13 ans parce que mon père est décédé et à ce moment-là, il y avait juste une petite pension des veuves. (...) J'ai travaillé sur la rue Notre-Dame, à la Place d'Armes. J'étais finisseuse. Je coupais les fils sur les robes. Ma mère avait besoin d'un salaire de plus et c'était normal, c'était courant. (...) J'avais une 5<sup>e</sup> année et je suis allée travailler. Et je me suis mariée avec un petit gars du quartier à l'âge de 18 ans.

Marguerite J'étais sur le marché du travail de façon régulière à partir de l'âge de 13 ans. J'ai travaillé à 10 cents de l'heure.

Madeleine Moi, j'ai commencé à 50 cents.

Maureen All us girls, there were 5 of us. We were encouraged to go to school. But, the mentality around at the time was "it's not worth it! You are going to get married and have kids anyway!" Like "what do you need schooling for?" I went to ninth. One sister completed high school. But nobody went to college.

Frances I was in high school. Got engaged, then got married (...) I never finished high school.

Donna I have three brothers. I am the only girl. I remember that my Dad worked really hard. And my Mother worked hard at saving money. I know that they had money put aside for us if ever we wanted to go to CEGEP or University.

Anna You were born in 1958.

Denise That's the difference. It has changed.

Michèle (Vers la fin des années 1950, début 60) ils commençaient à nous encourager à aller à l'école. Moi, c'est le gérant d'une Caisse populaire qui est venu à l'école des filles. Il disait « Les filles, on va vous prêter, sans intérêts, pour aller étudier ». Moi j'ai étudié comme ça. (...) On était pas poussées mais ça commençait.

Already, in the 1920s, while the population had reached a summit of 30,000, industrial growth began stagnating<sup>47</sup>. Although there was some respite

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<sup>46</sup> Dumont, 1990, p.38

during the second world war, as many people, including many women, were hired to work on the war efforts, after the end of the war, many owners began closing their factories in the old industrial zones<sup>48</sup>. Not having invested in renovations and technological renewal, the factories were fast becoming obsolete, and owners found themselves unable to meet the production needs of the time<sup>49</sup>. Wooed by the expanding industrial parks in the suburbs with direct access to roadways, which were replacing the river and the train tracks as means of transportation, the owners decided that it was more profitable to leave their desolate factories in the urban centers<sup>50</sup>. This industrial flight was accelerated significantly by the opening of the St-Lawrence river to navigation in 1959, and the closure of the Lachine canal in 1970<sup>51</sup>.

The massive layoffs, and the decreased buying power of neighbourhood folks, led to the closure of many local businesses and services and to an overall deterioration of living conditions<sup>52</sup>. People with a bit more money began leaving the neighbourhood, and the community saw its population drop from 28,000 in 1941 to 24,000 in 1961<sup>53</sup>. By 1961, 40% of the population (2,500 families) were living on welfare and the unemployment rate in the Point was 1/3 higher than the Quebecois average<sup>54</sup>. Poverty was the norm, and the average wage and salary income was 2540\$ per year<sup>55</sup>. Although Michèle grew

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<sup>47</sup> Le Projet St-Charles (July 1984). Des logements pour les gens du quartier : Le Projet Saint-Charles, construction et renovation au cours des trois prochaines années de 500 logements coopératifs. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2003.04.07.27.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles (2002). Outil d'animation « des manufactures au quartier », visite guidée du Canal Lachine.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Le Projet St-Charles (July 1984). Des logements pour les gens du quartier : Le Projet Saint-Charles, construction et renovation au cours des trois prochaines années de 500 logements coopératifs. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2003.04.07.27.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Beauchemin, Beauger, Beauregard, Boutin, & Perron, 1973.

<sup>55</sup> Dominion Bureau of Statistics (1961). Census of Canada, 95-519, published by the Authority of the Minister of Trade and Commerce.

up in neighbouring St. Henri, the description of her family situation reflects that of many working-class folks in the Point:

Michèle      On est arrivés à St-Henri, j'avais à peu près dix ans. Ça été un gros choc! C'était épouvantable d'arriver sur la rue Notre-Dame, avec les p'tits chars qui passaient juste en bas de ma chambre! (...) Mon père travaillait à la Simon Saw mais après trois semaines, la compagnie déménage à Granby! Lui, y'a pas assez d'ancienneté pour déménager à Granby! On est pris à Montréal, sur la rue Notre-Dame (...) Ma mère travaillait, mon père, malade, faisait des *jobines*... (...) Nous autres, les mercredis, y avait rien à manger chez nous – on attendait la paie du jeudi.

Not only were families poor, but they were also quite numerous. Although there were some women in Québec who had been vocal about controlling childbirth since the 1940s<sup>56</sup>, in the Point, at the time, family planning was considered immoral, and women who attempted to control the number of births suffered the consequences:

Marguerite    On avait pas la pilule – tu comprends ? (...) Comment tu fais pour avoir les enfants que tu veux quand t'as pas de moyens contraceptifs, sauf le thermomètre ? Ton chum, lui, le thermomètre, y veux pas retenir ça. On était pas équipé. Peux bien le dire haut, mais ça change rien de le dire tout haut, parce qu'il n'y avait rien, pas de moyens pour dire, « oui, c'est vrai, on a les enfants qu'on veut. »

Frances        If families would take care to not to have children, they were put out of the church.

Denise        They used to go tell you off at home. “You aren't supposed to do that!”

Frances        “Tu empêches la famille, t'es pas catholique”.

Michèle        Je me rappelle ma mère, elle allait à la confesse, et le prêtre lui donnait pas l'absolution parce qu'elle empêchait la famille. Ma mère disait toujours « On est trois dans la misère, je ne veux pas en mettre d'autres ! »

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<sup>56</sup> St-Columba House (March 1992). Pointe Info, 18th edition, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles SCH-06.

Unemployment or not, however, life has always been difficult, as the living conditions in this working-class neighbourhood have always been less than acceptable. Unsuitable housing, pollution of the air and the land, and unsatisfactory health and social services were the norm.

#### LIVING CONDITIONS

In this neighbourhood of factories, surrounded by train tracks, the pollution of the air and the earth was (and still is) a serious health risk<sup>57</sup>. Most of the industrial sites on the banks of the Lachine canal, as well as the canal itself, were polluted by decades of practices that were devastating for the environment<sup>58</sup>. Many factories used toxic products in their production, such as lead, benzene, and turpentine, which were often stored in underground reservoirs, and which have, because of corrosion, leaked into the earth<sup>59</sup>. Moreover, the neighbourhood, home of the incinerator of the City of Montréal, and in line with the dominant winds, has boasted, over the years, the highest rate of respiratory disease in Québec<sup>60</sup>.

Donna        There were different industries here, and things were dumped into the canal and into the ground itself. There's a lot of underground streams in the Pointe that are fed from the St Laurent river, and which therefore also have a lot of contaminants. And it turns out that there are large blocks in the area that have high levels of contamination (...)

Michèle      Notre linge sur la corde était noir (à cause de la suie des trains) !

Marguerite    Je ne sais pas comment on s'arrangeait pour avoir de si belles cordées ! (...) Ma voisine faisait son lavage à 5 heures du matin ! Et les cordées étaient belles ! C'était notre fierté !

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<sup>57</sup> Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles (2002). Outil d'animation « des manufactures au quartier », visite guidée du Canal Lachine.

<sup>58</sup> Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles (2002). Outil d'animation « des manufactures au quartier », visite guidée du Canal Lachine.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

In addition, housing conditions were terrible. With 85% of housing stock built before 1920, in 1961, 52% were in need of repair, 12% were uninhabitable (dangerous), 26% had no shower or bath, and 42% had no hot water<sup>61</sup>. Although most families lived in squalor, as the excerpts below indicate, the participants' mothers made every effort to keep their tiny spaces tidy, taking pride in what little they had:

- Anna Does anybody remember what the housing conditions were like at the time?
- Maureen Uninhabitable! Wiring, no good. Maybe small fires. (...) Ceiling falling down in your bathroom.
- Denise If you had a bathroom then! You had a toilet, but not everybody had a tub or a shower. It didn't exist too much. You had those pull toilets.
- Frances You have a bathroom at one end, and the bathtub at the other. And in your bathtub you could drop your bath towel down and it would go and you wouldn't have it no more. Oh yeah! My bathroom wasn't even as big as you. You'd go in the bathroom, open the door you'd turn around, sit down and you'd grab the door and close it. (...) So one day I got fed up and I was sitting in there and I put my foot through the wall! Cause it was like a little cubby. I made myself another two feet! (...)
- Myrna I had no shower, no tub when I first lived on the Laprairie street. A pull chain. With rats sometimes dead in the bowl.
- Denise Yeah, you had to watch the hole. Cause the toilets were made different, and the rats used to come up through the hole, in the toilet and come into the house and that.
- Maureen Yes that happened once on Wellington. I flushed and the rats came up through the toilet. There were traps that were supposed to prevent the rats from coming through. But since Point St. Charles wasn't the City's priority, when they were broken, they stayed that way!
- Denise The rats were the size of cats.
- Frances Exactly. Also, you didn't need a mailbox. You could get your mail underneath the door. It's like living outside. In the entrance, you

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<sup>61</sup> Le Projet St-Charles (July 1984). Des logements pour les gens du quartier : Le Projet Saint-Charles, construction et renovation au cours des trois prochaines années de 500 logements coopératifs. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2003.04.07.27.

could put your milk, and it would be cold all winter.

Denise Well people used to do that a lot. Between windows. You couldn't lean the furniture against the wall, cause you'd have all mildew and everything on everything. Cause it would come right through. The floors all wet, the carpet would rot. If you had one. If you were lucky enough to have one.

Thérèse J'ai vécu ça, pas de bain, pas de douche, juste une toilette! Il y avait une cloison en bois qui séparait une chambre et un petit salon. Une de mes grandes sœurs se mariait. Les gars ont défait la cloison pour faire le party du mariage et ils ont refait le mur après!

Madeleine On avait des prélaris usés pas mal! Et on gelait dans ces taudis là! Ma mère sortait le beurre le soir pour faire nos lunchs et le matin, il était aussi dur que quand elle l'avait mis sur la table! Ah oui, il faisait froid...(..) Mais chez nous, c'était toujours bien peinturé et ma mère faisait des beaux petits rideaux! On avait des prélaris pas mal usés mais cirés!

Thérèse Jeune mariée, j'ai demeuré sur la rue Mullins (...) Le logement appartenait à Joseph Élie (*a local elite*). C'était mon premier logement...(..) À un moment, je me retrouve enceinte de mon beau Daniel. Je vais à toilette et là, j'entends un gros bruit. J'ouvre la lumière, il y avait un rat d'égout qui était tombé de la toilette dans le bain. Un gros! (...) Je criais comme une perdue!

Not only were the apartments in poor repair, but they were also too small for the large families:

Marguerite On était comme des animaux! (...) Des grosses familles. Des 4 pièces avec 6-7 enfants. Il y en avait qui avait 12 ou 17 enfants! (...) Une chambre de garçons, une chambre de filles, une chambre de parents. Les enfants étaient élevés dehors. On parle pas d'éducation. C'était l'enfer (...), la grande misère.

Although as Marguerite indicates, the size of the apartments made it such that children were raised outdoors, leisure activities in the neighbourhood were quite limited.

Prior to the 1960s, parks, pools, recreational centers, and libraries were practically nonexistent. Many of the leisure activities, including sports teams, choirs, theatre, card tournaments, picnics, and cooking courses, were organised



by the Churches<sup>62</sup>. Because families did not have the resources to send their children to camp in the summers, they made do with what they had. They played in the streets and took advantage of the few organised activities that existed at the time:

Denise        We played with what we had. Nobody had much. It was poor families. Most of us didn't have a car, let alone a country place. You had to hang around the Point, and be very creative. My father used to work at the Northern. He worked in the cable division. He used to bring us these wires. We would braid them, make stick-men. We would play with cardboard boxes! We were very creative.

Maureen      My husband talked about playing hockey in the street with horse buns!

Denise        We used to hang off the buses.

Frances       Or play on the railroad tracks.

Thérèse      Dans mon enfance, la Ville plaçait d'immenses toiles dans le milieu de la rue. Ils prenaient l'eau des fontaines, ils remplissaient ça et on se baignait. Comme ça! Dans le milieu de la rue! On étendait nos serviettes sur le trottoir, et on se faisait griller entre les rues Manufacture et St-Charles. On avait notre place au soleil mais c'était pas trop hygiénique...

Denise        There were a lot of dances, and shows in Marguerite Bourgeois Park back then. There was a dome, a stage.

Maureen      My husbands remembers going, as a little kid, and signing at the concert, "Three little fishes" in Marguerite Bourgeois Park.

Donna        Yeah, it was like a music box!

In the summer, the adults spent many hours sitting on their balconies or their stoops talking to their neighbours while soaking up the sun<sup>63</sup>. Moreover, their leisure activities included going to the local theatre, to the bowling alley, to dances in the park, as well as to organised wrestling matches:

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<sup>62</sup> Société d'histoire de Pointe-Saint-Charles (1997). Les églises de notre quartier : Un chemin d'histoire; Association Sportive St-Charles, (1983). Loisirs St-Charles, in 1883-1983 ;, Paroisse St-Charles, album souvenir. Société d'histoire de Pointe Saint-Charles.

<sup>63</sup> Project participants.

Thérèse      Mon mari faisait de la lutte dans le parc. C'était une activité récréative des loisirs. C'était la grande soirée dans le quartier. (...) Et c'était des gars du quartier qui faisaient la lutte. Mon beau Germain était lutteur! Il y avait une vraie arène de lutte dans le parc St-Gabriel (...) C'était ça nos activités : les grosses fêtes du quartier, la danse dans la rue de Frank Hanley (*the municipal councilor*) et la lutte dans le parc.

In the following excerpt, Thérèse shares an anecdote which provides a humorous glimpse into the lives of many working-class folks in the neighbourhood:

Thérèse      J'étais jeune mariée et mon mari dit « Ce serait le fun si on avait une auto! Dans ma journée *off* on pourrait aller à la campagne avec les enfants, faire des pique-niques au parc Angrignon. – Ah oui mais, Germain, ça coûte cher une auto! – Non, non, tu vas voir, je vais m'arranger! » Dans ce temps-là, quand tu achetais une auto, ils te donnaient le permis de conduire. (...) Alors il est allé la chercher dans le centre-ville. Rendus dans la Pointe, la fameuse auto ne voulait plus marcher! Ils l'ont rentrée dans la cour et ils ont commencé à jouer avec ça, le beau-frère, un cousin, le beau-père... On avait pas d'argent pour faire réparer ça! (...) Un moment donné, l'auto, on la trouve belle en dedans, bien propre. Ça fait qu'on décide d'aller s'asseoir dans l'auto avec le petit. On a été veiller dans l'auto! On était bien.

Marguerite    Le petit bien lavé, en pyjama...

Thérèse      ...propre. S'il tombe endormi, on va le coucher. Nous, on jasait, on prenait nos décisions là, assis dans l'auto!

Louise        Les autos, dans les années 50, c'était comme un cadeau. Il y en avait très peu qui pouvaient se payer ça.

Thus, prior to the 1960s, although most of the folks in the Point lived in poverty and squalor, surrounded by pollution, they found creative ways to entertain themselves, and took advantage of the few organised activities in the neighbourhood – activities controlled by the Church and the local elite.

## THE LOCAL ELITE

Although most of Québec prior to the 1960s was controlled by local elite and the clergy<sup>64</sup>, in poor urban centers like Point St. Charles, the disparity between the ruling class and the “ordinary people” was especially flagrant. The petit bourgeois families – Magnan, Élie and Loïselle, and a number of wealthy individuals – were at the head of religious, economic, social and political life. They were the members of the Knights of Columbus, the Churchwarden, the Board members of the Caisse populaire Desjardins, and at the head of leisure activities. They owned much of the housing stock and many of the local businesses, and were allies to English factory owners. They were also the politicians. The following is an analysis of these dynamics written by local activists in the 1970s:

Ils lancent des entreprises, paient de bas salaires, refusent les syndicats, ramassent des profits qui permettent de repartir une autre affaire. Ils se font amis avec les assistés-sociaux en parlant contre les syndicats et avec les ouvriers en parlant contre les assistés sociaux. Ils deviennent des vedettes des parades, des élections municipales, des campagnes de charité, des ventes-trottoirs. Ils prêtent de l'argent, louent des logements, maîtrisent les services sociaux, les loisirs, l'éducation pour conserver leur prestige et l'idée qu'ils sont là pour aider. Enfin, ils rendent des services aux grandes compagnies (Canada Packers, Dominion Glass, Canada Sugar, Northern Electric, etc.) comme pour l'embauche du personnel, les pressions politiques, etc... (...) Le pouvoir à la Pointe (...) c'est un ensemble de petits et de gros capitalistes (canadiens-anglais et américains surtout, canadiens-français quelquefois) qui décident parfois ensemble, parfois chacun de leur côté de faire des profits donc d'accumuler et d'investir comme bon leur semble, où ils veulent et quand ils le veulent<sup>65</sup>

The participants expand, below, on this phenomenon, more common to rural villages than to urban neighbourhoods:

Marguerite Ici la politique, c'était la famille! (...) C'est du monde que tout le monde connaissait, on allait à l'école ensemble. Ils étaient au

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<sup>64</sup> Lesemann, 1981.

<sup>65</sup> Groupe d'action politique (1972). *Fonce pi Fesse*. Manifeste '72 du Groupe d'action politique de la Pointe, p.9. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.38. Written by Robert Arseneault, Daniel Courtois, Serge Faubert, Louis Favreau, Jean-Claude Naud, Pierre Pagé, Gaston Tessier, Carole Welp

fédéral, au provincial, au municipal... Tout ce beau monde-là était placé...

Thérèse ...dans les conseils paroissiaux, chez les marguilliers...

Marguerite ...à la Caisse, ils étaient partout, ils avaient le pouvoir (...)

Thérèse La bourgeoisie était en place.

Madeleine Et dans le temps, quand j'ai fait ma confirmation, c'était monsieur Magnan et madame Magnan. Lui, il était parrain de confirmation pour les garçons et elle, elle nous mettait la main sur l'épaule. C'était toujours les gros... Tu vois leurs tableaux partout! Joseph Elie, Loiselle, Magnan...

Marguerite Ça ne se voit pas dans tous les quartiers!

Thérèse C'était comme un petit village.

Not only were they everywhere, but they did not always act in a charitable way with the "petit monde" in the neighbourhood. Thérèse's story below, about having been refused a mortgage by the Caisse is just one example of how the rich controlled the poor in Point St. Charles:

Thérèse Je dis à mon mari « Les petits gars commencent à vieillir, il faudrait penser à avoir une maison à nous, pour qu'ils aient leur cour, pour qu'ils soient libres ». (...) Il dit « On va à la Caisse! ». C'était monsieur Normandeau qui était le gérant de la Caisse populaire, un autre monsieur très pesant, avec le gros garage sur la rue Charlevoix. On se présente, tout naïfs. Il nous connaît, il sait que le père de mon mari charriait le charbon pour Dansereau...« Qu'est-ce que je peux faire pour vous? – On s'en vient jaser pour un prêt. – Vous êtes pas capables d'avoir une maison! – Avec le salaire de mon mari, les épargnes que je fais sur tout, le revenu du loyer d'en bas, le revenu du garage (on a pas d'auto), on est capables ». On avait tout calculé avant d'aller là! Il répond « Ça marche pas de même, madame! (...) – C'est pas la plus grosse maison du quartier, c'est une petite maison sur la rue Coleraine ! – Je regrette mais je ne peux vraiment pas vous aider. »... Mais il y avait une madame Coulombe dont le beau-père était sur le comité des prêts, un monsieur bien ordinaire, bien facile d'accès. (...) Je lui ai dit « On n'aura jamais de maison – Germain était souvent *slaqué* l'hiver – parce que l'argent qu'on ramasse, on s'en sert pour les mauvais temps, tu sais. – Non, non, non! C'est pas comme ça que ça marche! La Caisse populaire achète la maison et vous payez, comme tu l'avais dit, avec votre budget. Vous payez tant par mois et la maison finit par être à vous! Je vais en parler avec

mon beau-père. » Elle parle de ça avec monsieur Coulombe. Il rencontre mon mari, on visite la maison...Trois jours après, il vient nous voir et dit à Germain « Tu peux venir à la Caisse, la maison va être à toi » !!! Comprenez vous?!? Si on avait pas connu ce monsieur-là, on aurait jamais eu de maison! Les petits travailleurs n'avaient pas d'ouverture pour monter d'un cran et se prendre en main. Ils n'en avaient pas!

Although the « ordinary folks » had much reason to dislike the local elite for the power they held over their lives, many people appreciated their charitable works:

Madeleine Yves Magnan restait à côté de chez nous, sur la rue Manufacture. (...)  
e (...) On était une grosse famille, on était 11 enfants. Quand sa femme faisait des repas et qu'il en restait, elle venait toujours le porter chez nous ou chez madame Soucy. (...) Moi, j'ai connu sa femme très généreuse et lui aussi. Il venait porter ça avec elle. Il avait des qualités.

Louise Il avait deux cotés, Magnan (...)

Madeleine Ils avaient plus d'argent que nous autres. Eux, ils ne mangeaient pas  
e la même chose deux fois! Elle faisait cuire un morceau de viande et s'il en restait, elle l'envoyait chez nous (...) Moi j'ai connu madame Magnan et monsieur Magnan comme ça... Mais je sais qu'il a mis des bâtons dans les roues pour des permis, pour ci, pour ça (...)

Louise Moi, j'ai toujours vécu à Pointe St-Charles et Magnan, je lui aurais demandé la lune, j'aurais eu la lune. Je n'ai pas connu Magnan comme ça. J'en ai attendu parler, je savais qu'il avait, comme on dit, « ses amis ».

Isabelle Il valait mieux être son ami que son ennemi !

Marguerite Mais sans être son ennemi, tu as le droit de dénoncer ! Mais lui  
e c'était l'enfer !

Anna C'était un big boss de quartier.

Louise Un contrôleur.

Thérèse Et il n'était pas le seul comme ça.

Isabelle Ce que je comprends, c'est que la bourgeoisie locale tenait le quartier. Elle pouvait bien être charitable, aider son prochain, réparer les toilettes, donner un peu de bouffe mais elle menait ça comme elle voulait.

This “love-hate” relationship that the folks from the neighbourhood had with the local elite is very characteristic of the times. The local elite, although they did their charitable duties, did not share their power with the “ordinary folks”.

The participants remember, again with contradictory feelings, Frank Hanley, a local Irish man, who was city councillor with a populist approach to politics, from 1948 to the mid-1970s<sup>66</sup>:

Madelein e Frank Hanley a toujours été indépendant. C’était le bon monsieur...

Louise Défendre les petits pauvres!

Marguerit e Il jouait aux « cennes » sur le bord du trottoir avec les gars.

Madelein e Quand il était pour rentrer en politique, il se promenait en calèche, il arrêtait chez Frigon et il nous payait des hot dogs avec des patates frites. Il disait « J’aime mieux que vous les ayez dans le ventre ». Il pensait toujours aux pauvres. Il était bon. Il vit encore!

Thérèse Combien de fois il nous a acheté des chaussures ? Pour qui ma mère allait voter !? !

Madelein e Je serais curieuse de savoir combien de monde il a fait placer à l’Impérial Tobacco, à la Northern Electric, à la Dominion Glass...C’est lui qui plaçait tout ce monde-là.

Marguerit e Il se promenait dans le tramway sur la rue Centre. Lui, il ne travaillait pas. Il prenait le tramway aller-retour, il parlait à tout le monde. (...) C’était quelque chose ! (...)

Anna Does Hanley fit into the same category as Magnan?

Maureen Yes he was just as bad.

Myrna He was rotten

Denise He was running against Loiselle, at the time

Maureen Hanley was always good for his supporters who helped to get their little cliques and gangs out. And he would fix tickets and do odds and ends for them.

Frances Sometimes helped with an electrical bill too

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<sup>66</sup> At the time, there were three city councillors in our area. It is only as of 1978 that this changed (personal communication, Marcel Sévigny, ex-municipal councillor, October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003).

Myrna Helped them with food and stuff. But there always had to be a payback. You owed him. If he helped you, you better vote for him or you better be there when he needed you.

Denise “Make sure you have your dozen eggs on Charlevoix Street and throw them at Loïselle when he wins! Throw them at his convertible!” (...) He used to have his gangs doing that. And, of course, he’d go to the local bars. All the French people voted mostly for Loïselle and the English were for Hanley. It wasn’t about politics. It was the idea of being French or English (...)

Anna But that existed also with Magnan with these other guys on the French side. Did people actually vote for him, Hanley?

All oh yeah

Anna Even though they knew he was an asshole?

Myrna Who else were they going to vote for?

Denise he was the only English!

Donna If you think about it, when you go to any voting, you really don’t have much of an option, any time, even today!

Denise They were two assholes, at the time.

Maureen But 90 percent, I would think, never even bothered to go out and vote, because it was, “which crook do you like the best?”

Denise The best of two evils

Anna So people saw them for who they were? Did they have qualms about demonstrating against the guy?

Maureen Oh God no! There was no problem with that. It was like, “lets get him!”

Myrna It’s like anything else. If you need a box of groceries to feed your family, well you’re going to say to Hanley “oh yes I’m going to vote for you” and “you are a great guy”, and all the stuff. The minute he goes, they say, “ah the asshole! (*laughs*) That’s true you know.

Today, the participants argue that even though they accepted the charity of the local elite to feed their families, many folks were not fooled by their charity antics. For lack of better options on the ballot, the people of the Point continued electing local elite until the 1980s.

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES FOR THE POOR

Although Point St. Charles, with its poverty, work and pollution-related illness, and poor housing and living conditions, was in dire need of health and social services, and quality education, the latter remained extremely limited until the 1960s-70s. Prior to this, the québécois government preferred to leave these responsibilities to the traditional local elite in the municipalities and to the clergy<sup>67</sup>. Although limited government resources were available to help the poorest of the poor, it wasn't until the 1920s that the government began contributing, with the municipalities and private charitable organisations, to charitable health and social service institutions<sup>68</sup>. The institutions – hostels, hospitals, sanatoriums, orphanages, and the public health services – for pregnant mothers, vaccinations, and diet – were available only for the poorest of the poor, and were still controlled by the local elite and the clergy<sup>69</sup>, who claimed that the best place to get help was from oneself and one's family. Here is an excerpt from a sermon given in 1958 by a Point Catholic priest: « Il n'y a pas de société valable qui ne doit s'appuyer au préalable sur cette première cellule qu'est la famille. Les hommes de notre temps ont parfois oublié cette vérité fondamentale ; ils ont voulu substituer l'État à la famille ; ils ont récolté simplement l'anarchie (sic.) »<sup>70</sup>.

Private health services were not accessible to most neighbourhood folks, and they either depended on the good-will of their local medical doctor to provide services for a symbolic amount, or they did without<sup>71</sup>. The following quote, from Dr. Georges Valérien Emond, a medical doctor in the Point in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, describes the situation well:

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<sup>67</sup> Lesemann, 1981

<sup>68</sup> Lesemann, 1981

<sup>69</sup> Lesemann, 1981

<sup>70</sup> Crevier, Y. (1958). *La famille et la paroisse, in 75<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la fondation de la paroisse Saint-Charles : Consécration de l'église*, p.65. Société d'histoire de Pointe-Saint-Charles

<sup>71</sup> Personal communication, Irène Dionne, member of the Société d'histoire de Pointe Saint-Charles, December 15th 2003.



Pour une consultation au cabinet, je ne pouvais pas demander plus que 1\$ et à domicile rarement 2\$. Les accouchements variaient de 5\$ à 10\$ et très souvent une promesse de paiement bâclait le tout. Dans ce montant tout était compris : les visites pré et post-natales, l'accouchement lui-même et les injections nécessaires<sup>72</sup>.

Moreover, in the 1960s, there were only “four medical practitioners located in the area, none of whom maintain(ed) an active full-time practice, and only one of whom live(d) in the area. This represents one physician per 6000 people. The Canadian average in 1961 was one physician per 857 people”<sup>73</sup>. Limited public health facilities were available, such as the “well-baby clinic” (“goutte de lait”) for children’s health, vaccines and nutrition<sup>74</sup>. Access to hospitals was limited as well, and often, families had to pay for their visits<sup>75</sup>. The only hospital in the area was not renowned for the quality of its services, to say the least, so Point residents often chose to travel to hospitals outside the area, not an easy endeavour since most families did not own a car<sup>76</sup>.

In Point St. Charles, people could get short-term help (“dépannage” and limited “social services”) from the Churches, the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul society<sup>77</sup>, and other local charitable organisations<sup>78</sup> (e.g., lunch programs, baskets of food, clothing donations). Although in the St-Jean parish, Freddy Kunz, a progressive priest who had arrived in the Point in 1955, had begun organising folks into mutual aid networks<sup>79</sup>, the more common approach to

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Georges Valérien Emond, medical doctor, by Ginete Duquette, Comité historique de Pointe-Saint-Charles, May 4<sup>th</sup> 1995.

<sup>73</sup> Frank, D. (October 1968). Contact, 1. A publication of the McGill Student Health Organisation Fonds de la Clinique communautaire, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles. Citing the Royal Commission on Health Services, Hall Report, 1964, p.238.

<sup>74</sup> Project participants

<sup>75</sup> Personal communication, Irène Dionne, member of the Société d’histoire de Pointe Saint-Charles, December 15<sup>th</sup> 2003.

<sup>76</sup> Project participants.

<sup>77</sup> Mailloux, V. (1983). La Société de St-Vincent de Paul, in 1883-1983 : Paroisse St-Charles, album souvenir. Société d’histoire de Pointe Saint-Charles.

<sup>78</sup> For example, in the St-Charles parish, Les Dames de la Charité, l’Assistance Maternelle, le Cercle de couture pour les missions. Schetagne, G. & Gagnon, J. (1958). Les œuvres, in 75<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la fondation de la paroisse Saint-Charles : Consécration de l’église, p.34. Société d’histoire de Pointe-Saint-Charles.

<sup>79</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

“helping the poor”, was most definitely not one of social justice, but one of putting bandages on social problems:

Donna I am going based on my experiences as a kid. I think the Protestant Church was more bent on saving souls than helping with the social aspects. As a kid I went to Salvation Army, the Trinity Church on Ryde street. From what I could see, it was more you go there to save your souls.

The language used in the parish writings of the times reflects this moralistic mentality, terms such as “indigent” and “malheureux” were pervasive<sup>80</sup>. In 1956, the St-Charles parish (French Catholic church) set up social services to deal with family and social life, work and health : “par des services et plus encore par l’intérêt, la sympathie et la compréhension témoignée à chaque individu, le Service Social veut être une manifestation de cette réalité qu’est la charité chrétienne »<sup>81</sup>. Although the workers helped mediate between landlords, creditors, and other institutions, and individuals, the approach was not yet one of advocacy, and the religious overtones were still very present :

Quelquefois (la) tâche (de la travailleuse sociale) est de rappeler que l’épreuve est une circonstance providentielle, une manifestation de l’amour de Dieu (...) la travailleuse sociale, s’inspirant de cette charité dont l’expression profonde la plus profonde est la préoccupation du salut, s’efforce, selon les circonstances, de faire réfléchir aux problèmes d’ordre moral ou religieux, parfois même, elle en a le devoir tout en respectant la liberté de chacun »<sup>82</sup>.

The relative inaccessibility of both health and social services seems even more unjust given the fact that the poverty and poor living conditions of Point residents were at the root of many of their problems. Dr. Emond, on this issue:

À cause de la pauvreté, de problèmes personnels et sociaux j’ai été à même d’observer parmi les familles auprès desquelles j’étais appelé :

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<sup>80</sup> Dussault, L. (1959). Monsieur l’abbé Guy Schetagne, ptre, curé : Après 25-ans, in 75<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la fondation de la paroisse Saint-Charles : Consécration de l’église, p.11. Société d’histoire de Pointe-Saint-Charles.

<sup>81</sup> Valois, M. (1958). Le service social de la paroisse Saint-Charles, in 75<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la fondation de la paroisse Saint-Charles : Consécration de l’église, p.66. Société d’histoire de Pointe-Saint-Charles

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

recherche d'évasion dans la délinquance, l'alcoolisme, la dépendance chronique et d'autres formes d'isolement social. Mais n'apparaissent pas plus qu'ailleurs les maladies contagieuses – les gens en étaient pratiquement immunisés (...) Face aux « gens à l'aise », je me rendais compte qu'ils avaient un taux de mortalité plus élevé, une espérance de vie inférieure, un niveau de santé plus bas tant physiquement que psychologiquement et souvent une alimentation insuffisante (...) Je remarquais qu'ils avaient maintes fois recours à des médecines familiales ou folkloriques, car les soins médicaux authentiques étaient pour eux trop onéreux et leur faisaient peur. Matériellement la vie de ces pauvres gens était pénible et circonscrite<sup>83</sup>.

Overall then, people in the Point did not have adequate financial resources, were often unemployed, suffered oppressive conditions when they did work, survived poor housing conditions, lacked leisure activities, and were “forced” to accept handouts from the Churches and local elite. Despite these seemingly dire conditions, there has always been, in this inner-city neighbourhood, a sense of cohesion<sup>84</sup> that give it the feel of a rural company town. The latter has been translated by a ubiquitous sense of belonging to the community, and of pride and solidarity.

#### SENSE OF BELONGING, PRIDE, MUTUAL AID AND SOLIDARITY

The sense of belonging to the community, and pride at being part of its history comes out strongly in the narratives of the participants. The excerpts below are but a sampling:

Marguerite Quand je reviens (dans le quartier), je ne sais pas ce que ça va me faire. Marcher dans les rues, rentrer au Carrefour, reconnaître des noms...Il n'y a nulle part ailleurs où je me suis sentie chez nous. Mais ça tu le sais quand tu reviens. C'est incroyable !

Thérèse Moi je suis née ici dans Pointe St-Charles et je suis venue à l'école dans le local où on est. J'y ai fait ma première année. (...) Ce sont

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Georges Valérien Emond, medical doctor, by Ginete Duquette, Comité historique de Pointe-Saint-Charles, May 4<sup>th</sup> 1995.

<sup>84</sup> A St. Gabriel Church parishioner is quoted as having said in 1956 “The French and the Irish always help one another in times of disaster” (cited in “More depression, war, peace, fire”, in 100 years of Masses, 100 years of people, documents in preparation of the centennial celebration of the St-Gabriel's Church in 1970, Société d'histoire de Pointe Saint-Charles).

des beaux souvenirs pour moi. Je suis fière d'être ici ! (...) Je dis toujours *dans mon quartier* parce que j'ai l'amour de ce quartier-là ! Je l'ai dit hier à mes enfants et je le répète encore « Ne me sortez pas d'ici ! À moins qu'il m'arrive quelque chose en vieillissant, qu'on soit obligé de me placer et qu'il n'y ait pas de place, laissez-moi dans mon quartier ! ». Je suis heureuse, je suis bien. Je ne serai jamais seule ici.

- Maureen I was born in the Point, and as a baby we moved out. We lived in the North End. When I met my husband, we moved to the Point. His family was from the Point. And we raised our kids in the Point. And when I retired I went to St-Gabriel for 7 years. And he died, it'll be close to a year in December. And I moved back. *It's home. I am alive.* St. Gabriel is much nicer. There is no comparison. *But this is home. This is where I belong.*
- Myrna My kids often say to me, "Mom, why don't you move?" One kid – he really doesn't want me to live here – he really gets upset with me. He just says, "why do you want to live there for?" I say, "well I'm okay here" I am though! (...)
- Anna What makes you happy here?
- Myrna I can walk down the street
- Frances And say hello to anybody
- Myrna I know everybody, I'm safe to walk down the street (...)
- Maureen I get angry actually when you meet people at a dance, or something like that, "where are you from?" "from the Point". "Oh yeah?! That is a good place to come from!" (*with sarcasm*). (*laughter*).

Thus, even though the Point is poorer and perhaps not as pretty as other neighbourhoods, the participants feel a strong sense of belonging and pride to a community in which people talk to each other on the streets, where "everybody knows your name", and where women feel safer walking in the parks.

Although it is difficult to untangle the past from the present in these excerpts, the following comments by the participants tend to indicate that this

atmosphere, and the values of mutual aid were pervasive even prior to the 1960s:

Madeleine Je suis née dans le quartier en 1946, ça fait 55 ans que j'y demeure. (...) Chez nous, ça a été le partage qui m'a amenée à m'impliquer dans la communauté. (...) On était jeunes et ça a toujours été palpable. Si on amenait une amie de l'école dîner chez nous, ma mère disait tout le temps « Y'en a pour dix, y'en a pour onze! » C'était comme ça. On a grandi dans ça, aider, partager. J'aide tout le monde moi !

Isabelle Toi, la notion de partage est bien inscrite. (...) On dit « La Pointe c'est un petit village » (...) S'entraider, s'impliquer là où il y a des besoins.

Madeleine C'est ça ! La Pointe, c'est un village, c'est très chaleureux ! Tout le monde se parle. Si on a des problèmes, on est pas gênés, on n'a pas peur de se regarder et de se parler. (...) C'est différent ! C'est la solidarité qu'on vit à la Pointe. Ça aussi ça aide à nous impliquer.

Thérèse Pointe St-Charles a toujours été un quartier d'entraide. On est nés avec ça. On a vu agir nos parents et c'est comme ça que ça part.

Marguerite La solidarité. Quand on a passé au feu, tu aurais dû voir le quartier se mettre en branle (...)

Thérèse On a été laver ses vitres avant qu'elle rentre.

Marguerite Plus que ça! Des sous, c'est incroyable! Ramassés avec des 1 dollar, des 2 dollars...Dans le quartier, ça en prend du monde! Et dire « Écoutez, on vous donne ces sous là, des 1000 dollars, on vous donne ça, et si c'est manger au restaurant dont vous avez besoin, c'est correct ! » (...) C'est pas tout le monde qui sait donner ! (...) Moi, dans Pointe-Saint-Charles, c'est ici que j'ai appris à savoir donner.

Most of the participants, being raised in religious families, grew up with the Christian values of sharing and mutual aid. These values are well ingrained, and coupled with the small town atmosphere of the neighbourhood, have, without a doubt contributed to the participants' sense of belonging to the community, to their pride, and their continued commitment to helping others around them:

Myrna We have a very special relationship here in Point St-Charles that doesn't happen everywhere else. There is this kind of family.

Donna Close knit.

Myrna (...) We have something very special. I think we are very proud.

Perhaps the fact that most neighbourhood folks “are very similar” contributes to this sense of belonging and mutual aid:

Myrna Most of the people, not all, but the majority of people were all in the same boat. Some people did have money. But the majority didn't, so we understood what each person was going through. That's why people helped each other too.

In addition to sharing life chances and conditions, however, until very recently, most folks in the neighbourhood were “White”, and Christian. Along with this relative “homogeneity” in the realms of class, race and religion, perhaps peoples' lack of mobility “forced” them to get to know their neighbours, and to depend on them for help. To palliate for the latter, they developed networks<sup>85</sup> within which they helped each other out with everyday activities, and in times of hardship. Also, they made the best of the outdoor spaces on the streets, hanging out on the balconies and stoops, talking with their neighbours. All of these daily interactions led, without a doubt, to lasting friendships, and perhaps even to the decision to make the Point their home. Perhaps the physical characteristics of the neighbourhood – an enclave surrounded by water, tracks, and now highways, with limited access (8 points of entry, today) – created a psychological border between the neighbourhood and the vast urban center of Montréal.

Notwithstanding this strong sense of territorial identity, facilitated by the factors discussed above, there have always been fissures and fractures in the neighbourhood. As I discussed above, the relations between the local elite and the “ordinary folks” have always been fraught with tensions, characterised by a

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<sup>85</sup> This focus on networks emerges from the narratives of the participants, and is in line with the literature on working-class neighbourhoods. One of the elements that does not emerge is the potential contribution of union-activism to the sense of belonging and pride. Perhaps this is due to the predominance of men in unions, and to the fact that all of the project participants were involved in community, not union activism.

“love-hate” relationship. Moreover, as I will illustrate further on, it is not automatic that people who are “in the same boat” all think alike, support or even like each other. Constructs of our society, as anybody else, folks from the Point also have the “master’s house within them”, and enact the processes of differentiation and stratification that are part and parcel of our society. In line with this, as I will show in Chapter 5, as was the case elsewhere, there was, and still is, sexism in the Point. Moreover, the division of the neighbourhood into parishes – “little villages” in and of themselves – along religious but also linguistic lines, reflects and contributes to longstanding tensions between the French and the English. Nevertheless, as I will show in the rest of this chapter, the feelings of mutual aid and solidarity often took precedence over the very real tensions between the two major linguistic communities when it came time, in the 1960s and beyond, to fight against local elite, among others, for their collective rights.

### THE AWAKENING (1963-1972)

The Western world of this period was in ebullition, from the student movements all over the Western world, to the movement against the war in Vietnam, to the Black civil rights movement and the “war against poverty” in the United States<sup>86</sup>. Québec and Canada were no exception. During the late 1950s and 1960s, the federal government had adopted a number of laws allowing for free hospitalisation, public health care, and for unemployment insurance<sup>87</sup>. In Québec, the conservative Union nationale government of the 1950s, allied with the Church and local elite, which had resisted these changes for many years, was finally replaced in 1960 – with the help of unions and other movements – by a Liberal government with “social democratic” values<sup>88</sup>. It was this government that shifted, once and for all, and with the help of federal

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<sup>86</sup> Mayer, Lamoureux, & Panet-Raymond, 2002

<sup>87</sup> Lesemann, 1981

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

transfers<sup>89</sup>, the responsibility for health and social services<sup>90</sup>, education<sup>91</sup> and public assistance<sup>92</sup>, from Church to State. Although the re-election of the Union Nationale in 1966 coincided with a slowing down of the Quiet Revolution, it was during this period that CEGEPs were set-up and a social security law was adopted<sup>93</sup>.

During this period, as power was transferred from the local elites and the Church to the State, there was also an ideological shift from a moralistic charitable discourse to one of social justice and rights: “l’affirmation du *droit à l’aide*, indépendamment des causes des besoins. L’aide doit contribuer au développement social collectif et non pas constituer le monopole d’un pouvoir institutionnel”<sup>94</sup>. These reforms and the changing mentalities that accompanied them opened up the space for emerging movements, and new ways of organising<sup>95</sup>. Change was in the air. Already in the latter part of the 1960s, students active in their unions were taking to the streets, and by 1968 the movement, following the times, had become radicalised in its tactics and demands<sup>96</sup>. During this time as well, nationalism was on the rise, and the issue of a sovereign Québec would be catapulted into the public agenda in the coming years<sup>97</sup>. It is in this context of effervescence that what is now referred to as the “autonomous community movement” was born<sup>98</sup>.

### THE BEGINNINGS: FROM VICTIM TO CITIZEN (1963-1968)

*Si on a fait tout ça, c’est parce qu’on voulait améliorer nos conditions de vie et qu’on voulait lutter contre la pauvreté. (...) C’est ça qu’on a fait toute notre vie.*  
-- Michèle

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> These include “assurance-hospitalisation” in 1961, free hospital care; and “assistance-médicale” in 1966 (Lesemann, 1981)

<sup>91</sup> Dumont, 1990

<sup>92</sup> Lesemann, 1981

<sup>93</sup> Mayer, Lamoureux, & Panet-Raymond, 2002

<sup>94</sup> Lesemann, 1981, p.27.

<sup>95</sup> Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999

<sup>96</sup> Mayer, Lamoureux, & Panet-Raymond, 2002

<sup>97</sup> (1980). *Vie ouvrière*, 145, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CEP-101.

<sup>98</sup> Secrétariat à l’action communautaire autonome du Québec, 2000



I begin this section by showing how traditional Church-based activities in the Point began to take a more progressive turn with the arrival of the Fils de la Charité. The latter, with their avant-gardes ideas, were central to the “awakening” of the folks in the neighbourhood as they openly questioned the moralistic charity discourse and practices of the Church, and began preaching for social justice “for the poor”. At the same time, social animators, working out of the Conseil des oeuvres de Montréal (COM), had chosen the South-West of Montréal as the pilot site for the creation of secular citizens’ committees. Because of this, Point St. Charles was among the first neighbourhoods to set-up citizens’ committees around issues such as schools, street safety and leisure activities. Although the progressive priests were not the formal leaders of these committees, their work in the periphery of the Church, in the neighbourhood, and within these committees, as I will demonstrate below, was central to their success.

#### FAITH-BASED ORGANISING

Although the Point, at the turn of the decade, was still controlled by the local elite and the religious institutions, there was already a glimmer of what was to come in one of the neighbourhood parishes. Freddy Kunz, a member of the Fils de la Charité – a group of progressive priests (“prêtres ouvriers”) which had been working in working class area on the south-shore of Montréal since 1950 (the movement originated in France) – arrived in the Point with his avant-garde ideas in 1955<sup>99</sup>. Since 1955, he had been working with young people working in factories, under the banner of the “Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique” (JOC, part of the “Action Catholique”), encouraging them to fight for better conditions, and helping them organise cultural and leisure activities that were

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<sup>99</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

still lacking in the neighbourhood<sup>100</sup>. This movement, born in the 1920s in Belgium, first came to Canada in the 1930s<sup>101</sup>. Since then, many young people in Québec, taken in by the activist discourse, and through the practice of « révision de vie » (voir-juger-agir), came to identify the structural roots of social problems<sup>102</sup>. Louise, a member of the JOC of the other parish, remembers :

- Louise      Moi j'ai commencé à m'impliquer quand j'ai travaillé à la Northern Electric. On était impliqué à la Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique. (...) Puis à l'époque, mon mari et les amis, on s'est beaucoup occupé des loisirs à la paroisse St-Charles, dans le sous-sol de l'église. Je pense qu'on a été les premiers à faire les petites vues du dimanche. On en a fait longtemps! Il y avait aussi les chapeaux, le tricot, l'art culinaire... Tout était organisé par des équipes de bénévoles. On faisait même un journal. C'était mes premiers engagements (...) On a fait beaucoup de camps. Des rencontres de ressourcement.
- Isabelle     Dans la JOC, les loisirs étaient bien importants. Parce qu'il y avait des jeunes qui n'étaient jamais sortis de la ville, qui n'avaient jamais de vacances.
- Michèle     (...) C'était pour permettre à ceux qui travaillaient de se défouler un peu, de vivre une expérience de groupe et d'adhérer à des valeurs.

Although “on this side of the track”, the activities of the JOC were less militant than those in Father Kunz' parish, it was nevertheless through these activities in their early years that many young people got their first taste of organising. In fact, as they participated in activities in and around the parish, and they had fun with other young people in their area, they were building networks, ties, sense of belonging and pride, all necessary ingredients for the success and staying-power of neighbourhood groups. Thérèse makes the same point below, arguing that Madeleine, who was always active in parish activities, was also active in community groups :

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<sup>100</sup> In the St-Jean Parish. Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>101</sup> (1983). Vie ouvrière, 167, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CEP-101.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

Thérèse Madeleine, elle fonctionne au niveau de la paroisse. Je regarde les efforts qui sont faits du côté francophone et anglophone justement pour arriver à une socialisation, à une reconnaissance d'appartenance à une communauté. Pas juste à une idée, à une communauté. On parle communauté, des repas communautaires, les gens apportent des choses, les partagent à la suite d'une célébration, d'une réflexion. C'est personnel mais il reste que le but, le sens de regroupement communautaire, il est là, il est créé. Je regarde une personne comme Madeleine qui fonctionne à l'intérieur de ces cadres-là, à l'intérieur du cadre paroissial dans ces groupes de socialisation. Et tout à coup tu revois Madeleine à l'intérieur du quartier, au Carrefour, une conférence de presse...elle est ici ce soir.

In addition to the activities of the JOC with neighbourhood youth, the progressive priests and activists that were associated with the latter during the 1960s played an important role in encouraging people to take interest in the community, and to act to improve their living conditions, sometimes directly, but often indirectly, as was the case for Thérèse:

Thérèse Il y avait le Centre St-Charles qui venait de se construire, avec une piscine. L'été arrivait. Le Centre n'était pas tout à fait fini mais la piscine était prête. L'abbé Héroux est venu chez nous et a dit qu'il faudrait forcer la note pour que la piscine soit ouverte pour l'été pour les enfants. (...) Je me rappelais mon fameux bain dans le milieu de la rue...C'est sûr que j'étais d'accord, la majorité des enfants ne sortaient pas du quartier. On avait pas de voiture, c'était pauvre, les enfants ne pouvaient pas se baigner, sauf dans le petit parc St-Gabriel dans les petites barbotteuses. Alors l'abbé Héroux m'a demandé si j'accepterais de la faire signer sur ma rue. *Ça a été mon premier engagement, ma première sortie de la maison.*

Following the times, by the mid-1960s, the Action Catholique in Québec had taken a more activist turn. It was during this period, in the "Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne" (JEC), that many students got their training, which was but the beginning of their long careers as activists and leaders in social and community movements in the years to come. In fact, many of the French local leaders ("agitators", see Chapter 5) in the Point arrived in (or returned to) the neighbourhood in the 1960s and 1970s after having spent

several years in the JEC<sup>103</sup>. Michèle's story, below, reflects the journey of many local leaders:

Michèle J'étais dans la JÉC à l'école et ça a ça fini dans la JOC, où il fallait transformer son milieu de travail, ne pas renier ses origines. Moi ça m'a marquée. Encore aujourd'hui. J'ai essayé d'être dans un groupe communiste mais j'ai jamais appris autant que quand j'étais dans la JOC. Une chance que j'avais ce fond-là! Ça m'a permis de ne pas trop dérailler! Et quand je me suis mariée, on a choisi de venir rester à Pointe St-Charles. Pour essayer de s'impliquer dans ce milieu-là et de l'améliorer. Au début, c'était avec les équipes de la JOC et après, ça a été l'implication avec des militants, avec Margo, avec la Clinique, avec tout ce qu'il y a eu autour.

Thus, the experience that Michèle and many other local leaders had had in the "Action Catholique" – starting from lived experience to analyse your current situation in light of the socio-economic context, and then to act on that new awareness – was central to the way that they later worked with other activists in community groups.

Moreover, it was in the mid-1960s, that the Ligue Ouvrière Catholique (the adult pendant of the JOC), previously very focused on the family, broke with the historical "apoliticism" of the movement in 1965 to become the Mouvement des Travailleurs Chrétiens (MTC)<sup>104</sup>. All over Québec, working-class men and women, as members of MTC teams were doing "révision de vie" – discussing their experiences and living conditions as workers – and began taking their learning out of the Church and into the streets in the 1960s<sup>105</sup>.

Point St. Charles was no exception. By the mid-1960s, with the arrival of several other members of the Fils de la Charité, the religious establishment in the neighbourhood began to change significantly. The Fils de la Charité believed that it was the role of the priest to work with people living in poverty,

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<sup>103</sup> Personal communication, Irène Dionne, member of the Société d'histoire de Pointe St-Charles, December 17th, 2003.

<sup>104</sup> (1983). *Vie ouvrière*, 167, p.20. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CEP-101.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

*in proximity*, to get at the root of social ills<sup>106</sup>. Their methods – preaching for the poor about social justice, living with the people in ordinary housing, working in factories, agitating for worker and citizen control of local institutions<sup>107</sup> – broke with the top-down moralistic tradition of the Church establishment:

Marguerite (Les Fils) ont fait du beau travail.

Michèle Ils ont pas été acceptés par l'establishment. (...)

Louise C'était une révolution, un choc culturel. C'était l'éveil des gens à une culture différente, à des idées nouvelles.

Michèle Il y a du monde qui n'embarquait pas là-dedans parce que les Fils arrivaient avec des idées d'égalité. Pour eux, les femmes étaient aussi importantes que les hommes, les petits comme les riches.

This kind of discourse and practice, coming from priests had an important impact on people in the neighbourhood, as they began to realise that the status quo, of poverty and alienation, was not a natural phenomenon but a structural one. The progressive priests quickly set-up a number of MTC teams with men and women from the neighbourhood, in an explicit attempt to effect social change<sup>108</sup>.

In fact, many men and women who participated in the “Service d'orientation aux foyers” (SOF) – their duty as newly wed Christians – were recruited into the MTC by the Fils de la Charité<sup>109</sup>. Traditionally, the SOF was a course for new couples, in which people were taught how to become a “good Catholic family” and how to raise their children according to God's teachings. The SOF under the “Fils”, however, took on a new activist flavour<sup>110</sup>. In Point St. Charles, couples, both men and women, with young

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<sup>106</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Jean-Guy Dutil, long-time Point activist, by Geneviève Beauchamp for the project « Du foyer au quartier » of the Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles. February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

children would participate in a series of evening classes on various subjects, ranging from male and female psychology to contraception<sup>111</sup>. During these classes, the priests would encourage men and women alike to join an MTC team, by emphasising the importance of commitment to social justice and of action (“engagement social”) in changing the order of things<sup>112</sup>.

Through their MTC meetings, as they did “revision de vie”, many men and women who would become local leaders in the years to come, came to discover the multiple, and important roles that women played in the household – that of treasurer and educator among other things – roles from which men would often exclude themselves. Parish members were taught about the importance of marriage contracts to protect women, financially<sup>113</sup>. Moreover, they were exposed to family planning through discussions about contraception<sup>114</sup>. Because of this process, many women stopped looking to the Church for salvation, started considering leaving the confines of the home, and eventually became community activists. Thérèse’s story, in the excerpt below, reflects the experience of many other men and women who began getting involved in activism during those years:

Thérèse      Pour moi, la grande découverte de ce qu’était l’engagement, ça a été avec les Fils de la Charité. (...) Pour mon mari, son travail à la Dominion Glass, une usine dans le quartier, c’était sa deuxième famille. C’était son monde et il en vivait. Quand il parlait de ça, ses yeux brillaient! Il était en admiration devant son travail et il aimait ce qu’il vivait à l’intérieur avec les gars. Quand on a rencontré les Fils de la Charité, ils ont commencé à nous montrer la révision de vie, le voir, le juger, l’agir. On a cheminé là-dedans. J’ai commencé à comprendre toute l’injustice de ce que mon mari vivait à la Dominion Glass, alors que lui est en admiration devant tout ça! (...) Il ne sentait pas cette exploitation. Il ne sentait pas (comme une injustice le fait) qu’il travaillait 7 jours par semaines, qu’il n’avait

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Jean-Guy Dutil, long-time Point activist, by Geneviève Beauchamp for the project « Du foyer au quartier » of the Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles. February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

pas de journées de congé. C'est venu plus tard, quand il a commencé à s'impliquer au syndicat. C'est là qu'il a commencé à découvrir que ce n'était pas juste de vivre ça comme ça et qu'il y avait des choses à défendre. Maintenant il avait les moyens pour le faire parce qu'on nous l'avait montré, on nous avait aidé. Et pendant ce temps-là, (...) je commençais à m'impliquer dans le quartier. Un engagement profond, pensé, recherché. Pour combattre, comme Michèle l'a dit tantôt, la pauvreté, les injustices, la manipulation. Tout ça nous était révélé, on le voyait. *Avant, on les subissait. Là, on ne les subissait plus parce qu'on les combattait.*(...) Et on savait que la femme avait sa place parce qu'on était traitées sur le même pied d'égalité. Autant mon mari était respecté dans son engagement à l'intérieur de son usine, autant moi je pouvais être respectée dans mon engagement au sein du quartier.

Thérèse's story reflects very well the passage from an uncritical acceptance of one's plight to a critical analysis of injustice, as well as the move from passive Church-goer, to active community activist (without breaking with her faith however). Many people in the Point, along with Thérèse, lived this shift in ideology and practice, which contributed, without a doubt to the building of a critical mass of local activists during the 1960s.

After the 1960s, religion in the Point would never be the same again for many neighbourhood folks. The following excerpt, written in 1970, on the 60s in the Catholic Church, describes this period of "awakening":

Bring the altar forward, stand behind it, close the Latin books and say Mass in the language of the people, sing in the language of the people, speak "homilies" instead of preaching sermons, change this, change that (...) Have Parish Councils, have dialogue, have 'penitential celebrations', have new ceremonies for baptism, marriage and funerals (...) Priests had taken off their hats in church, so women did the same, and nuns took off their habits and head-dresses, and started going to hair-dressers and looking in fashion-magazines! Guitars became the sign of the Christian for some. Others couldn't even stand churches, had to have "The Eucharist" in somebody's living room, around the coffee table, or in the basement playroom, not too far from the bar. Some priests left to

marry, some wanted jobs in factories, some stayed to argue, some took refuge in reaction<sup>115</sup>.

Thus, through the work of the priests and activists of the Action Catholique a space was created in the neighbourhood for local young people to get to know each other, build networks, a sense of belonging and pride that would later contribute to their commitment to community activism. With the arrival of Fils de la Charité, many parishioners were “shaken out” of their passive acceptance of Church doctrine, and through their reflection on personal experience and the analysis of structural inequalities, they came to develop critical minds and were spurred on to take their newfound knowledge into the community. Not only did the Fils de la Charité touch many parishioners with their avant-garde ideas, but they also “converted” several local priests to their cause. In addition, they actively sought out like minded nuns who would be willing to come serve in the Point. The “Soeurs Grises” and the “Soeurs de Sainte-Croix”, along with the Fils, as I will show below, supported the work of the secular citizens’ committees that were spreading like “fungus” in the neighbourhood during the 1960s.

#### SECULAR ORGANISING

At the same time, inspired by similar experiences in the United States, social animators working for the Conseil des oeuvres de Montréal (COM)<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> St-Gabriel’s Church (1970). “Change – renewal”, in 100 years of Masses, 100 years of people, documents in preparation of the centennial celebration of the St-Gabriel’s Church in 1970, Société d’histoire de Pointe Saint-Charles.

<sup>116</sup> La préoccupation principale du Conseil des Œuvres de Montréal est « de voir à ce que la population ait à sa disposition des services de bien-être adéquats. Les ‘services de bien-être’ dont il est question renvoient bien évidemment au réseau privé confessionnel institué sous la gouverne de l’Église catholique, à compter des années 30, sur le modèle anglo-saxon des ‘community chests’ et ‘community councils’. Sa structure, lorsqu’elle est complète, comprend pour chaque diocèse : une fédération d’œuvres qui recueille des fonds, un conseil d’œuvres qui développe et coordonne des services et enfin, des agences qui les dispensent. Après avoir été incorporées pour plusieurs d’entre elles sous la *Loi des évêques catholiques romains*, ces agences sont presque toutes constituées, à la veille de la réforme, en organismes sans but lucratif, en vertu de la troisième partie de la *Loi des compagnies*. Leur assemblée générale et leur conseil d’administration sont formés de bénévoles, clerics et laïcs dans des proportions variables. Les services qu’elles offrent sont principalement des services sociaux individualisés à la famille et à



were descending on the South-West, first in St. Henri then Point St. Charles, to set-up secular citizens' committees. During the mid to late 1960s, dozens of citizens' committees sprouted up, mostly in poor and working-class neighbourhoods in Montréal, in Québec and in certain rural areas<sup>117</sup>. Levesque and Bélanger summarise well the nature of these emerging citizens' committees<sup>118</sup>:

La différence avec la période pré-1963, c'est que « les comités de citoyens (...) échappent à l'emprise de l'élite traditionnelle et qu'ils ne sont 'ni un élément reconnu de la structure politique, ni un corps intermédiaire' »<sup>119</sup>. De fait, les comités se distinguent sensiblement des organismes de charité et des organisations de loisir que contrôlaient plus ou moins directement l'Église, les clubs sociaux ou encore les partis politiques traditionnels.

These citizens' committees provided a space outside the Church for people to organise on issues that affected their lives, such as childhood education, housing, health, urban renewal, and family planning<sup>120</sup>.

Although the activists in the committees of the first generation did not necessarily question the power structure of society, they were, for the first time, demanding a say in the decisions that affected their lives<sup>121</sup>. Here is an excerpt of a text written by Michel Blondin, one of the first social animators in Montréal, on the composition and mission of these committees, as well as on the role of animators within them<sup>122</sup>:

(L'animateur social) concentre ses efforts auprès d'un groupe de personnes qui veulent agir pour l'amélioration des conditions de vie de leur milieu. Ce groupe est composé de personnes représentatives du milieu, en ce sens qu'ils sont fondamentalement semblables – par leur

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l'enfance, de plus en plus fournis par des membres de la profession montante du service social. En 1960, tout le Québec est quadrillé par ce réseau qui, malgré son caractère privé et confessionnel, dépend des fonds publics pour au moins 80% de ses revenus » (Doré, 1992). In the mid 1960s, it becomes the Conseil de développement social, paying organizers to do community work.

<sup>117</sup> Bélanger & Lévesque, 1992

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> citing Michel Blondin, 1968, p.113

<sup>120</sup> Bélanger & Lévesque, 1992

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Michel Blondin, « L'animation sociale : sa nature et sa signification au Conseil des Œuvres de Montréal », p.3-9, cited in Lesemann & Thiénot, 1972a, p.305

genre de vie, leurs valeurs, leurs mentalité – à l’ensemble de la population de ce secteur. Le groupe n’a pas comme tâche de se donner des services, mais de voir à ce que les différents organismes responsables, privés ou publics, développent des services adéquats convenablement aux besoins du milieu.

L’animation sociale est donc une méthode d’intervention sociale au sein d’un milieu par un groupe en situation. Le processus d’animation donne évidemment lieu à un processus d’auto éducation dont l’essentiel est l’accroissement de l’aptitude à s’auto déterminer.

Thus, these citizens committees were initially set-up to put pressure on relevant authorities and local politicians in order to make sure that the services offered reflected the needs of the people who were active in these groups. The animators, as the second excerpt above illustrates, were conscious of the process as well as the results, and did their work with the objective of increasing people’s ability to control their own lives. In line with this, one of the main objectives of the animators was to help people who have been “deprived of citizenship” become full citizens. That is, there was no attempt made to change the power structures; instead, they worked to find ways for the folks who were excluded from that power to participate in its structures<sup>123</sup>. The following excerpt, attributed to Michel Blondin, illustrates this positioning, that social animators should refuse ideology:

Toutefois, nous refusons encore les contingentements idéologiques et doctrinaux, moyen de sécurité et de motivation, parce qu’ils sont contradictoires aux objectifs que nous poursuivons et aux responsabilités qui sont les nôtres (...) Proposer une idéologie comporterait le risque qu’elle devienne tôt une doctrine avec tout ce que cela comporte de limites et d’étroitesse<sup>124</sup>.

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<sup>123</sup> (August 1973). ADDS... Analyse, Fond Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

Finally, although these committees were explicitly secular, progressive priests and nuns, in certain neighbourhoods, including Point St. Charles, were actively involved and often in positions of informal leadership<sup>125</sup>.

During this period, citizens' committees in the Point were "spreading like fungus". It was not uncommon to hear – daily – about the seemingly spontaneous birth of a committee on housing, on street safety, on leisure, on health, on family planning, on childhood or adult education. The very first citizens' committee in the Point was the Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe Saint-Charles in 1964<sup>126</sup> following in the footsteps of the "Association des parents de Saint-Henri". The "Regroupement" was set-up under the leadership of the Fils de la Charité, local members of the MTC, and social animators working with the COM<sup>127</sup>. Under the slogan "s'unir pour réussir"<sup>128</sup>, its objectives were "de devenir vraiment une force représentative des intérêts de la population de la Pointe St-Charles. Travailler à améliorer les problèmes du quartier, la question des écoles – logement – chômage – assistance sociale, etc. »<sup>129</sup>.

Quickly, however, a conflict emerged between those citizens who were close to the local elite and the Liberal Party, and those who were working for structural change *against* the local elite. When, in 1966, the Regroupement adopted a set of principles, two of which were that the movement is exclusively secular and that it did not engage in politics<sup>130</sup>, the Fils de la Charité were

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<sup>125</sup> Personal communication, Irène Dionne, member of the Société d'histoire de Pointe St-Charles, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>126</sup> Personal communication by Isabelle Drolet, Gisèle Dionne, ex-president of the Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>127</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>128</sup> Personal communication by Isabelle Drolet, Gisèle Dionne, ex-president of the Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>129</sup> (1966). Le Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe Saint-Charles à l'action. La Voix populaire. Fond de Gisèle Dionne.

<sup>130</sup> (November 7th, 1966). Minutes of the Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles. Fond de Gisèle Dionne.

excluded from the committee<sup>131</sup>. Because of this, the *Not in my backyard* (NIMBY) approach to organising took precedence in the early years, and the Regroupement stayed away from « ideology », as is clear in the message it sent out through an article in the local newspaper : “Le Regroupement n’est pas un mouvement révolutionnaire, mais au contraire un mouvement plein de logique”<sup>132</sup>.

In line with this, their tactics were non-confrontational, focused at this point on lobbying, and they would often enter into direct conversations with the Mayor and other high-ranking politicians about their demands<sup>133</sup>. During this time, this direct line to power made it such that demands that the Regroupement had formulated would often be won within a day’s time, including paving of laneways, addition of circulation lights, beautification of parks, better books at the school libraries, « popular education courses » at the high school<sup>134</sup>. The biggest victory of the Regroupement, however, was, without a doubt, after several years of lobbying, the “Charles Lemoyne” High school in 1969<sup>135</sup>.

Thérèse C’était une petite organisation, le premier comité de citoyens de Pointe St-Charles. On voulait des autobus pour transporter nos enfants à St-Henri parce qu’il n’y avait pas d’école secondaire à la Pointe. On revendiquait des autobus qui prendraient nos enfants ici au lieu qu’ils aillent sur le bord de la voie ferrée et embarquent sur le train qui passait par St-Henri. Ça se voyageait très mal d’ici à St-Henri. On a eu un sous-comité d’école à l’intérieur du comité de citoyens de Pointe St-Charles et là on s’est dit « Arrêtons de nous débattre pour des autobus, c’est une école secondaire que ça nous

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<sup>131</sup> Personal communication with Gisèle Dionne. Propos recueillis par Isabelle Drolet le 2 octobre 2003.

<sup>132</sup> (April 5th, 1967). Le Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe Saint-Charles rend compte de son mandat à la population du quartier. *La Voix populaire*, p.32.

<sup>133</sup> Personal communication by Isabelle Drolet, Gisèle Dionne, ex-president of the Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>134</sup> (April 5th, 1967). Le Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe Saint-Charles rend compte de son mandat à la population du quartier. *La Voix populaire*, p.43.

<sup>135</sup> Groupe d’action politique (1972). *Fonce pi Fesse*. Manifeste ’72 du Groupe d’action politique de la Pointe, p.9. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.38.; Benfante, U. (May 1969). Le Regroupement des citoyens, Une manifestation publique... pourquoi. *Journal des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles*. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

prend ! » C'est de là qu'est venue l'idée de la fameuse polyvalente.

By 1968, the Regroupement had changed leadership, with a member of the MTC at its head, and the Fils de la Charité back in the picture<sup>136</sup>, and the group began taking on a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis the officials<sup>137</sup>. Although by the end of 1968, they set-up up a “Comité Éveil” specifically for this purpose<sup>138</sup>, the group disbanded in 1969<sup>139</sup>.

Although the Regroupement did not last many years, and its politics were questioned by many progressive activists in and around the Point, it was definitely one of the sparks that started the explosion of committees that began sprouting up on streets and in the different parishes of the Point:

Thérèse C'était par rues ces groupes-là. Il y avait du monde qui se rencontrait par rue. Par exemple, la rue Coleraine. Les femmes qui demeuraient sur Coleraine savaient par le bouche à oreilles qu'il allait y avoir une rencontre. Disons qu'elles venaient chez moi. Les femmes décidaient du sujet. Ça pouvait être les vaccins aux enfants, par exemple. (...) Au fur et à mesure qu'un sujet se développait, les gens le prenaient en main. Et ça débouchait sur quelque chose. (...) C'était sur tous les sujets dont les femmes voulaient parler (...) C'était dans les tous premiers temps du Regroupement des citoyens. Ça bougeait tout partout. Tout poussait comme des champignons.

Here is but a sampling of the committees that existed during these years of effervescence: Loisirs plus forts, Comité d'Entr'aide, Comité consultatif de l'École St-Jean, Comité Centre Communautaire, Comité Citoyens-locations de la rue Manufacture<sup>140</sup>, and Comité logement de la rue Congrégation<sup>141</sup>. Most of

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<sup>136</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>137</sup> (May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1968). Minutes of the Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles. Fond de Gisèle Dionne.

<sup>138</sup> (November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1968). Nouvelle orientation du Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe Saint-Charles. La Voix populaire, p.45.

<sup>139</sup> Personal communication by Isabelle Drolet, Gisèle Dionne, ex-president of the Regroupement des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>140</sup> (1968). Journal des citoyens de Pointe St. Charles, premier numéro, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

<sup>141</sup> Groupe d'action politique (1972). Fonce pi Fesse. Manifeste '72 du Groupe d'action politique de la Pointe, p.9. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.38.

these committees were composed uniquely of women, meeting in their kitchens, as was the case for Amitié-Café. Here is what the leaders of one of the committees of Amitié-Café wrote in a local newspaper at the time::

Sur certaines rues, des voisines se rencontrent l'après-midi, une fois par mois, pour s'informer l'une et l'autre sur ce qui se passe dans notre quartier, par exemple : les écoles, les comités existants, des trucs budgétaires, et cela tout simplement autour d'une tasse de café. De telles rencontres pourraient facilement se faire à chaque rue du quartier... Pourquoi pas ?<sup>142</sup>

Quickly, the citizens' committees of St. Henri, Little Burgundy and Point St. Charles, mostly composed of people living in poverty, federated to become "La Fédération des mouvements du Sud-Ouest"<sup>143</sup>. The latter had multiple committees, including the "human dignity watchdog committee", a permanent education committee, a schools committee, a social planning committee and an urban renewal committee<sup>144</sup>. Strong with their success in the South-West, citizens pressured the COM to increase funding for social animation. This led to the birth of citizens' committees in other neighbourhoods in 1967, including in Centre-Sud and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve<sup>145</sup>.

These experiences, spurred on by social animators who wanted to "give voice" to the "voiceless victims of industrialisation"<sup>146</sup>, and by progressive elements in and around the Church, marked the beginning of the "autonomous" community movement in the Point. Although during these initial years of organising, the social animators working with the committees wanted to improve living conditions by reforming institutions and services to reflect the needs of the population, they did not question the power structures which were at the root of the plight of the poor<sup>147</sup>. They believed that the

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<sup>142</sup> Dionne, T. & Coulombe, B. (1968). Journal des Citoyens de Pointe St. Charles, premier numéro, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

<sup>143</sup> Bélanger & Lévesque, 1992

<sup>144</sup> McGraw, 1978

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, p.55

problem was that political and social institutions were not adapted to the needs of people living in poverty and that the solution was a reform of the latter so that these people would have access to them. In line with this, they concentrated their efforts on winning small victories on very local issues, on pressuring local politicians, and on training local leadership. They did this in an effort to change peoples' mentalities, "to shake people out of their apathy", so that people could then solve their own problems, in an autonomous and cooperative way<sup>148</sup>.

This early phase of organising most definitely "gave people a voice", and in Point St. Charles, for the first time, ordinary folks were speaking out publicly, and in doing so, challenging the hegemony of the local elite and the institutions of the Church. The pre-existing sense of belonging, pride and mutual aid in the neighbourhood, channeled into community activism in this way, no doubt contributed to the explosion of alternative service and advocacy groups in the following period. Finally, although there was little class analysis, and no gender analysis in the neighbourhood activism of the early years, this was to change in the next phase, as activists, organisers and progressive priests began evaluating their past actions in the context of radicalisation of social movements in Québec and beyond.

### **POWER TO THE PEOPLE! (1968-1972)**

By 1968, in the context of an overall radicalisation of social movements<sup>149</sup>, certain animators, organisers and activists began questioning the strategy of the citizens' committees. A meeting of 20 citizens' committees from different Montréal neighbourhoods was held in 1968, at which point representatives concluded that the liberal strategy that had characterised the

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p.56.

<sup>149</sup> Front de liberation des femmes, Front de Libération du Québec, radical manifestos of the "centrales syndicales", occupations of CEGEPs and student demonstrations for "Québec français" (Mayer, Lamoureux, & Panet-Raymond, 2002).

committees was leading to a dead end<sup>150</sup>. That is, they noted that the actions were not leading to structural change, that the work was too local, and that the committees are often controlled either by local elite or by the social animators themselves, thus the objectives of turning over the control of the committees to local “newly enlightened” leadership had, for the most part, not succeeded<sup>151</sup>.

The following is an excerpt from the declaration from that meeting:

Nous sentons qu’il est temps de changer le système gouvernemental qu’on a... Nous avons tous les mêmes grands problèmes ; nous devons sortir de l’isolement et de l’esprit de clocher ; les gouvernements doivent devenir nos gouvernements ; nous n’avons plus le choix, il faut passer à *l’action politique* »<sup>152</sup>.

Despite the fact that the leaders of the committees had decided that the time had come to do political action, new citizen’s committees continued to flourish, but with an additional strategy, that of *alternative services*.

#### ADVOCACY AND ALTERNATIVE SERVICES

During this period, citizens’ committees continued to proliferate and innovate. They were spurred on by funding provided by a series of federal government programs: the “Company of Young Canadians”<sup>153</sup> (CYC), “Opportunities for Youth” (OFY) and “Local Initiatives Program” (LIP)<sup>154</sup>. The first two, make-work programs for young people, provided a pool of creative and oftentimes radical middle-class youth, who often ended up

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<sup>150</sup> (May 1980). *Vie ouvrière*, 145, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CEP-101.

<sup>151</sup> Lesemann & Thiénot, 1972b.

<sup>152</sup> « Déclaration adoptée le 19 mai 1968 par les Comités de citoyens de la base présents », cited in Lesemann & Thiénot, 1972b, p.72, my emphasis.

<sup>153</sup> Set-up by the federal government in 1966; youth hired on these programs started their activities in Montréal in 1968. They wanted to “organise the workers”, and to do so, worked on urban renewal and workers’ issues in Little Burgundy, Point St. Charles, Saint-Henri, Milton-Park and Sainte-Marie. Many of them were associated with radical left political groups (Mouvement de libération populaire, for example) (see McGraw, 1978, p.98-100). McGraw argues that the federal government set up the CYC in order to have some control over the social services in Québec, but the youth hired on the projects ended up being revolutionnaires – and agitating, organising workers, doing radical actions. When the municipal politicians complained (after a riot with Montréal taxis), the federal government set up an inquiry, and in 1969 took control of the board away from the “volunteers” and forbade involvement in political parties (McGraw, 1978, p.126).

<sup>154</sup> Huston, 1972



working with community groups in Montréal<sup>155</sup>. The LIPs, on the other hand, were used by citizens' committees to hire their members to do the work they had previously done on a volunteer and activist basis<sup>156</sup>. Moreover, during this period, some social animators from the COM, influenced by the "success" of the "war on poverty" in the United States, began to apply the lessons drawn from the work of their U.S. counterparts. The strategies of the citizens' committees, however, were changing, and a new form of activism was beginning to emerge, one that went beyond "parish"<sup>157</sup> concerns (housing, schools, parks, etc.), and beyond demanding reforms of the municipal government on these issues (based on the conclusion that citizens' committees were no longer winning their demands). In line with this, citizens began setting-up *alternative services* at the neighbourhood level, *for and run by* their members; that is, they had decided that "if the government won't provide, we will".

These services would fill the gaps identified in the traditional health, social and educational services, as well as provide a cooperative alternative for consumers. The underlying premise was that through participation in services that affected their lives, neighbourhood folks would become politicised on many social, political and economic issues, and hopefully would decide to act to change them. Finally, it was theorised, in setting-up and running these services – "counting only on themselves" – the citizens were pre-figuring the kind of society that they sought to build : "il s'agissait d'informer les gens sur le sens du projet collectif, conçu à la fois 'comme illustration de ce qu'ils voulaient voir exister à l'échelle du pays' et comme réponse aux problèmes suscités par le fonctionnement de notre société »<sup>158</sup>.

In Point St. Charles at this time, professionals and animators working with the social service agencies that serviced the area, decided to set-up a center

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Kruzynski & Shrage, 1999; Mayer, Lamoureux, & Panet-Raymond, 2002; Brodhead, Goodings, & Brodhead, 1997; Huston, 1972.

<sup>157</sup> a subgroup in a neighbourhood, "voisinage"

<sup>158</sup> McGraw, 1978, p.77

that would regroup the welfare office, the agencies and the organisers/animators under one roof. The overall goal of the “Services Communautaires”<sup>159</sup> was to better coordinate services, closer to the people. Although in the early years, this Center was quite top-heavy, with little citizen involvement<sup>160</sup>, it did eventually provide animator support to citizens’ committees, and free space to house groups<sup>161</sup>. Also during this time, many citizens’ committees were born, on issues of health, education, and consumer-rights, and along with their continuing mobilisation and advocacy activities, they set-up many alternative services on these issues.

The “Planning familial Pointe St-Charles” was started up by a number citizens and progressive medical students concerned with the recent closure of the still very new city family planning clinic in the neighbourhood<sup>162</sup>. Their pressures brought fruit<sup>163</sup>, and by 1968 a temporary clinic opened its doors, with medical students and nurses working on a volunteer basis relaying themselves to provide services as many days as possible<sup>164</sup>. This group was quite active in the neighbourhood, providing information on health issues in general, but especially on birth control and family planning, influenced by the publication of the first birth control handbook in Québec by a group of students from McGill in 1967<sup>165</sup>:

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<sup>159</sup> Also called “Centre Communautaire”, first located in the St-Charles presbytery (1969). Funded by the Federations (Red Feather, CFCS, FOCCF) and the government (Ministère des Affaires Sociales) (Le Centre Communautaire de Pointe St-Charles. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.039.67, no date).

<sup>160</sup> Le Centre Communautaire de Pointe St-Charles. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.039.67, no date

<sup>161</sup> Services communautaires de Pointe St. Charles, Inc., (December 4th, 1972). Présentation du programme d’action en vue du financement de l’exercice 73-74. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.04.039.66.

<sup>162</sup> Lévy, 2002

<sup>163</sup> St-Aubin, R. (May 1969). Santé à la Pointe. Journal des citoyens de Pointe St. Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

<sup>164</sup> St-Aubin, R. (1968). La santé à Pointe St-Charles, Journal des citoyens de Pointe St. Charles, premier numéro, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

<sup>165</sup> Interview with Jean-Guy Dutil, long-time Point activist, by Geneviève Beauchamp for the project « Du foyer au quartier » of the Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles. February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000; Lesemann & Thiénot, 1972b, p.73.

Madeleine La clinique avait un kiosque. Ils donnaient des condoms aux jeunes !  
Pis envoye donc ! (...) Ils donnaient ça, dans le parc, aux jeunes  
comme si ils donnaient des bonbons!

Michèle Le monde, ils aimaient pas ça !

Madeleine Tout le monde était choqué !

Louise Vous étiez avant-gardistes !

Madeleine Fait que les parents, ils parlaient des pilules pis tout ça !

Michèle On était bien mieux de distribuer des condoms, pis de faire de la  
prévention, même si tu savais que tu choquerais la moitié de la  
Pointe.

It is with this committee that a group of progressive medical doctors from McGill University set-up, in 1968<sup>166</sup>, what was to become the Point St. Charles Community Clinic<sup>167</sup>.

These students were breaking new ground in health care, and came to the Point to help people help themselves. They were not going to provide a service in the ordinary way, as is illustrated in the following excerpt from an article of the McGill Student Health Organisation, written in 1968<sup>168</sup>:

We feel that the approach to poverty which involves the sole use of charity is inadequate. It is our opinion that individuals and communities must be directly involved in the improvement of themselves and their social conditions before any lasting beneficial effects may be had. The simple offering of services to a poor community, without that community feeling both responsible for, and justified in their existence, represents in our minds an insufficient effort.

In line with this thinking, before opening the Clinic, the medical students consulted the community as to their needs in terms of health<sup>169</sup>:

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<sup>166</sup> Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles (1975). Bilan d'un service populaire: Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles. Bilan fait par les membres. Fonds de la Clinique communautaire, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles

<sup>167</sup> Beauchemin, Beauger, Beaugard, Boutin, & Perron, 1973.

<sup>168</sup> Frank, D. (October 1968). Contact, 1. A publication of the McGill Student Health Organisation Fonds de la Clinique communautaire, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles

<sup>169</sup> St-Aubin, R. (May 1969). Santé à la Pointe. Journal des citoyens de Pointe St. Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

Maureen I remember the medical students going door to door. (...) The students would ask, “do you think you need a Clinic”? I had six children, three handicapped. And the students were offering to take them to the hospitals and that kind of thing for me! (...) They helped a lot of people in that respect.

The Community Clinic was officially founded in 1970 at a general assembly<sup>170</sup>. Underlying the activities of the Clinic, from the very first, were the following values: the right to health, the right to choose and the right to be treated with respect, dignity and “simplicité”, deprofessionalisation and multidisciplinary practice based on the *faire avec* (not *faire pour*), collaboration with other groups, citizen control, autonomy, and prevention/education<sup>171</sup>.

Although there were many trials and tribulations, the Clinic became with time, a place that many citizens came to identify with, as is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Michèle La Clinique ça a été comme un milieu d'appartenance. Tu t'identifiais à la Clinique. T'étais pas malade, t'allais faire un tour à la Clinique. Tu parais, t'allais voir tes amis, tu revenais... Un jour, il y avait une madame que ça faisait longtemps que le directeur avait pas vue dans la salle d'attente. Tout à coup, il la voit « Salut! Ça fait longtemps qu'on t'a pas vue? » Elle répond « J'comprends, j'étais malade! »

The clinic was also the center for much action, especially in the early years, a characteristic that drew Denise in, forever:

Denise I wanted to find out about the Clinic, I hadn't been there yet, and there was a job opening, so I'm asking around and some people were saying, “that's a Communist place!” (*in a conspiratory whisper*). And others were saying, “there is lots of action there! And all these groups are involved”. So I said, “that sounds good to me!” So I went there, got a job! There was all kinds going on! (...) I was involved in a lot of different things. (...) I guess how I started. And I'm still going! (laughter). It's a big part of my life.

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<sup>170</sup> Bugara, M. (1970). À la Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles vous êtes les actionnaires. Journal des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

<sup>171</sup> Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles (December 13th, 2001). Notre droit à la santé passe par une Clinique citoyenne : On continue ! Rapport des travaux du comité de quartier.

I've been there, it'll be thirty years this summer.

Thérèse, an “ordinary citizen” was hired to work as a community health worker, because the citizens and allies who had set-up the Clinic believed that lived experience was central to the kind of work they did, and that people could learn the specific skills on the job:

Thérèse      On est « tombés » sur le bien-être. (...) C'est un Fils de la Charité, un prêtre de la paroisse St-Jean, qui m'a dit « Écoute Thérèse, tu es bilingue, débrouillarde...T'es peut-être pas allée en usine à cause de tes deux enfants d'âge scolaire mais tu es capable de faire quelque chose. Pourquoi tu ne vas pas faire application à la Clinique communautaire? » (...) Ma première réaction, ça a été, « J'ai pas d'instruction, qu'est-ce que tu veux que j'aie faire dans une clinique? – Tu peux être à l'accueil, tu es bilingue, tu connais le monde....» (...) J'étais bilingue mais je ne pouvais pas écrire couramment. Alors au comité de sélection, ils ont dit « Madame Dionne, est-ce que vous accepteriez un poste de travailleuse communautaire? – Qu'est-ce que ça mange en hiver, ça? » Barbara me dit « Je vais te rencontrer une journée et je vais te raconter des histoires du "Family Health Worker" qui se passent à New York dans le Bronx ». (...) Je voyais ça gros. J'ai dit « Hé! c'est presque un travail de travailleuse sociale ça! Je vous ai dit que j'avais seulement une 5e année. – Oui mais tu parles bien, tu es bilingue, tu représentes vraiment les gens du quartier. – J'espère bien! Je suis native d'ici! Si vous me donnez les outils nécessaires pour exécuter la tâche, moi je suis prête à tout! (...) Bien franchement, ce n'est pas le travail qui m'attire mais la paye. J'en ai d'besoin pour faire vivre mes enfants! » Et c'est comme ça que je suis venue en contact avec la Clinique plus sérieusement, en travaillant à l'intérieur de la boîte. (...) Ça a changé ma vie et ma vision d'une femme qui se prend en main.

Frances has also been at the Clinic for a very long time, but she first started out as a volunteer at the eye clinic, and experience that has marked her life:

Frances      A group of citizens started the eye Clinic. Parents. Because, in the Point, there wasn't any optometrist at all. Back then, the welfare was giving you 50 dollars for a pair of glasses. At the eye Clinic, we sold glasses. If the glasses cost 5 dollars, and the lenses cost so much, that's what we would charge. There was no profit made at all. (...) We had, I would say, about 200 pairs of different styles of

- glasses. So you could pick the style you wanted. (...)
- Maureen At the time people were doing without glasses because they couldn't afford it
- Frances I was with them for 16 years. Till they closed. I started out volunteer, five years after I started, I was working for pay. (...) And it was from 9 in the morning to about 9 at night, about 4 or 5 days a week. But the kids would come with me in the morning, and they would just cross the street, the school was there. Well they had lunch with me, and go back in the afternoon. I was secretary-receptionist, but I did about every other thing except the examination!
- Maureen Fixer-upper for glasses.
- Frances Oh yeah. I used to fix, do miracles with glasses!
- Myrna She fixed mine!
- Denise She had this tiny screwdriver, and it worked miracles!
- Frances Peoples would throw their glasses away. I would take all the screws out. And the nosepiece, and the arms off of it. And somebody would come in, "well I broke my glasses!". And then it would end up the frame would be okay!

Consistent with its preventative mission, and the idea that the determinants of health are often structural, thus related to social, educational and political conditions, through the organising activities of the Clinic, many new services and groups were born. With the help of the Clinic, the citizens' committee, "Mouvement Amélioration Santé" set up a cooperative pharmacy which provided very inexpensive or free medication to citizens. Another, called the "Development of Community Care", after having "proven" that 65% of GMAPCC (an English anti-poverty coalition, as I will discuss below) members suffered from malnutrition, set up "a mobile clinic to give check-ups and to inform people of their right to a \$10.00 diet supplement"<sup>172</sup>. Citizens affiliated with GMAPCC also organised against increased in drug prices, and after an occupation of the Montréal General Hospital, won their demands<sup>173</sup>. Citizens

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<sup>172</sup> Benello, 1972, p.466.

<sup>173</sup> Benello, 1972

also organised in favour of free glasses and health care (1971-1975), generic drugs, and safe containers. The Clinic has always been one of the hubs of community activism in the Point. The participants often reiterated the importance of the Clinic in improving the quality of their lives, but also as a service controlled and “owned” by the citizens of the neighbourhood.

In parallel, a citizens’ committee called “Comité d’éducation de base” began offering adult-education courses in the basement of the Église St-Charles, a first in all of Québec<sup>174</sup>. Concerned with the high number of citizens who were unable to read or write, but also with the need to provide a space for other kinds of learning, that would also allow for political education, the committee set-up literacy classes, as well as sewing and cooking classes<sup>175</sup>. These courses were taught, at first, by progressive nuns – the Soeurs Grises<sup>176</sup> and the Soeurs de Sainte-Croix. By 1970, the popular education centre – the Carrefour d’éducation populaire – had its own space, and the Comité d’éducation de base, in collaboration with the School Commission (CECM), was offering courses in cooking, sewing, knitting, childhood education, budgeting, French, Math, and “société en changement”<sup>177</sup>. In the excerpt below, Thérèse explains that the courses offered at the Carrefour have always had a “political education” component:

Thérèse      Quand je suivais les cours « Maigrir avec le sourire », au Carrefour... Tu fais pas juste ton régime, là! T’as toute une forme d’éducation. (...) Il y avait une pause café et dans la pause café c’était pas juste pour placoter de ce qui s’était passé avec la voisine. C’était ce qui se passait dans le quartier. Ils demandaient de l’appui à la Clinique juridique. Ils demandaient de l’appui pour les

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<sup>174</sup> Ouellette, C. (1970). Comité d’Éducation de Base, Journal des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

<sup>175</sup> Personal communication, Thérèse Dionne, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003; Personal communication, Irène Dionne, member of the Société d’histoire de Pointe St-Charles, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>176</sup> Gisèle Beaudet, at the time of the Soeurs Grises, who taught the literacy courses in the basement of the Church, wrote one of the first books on literacy in Québec (Personal communication, Thérèse Dionne, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003; Personal communication, Irène Dionne, member of the Société d’histoire de Pointe St-Charles, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

<sup>177</sup> Ouellette, C. (1970). Comité d’Éducation de Base, Journal des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

coopératives d'habitation. Tout ce qui se passait dans le quartier au niveau animation pour changer les choses, ça se passait à travers nos cours. Le mot se donnait et on participait de cette façon-là.

It is also during this time that a citizens' committee that would become the "Club populaire des consommateurs" – which emerged out of the kitchen meetings that citizens had been having over the last few years<sup>178</sup> – decided to come together to "envisager des solutions aux problèmes que pose l'alimentation pour des familles nombreuses et à bas revenus"<sup>179</sup>. Initially, they worked together informally in a buyers club, purchasing food in bulk, and separating it out amongst the members at cost price<sup>180</sup>. The group received its charter in 1970, and again, with the help of the Soeurs Grises, quickly set-up a « comptoir alimentaire » run *for and by* its members<sup>181</sup>. This cooperative store was run by members, on a volunteer basis, and not only provided quality food at cost prices, but was also a space for political education. Like the Carrefour, the activities of the Club always included a "political education" segment, around consumer rights, the control of corporations over food, and on the conditions of workers who worked in those corporations. All the women in the French group had been members of the Club, and Thérèse remembers how she learned to cook with unusual vegetables:

Thérèse    Le comptoir alimentaire avait comme objectif de faire économiser les familles mais aussi de faire de l'éducation au niveau de la consommation. Et aussi d'apprendre les nouvelles sortes de légumes, les nouvelles affaires. Par exemple, des zucchinis, j'connais pas ça, j'avais jamais mangé ça. Tu regardes ça, tu te dis, « C'est quoi? ». Ben y'avait quelqu'un qui était là pour t'expliquer ce que c'était et y'avait une recette qui avait été faite par Jocelyne (Gauvin). Alors, tu avais le bénéfice de connaître le

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<sup>178</sup> Floriot, L. (1970). Club populaire des consommateurs de la Pointe St-Charles. Journal des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

<sup>179</sup> (February 12th, 1976). Le projet expansion 1976-78 du Club populaire des consommateurs de Pointe St-Charles, Club populaire des consommateurs.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Floriot, L. (1970). Club populaire des consommateurs de la Pointe St-Charles. Journal des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.



légume et comment l'apprêter. Tu avais moins peur et tu l'essayais.

It is also during this period that a group of progressive law students, from Université de Montréal and McGill University came to the Point to set-up accessible legal services (1969)<sup>182</sup>. Influenced by professors, teaching about “law and poverty”, they decided that people living in the inner-city had the right to be represented in the legal system, on issues such as welfare, housing, divorce and bailiff seizures<sup>183</sup>. With the help of local organisers, the law students attempted, from the very beginning to involve the citizens in the birth and genesis of their Legal Aid Services, as one of these students explains in the following excerpt<sup>184</sup>:

Nous ici on dit, on est intelligent comme tout le monde, on est beau comme tout le monde, on est fin comme tout le monde, comme vous autres même vous êtes fins. Si vous venez ici, c'est pas seulement une aide qu'on va vous fournir, mais on voudrait que vous autres vous nous aidiez, pi vous vous aidiez. Ça dégage une responsabilité chez l'individu. Ça le rend pas seulement « attendant » les services des autres, ça développe la responsabilité. De dire, si tu veux un service, crée le toi-même.

The Legal Aid Services were incorporated in 1970<sup>185</sup>, at which point the control of the Clinic was officially transferred to the citizens<sup>186</sup>. During these early years, the Legal Clinic had a global vision of justice, not only providing legal services, but also doing “animation”, popular education, and community development, “le tout dans le but de sortir à jamais, des humiliantes et inhumaines situations dans lesquelles nous vivons dans cette société directrice et

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<sup>182</sup> (1973). Citoyen nouveau : Services juridiques communautaires. A film by Grant Kennedy, National Film Board of Canada; Personal communication, Lise Ferland, coordinator of the Services juridiques communautaires de Pointe St-Charles et de la Petite Bourgoigne, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>183</sup> Personal communication, Lise Ferland, coordinator of the Services juridiques communautaires de Pointe St-Charles et de la Petite Bourgoigne, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>184</sup> (1973). Citoyen nouveau : Services juridiques communautaires. A film by Grant Kennedy, National Film Board of Canada.

<sup>185</sup> Lettres patentes. Community Legal Services Inc./Les Services juridiques communautaires Inc., le 7 juillet 1970.

<sup>186</sup> Personal communication, Lise Ferland, coordinator of the Services juridiques communautaires de Pointe St-Charles et de la Petite Bourgoigne, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

exploitricer<sup>187</sup>. In fact, during these early years, the legal aid clinic worked with many citizens' committees, including "Citizens' Rights Against Bailiff Seizures" (CRABS), to help people fight against the arbitrary seizures of people living on welfare that ran rampant at the time<sup>188</sup>. The Legal Aid students also trained local folks in the law, on housing issues specifically, who then became "advocates" for other people in the neighbourhood who were having troubles with their landlords<sup>189</sup>. Legal aid lawyers also helped many women get divorces from their husbands<sup>190</sup>.

Although it may seem, in the way that I describe them, that the groups in Point St. Charles were mutually exclusive, this was far from the reality of the times. Again, the best image to describe the relations between the committees and groups is the spiral one – citizens were oftentimes members of *all* the groups discussed above. They received their health services from the Clinic, got help from lawyers at the Legal Clinic, bought their food at the Club populaire, and took adult education courses at the Carrefour. There was, however, a formal attempt in 1969, by the Conseil de développement social (CDS, previously COM)<sup>191</sup>, to regroup groups from the South-West of Montréal into a "Conseil de Quartier". To do this, they set-up the Projet d'Organisation Populaire d'Information et de Regroupement (POPIR), which was funded in its initial phases by the Conseil de Développement Social (CDS)<sup>192</sup>, and by the Église de Montréal, under the patronage of the Archbishop of Montréal, Mgr.

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<sup>187</sup> (1973). Citoyen nouveau : Services juridiques communautaires. A film by Grant Kennedy, National Film Board of Canada.

<sup>188</sup> Personal communication, Lise Ferland, coordinator of the Services juridiques communautaires de Pointe St-Charles et de la Petite Bourgogne, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>189</sup> (1973). Citoyen nouveau : Services juridiques communautaires. A film by Grant Kennedy, National Film Board of Canada.

<sup>190</sup> Project participants.

<sup>191</sup> COM becomes Conseil de développement social du Montréal Métropolitain in 1969 with the new discourse around the war against poverty (Shift away from community development approach to a more confrontational approach to organizing). In 1969, they changed their objective from "coordonner l'effort des oeuvres de bienfaisance", to "participer à l'identification et à la prévision des besoins de la population et à contribuer à l'aménagement des ressources communautaires accessibles à tous » (McGraw, 1978, p.97).

<sup>192</sup> pulled funding in 1971

Grégoire<sup>193</sup>. The organisers hoped that through a permanent federated structure, they would simulate new leadership by providing a space for training and information sharing<sup>194</sup>. Michèle remembers, with humour, the short-lived life of the POPIR<sup>195</sup>:

Michèle Un des animateurs, Michel Blondin, avait décidé que dans le Sud-ouest, il fallait qu'on intervienne dans différents domaines, dont l'éducation politique, le logement et l'éducation en générale. Le POPIR c'était aussi pour acquérir un contrôle sur les structures en place. L'aide sociale, nos propriétaires... Tu as le droit d'exiger qu'il soit chauffé (ton logement). On se mobilisait. On mettait de la pression. On manifestait devant la maison du propriétaire. Le POPIR a d'abord été financé par l'Archevêché de Montréal et on voulait qu'il lui donne \$100,000. C'était beaucoup dans ce temps là, en 71-72! On se réunit chez Henriette Farand, avec Claude Ryan, pour en discuter. Claude Ryan avait dit « Fiez-vous sur moi, ils vont les donner » (...) Il était au Devoir et il écrit à la une « L'Archevêché de Montréal prendra toutes ses responsabilités! » et tout ça. Monseigneur Grégoire est arrivé chez Henriette Farand « Vous m'avez fait un « hold up » ! On ne peut pas ne pas vous le donner! » Il était choqué! Il nous avait dit des bêtises! Henriette Farand demeurait sur la rue Congrégation et quand le train passait, tout tremblait dans la maison. Madame Vanier est là, dans toute sa dignité. Monseigneur Grégoire est assis à côté d'elle et un cadre lui tombe sur la tête! Certains pensent qu'il y a un tremblement de terre. Henriette Farand criait son patois « Mortel! Monseigneur! Mortel! » Monseigneur Grégoire était à genoux dans le salon avec madame Vanier! Nous, on n'était pas énervés, un train qui passe sur la rue Congrégation...Bien, c'est ce soir-là qui nous ont donné \$100,000 pour partir le POPIR! L'église a un rôle à jouer dans le phénomène de la pauvreté dans le Sud-ouest. Elle prêche qu'il faut aider les pauvres. On est allé en chercher! On a oublié que le POPIR, c'est parti dans la Pointe. La première réunion s'est tenue chez Henriette Farand, avec madame Vanier. Ça été une grosse histoire quand ça a déménagé de Pointe St-Charles pour St-Henri. (...) Moi, j'ai travaillé de 69 à 71 à mettre sur pied le POPIR avec Berthe Coulombe, Michel Blondin, sa femme, les Farand.(...) Aujourd'hui c'est un organisme de St-Henri qui s'occupe uniquement de logement mais au départ,

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<sup>193</sup> Lesemann & Thiénot, 1972b; David, 1972

<sup>194</sup> David, 1972.

<sup>195</sup> The POPIR was reborn later with a lesser scope (housing in St. Henri), and still exists today.

c'était le Programme d'Organisation Populaire d'Information et de Regroupement(...) Ce n'était pas juste sur le logement, c'était vraiment de l'information politique pour rendre les gens plus conscients du système dans lequel on vivait.

Thérèse, as a member of the citizens' committees in the Point, remembers participating in the training program offered by the social animators working at the CDS, and associated with the POPIR, "Citoyens face au pouvoir":

Thérèse Je me souviens moi d'avoir été dans une formation à St-Jerôme avec le fameux Chanoine Desgrandmaisons et Michel Blondin qui était là à ce moment là, pis y avait Guy Beaugrand-Champagne là, tout ce beau monde là, y était toute là. Et y avait tous les gens qui étaient responsables dans des groupements comme ici dans Pointe St-Charles pis dans St-Henri. On avait eu une grosse fin de semaine de formation. (...) On apprenait comment fonctionnait un comité, c'est quoi le rôle de la secrétaire, c'est quoi le rôle d'un conseiller, c'est quoi le rôle du président, vice président ainsi de suite.

Many citizens, like Thérèse, participated in these training programs, and not only learned a great deal about how citizens' committees functioned, but also about the municipal political structures and about the potential of citizen power in politics.

In the meantime, in the context of the emergence of English citizen's committees in and around Montréal<sup>196</sup>, and influenced by the New Left in the United States<sup>197</sup>, organisers working with Parallel Institute arrived in the Point to work with the English folks. Parallel was born in 1967 "with the general objectives of improving the conditions of community and promoting self-help

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<sup>196</sup> Prior to this, a few English citizen's committees had been set-up in different neighbourhoods of Montréal, regrouping citizens ranging from lower to middle class. The first experiences were in Park Extension beginning in 1966, taking two different routes, the first, led by a social worker, to set up a community service center, and a second, led by a "radically oriented social worker", to set up a community council. In Westmount, the Westmount Tenants Association was set up to fight the expropriation for the Downtown Trans Canada Expressway in 1966 (lower Westmount). These groups, focussed on single-issues, and lacking political vision, did not manage to maintain participation in the same way as those that came later, centered around poverty issues (Benello, 1972)..

<sup>197</sup> Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999.

organisations and doing research”<sup>198</sup>, and the organisers decided, following a similar analysis as the French animators in 1963, to begin their work in the poor neighbourhood of Point St. Charles<sup>199</sup>. The presence of a progressive Minister at St. Columba House during those years opened the door to the organisers, marking the beginning of explicitly confrontational anti-poverty organising in the English community<sup>200</sup>. However, benefiting no doubt from the evaluations that the French groups had been doing around their organising, from the very beginning they integrated advocacy, action, development *and* alternative services into their work. Although the citizens’ committees set up by the English animators were quite similar in mission, organisational form, and strategies as those set-up previously by the French social animators, the former, were more explicitly “oriented to an Alinsky approach, which means using public contestation and conflict as a means of organising and making people aware of underlying issues”<sup>201</sup>. Thus, they used confrontational tactics against clearly targeted “enemies”, but were also concerned with setting up alternative services run “for and by the people”.

Initially, Parallel Institute’s main project was to “create a Community Development Corporation (CDC) in Point St. Charles”<sup>202</sup>. The idea was that citizens and their groups, regrouped in a “Conseil de Quartier”, would develop an urban development plan that would meet their needs, which could then be used to seek funding. The idea behind the latter was that the citizens from the Point could think-up, create, and manage not only their own services, but also their own businesses and housing units. In line with this, they acquired a small workshop and took on a contract to make rowboats for the provincial

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<sup>198</sup> Benello, 1972, p.485.

<sup>199</sup> Prior to this, Peter Katadotis, one of the main organisers of Parallel Institute, had been doing welfare rights organizing in and around University Settlement in Milton Park. Personal communication, Eric Shragge, October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>200</sup> Much of the research done on GMAPCC and its groups was written up in an article on the subject in Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999.

<sup>201</sup> Benello, 1972, p.462-493

<sup>202</sup> Benello, 1972, p.485

government. To do this, Parallel set up “Les Industries des Travailleurs de Pointe St-Charles”, a profit-making, “self-managed” (“auto-gérée”) corporation<sup>203</sup> located at St-Columba House<sup>204</sup>, that in 1972 had 19 members, including 4 women<sup>205</sup>. The shares were held by Parallel with the intention of turning them over to the Conseil de Quartier when it became formalised<sup>206</sup>. Les Industries des Travailleurs also refurbished furniture, and renovated houses for one of the first housing cooperative in Québec (Loge-Peuple)<sup>207</sup>, funded by the Federal government and closely connected to Parallel<sup>208</sup>. These efforts failed :

Maureen     I thought it moved too fast. You can’t take people who have been screwed all their life, put them in and say “okay, now you are running this business”, and think that everything is going to be smooth. And that they are going to do all the right things. This doesn’t happen.

Anna         So there wasn’t enough training?

Maureen     And development of people before trying to start something like that.

At the same time, Parallel organisers were doing welfare rights organising around the Social Aid Act<sup>209</sup>. Although the demonstrations they organised with their ad hoc “committee on Public Assistance” were successful, the organisers came to the conclusion that this form of organising would not mobilise people for the long haul<sup>210</sup>. Moreover, they felt that “there was a real conflict of interest between the social agencies represented on the ad hoc

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<sup>203</sup> (September 3rd, 1972). Les industries des travailleurs de Pointe St. Charles Ltee. Fond de la Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>204</sup> (August 6th, 1971). Lettres patentes, Les industries des travailleurs de Pointe St-Charles Ltee. Fond de la Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>205</sup> (September 3rd, 1972). Les industries des travailleurs de Pointe St. Charles Ltee. Fond de la Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Loge-peuple de Pointe St. Charles Limitée, information pamphlet, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 1998.01.082.22

<sup>208</sup> Benello, 1972, p.485-486

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Benello, 1972

committee and their own concerns with the needy and those on welfare<sup>211</sup>. Thus, they decided to do direct organising with people living on welfare in an effort to form permanent citizens' committees. Kitchen meetings were organised in Verdun and Point St. Charles<sup>212</sup>, to discuss welfare issues, among other things. Out of these kitchen meetings were born, in 1969, the Point Equal Rights Movement (PERM), and the Verdun Anti-Poverty Association (VAPA, which mobilised more Francophones than Anglophones)<sup>213</sup>.

PERM, located in St-Columba House, was active on many fronts. The members participated in the setting-up and/or running of alternative services, including the Legal and Health Clinics and a food depot. They did advocacy and action around welfare rights, housing, and consumer protection. In fact, PERM was the first welfare rights group in Montréal to set-up a “hospitality booth” in a welfare office, at which worked a welfare advocate. Welfare advocates were people living on welfare, who learned the welfare laws inside-out, and who “helped people get their rights”; that is, in the initial phases they would provide them with information on the benefits they should receive at an information kiosk at the welfare office, but in the later phases the advocates actually accompanied their peers to negotiate with the welfare officer<sup>214</sup>. The work of the welfare advocates was central to the cleaning up of unscrupulous and unequal treatment that people living on welfare, and especially women, were subjected to<sup>215</sup>. Here Maureen remembers Helen Bastien, one of the Point's best welfare advocates:

Maureen Now “there's no sense in asking for that because you're not going to get it. That's not the law. But you are entitled to this, this and, this”. And there was no one better than Helen Bastien. If they ever made a mistake! If the welfare worker ever made a mistake, him saying, “you're not entitled to this, that” Out came the book! “At

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p.469.

<sup>212</sup> and one out of University Settlement, but it did not survive

<sup>213</sup> Benello, 1972, p.469.

<sup>214</sup> PERM (1971). PERM video. Parallel Institute, Montréal. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>215</sup> Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999

item 32, dadadadada, she is entitled”. That was it. That women had it. She should’ve been a lawyer. It was incredible! The way she knew the law for welfare rights. An expert. No one beat her. And it didn’t matter what they came up with. If they’d say, “oh we can’t give you da da da. It’s according to rule x or y”. Before, all you could say was, “ok, I guess that’s right”. But she would automatically come up, “Oh no! Listen, look at 316. Just check in the file there. You can give some to that woman, you know”. It was fantastic.

The housing wing of PERM was also extremely active in denouncing poor housing conditions. It was quite common for a group of activists to descend on Westmount or Montréal-West to demonstrate in front of the house of one or the other local slumlord<sup>216</sup>.

In 1970, under the leadership of Parallel and of local leaders active in PERM, an umbrella organisation was set-up to regroup the English-speaking citizens’ committees in and around Montréal, the “Greater Montréal Anti-Poverty Coordinating Committee” (GMAPCC). For members of GMAPCC groups, at the height of their success, between 1970 and 1972, it was commonplace for them to spend days occupying welfare offices, demonstrating against slumlords, and often winning their demands<sup>217</sup>.

During the most active phases of PERM and GMAPCC, under the leadership of the Fils de la Charité, and with the help of Parallel, French citizens also began organising around welfare rights issues, in a group called “Organisation des droits sociaux”<sup>218</sup>. Other neighbourhoods followed the example set in the Point<sup>219</sup>, and by 1971 the groups became federated as the Association pour la défense des droits sociaux (ADDS)<sup>220</sup>. ADDS groups, led by

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<sup>216</sup> Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999

<sup>217</sup> For example, the needy mothers sit-in, the sit-in at the Longueuil welfare offices, the St. Denis sit-in against “hunger and slavery of welfare (Benello, 1972).

<sup>218</sup> (1976). *ADDS – le mouvement. Document historique 1969-1976*. Fond de la Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid..

<sup>220</sup> McGraw, 1978.



local leaders<sup>221</sup>, took up the idea of the hospitality booth in welfare offices, and began working to inform welfare recipients of their rights. In Point St. Charles, PERM and the local ADDS group worked closely together, sharing their hospitality booth at the welfare office. Although the English and French groups worked together on welfare rights issues, and Parallel worked with the POPIR in an (aborted) attempt to regroup community groups in a Conseil de Quartier, there was always a tension underlying their alliance, which was quite fragile at times (see section of linguistic tensions, below).

While all this was going on, on the welfare rights, housing, and consumer rights fronts, organisers at the Community Clinic began working with parents to demand quality education for their children<sup>222</sup>. The Bureau d'Information Scolaire (BIS) was set-up to work with French parents around the schools, which laid the foundations for the birth of the first popular daycare in the neighbourhood (see Chapter 5)<sup>223</sup>. Marguerite remembers how the organisers working with the BIS helped insecure parents feel at ease with issues around childhood education:

Marguerite On a commencé à faire des rencontres parents-enfants. On était 6 familles dans le Bureau d'Information Scolaire, le BIS. On a appris à se connaître, on a fait des activités avec les enfants et on se posait des questions comme parents. Ça nous aidait à y voir plus clair. On savait pas comment ça se passait dans l'école. On savait pas l'éducation qui devait être faite. Comment on pourrait s'impliquer là-dedans ? Mais on a eu la chance d'avoir des personnes qui avaient une meilleure connaissance et qui étaient capables de nous la partager. Ça te donne le goût d'être à l'école parce que tu as des choses à y apporter.(...) Dans les écoles, on avait regardé les livres de lecture avec un regard critique. On avait rencontré des personnes de la commission scolaire et on a fait la critique des livres. Ça, ça commence à être intéressant. Parce qu'on connaissait pas ça et ça avait l'air correct! Mais si on commence à regarder le matériel avec lequel nos enfants travaillent et à faire des choses dans lesquelles on peut apprendre et se reconnaître, c'est différent. Ce

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Linda Savory

<sup>223</sup> Beauchemin, Beauger, Beauregard, Boutin, & Perron, 1973

sont des animatrices qui nous ont aidés.

In a similar vein, a bit later in 1970, the Point Improvement Education Committee (PIEC) was born, also under the leadership of the Clinic, but also affiliated with GMAPCC<sup>224</sup>. PIEC members occupied School Board meetings (both Catholic and Protestant), demanding free school supplies, smaller classes, and parents as teachers' aids<sup>225</sup>. They succeeded on many fronts, and several of the mothers involved in the fight became teachers' aids. When the parents started talking about "community control", however, the principals responded by "indoctrinating new teachers against it, so support from teachers became smaller and smaller", and by red-baiting PIEC members<sup>226</sup>. The latter had the effect of radicalising the parents who began to see that there were class dynamics at play, and that further confrontational tactics would be necessary. Maureen explains in the excerpt below why she decided to leave the more mainstream parent school committee to become a leader of PIEC:

Maureen How I got involved in the beginning, was that my children were going to Lorne school. And, not being very satisfied with the education, I got involved with the school committee, became chairman. But it was obvious that all the staff wanted was someone to fundraise, to go out on field trips, wipe noses, tie shoe laces, whatever. But input into the education itself was not welcome. (...) The school committee would ask the school board to come and it would be, "well they're very busy", you know, "they haven't got time for you, to just come down to discuss education" (...) they didn't want the parents to participate in what they were doing in any way shape or form (...) And PIEC was starting up. Point improvement education committee. (...) And they had invited the chairperson of the school board. And the school board was coming! They were coming within a week's time! My reaction was, "well what the heck am I doing banging my head up against the wall, in the so called 'normal process'!". After the first PIEC meeting I went to, I thought, "well I'll wait and see. I'll talk to the principal first" I went back and talked to the principal. I asked, "How come you'll go

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<sup>224</sup> PERM (1971). PERM video. Parallel Institute, Montréal. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Benello, 1972, p.473

to see PIEC, and when the school committee asks, the school board will not come?” And, you know, he said, this gets me, he’s sitting at a desk, he pulls out a brown envelope, and he said, “you be careful, don’t you get involved with them, they’re all communist you know!” (*laughter*) “And it’s all in here (*tap, tap, tap the envelope*) I’m telling you, it’s all in here”. And I said, “can you give that to me? Let me see?” “No, no, I can’t do that, this is all confidential”, and, you know, “it’s not just for everybody out there just to see”. So he puts is back in. (*laughter*). Needless to say, I joined PIEC! (*everyone laughs*)

Donna Communist !

Maureen If that what communism was then, “yes, I’m it!”

For Maureen, and many other English women concerned about the quality of their children’s education, PIEC was the point of entry into community activism.

Closely associated to PIEC was the Peoples’ Library – also an educational project – aimed at improving access to books for local folks. Set-up in 1971, by university students with a group of high school students from Point St. Charles, the Library had a storefront on a main artery, and through donations from public libraries, university students, professors, and the general public, they gathered over 8000 books, French and English<sup>227</sup>. The library, however, did not only lend books, it also provided a space for people to gather, and political information sessions for its members, as the following excerpt, from an information pamphlet, illustrates:

In the capitalist system which we are living in, information to the public is usually very general and false. For us, the workers, to become conscious of our exploitation by who and how?, the library is offering an information service “political education is needed to organise”<sup>228</sup>.

At first, the library was run by local women volunteers, with students paid by the federal government’s Opportunities for Youth program, but later, when the

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<sup>227</sup> (1971). Section II : Opportunities for Youth – People’s Library Project Fond de la Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>228</sup> Flyer, People’s Library, Information. 1984 Wellington. Fond de la Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles

library received funding from the Local Initiatives Program, they were able to hire local folks for pay<sup>229</sup>. Maureen remembers the setting-up of the Library:

Maureen Hanley was our local representative in the government and he told them that they were crazy to spend their money on a library in Point St. Charles! He said, “Two-thirds of the people here can’t read anyway!” So we started the People’s Library on Wellington. It started small (...) It was just a storefront and books were donated. Kids were invited to come.

Thus, during this period, from 1968 to 1972, there was a proliferation of advocacy and alternative service groups in Point St. Charles. Citizens who had had enough of waiting for the City and the State to provide the services they had been demanding, set-up their own health clinic, legal aid clinic, adult education center, and library. At the same time, they continued to fight for their rights, and to advocate on behalf of their members on issues that touched their lives: housing, health, welfare, and childhood education. It is during this time that the leadership of the groups shifted (more than before) from organisers and animators to ordinary citizens as the latter participated in many leadership, advocacy and political education training sessions. This pattern is not unique to Point St. Charles. Similar groups were being set up in Centre-Sud (e.g., Clinique des citoyens de Saint-Jacques) under the leadership of the Plan de réaménagement social urbain, and with the help of workers from the CDS, and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve (e.g., Comptoir alimentaire d’Hochelaga under the leadership of the CDS). In fact, many of these alternative social services were models for reforms in health and social services that would revolutionise the area in the following period.

This kind of activism was based on different premises than the original citizens’ committees that were focused on « shaking people out of their apathy » and reforming structures to « include the poor » (premised on the idea that the problem is one of inclusion, partly due to personal apathy). Instead,

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<sup>229</sup> (1971). Section II : Opportunities for Youth – People’s Library Project Fond de la Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

these new forms of activism were premised on the idea that the problem is one of unequal distribution of collective wealth, caused by lack of real power<sup>230</sup>:

La mentalité des gens vivant dans des quartiers défavorisés, leur absence de coopération et d'autodétermination serait beaucoup moins le résultat des déficiences personnelles pour s'adapter au changement occasionné par l'industrialisation, qu'une conséquence des structures de notre société qui favorisent l'inégale répartition des ressources collectives. C'est en travaillant à un partage équitable du pouvoir qu'on arriverait à changer la mentalités et les intérêts des différent groupes sociaux. Pour modifier les mentalités, autant des 'financiers que des ouvriers', il s'agirait d'arriver à construire une société où 'les trois principales valeurs seraient l'égalité, la liberté et la fraternité' (...) Mais comme le pouvoir est identifié comme étant la cause première de cette situation, c'est à ce niveau qu'il faudrait travailler – 'remettre le pouvoir à la majorité de la population puisqu'une fois que l'on a le pouvoir on peut se procurer le reste'<sup>231</sup>.

Thus, systemic change, it was theorised, would not emerge from “conflictual” relations with the state, or reforms of its institutions. Instead, change would come from pre-figuring « une société de participation » : « l'action des individus ou des groupes, plus ou moins informels, véhiculant de nouvelles valeurs, non reconnues dans l'état actuel du développement de nos sociétés, (...) serait le moteur de cette évolution »<sup>232</sup>. This analysis, however was not, by any means, unanimous in the movement. Another tendency (not mutually exclusive) that was very strong during this period was that of activists who believed that structural social change was impossible without political activity within the sphere of electoral politics.

#### THE BEGINNINGS OF POLITICAL ACTION

Also during this period, groups concerned with acting on the political front, from Pointe St. Charles, Saint-Henri, Centre-Sud and Hochelaga, created a loose coalition, known as the “Regroupement des associations populaires” (RAP), whose objective was to build on the experiences of the existing

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<sup>230</sup> McGraw, 1978

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, p.84

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, p.86.

community groups to lead “une action politique au sens strict, c’est-à-dire d’opposition au pouvoir municipal pour le remplacer”<sup>233</sup>. Faced with the fact that citizens’ committees were continuing their local work, and developing self-run alternative services, despite the decisions being taken by the activists regrouped around the political action question, the social animators decided to diversify their strategies depending on the characteristics of the neighbourhoods : “Ils distinguent dorénavant milieu populaire de milieu ouvrier”<sup>234</sup>. In the “popular neighbourhoods” (majority of people living on welfare or small income)<sup>235</sup>, they would work with existing citizens’ committees to set-up and consolidate alternative services and groups and to organise public assemblies to confront local politicians on various issues related to their local struggles. In “working class” neighbourhoods (workers have a “decent” income), on the other hand, by way of the popular education course “Citoyens face au pouvoir”, they would encourage people to set up their own public assemblies, and decide together how to act, ideally on the municipal front.

The RAP was soon consolidated as the Front d’action politique (FRAP), and the organisation went about setting up local organisational cells, called the

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<sup>233</sup> RAP, cited in McGraw, 1978, p.105. Thinkers distinguished between groups that aimed at integration into the system (e.g., Société Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, associations paroissiales, Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste, l’Union Nationale, and the Parti libéral), and groups that were *moving towards* rupture (e.g., citizens’ committees, student movement, union movement (2e front, more radical), and the Parti québécois). (McGraw, 1978, p.117). The idea was that they needed to set up a structure that would allow the groups to get to rupture (now in a state of transition). They would start at municipal level (with local cells), because close to people, but the provincial is not out of the question for the long-term. Also, this should help create the society of participation by helping extend it beyond neighbourhoods. In the United States, groups active in the War against poverty are also regrouping into municipal political parties (McGraw, 1978).

<sup>234</sup> Lesemann & Thiénot, 1972b, p.81

<sup>235</sup> This is based on an analysis that claims that people in “popular” neighbourhoods hang out closer to home, have a low level of “consciousness” of power in society, are isolated, and therefore are more easily mobilised through the setting-up of alternative services; people in working-class neighbourhoods have more social mobility, are less isolated (they identify with the city, not just the neighbourhood), bigger distinction between workplace and home, are more used to union “demands”, and are therefore more “ready” for political action. So they decided to concentrate political action efforts in working-class neighbourhoods (McGraw, 1978).

“Comités d’action politiques” (CAP), first in the South West, then in the East end, and later in St-Edouard and Rosemont<sup>236</sup>. The latter were set up in an effort to create the basis for de-centralised municipal politics. Activists from unions (du 2e front), the Parti québécois, and the student movement joined the animators from the CDS in the founding of the FRAP<sup>237</sup>. The FRAP was active on three major fronts: « Front de la consommation », « Front du travail », and « Front politique ». The CAP St-Jacques (part of Centre-Sud) and CAP Hochelaga were extremely active, and it is through the door knocking campaign of the latter that Marguerite first got involved in community activism, in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve:

Marguerite C’étaient des jeunes étudiants qui faisaient du porte-à-porte. Ça s’appelait le CAP Maisonneuve, le Comité d’Action Politique. (...) Ça m’intéressait, je voulais apprendre et comprendre. Pour être à la hauteur de mon mari. (...) Dans Hochelaga-Maisonneuve (...) on avait étudié la possibilité de mettre une garderie sur pied en 68 (...) Il y avait le Comité de citoyens, ils faisaient du porte-à-porte (...). La machine était partie, on avait un comptoir alimentaire, un atelier parents-enfants. Dans cet atelier, on faisait des activités pères-mères-enfants, la fin de semaine et le vendredi on avait un échange sur notre comportement avec nos enfants et avec ceux des autres. On laissait interpeller, on avait comme lecture « Libres enfants de Summerhill ».

Although Marguerite was interested in learning about the political analysis of the CAP and its call for action in the arena of municipal politics, it is clear from the excerpt above that as a woman and mother in a working-class neighbourhood, what drew her in was the work around food security and childhood education. In Point St. Charles, a Comité d’action politique was set-up, under the leadership of the Centre communautaire, but also with the support of the Fils de la Charité and some of the members of the MTC<sup>238</sup>.

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<sup>236</sup> McGraw, 1978

<sup>237</sup> The revue “Mobilisation” critiqued the leadership of FRAP, the social animators, claiming that « on peut dire qu’il y a eut passage d’une orientation plutôt libérale et populiste vers une orientation plutôt social-démocrate » (cited in McGraw, 1978, p.115).

<sup>238</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

When the FRAP decided to present candidates in the 1970 municipal election, the neighbourhood had a candidate, who was a working-class member of the Knights of Columbus, close to the PQ<sup>239</sup>.

Here is an excerpt from an article by a local activist published in the *Journal des citoyens de Pointe St-Charles* in 1970, just after the municipal elections<sup>240</sup>:

Les élections municipales du 25 octobre 1970 se sont déroulées dans un climat d'insécurité. (...) Les moyens pris par le FLQ (...) ne peuvent être acceptés en tant que chrétiens et citoyens responsables : l'injustice ne peut être résolue par une autre injustice. La loi de guerre oblige tous les comités de citoyens à surveiller leurs paroles et leurs écrits : notre liberté est en branle ; ce qui provoque la confusion et une peur apparente dans tous les milieux. En plus, pour la première fois, les élections municipales est l'affaire de tous (...) Une telle insécurité porte les gens à voter pour des personnes déjà connues au point de vue électoral. Avec ce climat, il y a un grand besoin de sécurité, et pour certains, ça veut dire rester chez eux et ne pas réagir contre l'injustice présente (...) Le jour d'élection est fini – mais pour les Comités d'Actions Politiques c'est un début : le travail, la consommation, le logement, tous les besoins de quartier sont autant des luttes dont chaque citoyen devrait se rendre responsable. C'est l'affaire des tous sans exception.

Thus, although the CAPs, working within FRAP, did succeed in stimulating an interest of citizens to municipal affairs<sup>241</sup>, and they managed to shake-up the municipal establishment, the movement was demobilised by the 1970 elections during which their candidates did not get much support, and by the repression of their members following the FLQ crisis in October 1970<sup>242</sup>.

To conclude this section, “power to the people”, although certain social animators, organisers and activists managed, with mitigated success to interest citizens involved with local committees in municipal politics, this period is mostly characterised by a proliferation and consolidation of alternative service

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<sup>239</sup> Project participants

<sup>240</sup> Duquette, G. (1970). Les élections municipales. Le Journal des citoyens de Pointe St. Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CCPSC-120.

<sup>241</sup> Groupe d'action politique (1972). Fonce pi Fesse. Manifeste '72 du Groupe d'action politique de la Pointe, p.9. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.38.

<sup>242</sup> Lesemann & Thiénot, 1972b.



and advocacy groups. For most, “power to the people”, did not yet mean *political power*; instead, people-power was about setting-up, running and developing their own services and groups, putting into practice, through *pre-figuration*, the kind of society that they were seeking to build. Moreover, many groups continued to demand reforms from the relevant authorities and often won small victories. In line with the notion of “power to the people”, the leadership was now, more than ever, in the hands of “ordinary citizens”, and those to advocate on behalf of people living in poverty were more often peers, not organisers. To a certain extent then, by the end of 1972, the original objectives of the *first wave* of social animation – to give the “voiceless” a voice, to help people living in poverty have more control over their own lives, and to reform the institutions to reflect the needs of those who use them – were attained. The emerging analysis, however, that to get at the root problem of poverty the movement had to take its activism into electoral politics, was only beginning to take hold amongst community activists<sup>243</sup>. Not only did this kind of analysis come to the fore in the next period – 1972 to 1980 – but the discourse took on a much clearer anti-capitalist flavour with the emergence of radical socialist groups.

#### CHANGING STRATEGIES, RADICALISATION AND TENSION (1972-1980)

In 1972, the community movement was, on the one hand, demobilised by the FRAP’s failed attempt at municipal politics, and on the other hand, mobilised around the proliferation and consolidation of alternative service groups, the small victories in reforms, and around their advocacy work. This next period – 1972 to 1980 – was a period of paradox – a period of innovation, radicalisation, State cooptation, red-baiting, linguistic tension, and tensions between ordinary folks and organisers/animators. During the early part of this period, in the midst of the oil crisis and reduced federal transfers to the

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<sup>243</sup> Groupe d’action politique (1972). *Fonce pi Fesse*. Manifeste ’72 du Groupe d’action politique de la Pointe, p.8. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.38.

provinces, the Québec government put into place a number of reforms in health and social services, justice and education, which would change the face of community activism for the years to come<sup>244</sup>. It is during this period that the State set-up the “Centre locaux de services communautaires”, and the provincial legal aid services, based on the clinics set-up by citizens’ committees in previous years. Paradoxically, in creating these public institutions, the State increased access to front line preventative services and justice all over Québec, but at the same time reduced citizen control and jump-started the professionalisation of the services, which slowly began losing their *alternative* flavour.

This phenomenon, coupled with the FRAP’s failed attempt at electoral politics, the repression following the FLQ crisis, and the increasing awareness of the limits of reformist activism, led many groups into critical self-evaluation. It is during this period that certain individuals active in the community movement began to radicalise their discourse, leading to the birth of the Marxist movement in Québec in the mid-1970s, which shook up the movement, paradoxically, resulting, at the same time, in increased politicisation and demobilisation<sup>245</sup>. Also in the mid to late 1970s, the women’s movement, previously more of the student movement, spread to the community movement, leading to the proliferation of women’s caucuses and centres all over Montréal and Québec (I address this in Chapter 5). By 1976, the PQ was elected to power, with the support of many community activists, generating both expectations and uncertainties<sup>246</sup>. Preoccupied with the first referendum on Québec sovereignty, by the turn of the decade, many activists were shocked and demobilised not only by the failed referendum and the disintegration of the Marxist movement, but also by the “surprising” rise of the New Right.

Point St. Charles is no exception. This time period was one of great upheaval, with the culmination of years of activism, and the increasing

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<sup>244</sup> Mayer, Lamoureux, & Panet-Raymond, 2002

<sup>245</sup> Lagüe, 1979, p. 44-49.

<sup>246</sup> Mayer, Lamoureux, & Panet-Raymond, 2002

radicalism of citizens, spurred on by friends and peers who were converted to the Marxist cause, but also by the spreading influence of the Fils de la Charité within the Church and in many citizens' committees. It is during this period that organisers changed their organising strategy, from the neighbourhood-based methods to *bloc organising* around issues such as street safety, parks, welfare, unemployment, housing. This is also the time during which the women active in the citizens' committees and alternative service groups began organising around strategic gender needs, spurred on by feminist agitators in their midst (Chapter 5). It is also during this period that Marxist activists were present in all the alternative service groups, agitating for the revolution, and in doing so, highlighting and rendering central the constant tension between services/advocacy and political action, and between doing *with* and doing *for*. Related to the latter, the increasing citizen-control in the English groups brought to the fore the tensions between professional organisers and their organising styles, and the "ordinary citizens" who had become local leaders. Mixed into all this, were the increasing tensions between the English and French communities in the Point as the "Québec-question" began to take up a bigger place in the organising picture. The tensions, however, did not come only from within the movement. During this period the local elite, through red-baiting, ended up harassing many citizens involved in committees, and chasing out the Fils de la Charité, considered to be too radical for their parishes. Moreover, it was now that groups began experiencing the negative consequences of State funding, as they realised that in many ways, through the money the government provided for staffing, it was not only controlling the work of the groups, but also dividing the activists within, threatening to conquer.

## AUTONOMY, BLOCK ORGANISING, AND POLITICAL EDUCATION AROUND CLASS

It was during this period that the Services communautaire, previously run by social animators and professionals, came under citizen control, and was renamed “Maison de Quartier”. In the wake the reforms in health and social services, and of the struggle to preserve the autonomy of the Clinic, and its citizen-control, the Clinic and the Services communautaires managed to negotiate, with the government, that the Clinic would take on a mandate of CLSC as long as the government would fund – with no strings attached – a citizen-controlled community centre that would do community organising<sup>247</sup>. The Maison de Quartier, it was planned, would be independent from the government, and would work on providing information, on the training of activists, on grassroots organising and on coordination of local actions<sup>248</sup>. The areas covered would include work, housing, workers’ rights, welfare, health, education and consumer protection<sup>249</sup>. Above and beyond this, however, evaluating that citizens’ committees had reached the maximum of their potential, that they were no longer mobilising citizens, and that there was an ever increasing gap between the reality of leaders and “ordinary citizens”<sup>250</sup>, the activists involved with the Maison de Quartier decided to work with local groups to change their strategies.

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<sup>247</sup> Services communautaires de Pointe St-Charles, Inc. (1972). Rapport du Conseil d’administration des Services Communautaires Pointe St-Charles, Inc., Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.04.039.66 ; Services communautaires de Pointe St. Charles, Inc. (December 4th, 1972). Présentation du programme d’action en vue du financement de l’exercice 73-74. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.04.039.66.

<sup>248</sup> Services communautaires de Pointe St-Charles, Inc. (1972). Rapport du Conseil d’administration des Services Communautaires Pointe St-Charles, Inc., Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.04.039.66

<sup>249</sup> Services communautaires de Pointe St. Charles, Inc., (December 4th, 1972). Présentation du programme d’action en vue du financement de l’exercice 73-74. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.04.039.66.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

The new strategy would include political education on power and class dynamics<sup>251</sup>, and they would do this, using a block organising strategy. That is, instead of trying to draw people into the groups, they argued, they would go to where people live their lives everyday, on their streets. They decided that they needed to work at training trainers, or « des multiplicateurs; c'est-à-dire, former autant que possible des personnes du milieu qui pourront à leur tour agir comme chercheurs et personnes-ressources dans leur comité, sur leur rue »<sup>252</sup>. They also proposed to produce a French newspaper, accessible to all<sup>253</sup>. Although, the Services Communautaires/Maison de Quartier was an interesting response to the attempts at cooptation by the State<sup>254</sup>, and did contribute to politicisation and reflection in the neighbourhood, paradoxically, it was highly criticised in the neighbourhood as being “too intellectual” and top-heavy:

- Marguerite La maison de quartier, c'était vraiment pour la réflexion politique. Les gars universitaires venaient nous présenter les théories qu'ils apprenaient à l'université, ce qu'on devait faire!
- Thérèse La gang de la maison de quartier, on les avait à l'œil!
- Michèle Ah oui! C'était les gauchistes! (...) Mais il y avait du monde terre à terre là-dedans. L'ADDS était là. Il y avait des gens qui travaillaient sur le logement.
- Marguerite Les avocats populaires. On a occupé la Caisse Populaire une journée, avec David Gourd, pour faire changer les chèques des assistés sociaux. La Maison de quartier a fermé ses portes avant qu'on ait eu le temps de faire d'autres choses.
- Michèle Ça a été éphémère (...) mais ça a jeté des bases.
- Denise The Maison de Quartier was considered to be more communist than anything else.
- Maureen And it wasn't bringing people along. It was their thing. You either fit into what they did, or you didn't get in.

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Couillard & Mayer, 1980, p.111.

On the English-side, after several successful years, members of GMAPCC groups, including PERM and PIEC, were also deep in evaluation of their activities. Having reached the same conclusions as activists within the Maison de Quartier, English activists also decided to change their organising strategy<sup>255</sup>. Influenced no doubt by the Marxist analysis of a new wave of organisers, in 1972 GMAPCC adopted a statement of principles, which included class analysis, feminist analysis, and support for the nationalist project. This is also the period during which GMAPCC members began working with unions, recognising that the problems of people on welfare and workers have common roots, and to effect structural change people living on welfare would have to unite with workers. In 1972, they began critiquing the LIP program, started taking on the unemployment offices, supporting striking workers and allying with the common front of the three major Québec unions<sup>256</sup>.

Still working with organisers from Parallel Institute, but also with the help of organisers working at the Services communautaires/Maison de Quartier, activists associated with GMAPCC groups created the Point Action Citizens' Council (PACC) in 1972 to organise by block. In a way, this strategy was a development on the "by-parish" organising of the first wave of citizens' committees, in that instead of sharing a parish, people who shared a block would regroup to form a committee around issues that concerned them, close to their homes. In line with this, Maureen was hired to organise block committees. Once a month, block committees from Point St. Charles, along with other citizens' committees that were still around at the time, would come together to share information, and for decision-making on issues that affected all of them<sup>257</sup>.

Maureen One of my blocks was Charon. So I'd look, I'd walk up the street and look and see what was there. And then I'd ring a bell, door

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<sup>255</sup> Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999

<sup>256</sup> Benello, 1972, p.468.

<sup>257</sup> PACC (September, 1974). Minutes. Fond de St-Columba House, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

knocking, and say, “I’ve been talking to your neighbours and there seems to be an awful lot of garbage in your lane”. If that’s what I had seen. And they’d say, “yes the garbage is bad, but the sewer is something else. The rats are coming out of there, and our kids are playing in the street”. And that’s how actions came about. And it maybe 5, 6 people on a block, maybe 10, 12 all depending on the street. And we would work on the real issue right there. In their kitchens. They take their turns.

Although PACC organisers attempted to organise around a broad-base of issues, such as “housing, welfare, unemployment insurance, jobs, health, education, and community improvement”<sup>258</sup>, in an effort “to change the system which creates problems”<sup>259</sup>, most of the work of the block committees centered around urban renewal issues (e.g., parks, paved laneways, sewers, street safety, housing). Committees also organised fun activities on their blocks, such as dances, film showings, and picnics, which often included a political education segment, as Maureen relates here:

Maureen The idea was to involve the parents with the kids. They would make movies of themselves, as well! They would show them. Of course everybody came out to see themselves! The family and their kids. And we would also have a short talk about something political at the end, and people would stay. It would be like showing the Simard family and, “by the way folks, this is how it work. The elections are coming up, we’re not telling you how to vote, but this is the information!” Actually maybe there was 10 parents that actually organised, that were part of it. But the whole street knew of it. It was a good doorknocker. Like, “Oh, by the way, we’re part of PACC, who put on the movies”. “Oh yeah! My kids go to that!” It was over a summer period naturally, and maybe once a week that kind of thing would happen.

The group published a monthly newspaper called “The Boiling Pointe” which kept folks informed of PACC activities, as well as of activities of other groups in the neighbourhood.

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<sup>258</sup> PACC (September, 1974). Minutes. Fond de St-Columba House, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

PACC was quite successful in winning small victories, including convincing the City to change the road signs to 20 miles per hour to reduce traffic speed<sup>260</sup>, to provide and renovate parks to reflect the needs of the families that used them, and to pave laneways<sup>261</sup>. However, some of the campaigns organised by block committees affiliated with PACC – like the one for *increased* police presence in the Point (the “beat police”) to reduce crime<sup>262</sup> – reflect a paradox that many organisers working within this decentralised structure were confronted with; that is, block committees decided what kind of actions they would do, based on self-identified issues and needs. Maureen remembers the campaign for the beat police, and the reactions it had elicited from groups like the Clinic<sup>263</sup>, who were arguing that the police were not the solution, but part of the problem:

Maureen When we had the beat police. Police walking the beat. Who the hell wants it? The community was saying they wanted it. My reaction was, we got to go there. That’s what they want, so we’ll take it through the steps. How do you educate people by just saying, “no it’s not a good thing”, it doesn’t work. It’s letting people work through the process themselves, and not imposing your ideas on them, telling them what they need or want. We went to the police station. It was easy enough. I mean, God knows, it’s easy enough to let the police make an ass of themselves! That doesn’t take too long! Doesn’t take too long to educate the people! I remember, an organiser at the Clinic at the time saying, “that’s the most ridiculous campaign I have ever heard” And my arguing with him. Saying, “no I think you have to do it. It’s what the population thinks they want”.

Denise You need to go through with it with people. This is what will be the outcome. Next time you’ll know.

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<sup>260</sup> PACC (July 1973). PACC’s fight for safe streets, The Boiling Point, 3(4). Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 1998.01.082.06

<sup>261</sup> PACC (Summer 1975). PACC. The Boiling Point, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 1998.01.052.12

<sup>262</sup> PACC (September 1975). The next step, Beat police. The Boiling Point, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 1998.01.042.09

<sup>263</sup> The Editorial Committee of “To your health” (June 1976) The police in Point St. Charles. To your health. Fond de la Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles



- Maureen That's how you get people involved.
- Denise And show them that there's a better way.
- Maureen It's not a good strategy to turn around and tell them, "well actually, you're wrong, this is the way it should be."
- Anna In French it would be 'faire pour' versus 'faire, faire avec, faire faire'. So "doing with" versus "doing for".

Although citizens were active around this campaign for quite some time, in the end, through political education, the block associations decided to stop the campaign, having recognised that "police work for the system, not the people"<sup>264</sup>.

Thus, although the work of the Maison de Quartier remained, for the most part, in the realm of the theoretical and the abstract, the lessons that it had helped to draw on organising definitely contributed to the success of PACC. That latter, although more focused on practical and immediate resolution of problems than on structural change, still contributed in a way to the increased political consciousness of "ordinary citizens" through the facilitation of "political moments" by local leaders ("des multiplicatrices") during neighbourhood activities. This organising, building on years of citizens' activism, laid the foundations, without a doubt for the successful election of Marcel Sévigny in the 1980s, as municipal councillor with the Regroupement des citoyens de Montréal, the first local politician to be supported by community groups<sup>265</sup>. But before this, however, during the height of the activities of the Maison de Quartier and of PACC, certain activists had espoused the Marxist cause, and began agitating for a socialist revolution, shaking-up, yet again the status quo, but this time with quite radical ideas.

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<sup>264</sup> PACC (no date). The Police work for the System, not the people. The boiling pointe. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 1998.01.042.09

<sup>265</sup> Sévigny, 2001

## RADICALISATION

During this period, in Point St. Charles, as elsewhere in Montréal, activists involved with the political action committees affiliated with the FRAP began radicalising their discourse and organising activities. By 1975, the Marxist Leninist groups, En Lutte and La Ligue communiste, were present in most community groups in the Point. This period was one of great upheaval, as the latter were virulent in their attacks against “reformist” activities in the groups, and were less than effective in their organising strategies which ended up, paradoxically, both demobilising and politicising many of the members of community groups.

### FRAP: FROM MUNICIPAL POLITICS TO A REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS’ PARTY

By 1972, the more reformist members of the FRAP, many social animators and some unionists, had left the movement, leaving behind the “radicals”. Because of this, what emerged from the evaluation done by the FRAP (similar in content to that done by the Maison de Quartier and PACC), of the state of community and political organising in Montréal, was a clearly anti-capitalist, revolutionary stance. Thus, the FRAP moved away from its social democratic origins, and its discourse became clearly socialist. Its objective was no longer to take over the municipal government, but to form a revolutionary workers party (inspired by Marx and Lenin) : « ce Parti viserait à transformer le système économique et l’État, à savoir ses appareils de domination et de direction »<sup>266</sup>. To do this, they decided to expand their organising strategy from the “point of reproduction”, to the “point of production”<sup>267</sup>. Building on their initial strategy, they planned to set-up cells

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<sup>266</sup> McGraw, 1978, p.143

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, p.139. This is a shift in the analysis of the cause of the problem (from individual, to unequal power, to a class analysis) “l’analyse (...) situe les causes des conditions de vie et de travail des salariés dans la nature du système économique : les travailleurs productifs, indirectement productifs et improductifs, sont exploités au profit d’une classe dominante qui récupère pour les fins propres de son développement les résultats de leur travail. Ainsi serait posée la nécessité de construire un parti des travailleurs qui viserait à transformer le système

(“des noyaux politiques”) in neighbourhood groups and in factories, within which leaders of the political action committees would be “implanted” in an effort to lead « la lutte idéologique et développer le leadership politique prolétarien »<sup>268</sup>. Because they had evaluated that much of the work being done in community groups – given its reformist nature – was actually counter-productive,<sup>269</sup> they decided to work to “neutraliser les effets de la pratique de direction liée au block dominant dans les quartiers considérés comme lieu de reproduction de la force de travail »<sup>270</sup>. Thus, through training and action at the factory level, and by taking the leadership of existing community groups, they would create the conditions that would favour the emergence of a workers’ party<sup>271</sup>.

In line with this, in Point St. Charles, a new political action committee, “Le Groupe d’action politique” (GAP) was born, composed of intellectual local leaders and university-educated allies. The objectives of this group, in line with the analyses of the times, were as follows:

il veut aider les travailleurs et travailleuses à s’expliquer à leur manière ce qu’ils vivent chaque jour. Il veut partir de la vie ouvrière, de ses luttes. Il veut trouver des moyens nouveaux d’action. Il ne veut plus être sur la défensive mais passer à l’offensive. (Le groupe) veut montrer la face de ceux qui tiennent le ‘mur politique’ sur lequel se cognent toutes les demandes des citoyens. Il cherche à le faire tomber, ce mur aux mains de la majorité. Bref, c’est un *comité d’action mais d’action politique des travailleurs*”<sup>272</sup>.

The members of the GAP concluded that although the citizens’ committees in the Point had won certain small victories, the latter had not resulted in

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économique et l’État, à savoir ses appareils de domination et de direction » (McGraw, 1978, p.143).

<sup>268</sup> CAP St-Jacques, cited in McGraw, 1978, p.145 In fact, they did door knocking in areas where the vote for the FRAP had been strongest in 1970 – they would bring these people together in a « Comité de travailleur de quartier » which was considered to be a springboard toward workplace organising (CAP St-Jacques, cited in McGraw, 1978, p.135).

<sup>269</sup> CAP St-Jacques, cited in McGraw, 1978, p.135

<sup>270</sup> McGraw, 1978, p.141

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Groupe d’action politique (1972). *Fonce pi Fesse*. Manifeste ’72 du Groupe d’action politique de la Pointe, p.1. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.38.

structural change. They argued that the content taught in the schools had not changed significantly, that the bond between the city and the local landlords had not been broken, and that the neighbourhood was still being “bombarded” by Drapeau in the name of urban renewal<sup>273</sup>. They also argued that because the Parti Québécois (P.Q.) included in its midst both “capitalists” and people seeking to help workers organise, they needed to form a new political organisation that would be independent from the P.Q. but that would work in alliance with the more progressive elements within the party<sup>274</sup>.

Given all this, the GAP « cherchera surtout à préparer les conditions de la mise sur pied d’une organisation politique de travailleurs dirigée par des travailleurs et luttant avec et pour les travailleurs »<sup>275</sup>. The ultimate objective being « remplacer l’organisation capitaliste de notre société par une *société socialiste* où les travailleurs exerceront le pouvoir dans le cadre d’un *Québec devenu indépendant* »<sup>276</sup>. To do this, in line with strategies developed by the FRAP, individual members of the GAP would work to form cells in community groups, factories and schools, and would work to deepen the class analysis of those present in the latter<sup>277</sup>. Each member of the GAP, considered to be an “avant-garde de masse”<sup>278</sup>, would contribute part of their salary to the movement, and would be tied to a certain amount of discipline in their actions<sup>279</sup>. Already, in 1972, before the official advent of the Marxist Leninist groups, this group was feeling the need to differentiate its own actions from those of other radical groups (du “gauchisme terroriste”<sup>280</sup>) who, claiming that

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p.12, my emphasis.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid, p.17..

<sup>278</sup> Favreau, L (January 1973). Stratégie de lutte du GAP à l’intérieur de la classe ouvrière et particulièrement à Point St. Charles. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.39.

<sup>279</sup> Groupe d’action politique (1972). Fonce pi Fesse. Manifeste ’72 du Groupe d’action politique de la Pointe, p.17. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.38.

<sup>280</sup> Groupe d’action politique (1973). Rapport de la session tenue les 27 et 28 janvier 1973. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.39.

the activities of cooperatives and alternative services were reformist, focused solely on long-term revolutionary goals<sup>281</sup>. In line with this, many of the members of GAP were also members of local community groups, and participated in an attempt to take over the Caisse populaire in 1972<sup>282</sup>.

#### MARXIST LENINIST ORGANISING

By 1975, however, many of the activists who had been part of the political action committees within FRAP, including those in Point St. Charles, became sympathisers and/or members of one of two competing Marxist Leninist (ML) groups, En Lutte (born in 1973) or La Ligue (Parti communiste ouvrier, PCO, born in 1975)<sup>283</sup>. In the same vein as FRAP, these groups, also inspired by Marx, Lenin, but also by Mao, were organising for socialism and therefore for a revolutionary workers' party<sup>284</sup>. Both groups used agitation and propaganda to recruit members to their cause; that is, they distributed their newspapers and organised "reading circles" ("cercles de lectures") in both factories, and community groups. ML group members would lead these circles, during which the recruited sympathisers would discuss key readings from

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<sup>281</sup> Favreau, L (January 1973). Stratégie de lutte du GAP à l'intérieur de la classe ouvrière et particulièrement à Point St. Charles. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.39.

<sup>282</sup> After a few thwarted efforts, they managed to take the control of the Caisse populaire away from the local elite (short-lived victory). "Notre objectif vis-à-vis la Caisse n'est pas uniquement de faire une brèche dans le pouvoir des libéraux ou de les déloger pour le plaisir de les déloger, mais aussi pour arriver à donner une impulsion nouvelle à l'orientation de la Caisse, de façon à répondre prioritairement, par de nouvelles politiques de crédits et d'investissement, aux besoins sociaux et collectifs de la Pointe (Groupe d'action politique (December 13th, 1972). Procès-verbal de la réunion du Groupe d'Action Politique de Pointe St. Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.39). Two members of citizens' committees were elected to the Board at the time, to the great consternation of the local elite on the Board: « A cette occasion, on a vu les 'gros' perdre la face: par exemple, un député crier à un citoyen de se taire et de 'manger de la merde'; un propriétaire de taverne jurait à tour de bras menaçant l'Assemblée à chaque fois que quelqu'un qui n'était pas de sa 'gang' s'approchait du micro... » (Guay, L. & Soutière, M. (1973). A Pointe St-Charles: Éclatement de l'église locale, p.4. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles).

<sup>283</sup> Lagüe, 1979, p. 44-49.

<sup>284</sup> Personal communication, Jocelyne Bernier, ex-member of La Ligue (PCO), December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

Lenin, Marx or Mao, and apply the latter to their lived experiences<sup>285</sup>. The passage to member depended on the sympathiser's commitment to the party line, to their ability to master and disseminate the discourse, and to their readiness to contribute time and energy to the cause<sup>286</sup>.

In the Point, as was the case all over Montréal, members and sympathisers from both groups – En Lutte and La Ligue – were present in most community groups, from the Club populaire, to the Carrefour, to the Clinic, to the daycare. Although, as the participants discuss below, many ordinary citizens agreed with the theory, they were hurt, angered, and scared off by the dogmatic organising methods that the groups used (including, in the case of La Ligue, of clandestine infiltration), and by the fact that the two groups would monopolise their group meetings by stacking the room to get their point across. Many ML activists would take advantage of every opportunity to attempt to convince community group members that their services were reformist, and that they needed to transform these into “des (groupes) de lutte de classes”<sup>287</sup>. This “philabustering” ended up stalling the everyday work of many groups concerned with finding solutions to practical needs such as food security, health, adult education, and housing<sup>288</sup>:

Marguerite Je faisais partie d'un cercle de lecture (ML). Et vraiment, j'ai aimé ça, j'ai appris plein d'affaires. La théorie est bonne ! C'est quand on allait dans les assemblées que les chicanes prenaient. (...) Nous, on apprenait à être solidaires avec les prolétaires. On devait mener une lutte ensemble. Et tout d'un coup, quand on était dans une grande assemblée, on divisait les prolétaires et on les traitait d'étapistes! (...) « On ne peut pas organiser ce système, il faut le changer ». Mais pour ça, il faut travailler par étapes, avec les gens ! Pour les amener à comprendre et à savoir ce qu'ils font. Aller moins vite dans nos luttes pour que les gens embarquent avec nous. Mais quand tu vas dans une assemblée et que tu entends les « istes » qui revolent, ça a l'air péjoratif et tu ne comprends plus

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<sup>285</sup> Personal communication, Jocelyne Bernier, ex-member of La Ligue (PCO), December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Lagüe, 1979, p.48

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

rien. Moi ça m'a jetée sur le dos! C'est ce qui a fait que j'ai laissé le cercle de lecture. Je trouvais qu'ensemble on apprenait mais quand on arrivait dans la réalité...(...).

Michèle En 76, les groupes communistes se sont polarisés en deux parties. Il y avait la Ligue communiste et En lutte. Moi j'étais dans la Ligue, le Parti Communiste Ouvrier. Je ne suis jamais allée jusqu'au bout parce que comme mon mari ne voulait pas faire partie de ces groupes, ils m'ont demandé de me séparer! Là j'ai dit « Vous allez tous manger de la merde! (...) Je suis sûre que s'il y a une révolution, je vais être dans les tranchées avec mon chum! »

Marguerite's experience with the reading circle, and Michèle's reaction to the rigid discipline of the groups, were also that of many other "ordinary folks" who were tempted by the theory, but turned off by the practice. Not taking the time to do real popular education – or *power-with* – the ML activists ended up alienating the very people they were attempting to organise – the "proletariat" – with their *power-over* techniques.

Michèle's example of an intervention that she was mandated to do at an ADDS meeting illustrates the kind of propaganda that these groups engaged in within community groups :

Michèle C'est le dogmatisme, ça. (...) Quand il y avait une assemblée publique, t'avais une réunion de ta cellule. Et là, on nous disait « Toi, tu intervies là, toi tu intervies là et toi tu vas expliquer telle affaire... » Aille ! Imagine! À une réunion de l'ADDS, après une vague de froid épouvantable. Le monde n'avait plus de chauffage ! On m'a demandé d'aller expliquer la dictature du prolétariat. Et je l'ai fait! Je ne referais plus jamais ça mais je suis certaine qu'il y a plein de monde comme moi qui en ont fait des affaires de même (...) C'était très dogmatique. Mais je me rappellerai toujours d'une fois où j'étais allée faire ma commande au Club des consommateurs. On nous avait tous mis dehors, les communistes! Un après l'autre et pas à peu près! (...) Ils avaient décidé que c'était assez et ils avaient raison.

Michèle's intervention at the ADDS meeting exemplifies the gap that existed between the reality of many "ordinary folks" working with community groups on practical needs, and the ML activists' abstract theoretical discourse. The

reaction of the Club populaire was perhaps a bit strong<sup>289</sup>, but understandable given the circumstances:

- Thérèse C'était démobilisateur.
- Marguerite Dans les groupes, il y avait du monde. Et ça a été le fun! Mais quand cette gang là est arrivée, ça ne pouvait pas marcher. C'était fait pour qu'on perde les groupes. Si tu veux changer un système, faut pas que tu fonctionnes dedans! Faut le démolir.
- Anna Donc les ML n'étaient pas d'accord avec la participation à la gestion d'une caisse populaire...
- Marguerite En menant leur lutte contre le système, ils ont démobilisé du monde partout. Pas seulement à la Caisse. Mais la Caisse, on l'a perdue et c'est la gang d'avant qui l'a repris. Avec nous, les assistés sociaux pouvaient même emprunter. Les Fils se montraient garants. On avait fait une belle job.
- Louise Mais c'est tombé (...)
- Marguerite Bien sur que c'est tombé! Si on se tient pas! Les poteaux (l'élite locale), ils sont restés. Nous on s'est démobilisés...Pourtant, c'était gros cette affaire là mais les gens ont arrêté de s'impliquer.(...) Maintenant, c'est perdu. Et les gens qui sont sur l'assistance sociale, et bien ils sont mal pris.

Thus, several campaigns that had been underway were short-circuited during these years, including the move to take the control of the Caisse populaire away from the local elite. And in constantly criticizing the work of community groups, and in engaging in vicious "name-calling", the ML activists ended up demobilising many "ordinary folks" who had been active in the groups for many years. Thérèse remembers the tensions at the time, between political action and services:

- Thérèse Alors là une journée il y a une manifestation qui se fait à quelque part Moi je sais que j'ai une rencontre dans une maison avec une p'tite madame monoparentale quatre enfants, une famille anglophone. Faut que j'aille là, je sais. Le médecin vient de me dire que le bébé fait un début de pneumonie et je sais qu'il y a des problèmes financiers graves. Alors j'dis, « bon, je vais pas à la

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<sup>289</sup> Guay, L. (May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1977). Lettre adressée aux membres de la COOP. Club populaire des consommateurs.



manifestation je m'en va là ». Et c'est là, la discussion commence dans l'heure du midi, où un employé de la Clinique me dit « tu commences à être une travailleuse sociale ben encadrée ?! » Je l'ai pas pris. J'étais pas contente, mais pas du tout. Je dis « peut-être que je fais du 'patch work', qu'y appelle, mais je dit, contente mais pas du tout, je dis « peut-être que je fais du patch work » mais je dit « toi là, qu'est-ce qui est plus important ? » « Vas-y à la réunion toi, vas y toi ! Allez manifester ». Je ne pouvais pas dire qu'il avait tort. Il avait raison qu'il fallait frapper au niveau des structures pour pas que je sois obligé de faire du patch work... (...) J'étais d'accord avec ça, mais moi j'savais que sur le terrain il y avait des choses à faire aussi. C'est vrai c'est plate, c'est vrai j'avais l'air de la travailleuse sociale, celle qui va guérir les p'tit bobos des autres là, tsé ? Mais maudit ! J'arrivais dans cette maison là moi et c'était le fourneau qui chauffait la maison, c'était un enfant qui avait le début d'une pneumonie ! Fait que là je dis « ça n'a pas de bon sens ! » (...) Fait que je saute sur le téléphone, j'ai appelé le Bien-être et j'ai dit « il faut de l'huile dans ce maison ! ». J'ai dit « je viens de voir le médecin et l'enfant a un début de pneumonie et il faut la chaleur dans ce maison là ! ». Dans l'après-midi le baril d'huile s'est rempli et elle a pu chauffer sa maison raisonnablement. Mais si j'étais allé à la manifestation, j'change quoi là moi ? Ça prend du monde sur le terrain

One of the most difficult things, around this tension between politics and services, was the name-calling, and judgments that others made of their work.

Marguerite remembers wanting to understand and not feeling “up to par”:

Marguerite Tu t'en poses des question ! Mais j'te dirai que c'est difficile parce que *tu veux*. Ce qui arrive, c'est qu't'es pas correct. Quand tu arrives dans cette gang là, t'es pas correct, t'a pas le goût de pas être correct ! La théorie, c'était logique ! (...) Sauf que le mettre en pratique, comment on va faire ça, comment on va s'y prendre ? Comment on va s'y prendre juste pour changer une mentalité, une compréhension ? Juste là-dessus c'est déjà quelque chose ! Mais là, un moment donné il faut que tu dénonces. Mais tu dénonces qui? Les tiens? Mais dénoncer

Michèle ta voisine

Marguerite Ben oui (*silence*). Dans ta façon d'être, là tsé ? Nous autres on marche plus par étape. Pis là on se fait dénoncer ça ! Pis « c'est pas comme ça ! » Pis on fait un ordre du jour, pis là les personnes (des groupes ML) y viennent nous défaire l'ordre du jour. Mais ces

personnes là, c'est nos amies ! Fait que là, au début tu dis rien parce que t'as fait partie de la table, celle de lecture, t'as compris des affaires.

Michèle On a appris des choses

Marguerite Oui mais là, à l'assemblée par exemple. J'me souviens, Thérèse Dionne s'en va au micro, on faisait ça au sous-sol de l'église. Tout d'un coup, il y a quelqu'un qui se lève j'sais pu qui, « t'es rien qu'un étapiste ! » Voyons donc ! On était supposé de travaillé ensemble, pis on était pour le prolétariat, pis on était en train de s'écrasé nous autres entre nous autres ! Fait que là ça été difficile pour moi de dire, « moi je débarque de ça », parce moi j'étais pris entre deux. Parce que t'as pas l'goût, tu voudrais rester même si tu commence à croire que là , ça plus d'allure. Tu vois. Ça n'a pu d'allure. Faudrait débarqué de ça. C'est pas ça qu'y faut faire. Y'a des vérités mais on a pas l'tour...

Not only were they feeling conflicted about, on the one hand, their belief in the grand theory, and, on the other, their understanding that change was about taking things “one-step-at-a-time”, but the participants were also hurt and torn by the fact that the “name-calling” and judgments were coming from friends, peers and colleagues.

For the participants, and many local activists who had been working *with* “ordinary citizens” to change living conditions in their citizens’ committees and community groups, it was untenable to do organising using propaganda. Because the pedagogical methods were lacking, and most of their “education” was done through reading material that many people could not read<sup>290</sup>, many people who participated in the movement did not understand the principles upon which it was based, as the following excerpts show:

Marguerite On arrive à l’auditorium et ils annoncent « les communistes »! La madame (à côté de moi) tombe assise et dit « Oh! mon Dieu! Faut pas que mon mari sache ça ! » Elle est toute énervée, elle a peur! Tout d’un coup, les gens se lèvent pour chanter *l’Internationale!* Elle se lève elle aussi ! (...) Quelqu’un à côté dit (*talking about someone on the stage*) « Coudonc, c’est René Lévesque ? » Moi je répons « Avec tout ce qu’on vient de dire, ça fait longtemps qu’il

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<sup>290</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22nd, 2003.

serait parti ! » *Il y avait beaucoup de personnes qu'on emmenait sans qu'elles comprennent vraiment ce qui se passait.* Quand tu penses à tout ce qu'on avait fait comme démarches...Pour une grande majorité, c'était des femmes qui travaillaient dans les garderies. Quand on s'est embarqués là-dedans, tout le monde y croyait mais un moment donné, ça a dérapé...

Michèle Je me rappelle, un 1ier mai, les communistes ont avait mobilisé du monde pour aller dans une manifestation de La Ligue. (...) Il y avait un vieux monsieur de 75 ans. (...) Moi je les avais amener, de bonne foi, à la manifestation contre la loi Trudeau. J'avais mobiliser ben du monde. J'étais fier de moi. (...) Pi le slogan – non y étaient pas capable de le dire – c'était «Azani, Nanibi, Zimbabwe, Solidarité ! » . C'était des pays qu'on avait jamais entendu parlé, d'abord. Mais là après ça, on s'est ramassé dans la garderie, dans la cuisine, pis on a dis, « ouin, c'est vrai, on connaissait pas ces pays là. C'est ben épouvantable, c'est ben effrayant qu'on ai fait dire ça à ce monde là sans leur expliquer ! Faut retourner les voir, faut retourner leur expliquer ! » J'ai été m'asseoir avec le monsieur de 75 ans, pis là on a acheté des livres – Azani, Nanibi, Zimbabwe. On avait toutes appris des affaires. Nous autres, on avait senti le besoin de dire, « ça pas d'allure traîner du monde pi les faire répéter des affaires de même. » Notre sens de la pédagogie, de l'éducation, quand on en a reparlé, pi là on disait « ça pas de sens là ». Pi on allait plus loin.

Although Michèle and Marguerite remember taking the time to work through some of these issues outside of the formal organising channels, many “ordinary folks” ended up being drawn into the movement without proper education on the underlying issues.

Although their methods were clearly problematic, the analysis that the Marxist Leninist activists were attempting to share with their “comrades”, about class oppression, state cooptation, and about the “reformist” nature of some of their organising strategies did make did make some headway in the

early years of agitation<sup>291</sup>, as the following excerpt, from an analysis done by the ADDS at the time, demonstrates<sup>292</sup>:

L'animation sociale telle que pratiquer dans les comités de citoyens est basé en grande partie sur les écrits de Michel Blondin. L'ADDS en fait une analyse détaillée après quelques années d'expérience. Ils démontrent que l'animation sociale, telle que pratiqué par des « petits bourgeois » de 1967 à 1973, est réformiste. Que l'objectif, au bout du compte, était d'aider le « pauvre » à participer au processus politique duquel il était exclu, et non pas de renverser le système capitaliste. L'animateur, selon Blondin, « se perçoit comme neutre », et que « c'est faux, personne n'est neutre. Les animateurs, eux aussi font partie d'une classe sociale, la classe intermédiaire, la petite-bourgeoisie ». Selon Blondin, « l'animateur se croit détaché de toute idéologie », mais « en se cantonnant à l'animation sociale et à la participation dans certains quartiers bien définis, il empêche les travailleurs de voir que leurs véritables intérêts sont ceux de l'ensemble de la classe ouvrière. En refusant de leur donner les instruments d'analyse nécessaires à une juste compréhension de leurs intérêts et de la société, il les empêche de découvrir les véritables causes de leur exploitation et les solutions adéquates au renversement de cet état de choses ».

L'ADDS reconnaît quand même la contribution positive des animateurs sociaux : « il serait malhonnête de jeter la pierre aux animateurs sociaux de cette époque. Il faut restituer les débuts de l'animation sociale dans leur contexte historique. Dans les années '60, le mouvement ouvrier au Québec n'était pas ce qu'il est aujourd'hui. La théorie marxiste était pas ce qu'il est aujourd'hui. La théorie marxiste était à peu près inconnue au Québec. Et si, aujourd'hui, le mouvement ouvrier a pu progresser, se développer, nous le devons en bonne partie au travail de ces animateurs sociaux. Plusieurs militants politiques ont débuté en faisant de l'animation sociale. Ce n'est que par un long processus de critique, d'autocritique de leurs pratiques et par l'étude de la théorie marxiste qu'ils en sont venus à délaisser l'animation sociale pour un travail plus politique. Toutefois, on ne peut refaire l'histoire, nous devons aujourd'hui critiquer et dénoncer ouvertement l'idéologie de l'animation sociale. Cependant nous pouvons utiliser avec avantages différentes techniques d'animation sociale (comme les jeux de groupes). Nous aussi, nous devons susciter la participation, favoriser la socialisation, améliorer la diffusion et la réception de l'information, mais en fonction de nos objectifs, de notre idéologie propre ».

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<sup>291</sup> Lagüe, 1979

<sup>292</sup> (August 1973). *ADDS... Analyse*, Fond Clinique communautaire de Pointe St-Charles, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

In addition to the influence on analyses of groups, the participants recognise that they learned quite a bit from those years of agitation, and that the overall political consciousness of activists in the neighbourhood made a leap:

Marguerite On a appris que quand il y a un problème, faut que tu le règles. Il n'y a pas de problème qui n'a pas sa solution. La preuve c'est qu'à Pointe St-Charles, et dans le Sud-ouest en général, quand il y a un problème, tu as du monde qui se lève, qui essaye de le régler. Ça, le monde a appris ça pour une bonne secousse et ça, c'est pas perdu (...)

Michèle Ça a eu un impact dans la relève. Nos enfants n'acceptent pas l'injustice. Ils les voient leurs droits. (...) Ça a fait que la conscience politique des gens en général aussi s'est élevée. Le monde a fait un moyen bond (...) Ça a commencé avant les ML, mais c'est venu renforcer ça.

Anna Oui, vous avez commencé à parler des structures capitalistes, patriarcales, impérialistes

Thérèse Oui, tu l'as très bien compris

Anna Si on regarde tous les groupes qui ont commencé à la fin des années 70, début des années 80, il me semble qu'il y a toujours les deux volets, service/entraide et politique. Peut-être ce qui était positif c'est qu'on est passé, à l'époque, de la charité, et du « self-help », à quelque chose de plus politisé. Peut-être que c'était trop, mais on est peut-être arrivés à trouver le juste milieu. Je trouve que c'est ce qui fait la force de ce quartier. Les groupes sont politiques, parlent du capitalisme...

Michèle ...mais en même temps ils sont capables d'être sur le terrain.

Thus, although the passage of the ML groups in the Point was filled with tensions, many activists came out of this period with a newfound political consciousness which continues to mark the neighbourhood today. And, although many groups in Montréal folded after this period, as did the Maison de Quartier and the comptoir alimentaire (of the Club populaire) in the Point, all the other groups in the neighbourhood survived. And this despite the red-baiting by local elite, and attempts at government cooptation that were also rampant at this time.

## RED-BAITING AND GOVERNMENT COOPTATION

Radical or not, most of the community groups and citizens' committees were red-baited in some way by local elite. Some of the local elite took their revenge, not only by engaging in public name-calling, but also by increasing their already existing control on the loans and housing allocated to people known to be associated with the activist community:

Marguerite C'est incroyable ce qu'il a pu faire comme harcèlement ce gars-là. (...) Mais ce monsieur là, ça a toujours été difficile, il nous criait après. Crier après nous autres, c'est une chose. Mais il faisait aussi des menaces aux gens de leur enlever des choses! (...) était conseiller municipal mais il était aussi à la Caisse! Il coupait les emprunts, il exerçait son pouvoir!

Louise Il était directeur du conseil d'administration alors il avait un pouvoir énorme. « Fais ce que tu veux, j'ai juste un mot à dire, et tu n'auras pas rien! »

Marguerite Il était sur le comité des prêts, c'est lui qui acceptait qu'on prête ou non. Il y allait par des menaces « Non mais là vous autres! Je vous ai vu, je vous ai entendu et si vous continuez ça, vous l'aurez pas votre prêt! »

Along with individual activists, groups were red-baited as well, most likely the government attempting to scare people away from organising efforts:

Maureen The RCMP came to St Columbus House and demanded all our files. Emptied the place! It was during GMAPCC. At the same time they were doing St Columba House, they were doing other groups in Cote de Neige, Verdun all these other places too. They were taking their files too. I remember almost dying. I was in St Columba House and it was lunch hour, and there was no one in the office but me. Luckily, Mr. McDougall was upstairs. And he is a Westmount type, very powerful, smart looking man, like, "don't mess with me"! The RCMP came in, and they were saying to me (*clap clap*), "come on!" -- three big burlies in their leather jackets -- and "we want this and we want that". And all of sudden I heard this voice. It sounded like God, that came downstairs and said, "And who wants to know? Who is the boss here? Who wants our files? Where is your warrant?" All of a sudden the attitude changed. Before that, it was "hey missy (*clap clap*) hop to it!" Like you know, "get us this stuff."

Myrna But they took it.

Maureen Oh yeah they took everything. Yeah! Because we were communist!  
(...)

Maureen That was the thing that *scared people* like Myrna off you know. Sure it had it's effect. You know where there is smoke there is fire, people thought "maybe there is something going on there".

Maureen Magnan also used the scare tactics through the Church. That the people who were out there demonstrating against him and everything were the "communist crazies". All the time, anytime you wanted to scare people off, that was the tactic that was used. The Liberals used it. (...)

Denise Like I said before too. How many times did they write "communist clinic" on the clinic, to discredit it?

More subtle, however, were the consequences of government funding for groups that had previously functioned on a volunteer basis. After an initial "upper" stimulated by large amounts of funding – over 300 workers paid on LIP grants in the Point<sup>293</sup> -- in-fighting around funding issues ended up demobilising many groups in the neighbourhood:

Maureen They threw in the LIP's to cool out all the people. (...) Government grants, like for example PERM. They would give them 5, 6, 10 jobs. And then people would be paid to do what they normally did. (...) on a volunteer basis. And then other people, well, "why should I go and volunteer?" Or, "why should I demonstrate?" "Why should I do anything? You get paid to do it. Why don't I get paid to do it? You picked her to do this job. I can do that job just as good. Why her, why not me?".

Anna So there was in-fighting.

Myrna Well it was conflict, yes.

Denise I think that's what they wanted.

Maureen That was a whole set up. That was a set up.

Anna What do you mean?

Denise Because they you give money. You pay someone to do something and the other person's doing the same thing but she, or he is not getting paid. That's a piss off, you know. But they're doing that to

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<sup>293</sup> Beauchemin, Beauger, Beauregard, Boutin, & Perron, 1973.

create conflict between people that are working together, you know. It weakens the group. And it separates the people within.

Maureen People have so little. They're on welfare, they're hardly making it anyway. And then seeing somebody get a salary for what you do. What better way to cause all this conflict? (...)

Denise It was dismantling the groups. Well they laugh at that. It didn't cost them that much to do either. They said, "Well we didn't do nothing. We gave you money". But its them, they caused it.

The activists from Maison de Quartier had a similar analysis at the time :

Pour bien des travailleurs du quartier cela est l'occasion d'avoir un bon gagne-pain, de développer des compétences en organisation de groupes et en administration. C'est stimulant de pouvoir rendre des services concrets à ses semblables. Malheureusement, l'absence de direction politique correcte de ce projet ne fait qu'encourager les courants bourgeois: - par exemple, les directeurs des projets prenaient les mêmes méthodes de direction que celles des boss des entreprises capitalistes. Cette absence renforcit aussi les tendances réformistes des groupes en laissant croire que ces projets issus de l'État bourgeois permettraient un meilleur contrôle des conditions de Vie pour la classe ouvrière<sup>294</sup>.

Although the groups were weakened by red-baiting and attempts at government cooptation, and despite the tensions elicited by the arrival of the Marxist Leninist discourse and organising in the groups, they still managed to continue their work. One of the reasons that explains, at least in part, why many local activists were not completely demobilised by what was happening at the time, was the continuing presence of faith-based organising. Although, as I will show below, it is during this period that the local elite pushed the Fils de la Charité out of the Churches, they did not succeed in stopping their organising efforts.

### THE CONTINUING INFLUENCE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANISING

During this period of radicalisation and politicisation, the Fils de la Charité were continuing their work with the MTC teams and with folks in the

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<sup>294</sup> Maison de Quartier (1976). Bilan de la Maison de Quartier de Pointe St-Charles, 1973-1976, p.19-20. Fonds de la Clinique communautaire, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles,.



citizens' committees<sup>295</sup>. They were clearly aligned with the progressive elements of the neighbourhood, against the local elite and the Liberals, and for worker and citizen control of social and health services, economic and political institutions<sup>296</sup>. In fact, many of the progressive priests shared the political analysis of the FRAP, and even of the ML groups, who were calling for the formation of a revolutionary workers' party<sup>297</sup>. Where they differed, however, was in the organisational form and tactics – they did not agree with the infiltration, manipulation, and philabustering that the activists engaged in to get to their goals<sup>298</sup>. In fact, in the meetings of the MTC, local activists, including Thérèse and Marguerite, would discuss local dynamics, share experiences and attempt to find ways to save the committees and groups from the devastating methods of the ML activists<sup>299</sup>. It was during this time of upheaval that the local elite cracked down on the progressive priests and their organising activities.

Although the local elite had always been critical of the work of the Fils de la Charité – not taking kindly to their kind of parish work, to their critiques of tradition in the Church, and especially to the fact that the local elite had been dislodged from many positions of power within the neighbourhood – it was during this period that they came out publicly against the “revolutionary communist agitation” of the parish priests<sup>300</sup>. The political involvement of the latter had given the local elite an excuse to repress them and their work. In early 1973, the Fils de la Charité were « relieved of their duties » by the Church authorities: « A force d'être avec les travailleurs, les assistés sociaux, les chômeurs, etc., en prêchant la justice sociale, en participant à des manifestations

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<sup>295</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22nd, 2003.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22nd, 2003.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

ouvrières, les Fils sont classés comme étant des ‘être dangereux et révolutionnaires’ »<sup>301</sup> :

Michèle Monseigneur Grégoire les a mis dehors en leur disant « Vous annoncez l'évangile seulement aux pauvres ! ». Moi, c'est à partir de ce moment-là que je n'ai plus rien voulu savoir de l'église!... Mais je me souviens, à l'époque (...) ce qu'il disait c'est « Monsieur Loïselle, monsieur Magnan et monsieur Laporte ne sont pas à l'aise d'aller à l'église le dimanche, parce que de la manière dont les Fils annoncent l'évangile ou quand ils parlent de la vie, eux, ils ne se reconnaissent pas. Alors on vous demande de changer le discours pour qu'ils s'adressent à tous! ». Les Fils disaient « Non, la majorité c'est le monde qui ont pas une cenne, c'est pas vrai qu'on va changer tout notre discours pour ces 3 là ! » Jeoffre Laporte s'est rallié à ce groupe un peu plus tard mais Magnan et Loïselle n'étaient déjà plus à l'aise dans la paroisse. Le choix de monseigneur Grégoire était clair.

Thérèse Ils (les Fils) étaient dérangeants.

Marguerite Mais Lorenzo nous a raconté dernièrement que c'était un peu plus nuancé que ça. À l'Archevêché, quelqu'un avait dit aux Fils « Faites vos propositions, mais lentement, doucement. Apportez-les moi et je saurai quand et comment les transmettre à Monseigneur Grégoire ». Certains Fils, plus pressés que d'autres, voulaient amener leurs propositions plus vite ! Alors ils ont fait un genre d'ultimatum en disant à Monseigneur Grégoire « On veut travailler à notre façon et si on ne peut pas, nous, on s'en va ! » En gros, c'est ça que ça voulait dire! Et comme, à l'Archevêché la menace pesait déjà sur eux à cause de leurs manières de faire qui dérangeaient l'élite locale, ils ont été mis dehors...Les Fils auraient dû y aller plus *molo*.

In the end, although the local elite managed to “convince” the Fils de la Charité to leave their Church, the effervescence of the citizens' committees and community groups continued, as well as the faith-based meetings that citizens had been participating in for several years.

In fact, because they were banned from the Church, and because the Fils de la Charité and some of the MTC members were still wanting to continue

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<sup>301</sup> Guay, L. & Soutière, M. (1973). A Pointe St-Charles: Éclatement de l'église locale, p.4. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

with their meetings, they created what came to be called “les communautés de base”<sup>302</sup>. The latter, no longer associated with the Church and the Action Catholique, became a place for people to get together to celebrate mass – a popular mass. Once a month, they would meet to discuss current events, and personal issues, with the gospel:

Marguerite C'était à une rencontre de chrétiens où Claude Ryan avait été invité pour faire un genre de conférence pour parler de lui et dire c'est quoi un chrétien engagé. On a fait un échange et c'est après ça qu'on a parti un groupe qu'on a fait baptiser comme communauté de base par le père Kunz, peut-être 5 ans plus tard. Mais depuis cette première rencontre, on a continué. On a commencé à se regrouper, pour avoir des célébrations différentes que celles de la paroisse. Le curé de la paroisse St-Jean, disait la messe ordinaire en haut et nous on avait nos rencontres de communauté de base au sous-sol, la même journée.

Anna Vous alliez à la messe à l'église avant?

Marguerite Non, on n'y allait pas. (...) C'était rare que des gens fassent les deux.

Isabelle Dans les communautés de base il y avait souvent un prêtre, un célébrant?

Marguerite Toujours (...) C'est une célébration qui durait 3 heures intéressantes plutôt qu'une demie-heure plate! Il y avait toujours 3 personnes qui préparaient la rencontre avec le prêtre. On trouvait des événements avec lesquels on pouvait faire une réflexion sur l'évangile. Ça menait toujours à un agir.

Thérèse C'était engagé, ça venait renforcer notre agir.

Marguerite Mais c'était vraiment une célébration

This space to make the links between lived experience and the gospel was, and continues to be, and important lieu for analysis that supports the activism of several of the participants. A similar phenomenon began in the mid 1970s on the English side, this time within the walls of St. Columba House:

Myrna We do a worship service. When we do comparisons with our community. How it affects our lives (...) Once a week (...) We do a

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<sup>302</sup> The MTC no longer existed in Point St. Charles as of the early 1980s. Personal communication, Ugo Benfante, Fils de la Charité, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

reading out of the Bible. We can select it. We read it. We talk about it. What it means to us. How it affects us in our work. And our community (...) We've been doing this for 25 years or more.

Isabelle Alors ils partent de l'évangile et ils traduisent ça dans leur travail. Pour les Francophones, c'est plutôt l'inverse. Dans la JOC, tu pars d'un fait, que t'as vécu dans ton travail, pi ensemble t'essayes de voir comment ça te touche et comment ça peut rejoindre l'évangile (Anna translates)

Myrna For us, it can go that way too.

Donna What ends up happening is that because we've been involved in so many different things, that when we do the lectionary that we are looking at, it just jumps out at you! We have no problems related what we are living to what we are reading. No problems. There are times we've left worship and said, "we did not like that reading at all!" I have problems with it. I struggle with it. But that's fine.

Anna How do you feel this is related to your activism? Is it related?

Myrna Yeah! How is it not? (...)

Donna I'd like to give one example that really speaks for me. There is a parable that is called "the widow and the judge". So you have a widow that is constantly going to the judge, demanding her rights. Now, if you know the history of the Bible, women first off are very low-class citizens. And to be a widow is even worse because no one is taking care of you. So, you have this woman who approaches the judge, and who is asking for her rights as a human being. And when we read that passage, its so much like at PACE. Because so many times we've had to go to the School Board and demand, and fight for our rights. To have access to education! I was able to relate that so much to that parable because, number one, despite what society said about that woman she felt she had rights as a person. And she was not going to give up. She was going to pester that judge until she got what was her due. So reading that I was able to see that that is pretty much what we do at the School Board. We pester them, and pester them, until we get our due (...)

Anna It helps you analyse.

Donna Yeah! It reinforces and it gives conviction (...) And what you are doing is right.

Thus, at St-Columba House as well, the work with the progressive ministers had a role to play in the activism of the English community<sup>303</sup>. For Thérèse, Marguerite, Myrna and Donna, as for many other neighbourhood activists, their involvement in faith-based organising was, and continues to be an important part of their lives as activists. Not only did their regular get-togethers strengthen their commitment to community activism, but the support they received from their friends and peers in these spaces helped sustain them through hard times, including the tensions around language that were also rampant in the 1970s.

### THE “QUÉBEC QUESTION” AND LINGUISTIC/CULTURAL TENSIONS

Added into the mix of this period is the sovereignty issue, which began, during this time period, to play a greater role in Québec in general, and in Point St. Charles specifically. After the silencing of the radical elements (FLQ), the stage was left wide open to the Parti Québécois, which proceeded to monopolise the discourse on the issue, and was elected in 1976<sup>304</sup>. Given the linguistic composition of the Point, tensions were inevitable, especially in the organisations that “belonged to both communities”, such as the Community Clinic. In Point St. Charles PQ sympathisers were organising in and around the groups in the mid 1970s<sup>305</sup>, there was a campaign for the “francisation” of the Clinic<sup>306</sup>, and individuals from Alliance Québec were agitating against sovereignty<sup>307</sup>. It was in this context that tensions that had previously been minimal began to take on a new flavour.

Maureen     Those were the times that Quebec was changing. The pendulum  
                  was swinging

Anna         from where to where?

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<sup>303</sup> This question could be developed in future research.

<sup>304</sup> (May 1980). *Vie ouvrière*, 145, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CEP-101.

<sup>305</sup> Groupe d’action politique (1972). *Fonce pi Fesse*. Manifeste ’72 du Groupe d’action politique de la Pointe, p.4. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.028.38.

<sup>306</sup> David, 1972.

<sup>307</sup> Personal communication, Eric Shragge, November 2002.

- Maureen from Anglophone power to Francophone majority power
- Denise it had an effect
- Myrna because it came very fast. It came fast. I mean, at one meeting they were in English and French, and the next meeting you go, nobody said the next meeting is going to be Francophone. It would just happen! Things just happened. “Boom!” Like that, you know? So If you’re the Anglophone on the other side, its really like a slap in the face. So I found it extremely, extremely hard. Especially when you work so hard to get the organisations going. And all of a sudden it was like you didn’t count anymore. The Anglophones didn’t count anymore.
- Anna So you felt pushed out. You felt you had done stuff in good faith and that you are being sort of
- Myrna There is more to it than that. (...) I just don’t know what word to use. From my point of view, I couldn’t understand why we couldn’t do it together. I couldn’t understand if we lived in a community that’s Francophone/Anglophone, ‘cause at that time we are talking about there was more Anglophones here. Why couldn’t we work 50/50? Why couldn’t we do this stuff? Because even today, I don’t see it as all different. I see that we are people with needs, we all have needs together. So I found it extremely hard.
- Myrna I remember the thing that always amazed me the most was how well everybody got along together before
- Maureen Look, I remember one action I went on. And it was really at the beginning. When I was still at the stage of, “do I want to do this or don’t I?” And there were two buses, it was a welfare rights action, and there was two buses. One bus was the French group and the other bus was the English group. And they were calling names. Calling names back and forth. “Tête carrée!” “You shut up you frog!” And they’re going’ back and forth like this. And it was all in fun. And I was looking, wondering “oh my god what am I doing here!”. You know, “Are they really mad at one another?” And then they get off the bus, and they’re all in there together with their signs and all.

The historic tension between English and French, that people had lived with for decades and that had always been in the background, came to the fore during this period.

Initially refusing any association with the political action committees of the FRAP, because of their pro-sovereign stance, many activists in the English groups came to realise, over time, that the French had reason to want a redress of the colonial situation they had been in for centuries<sup>308</sup>. Nevertheless, the participants in the English group, argue that folks in the neighbourhood were “blamed” for the doings of “rich” English elite:

Denise        The companies that were here were mainly English companies.

Myrna        That’s right.

Denise        So is it the English population’s fault that they would hire English first and French second? It’s not. You want a job, you are English, you are in. You take the job. You are not going to say “give it to a French guy!” You are in, you are in. Now people got blamed for that. “Ah, its offered to the English” and this and that, and “there is nothing for the French”. So they were blamed. The residents were blamed for that and it wasn’t their fault. (...)

Maureen      That’s where the power came in though. It was the English who owned the companies.

Denise        That’s right. They owned the companies. But they happened to be English. If it would have been French it would have been the other way.

Maureen      But in the companies, the Francophone didn’t have the opportunity to move up, but the Anglophone did. But they got blamed. Instead of the company or the guys with big bucks, the owners. They were mad. The French were mad at the English people because they got better jobs.

Although much of the awareness on the English-side about relations of domination between English and French in Québec had come from the political education done by organisers sympathetic to the nationalist cause,

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<sup>308</sup> Benello, 1972, p.489-490.

much of the anger around the issue was sparked by the agitating of other organisers, more “dogmatic” in their approach:

- Maureen I think that the people resented that the shit was started by so-called professionals coming in. It didn't stem from people in the Point. The shit of “the Anglophones have no place here”. The professionals had their own political agenda
- Anna So there is a bit of a class analysis here. So when you're talking about professionals, who are you referring too? The clinic or...
- Maureen The clinic for one place. And I remember one of the organisers saying “its only about 35 percent that are Anglophones, we don't have to translate”. You know, “All of them should be speaking French by now”. And, that's it , forget it. It's not like, “yeah they should be speaking French, and how can we help to make that happen”. You know.
- Anna No recognition perhaps of people's level of education, or level of being able to go back to school? Or whether you had money to go to school?
- Maureen That's right. And not understanding the community itself. Coming in brand new into a community which has been going on for however long. People in there had been doing things their own way, getting along the way they did
- Anna calling each other names but still getting together
- Maureen Yes and would help each out and all kinds of things. Not understanding any of that. I think that professionals have a place and are needed, but they have to understand what is their own agenda, be conscious of if they are trying to develop the community or their own politics. There is a difference.
- Anna Does that ring a bell with you at all Myrna? Do you feel that it was the woman who lives next to you who was also in the group? Or do you feel that it was...
- Myrna Oh no. I think it came from politics.

Maureen's resentment is palpable, at the fact that “outside” organisers were coming in with their big ideas, not recognising the reality of the neighbourhood, and especially, not recognising the efforts of some of the English folks to redress the imbalance in power. She goes on to argue that:

Maureen And its not hard to initiate problems in a community were



nobody has very much. You know, if you tell the Francophones, “do you realise you are not working because its all these Anglophones that have your jobs.” Its not hard to stir up resentment.

Anna The English ended up separate in St Columba House, but do you feel also that some people just gave up?

Maureen I think so. It was like, “what the hell is this?!?”

Denise I think it is obvious we did.

Frances because I was on the Board and I gave up too

Maureen It was like, “this is just too much. Not only are you working for the clinic or whatever organisation and doing everything possible you can there, and then you have to fight a language problem as well. To hell with it!”

For many English activists, who had tried in good faith to work on these issues, and who felt pushed aside during this period, these events marked a turning point in their participation in community groups.

The French group also remembers this period as being filled with contradictory tensions. Although they recognise that the dogmatism of some of the pro-sovereignty activists did not help the cause, they also claim that not all English folks were as open as the activists that the English participants were talking about:

Isabelle Historiquement, est-ce qu'on peut associer la radicalisation des différences linguistiques au fait français qui prenait sa place avec le RIN, le mouvement d'indépendance nationale, l'arrivée du PQ au pouvoir en 76? Les anglophones nous ont dit « On a participé à la mise sur pied des organismes, qu'on pense à la Clinique, aux Services juridiques, au PEP. Mais un moment donné, on a senti qu'on se faisait tasser. »

Michèle Moi c'est ça que je pense. Il y a eu du tassage. Je me souviens d'une assemblée de la Clinique. On avait invité un animateur indépendant parce que ça *fightait* les Anglophones et les Francophones. C'était toujours dur. On ne sait pas ce qui s'était passé entre le moment où il l'a engagé et celui où il est arrivé mais il est monté sur la scène et a dit « Bon! Écoutez, les Anglophones, vous ne parlez pas le français encore mais on vous donne deux ans

pour l'apprendre! C'est la dernière fois que vous avez des écouteurs, de la traduction. Y'est temps, là! On est au Québec! » Le directeur en était pas revenu, il était en maudit contre lui !. Après ça, ça a été repris par des francophones très nationalistes. Pas des péquistes, du monde du RIN. Ils faisaient le décompte des anglophones et il n'y aurait plus de traduction simultanée... C'était virulent! À une autre réunion, les Anglais étaient venus avec des fusils à l'eau! Ils pitchaient des chaises! C'était une réunion de la Clinique. Ça avait été épouvantable!

Thérèse À St-Columba House, il y a un soir où on a pensé que ça allait sauter! C'était carrément bien situé, les Anglophones d'un côté, les Francophones de l'autre. Ça avait chauffé ce soir là! On avait eu peur. Un moment donné ça criait « Speak White! »

Marguerite Il y avait de la traduction en anglais mais quand une personne a fait une proposition en français, quelqu'un s'est levé et a dit « Speak White! » Ça veut dire de parler en anglais.

Michèle Les francophones, on le prend pas de se faire dire ça! Après, ça s'est tassé un peu. Pour être au CA de la Clinique, et j'imagine que c'était pareil à l'Aide juridique, il y avait un pourcentage de francophones et d'anglophones. Mais il fallait que les anglophones comprennent le français. Ils pouvaient parler en anglais mais il fallait qu'ils comprennent le français. Et ça, ça avait été une autre insulte pour les anglophones, ils ne comprenaient pas! Et tu avais toujours les « nationaux » qui disaient « On est au Québec, apprenez le Français! » Il y a qui disaient ça mais c'était pas tout le monde (...) Il y a eu un bout *rough*. Après, il ya eu une ouverture vers les anglophones mais ils l'ont jamais prise.

Thus, the anger of the French citizens, against English domination in Québec society, that had been awakened by the agitation around the sovereignty issue, ended up shaking things up in the groups, especially within those groups where both linguistic communities were active. It was not all the English folks who were ready to recognise the imbalance in power, and although some recognised that the fight of the French was about seeking justice, others reacted with racist slurs, and still others by removing themselves from the leadership of community groups.

Notwithstanding all this, there was and still is a will to work together, especially among the citizens who were leaders in the groups (see Chapter 6 for more):

Myrna I remember, we had a panel at St Columba House when this big issue came up. And we met in the big hall. We had the Anglophones and Francophones come and meet with us. We had a talking stick because we didn't know what kind of a meeting it was going to be. So if you had the stick you could talk. But people took their turns and went around. The Anglophones and the Francophones. We just didn't understand how all this was happening. Because after all, they believed in what we were doing. And we believed in what they were doing.. So we didn't understand, why all of a sudden we had these big issues! And we talked about things changing so much just for the Francophones. We did our business that we had to do, and we didn't have time for this – we called it “this foolishness” – that was going on.. So that was interesting.

Donna What was good about the meeting was that it provided a safe place where people felt they could really voice their opinions and not be judged or shut down. So it didn't matter what side of the fence you sat on, you were able to say what you wanted to say and you weren't judged by it. And you were welcome back the next day.

Anna And that was on the national question.

Donna This was the first referendum. And like Myrna said, in the end, after it all, we saw that everybody was scared. This is the bottom line. We all are working here. We all have the same goals in this community. Whether you are French or English. “To hell with all of that!. Lets work together!!” Like, “to hell with what the Government wants. We know what we want. Lets work on that.”

Above and beyond the tensions related explicitly to the political turn of this period, tensions around power and organisational culture, also contributed, according to Benello, to the widening gulf between the English and French groups in the area :

Although animosity among the English speaking groups has had to deal with the problem of being a minority within a French speaking majority, the parallel with black groups in the United States is in one sense reversed, since by virtue of being Anglophone, English speaking groups are identified with the dominant elites, which are English speaking, and thus distrusted by Francophone groups with similar

objectives. Although English speaking welfare recipients are in much the same situation as French speaking welfare recipients, there is even here some objective basis for claiming discrimination, since English groups tend to receive considerably more aid from private welfare and service organisations than the French groups (...) English groups often have animators who are paid by the English agencies which in turn are funded at least in part by members of the English elite, and have members of the elite on their boards<sup>309</sup>.

Michèle's reaction to this analysis supports Benello's claim that the French did not trust the English groups, but specifically, Parallel Institute:

Michèle    Moi j'ai été plusieurs fois, parce qu'ils voulaient mettre un Conseil de quartier sur pieds. Mais dans le fond, ce qu'ils voulaient, c'est que les subventions de la Clinique aillent là. Pi que Parallèle redistribue cet argent là. On essayait de savoir c'est qui leur conseil d'administration, pis y ont jamais voulu nous le dire. Et moi je pense que ces questions ont leur raison d'être (...) C'était pas du monde proche du monde.

Maureen, on the other hand, also reacting to Benello's analysis, argues that the Francophones – specifically the professionals or university-educated allies – had an erroneous perception of their organisers and of the members of the groups:

Maureen    Professional Francophones who came in, I found thought the Anglophones were like “Westmount types”! That is the impression I got. They think we are all above them! That we have more money than anybody! Like we're not on equal footing with everyone else.

Not only were the members of the groups equally poor, she argues, but the organisers at Parallel were always scrambling for funding:

Maureen    Parallel paid by elite charitable English institutions? Jeez! Every time they turned around they were begging for a buck! Here and there just to keep going! Half the time on unemployment insurance! Getting topped by a couple of bucks! Working seventy hours a week! I have to give them credit for that. When I read that it was like “arghhhh!”.

Anna        We read a lot of documents that said “where does Parallel get their money?” And apparently, Parallel was closed. And did not want to tell anybody where the money came from. That's why there was all

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<sup>309</sup> Benello, 1972, p.489-490.

this “unknown” around them (*Maureen laughs*).

Denise Well if they talked maybe they’d have to share!

Maureen Well, they didn’t have a lot to share, that’s for sure!

Whatever the conclusion one draws from this, there were, without a doubt, differences in the ways that the French and the English groups functioned, as the following series of excerpts illustrates :

Maureen My impression and it could be totally off the wall, is that the francophone groups did very *nice* things. We were radical.

Denise Yeah, exactly.

Maureen We did actions. We wanted to get to see a representative of the power, so we went. We would definitely work back and forth with the French groups, and support one another. But we found, when we were supporting the Francophone groups, they would go and picket an empty building. And our reaction was, “What the hell are you doing here? We want to see somebody! We want to do something!” (...)

Denise They weren’t daring, lets put it this way. They didn’t have the balls that the English people had. They tried to do it in a more peacefully

Anna Why do you think that is? I’m wondering if, you know the organisers who came in, GMAPCC, like Katadotis and gang, and all those people from Parallel. Who came in with their ideas of Alinsky style of organising. Organising using pressure and rights, and victories. Like the whole thing about small victories immediately. “Let’s do a sit-in, we’re going to stay there until we win. We’re not going to move until we win”. That sort of training that was given (...)

Denise Well maybe it is for some people, but I don’t think it’s what made the difference.

Maureen But that could very well be. That definitely that was our training. That was my training

Thérèse Ils travaillaient à leurs affaires, à leur façon. C’était deux façons différentes de travailler mais on avait quand même des idéologies qui se rejoignaient. Leur approche des personnes était différente.

Michèle Ils étaient plus pragmatiques. Peut-être que je me trompe mais je pense au « 20 miles à l’heure », par exemple. Les anglophones ont

eu une réunion un soir par rapport à un enfant qui s'était fait frapper (par une automobile). Ils trouvaient ça effrayant et le lendemain, ils avaient écrit « 20 miles à l'heure » partout! Ils étaient à la sortie de l'école pour parler au monde et ça pas été long que le trafic a été ralenti à 30 miles à l'heure. C'était fini, ils avaient gagné! Nous, les francophones, on avait été tout aussi scandalisés qu'eux mais on discutait encore sur comment on ferait la bataille! C'est pas qu'on ne faisait rien mais on planifiait, c'était plus long. Alors que les anglophones disaient « Hey! Il est mort! Demain matin, on y va! »

- Isabelle      Semble-t-il qu'ils avaient aussi une manière de former leurs gens? Les anglophones nous ont dit qu'une des différences, c'était qu'ils se trouvaient plus radicaux, plus agressifs, plus fonceurs. Et ils disaient des francophones qu'on était plus « polis » face au pouvoir. Donc, ça pouvait prendre plus de temps.
- Michèle      Moi je suis convaincue de ça.
- Thérèse      Moi aussi je suis convaincue (...)
- Michèle      L'institut parallèle était très organisé pour les anglophones. Ils leur donnait des cours. Les gens étaient plus revendicateurs et plus vite que nous.

According to the participants, the organisational cultures were different. The English, trained in Alinsky-style « in your face » organising, were more pragmatic in their approach, while the French, had a more ideological approach, which tended to take the issues to their root, but which also made it such that they weren't out there in the streets in the same way as the English.

Thus, although language, and the politics around the sovereignty question definitely contributed to the tensions between French and English groups in the Point in the 1970s, the differing organisational cultures and traditions also had a role to play. While many citizens active in English groups became aware of the injustices around language through political education facilitated by English organisers sympathetic to the nationalist cause, other citizens reacted to the increasing French activism with fear, anger, scorn, and racism. And, while French citizens were learning about their own oppression, their relations with the English citizens became tense, often spurred on by hard-

line discourse which did not necessarily recognise that many of the English in the Point were just as poor as the French. Although these tensions faded after the 1980 referendum, they did not disappear, and as the English citizens slowly retreated from many of the groups they had helped set-up, some into their homes, and others into the English groups at St-Columba House, the “two solitudes” became even more solitary.

### TENSIONS WITH ORGANISERS/ANIMATORS

It is also during this period that the tensions between « ordinary citizens » and organisers/animators began to come to a head. It is during the mid-1970s that English citizens “pushed out” the organisers from Parallel Institute. Lesemann and Thiénot, writing in 1972, critiqued Parallel, arguing that their “failure” was related to its : « caractère professionnel (...) avec ses intentions de rationaliser et planifier et même de rentabiliser les comités de citoyens, par exemple, n’ont-ils pas pu être perçus comme une tentative d’intervention d’une classe sur une autre ? »<sup>310</sup>. Maureen, reacting to the idea that Parallel organisers were middle-class folks imposing themselves on the working-class, makes an important nuance:

- Maureen I think that anybody, going in anywhere has their own agenda. Nobody is going in blank “whatever happens, happens”. But as far as a middle-class imposing its vision. For the greater part, I would say “no”. *There was a tension*. At the end, I think it had to do with the fact that you have a certain life as an organiser. Four years, eight years, then you move on. If you haven’t moved up people enough to fit in there as the leaders, you haven’t done your job. I think they were seeing themselves still as the leaders. I think there were people around saying, “no, you’re not”. But I really don’t see it as an overall picture of this middle-class coming in, imposing their point of view. They were probably, yes, middle class. 90% of professionals are. But they came in wanting to know. The Gwynn’s, the Sue Harvey’s, Sue Morehead. I think the women who were involved.
- Anna Maybe it was a gender thing? These guys don’t talk about gender at all.

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<sup>310</sup> Lesemann & Thiénot, 1972c, p.495-497.

Maureen Sure. To me there was a gender thing.

So Maureen nuances Lessemann and Thiénot's claim of class friction, and adds in the gender relations that were at play (see Chapter 5). Nevertheless, members of the English groups affiliated with GMAPCC did end up pushing Parallel out of the Point, claiming that they had done their time, and were no longer working *with* the community for its self-identified needs:

Maureen And it wasn't always easy for (the professionals from Parallel) They weren't always accepted (...) There is a fine line. Like Parallel, overstaying their welcome and getting to a point where they were insisting on their politics, their issues, their priorities and forgetting the community. And that's not the way it works. (...) (When we pushed them out though), I felt like I was torn in two directions. For the citizens, it was important that the professional's were saying "okay you're getting there", you know. On the other hand, "but we need you to know the community is not ready and if I have to take a stand it's on the side of the citizens, thank you". And that definitely happened. And Parallel left, but it kind of left me in a lurch 'cause then I was really on my own with PACC, and running an organisation. Okay when an action came up. But for development? That wasn't me. I couldn't do that.

Although Maureen was one of the activists to assert citizen-control over professional-control, she is still conflicted about the result, realising that the professionals really did help in training and support, in pushing the political analysis, and in organisational development. And, although the participants claim that relations with organisers/animators/professionals were always touchy, and that there was always a tension between "what the community wants", and the organiser's personal, professional or political motives, they recognise that these kind of alliances were, and still are, central to community activism (see Chapter 6).

In fact, already in the 1970s, organisers and animators were struggling with these very questions. What is their role? Was it to be avant-garde revolutionaries pushing the debate and actions, or to do what the citizens



wanted? Françoise David, writing in 1972, highlighted the dilemma that many animators/organisers were faced with in their leadership of citizens' committees:

Les animateurs sociaux du POPIR, comme ceux d'autres mouvements populaires, sont en partie responsable (de la non-atteinte des objectifs). En appliquant le principe suivant lequel l'animateur doit laisser les citoyens procéder eux-mêmes à la définition de leurs besoins, l'animateur laisse planer de grandes incertitudes sur son rôle. D'une part, il s'interdit de provoquer une réflexion qui va jusqu'au fond des choses mais d'autre part, il ne peut généralement s'empêcher de pousser le groupe vers une telle priorité, tel type d'action, tel cheminement. Il se fait donc régulièrement accuser de « charrier » les gens alors que par ailleurs on s'interroge sur ses motivations idéologiques et pratiques (David, 1972, p.346).

Caught between a rock and hard place, the animators found themselves playing an ambiguous role, with differing effects. For example, what was the animator to do when citizens wanted to do NIMBY organising as did the Regroupement des citoyens in 1965, or organise for more police in their sector as did PACC in 1975? Citizen control meant citizen's deciding what they wanted to do based on their self-identified needs. The important nuance, however, and one of the major lessons of organising in the Point from 1963 to 1980, is that there is a constant need for political education that is done *with* the citizens. That is, through a true popular education process, people are encouraged to reflect on their experiences, and based on new information and concepts they analyse them, and then act on their discoveries. "Agitators", as I will show in the next chapter, are essential to this process.

This alliance, however, can, and did, in the case of ML activism and certain dynamics with organisers/animators (e.g., Maison de Quartier), become one of domination instead of dialogue, as Couillard and Mayer summarise here:

Les deux bilans (de la Maison de Quartier) questionnent sévèrement les permanents et les intellectuels militants ou plus précisément les « militants experts » pour reprendre le terme du 2<sup>e</sup> bilan. On y répète les critiques (...): contrôle et direction des organisations, bureaucratisme, établissement de leur pouvoir de classe, etc. (...) Quoi qu'il en soit, le

problème particulier que l'on doit signaler ici, comme on l'a vu précédemment, c'est une certaine carence dans le rôle d'appui et de soutien technique qu'une organisation populaire peut minimalement exiger de ces intellectuels. *Sinon, ce n'est pas effectivement une alliance, mais une domination*<sup>311</sup>.

Sometimes, however, the organisers/animators working with the citizens did manage to create the kind of alliance that did not reproduce relations of domination – many of the women associated with Parallel Institute and the Clinic, for example, as I will show in the next Chapter, had a lasting influence on the project participants because of their approach to organising. The Fils de la Charité, using “revision de vie” with MTC members – a process that is very similar to the popular education spiral that I presented in Chapter 2 – also succeeded in “agitating” people into political consciousness and action. Although they did meet with resistance, specifically from local elite and from citizens who were close to the latter, their work was central to the formation of a local leadership that has had incredible staying power.

To conclude, during this last period, of changing strategies, radicalisation, red-baiting and government cooptation, linguistic tensions, and tensions with organisers, there were many reasons to be completely demobilised. Although the Fils de la Charité were banned from the religious institutions, people active in faith-based organising continued to work together outside the official channels, and thereby creating a space to sustain each other through hard times. Although block organising did not bring about the “revolution” and even in some cases, brought about reactive campaigns, through an approach that was “close-to-the people”, many citizens found a voice, and together they won many small victories. Although many people were demobilised by the philabustering and style of ML organising, other activists came out of this period with a new awareness about class oppression, a political education that continues to influence activism in the Point today. Although several groups did not survive this period, and the Maison de

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<sup>311</sup>Couillard & Mayer, 1980, p.117.

Quartier fell apart, the Community Clinic, the Legal Aid Clinic, and the daycare continued to expand their services and actions, and are still today, models in citizen-run alternative services. Although some English citizens retreated from community activism, others continued to set-up alternative services within the walls of St-Columba House, such as an alternate school and a center for adults with handicaps. Although there were on-going tensions with organisers and animators, many “ordinary citizen’s” activist careers were jump-started through training, political education, and support that the latter provided. Thus, through the tensions of this period, change did emerge.

### CONCLUSION

From a neighbourhood controlled by the Church and its local elite, Point St. Charles has become a symbol of active citizenship throughout Québec. From the faith-based organising of the Action Catholique, led by the Fils de la Charité, and the citizen’s committees of the early 1960s emerged a “power to the people” movement by the end of the 1960s. Citizens, with the help progressive priests and social animators/organisers set-up alternatives services run for and by the people. By the turn of the decade, the neighbourhood had a health clinic, a legal aid clinic, a Club populaire des consommateurs, an adult education center, and a daycare; many of these alternative services became models for state-run health and social services that were set-up in the following years. By way of committees who were advocating on welfare, housing, urban issues, and consumer rights, citizens had improved their living conditions, forced institutions to reduce their repressive practices, and contributed to the movement that pressured the state to pass laws in these areas. At the same time, through the activities of the Rassemblement pour une action politique, and later the FRAP, many citizens became politicised on issues of electoral politics.

By the early 1970s, in the wake of a Montréal-wide radicalisation of the movement, citizens active in the groups began critiquing their past actions, and

integrating more of a class analysis. In light of this, many groups began changing strategies, working on street organising – closer to the people – and, at the same time, attempting to do explicit political education. A faction of activists became members of Marxist Leninist groups during this period, and began agitating for the creation of a revolutionary workers party that would build a socialist Québec. While their organising methods ended up stalling the functioning of many groups in the neighbourhood, their discourse made some headway, and many group members became more politicised. Because of their continued involvement in faith-based groups, and because of the pole of organising around St-Columba House, many local leaders were able to maintain control of their organisations and not be completely demobilised by the tensions of the time. And, out of the tensions between linguistic communities and between organisers and ordinary citizens emerged new learning and change.

All the participants in this project were part of this history, in one way or another. Each participant began her involvement somewhere during these years of social change. Be it through the Action Catholique, the Clinic, St-Columba House, or a citizens' committee, they all came out of their kitchens, into the community, to become leaders and activists. Hidden in this story, and the story that is generally told about the history of community activism in Québec, are the journey's of women – as women – around their strategic gender needs. As people were beginning to organise in neighbourhoods, in the 1960s, second wave feminism was burgeoning within the student and women's movement, to later come into the community, full force by the mid-1970s. What is less documented is that there were feminist agitators, amongst the animators and organisers, who were helping women in the groups to come to new awareness about gender oppression. Their journeys, from newfound awareness of strategic gender needs, to individual and collective actions, to living the tensions, and the impacts, is the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: WOMEN'S SPIRAL-LIKE JOURNEYS THROUGH HISTORY

The participants' journeys from silence to affirmation – as women – was jumpstarted by their participation in the (mixed) citizens' committees of the 1960s for some, for others in the political action committees, and still others through the alternative service groups which sprung up in the in late 1970s and early 1980s, building on the legacy of the earlier movement. It is this journey, a spiral-like one, that reflects the popular education and organising spiral discussed in the literature review, that I explore in this chapter.

Through their first involvements, as they *shared personal experiences* with other women in the groups, feminist *agitators* helped neighbourhood women name the oppressions they had been living in their family, in society and in the groups themselves. These *analyses*, applied to personal experience, lead to more awareness of root causes of personal problems, which, for all of the participants lead a serious “shaking-up” of the structures that they had grown up with: the Church, the state, capitalism, work and the couple. This *new awareness* led many of these women to take *action* on their newly identified strategic gender needs. They created their own spaces within the “mixed” community groups, as well as “women-only” groups, they took a public stand against sexism, and took their new “consciousnesses” into their personal lives. Once “eyes wide-open”, there was no turning back – they saw injustice everywhere. The *tensions* that ensued with their neighbours, the agitators, their husbands, and their family and friends, were oftentimes vicious, but the women kept on at their task. These tensions (new information), again, lead to more awareness, to deeper analysis, and again, to action. They were *sustained* by their anger, their belief that they were “doing the right thing”, the realisation that they were having an *impact*, and of course by the fun they had in the gang. Throughout this spiral

emerged continuous transformations of self and community, including increased power due to learning acquired through their activism.

In the first part of the chapter, I present this spiral-like journey, through the narratives, supported by archival materials. In the second part, I bring in my own metanarrative on the spiral (which already includes me), applying my conceptual framework, and making links with the literature. I show how this spiral captures the continuous (re)construction and (re)positioning of the participants, of their families, of the community through history. Although I attempt to tease out “results” from “analysis” for easier comprehension, this binary does not actually reflect the “results” themselves. Because of the methodology, as the reader will notice, the “analysis” (or reading of the narrative) is part and parcel of the narratives themselves, as participants, Isabelle and I reflect on the meaning of the experiences discussed. Because of this, my “readings”, as well as those of everyone involved in the process, shifted as we moved along in the process, and are present in the “results”. And, because of this spiral-like process, the chapter is not organised in a linear form (it does not follow the categories of the literature review: form, basis, motivations, etc.). Instead, it is a *gumbo ya ya* of voices and readings. In fact, not only are the “analyses” mixed in with the “results”, but the transformative spiral of the history-making process is present as well (I will discuss the spiral in the process in Chapter 6).

Before getting into the presentation of the spiral however, it is important to note that the reading of the narratives that is presented in this chapter has been reviewed by the participants – that it is a collective reading. At the end of Phase I, Isabelle and I presented an earlier version of the spiral to the French group<sup>312</sup>. At this meeting, we went through much of the content of this

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<sup>312</sup> As the project moved along, the image of the participants’ journeys through time started to take shape. Nearing the end of the process (May 2002), Isabelle and I noticed that the English group had integrated a feminist analysis into their discussions, in that they often discussed women’s specific experiences in their examples, and analysed gender relations. The French group, on the other hand, did not generally do so, and sometimes contradictory comments

chapter, and the participants interjected with questions, comments, corrections and additions. Later, during Phase II, after we had worked our way through the folder of analysis that is the basis for this chapter, it was clear that they recognised the spiral as reflecting their journeys<sup>313</sup>:

Thérèse Je suivais ça. C'est pareil comme si ma vie me passait devant les yeux. (...)

Michèle Je trouvais que c'était bien ce qu'on avait dit (...) En général, chapeau!

Anna Vous vous reconnaissez dans ce cheminement-là?

All Oui.

### THE JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

Although organising around strategic gender needs per se did not emerge in Point St. Charles until the mid to late 1970s, feminists were active in the burgeoning Second Wave Feminism movement<sup>314</sup> in the late 1960s. At this time, women all over Québec (and North America and Europe), not buying the

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were made on the topic. Given the latter, we decided to re-read all the transcripts with a specifically feminist lens; Isabelle re-read the French ones, and I re-read the English ones. We had a meeting to compare notes, discuss and analyze. I then took our notes to prepare a presentation for the French group. From all this emerged the spiral-like journey. We did not present this analysis to the English group. At the time, we decided that since there was a limited set of meeting dates, that we had other content we needed to discuss with the English group, and that the English group had integrated a feminist lens into its discussions, we would not present it to the English group.

<sup>313</sup> This kind of discussion, around readings of narratives, abound in the data, as will become clear as I move through the elements of the spiral. Often, through discussion, each of us deepened our analyses, brought in new information, and came out with new awareness. Due to concerns about space and redundancy, however, I do not comment them every time, but do a summary later on.

<sup>314</sup> In Québec there were two tendencies within first wave feminism: one which demanded recognition of women as individuals (Idola St-Jean) and another that demanded citizenship based on women's complementary roles as mothers ("tendance maternaliste", Fédération Nationale Saint-Jean Baptiste) (Cohen, 2000). For the history of the Suffragettes in Québec see Dumont, 1989. To summarize, the Fédération Nationale Saint-Jean Baptiste, the first feminist association, was founded in 1907 by Marie Gérin-Lajoie, and demanded the vote for women. By way of a pan-Canadian campaign in 1913, the vote for women in Canada was won in 1918. At this time, Québec was the only province left in which women were not allowed to vote – a bilingual committee called "Comité Provincial pour le suffrage féminin" was created but was unsuccessful. Later, Idola Saint-Jean and Thérèse Casgrain took on the cause. The cause was won in 1940.

liberal feminist discourse (e.g., Fédération des femmes du Québec, l'AFEAS) that equality was attained through the vote in 1940 and the abolition of the notion of "incapacité juridique" of the married woman in 1964, took to the streets to demand "l'autonomie, l'autodéfinition et l'égalité entre les sexes"<sup>315</sup>. Many feminists went beyond the demand that the State should recognise women's roles as complementary to that of men's, to focus instead on women's liberation. In fact, they took the debate into the personal sphere, and in doing that, took on the institution of marriage, the family, education, work, beauty stereotypes, and behaviours<sup>316</sup>

The first signs of this new wave of feminism in Québec emerged with the creation of the Montréal Women's Liberation Movement (1969), and a bit later, the birth of the Front de liberation des femmes du Québec (1970), whose activists were in large part associated with the Québec nationalist movement<sup>317</sup>. The former, with the financial backing of Henry Morgentaler, set-up the first women's centre in Québec in 1969<sup>318</sup>. For the first time, they brought into the public arena, demands around women's bodies, they organised against the objectification of women's bodies, demanded free and accessible contraceptives and abortions, and denounced violence against women. They published a radical periodical, called "Québécoises deboutte!", which outlined many of their concerns and demands. In the early 1970s, women within mixed groups, be they unions or community organisations, influenced by these radical groups, began regrouping and discussing the specific oppression of women<sup>319</sup>. Many of these feminists went on to create permanent "status of women" committees in unions, and fought for daycares. They also took on their peers on the Left, within unions and within socialist groups, charging that the sexism in the

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<sup>315</sup> Le Collectif Clio, 1982, p.477.

<sup>316</sup> Le Collectif Clio, 1982, p.476.

<sup>317</sup> Lacourse, 1984

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Gobeil, 1984; Collectif intersyndical des femmes, 1984; Bouchard, 1984; De Koninck, 1984; Pomerleau, 1984; Guénette, 1984



groups needed to end (e.g., *Manifeste des femmes québécoises*, 1971), as illustrated by the famous slogan of the times : “Pas de Québec libre sans liberation des femmes! Pas de femmes libres sans libération du Québec ! »<sup>320</sup>. During these early years, this feminist discourse was not, by any means, taken up by the majority of women in Québec. There is no question, however, that the work of these feminists had a significant impact, not only on “ordinary” women all over Québec<sup>321</sup>, but also on the more reformist elements of the women’s movement, such as the *Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ)*<sup>322</sup>.

It is during the 1970s that the FFQ and its allies took their actions beyond demanding political and legal rights, to “personal is political issues”, by making the pro-choice battle their own. They succeeded in forcing the government to set up the *Conseil du statut de la femme du Québec* (1973). And, with the UN’s decree that 1975 was the international year of women, women all over Québec, and especially those already involved in movements, be they student or community, began to espouse the feminist cause. All of this filtered into the community movement as well, not only because of the media, but also, and especially, because of the presence in these groups of feminist agitators.

It is also as of 1975, in the midst of Marxist Leninist organising, that ideological debates around the root causes of women’s oppression ended up dividing the movement into factions – feminists active in status of women committees in unions, versus feminists in the autonomous women’s movement (women-only, and not institutionalised), versus feminists in the Marxist Leninist groups<sup>323</sup>. Paradoxically, it is also during this period that there was a real explosion of feminist organising, as women, tired of always being second in line in mixed groups, and wanting to make feminist issues a priority, began, in earnest, to create autonomous spaces<sup>324</sup>. Some feminists had had enough of

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<sup>320</sup> Le Collectif Clio, 1982, p.483.

<sup>321</sup> Desmarais, 1980

<sup>322</sup> Le Collectif Clio, 1982

<sup>323</sup> Lacourse, 1984

<sup>324</sup> Lamoureux, 1986

butting their heads against attempts of their peers (most often male) to “reason with them”, and to bring them to act on more “urgent issues: the proletariat, the national question, the groups that are ‘truly’ oppressed”<sup>325</sup>. Many of them went on to set up autonomous women’s organisations, such as women’s health centres, battered women’s shelters, rape centres, self-defence groups<sup>326</sup>, “organised as women-defined, women-controlled resources” and “established as ‘women’s responses’ to what were seen as problems and needs that were specific to ‘women’”<sup>327</sup>. These alternative feminist services were born in the wave of the “alternative services phase”<sup>328</sup>. The radical feminist voice was re-born in 1976 with the short-lived publication of “Les Têtes de pioche”. There was always a tension between more reformist elements of the movement and radical feminists, and between French and English feminists (the latter not mobilised by the nationalist and Marxist tendencies of the former). By the end of the 1970s, the radical edge to the movement had all but disappeared, but the movement decentralised into neighbourhoods, homes, workplaces, becoming more difficult to document, but rich in its contradictions<sup>329</sup>.

In Point St-Charles, it is during this period that women active in the Maison de Quartier, and GMAPCC began to form caucuses to discuss their experiences as women. It is during this period that the “Garderie populaire” was born, as well as the beginnings of the women’s centre (1979). I turn to this journey now – the one that led up to the creation of these groups in the Point, and to all the other transformations that emerged from women’s activism around strategic gender needs.

## AGITATORS

As I described in Chapter 4, all the participants first got involved in

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<sup>325</sup> Gobeil, 1984, p.22

<sup>326</sup> Lacourse, 1984

<sup>327</sup> Masson, 1999, p.51

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Lacourse, 1984

some form of citizens' committee or community group, some as early as 1965, others in the late 1970s, most motivated by practical gender needs. It is through their involvement in these (mixed) committees that their journeys from silence to affirmation – as women – were jump-started. Thérèse, from church-based activities first got involved in secular organising through the Regroupement des citoyens, then the Clinic, then the Centre des femmes Madame prend congé, and now the Conseil des aînéEs. Marguerite, also from church-based activities, got involved first in the Comité d'action politique Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, then in the Point, with the garderie populaire, the Maison de Quartier, the Club populaire des consommateurs, and was founding a member of Madame prend congé. Michèle, from the JEC, came to the Point and got involved in the comité d'action politique, the PCO, the Maison de Quartier, the Clinic, and was a founding member of the Projet économique de Pointe St. Charles. Madeleine, again, from church-based activities, was active at the Carrefour d'éducation populaire, and the Projet St-Charles, founding member of a “women-centered” cooperative. Louise, from the JOC and parish leisure activities, became a pillar in the schools, with the founding of the collective kitchen, la Cuisine des Parents. Maureen went from the school parent committee, to PIEC, to founding PACC, and to St-Columba House. Myrna went from working in the kitchen at St. Columba House, to founding and running Hand in Hand and to the St. Columba House Women's Discussion Group. Donna from a first involvement through the Alternate School, went on to found Point at Work (a women's re-upholstering cooperative), to fight against the closure of Lorne School, to the founding of the Point Adult Centre for Education, and to the Women's Discussion Group. Frances, from a first exposure through the Head Start Program, spent many a year at the Eye Clinic, and became life-long receptionist at the Clinic. Denise has supported groups from the very beginning, in her capacity as right-hand woman to the coordination of the Clinic.

While they were involved in all these groups, the women were greatly influenced by agitators in their midst. The latter, through their discourse and actions, brought in new information and helped deepen analyses of personal and collective experiences.

Anna On s'implique dans les groupes, avec des agitateurs, des agitatrices...À travers une implication, à partir de ce que les gens disent, on a souvent des prises de conscience.

Michèle Ça veut dire « animatrice » , en mots bien simples.

Anna On a une prise de conscience. Et on agit là-dessus, souvent.

Thérèse Voir, juger, agir, on a travaillé là-dessus.

Anna Quand on agit, souvent ça entraîne d'autres prises de conscience. Ça continue et peut-être qu'on devient agitatrice après ça. Et on entraîne d'autre gens. C'est un peu ça la spirale.

Thérèse Le cheminement.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, in the early years, many university-educated allies, social animators, and progressive priests, “agitated” people into demanding rights from the State, developing alternative services, and into awareness regarding the causes of their fate. Later, Marxist Leninist activists took the agitation to another level, with their hard anti-capitalist line. Less documented, however, are the interventions of professional women, and feminists in the early citizens' committees. The latter were central, according to the participants, as I will show throughout, in encouraging them to outdo themselves, to break with fears, and to stand up for themselves, as women.

In helping to name and analyse the oppressions that “ordinary” folks were living, all of these “agitators” helped shake people into an “awakening”. Not only did they facilitate the formation of citizens' committees, by convincing local leaders that organisation was central to voice and change, they also helped groups see the larger picture, and challenged them not to fall into conservative NIMBY mentalities or purely “self-help” models. In fact, some groups, which had less exposure to agitators within their ranks, such as the

“Regroupement des citoyens”, never did integrate a structural analysis of the root causes of the social ills that they were fighting against, while others, such as PERM, were more likely to have a class and gender analysis. As the participants explain in the excerpts below, the “agitators” in the groups were central in helping people analyse the root causes of their problems, formulate demands, plan actions, and learn new skills :

Thérèse    Au fur et à mesure qu'on avance on s'aperçoit qu'effectivement c'est un cheminement. Le curé de la paroisse St-Charles, m'avait frappé un dimanche quand il avait dit dans son homélie « Quand on dérange, on fait changer des choses! » et c'est vrai, quand on dérangeait on faisait changer les choses. Les Fils de la charité, ils ont dérangé, ils ont fait changer des choses. En partant du monde, ils les ont fait changer, ils nous ont fait changer nos mentalités! Et les M-L sont venus, ils ont fait changer les choses parce que c'est là qu'on a arrêté le « self help ». Pis on a commencé à être politisés. (...) Il y avait deux sortes de politiques. Il y avait la politique qui voulait jeter les clôtures à terre, et les étapistes, dont j'étais, à ce moment-là. C'était à ça que je croyais, j'étais rendue là au niveau politique. (...)

The participants reiterated many times throughout the project that there was a need for “extremists”, or people who came in to agitate around new ideas, that often did not sit well with people in the neighbourhood:

Marguerite    C'est des extrémistes qui nous ont amené à être capables de faire des pas. Sans eux, on aurait jamais été capables (...) Pour nous faire bouger, si on est trop lents, ça prend toujours des personnes qui vont crier. Si on entend du monde crier, tes oreilles s'ouvrent pour entendre. C'est avec ces personnes, ces extrémistes, qu'on a appris (...) Ça te force à réfléchir et à en parler.

This agitation took, and continues to take, various forms. From every day contact, to facilitation and trainings, to interventions in meetings, to speeches at public assemblies, to articles published in local newspapers. Throughout the entire project, however, the participants reiterated the importance of “social animation” (or “agitation”) for social change, of the presence of “agitators” within the groups (as opposed to “outsider

propaganda”). Without political education, they argued, the groups will not attain their goals. They nuanced the latter, however, by drawing lessons from the different kinds of social animation, organisation or agitation that was being used, always reiterating the importance of *doing with*, as opposed to *doing for*. The latter implies a real process of popular education – which takes time and energy – and not, top-down propaganda (see tensions section).

In fact, many of the participants attribute, at least in part, to these agitators, their own political awareness, their “know-how”, and the recognition of their “grassroots” skills and knowledge as valuable – all of which led to increased confidence in their abilities and changed their lives. These agitators helped people identify their demands, figure out ways of winning them, shared information, experiences and knowledge, helped make connections, motivated people by encouraging them to take their reflections and actions further. Most important, however, is that through these encounters, the participants then became “agitators” themselves, “agitating” new folks from the neighbourhood :

Maureen I believe the importance of professionals. For me – I can’t speak for anybody else – but I know I never would have done what I did if it hadn’t been for professionals.

Myrna Me neither, you’re right. But I think when professionals involve people in the community, that’s what really counts, you know? Cause I wouldn’t have got where I was either without help. I never lied about that right from the start.

Anna And what do you mean by that? Who are you talking about?

Maureen I’m talking about, for me, Linda Savory’s (social worker at the Clinic) encouragement. Looking up research. Stuff I wouldn’t have known how to do. Supplying that information. Sue Harvey (organiser at Parallel Institute). I remember not even understanding, though living in Montreal and Quebec, the government set up. The Smarts, Bourassa, his family, the Lacks, all that kind of stuff. I would never in a million years have figured that out or seen the connection.

Anna So the political education

Maureen Definitely, and it took, I think, professionals, people who were able to do that kind of stuff to spur us on (...)

- Anna        And then you went on to work with other women to transfer some of that.
- Maureen    Yes, definitely. As you grow, people around you are growing. Sure.
- Thérèse    J'ai appris par des personnes qui m'ont partagé leurs connaissances. Quand je suis arrivée à la Clinique, j'avais une 5e année. J'étais loin d'être une travailleuse communautaire! Je savais même pas ce que ça mangeait en hiver, les travailleuses communautaires ! Mais des personnes comme Barbara Stewart (infirmière), François Lehmann (médecin), elles avaient ces connaissances-là et nous les donnaient pour nous permettre de les diffuser dans le quartier. Aujourd'hui j'ai cette fierté-là, cette valorisation-là, ce goût-là encore de communiquer à notre monde. Et de le dire « Maintenant que j'ai acquis ça, j'ai le goût de le partager, de le donner ».

In the excerpts above, both Maureen and Thérèse talk about how their experiences turned them into “agitators”. Although there has always been an emphasis in Point St. Charles, as elsewhere in Québec, on training local leadership, the 1960s and 70s were especially impressive in this regard. Many of the women trained to be local leaders, became in turn agitators in and around the Point, spurring other women to get involved. Here are Maureen’s and Myrna’s journey’s: Maureen gets “agitated” into action by “crazies” at PIEC, then becomes one of them herself, and “agitates” Myrna into action:

- Maureen    (I was afraid). You know, “those crazy people!” You know, I did not understand. “Why are they always protesting?” (...) “Oh that’s crazy people who go there! All they want to do is protest! And scream! And yell!” You know like, “I don’t want to be any part of that!” (...) But then, I thought, “I’ll just go and see what they’re saying...” Like with you, Myrna, when the groups would come in, your reaction was, “I’m here as a cook! Get those idiots out of my kitchen!” (...)

Once Maureen became a local leader, she went around « agitating », getting others involved. Myrna remembers with good humour these times, before she herself got involved and became a “quiet agitator” in her own right:

Myrna At the time, I was going to St-Columba House, and Maureen and all her nutty friends were going around banging on doors and making all kinds of noises! I'd bring my kids and run like hell 'cause I wasn't interested in any of that! And where we come from we sure didn't know about this kind of stuff!

This spiral of “agitated turned agitator” is central to the process of popular education and organising, and is reflected throughout the entire narrative.

Although the participants recognise the importance of the agitators, they also argue that the support from the other members of the groups, especially the women, was equally important (see women's caucuses section below). In particular, they noted the importance of the small group context, where people were encouraged to make the links between their lived experiences and the social, economic and political structures of society, without fear of being judged.

Marguerite Quand on a de la misère avec nos enfants ou nos adolescents, on se dit « Les gens vont le savoir! Qu'est-ce qu'ils vont dire ? » Mais pas si on a plusieurs petits groupes, des endroits où on se sent en sécurité, où on est certaines qu'on ne se fera pas abaisser. Des petits groupes de femmes pareilles à nous.

Donna I think there might be some people in the community who don't have resources, or who feel alone. And I think this is one way, through popular education, to give them power. (...) I think education, number one, is power. (...) I really feel unless you're connected to a group or something, you can easily get lost. I think it's very easy to feel isolated and alone if you're not connected to someone or some organisation.

Maureen And we don't always have the “know-how” (...) When you're alone, trying to figure out what you can do, and someone says “No” to you, you figure “oh, that's it!” (...) “Nothing I can do”, you know? It's only with all these other resources and women getting together to realise that there is something you can do. And 90% of the groups are all women.

Myrna Being with other women made a difference. Look at tonight, we are sitting around here tonight, discussing this stuff, right? Well years back, we wouldn't have even been allowed to go out and



come to a meeting like this, let alone sit and discuss it! I think it was going to different meetings. You left your kids at school, then you met other women. They would be talking about how they had it bad. Maybe some didn't, but then someone said, "why don't you come for coffee?" And you go and you discuss things. That's how I think things happened. Because women are very supportive of each other. Like look at here, besides Maureen and Donna, I didn't really know you, but I'm comfortable, and I feel like you support me. So it makes that, we have this kind of trusting, with women.

In line with this, Michèle and Marguerite explained that they would discuss the new information and analyses brought in by the agitators in their groups. For instance, they would often meet in the kitchen of the daycare, while their children were in activities, and exchanged on definitions, analyses, and strategies. This is where they were able to be honest about their insecurities, ask questions of each other, question the way they were behaving in demonstrations, without fear of appearing "unknowledgable" in front of their peers:

Michèle C'était des affaires qu'on faisait parce qu'on était en gang. On se disait « Moi, j'ai pas aimé ça. » Il y a du bon et du moins bon. Les vraies affaires.

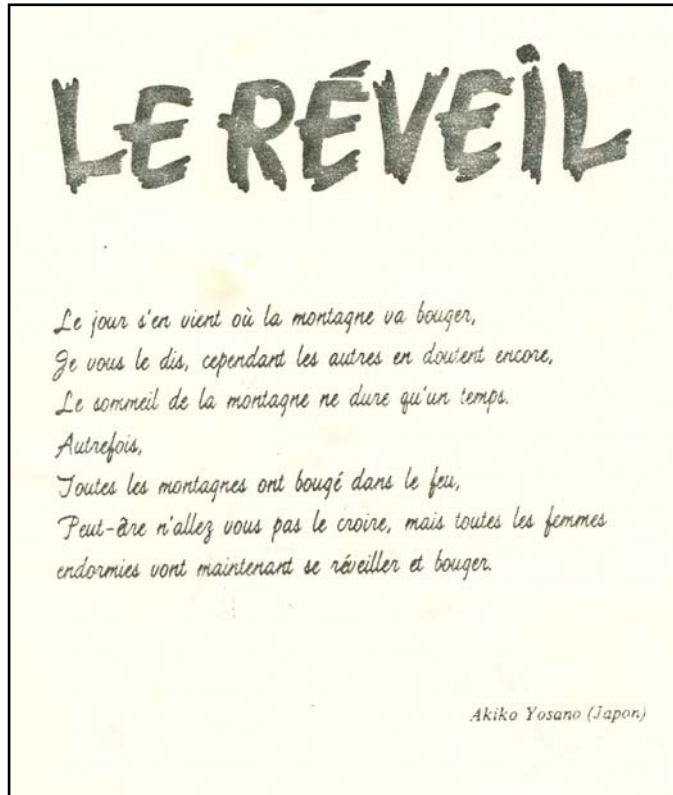
Thus, had their not been a space in the groups for women to discuss their experiences, the work of the agitators would not have had the same effect. As we will see in the "tensions" section, below, the relationships between "ordinary" folks and agitators was not always easy, but, as the excerpts above attest to, they very often led to new awareness of the links between lived experiences and systemic injustice.

### NEW AWARENESS

*Parce que moi aussi j'étais courageuse ! J'élevais mon gars tout'seule.  
-- Madeleine*

Once their “eyes wide open”, the participants claimed that they saw injustice everywhere (See figure adjacent<sup>330</sup>). As soon as they began making the links between their lived experiences and the structures of injustice, they couldn’t help but see more, and, to begin recognising gender inequalities: unequal gender relations in the groups, society’s tendency to blame women for their plight, the unequal division of roles in the home, men’s control over women via violence. It is through their participation in the mixed community groups, with the help of feminist agitators, that the participants began to identify strategic gender needs, or those that were related to the subordination of women to men.

Donna        Us women, I think came to realise that, “No! He’s not the man”! And found out that there are other women who feel the same way, and are willing to say something about it. Of course, it’s not something that’s going happen over night. It can take years, and you have to change the mentality of everybody. You know, the women themselves too. You need to gently change that to saying, “no, you are a woman, you are a human being, you have rights too”.



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<sup>330</sup> Le Réveil. Flyer of the Carrefour d'éducation populaire. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2001.02.102.05,.

## GENDER ROLES IN THE GROUPS

Throughout the process, participants often talked about having lived sexist experiences, and how they began naming them as such. For example, when Marguerite and Michèle attempted to become members of political action committees in the late 60s, early 70s, they both faced sexist responses :

Marguerite On avait chacun donné notre nom, mon mari et moi. Mon mari est accepté, moi, j'ai une entrevue. Après l'entrevue, un des étudiants me dit « Savez-vous, madame Paradis, on n'est pas assez avancés pour vous ». Il rit de moi, vous comprenez ! Parce qu'oubliez pas que moi (...) j'ai pas d'instruction ! Mais ça m'intéresse ! J'aurais aimé être au moins à la cheville de mon mari. Et pour être au moins à sa cheville, il faut que je m'implique, que je comprenne... Une femme qui veut pouvoir échanger, et tout ça. Ça fait que l'étudiant me dit ça. J'avais été choquée et déçue... On dit que les femmes, ça sait pas parler d'autre chose que des couches pis des bébés ! Là, j'veux m'impliquer mais il n'est pas assez avancé pour moi !!! Il dit « Je ne pensais pas que vous étiez pour le prendre comme ça ! On va en discuter... ». Ça fait qu'ils en ont discuté et j'ai été acceptée. Ç'a été les débuts de mon implication. (...)

Michèle Il y avait un CAP à Pointe St-Charles, j'y étais. Ils n'avaient pas voulu de moi, j'étais pas un élément assez avancé, on me l'avait dit !

Marguerite Ils étaient pas assez avancés pour moi, et toi...

Michèle C'était moi qui n'était pas assez avancée !

Louise C'était des mouvements d'hommes. C'était beaucoup plus le mouvement des hommes que celui des femmes !

Once they made it into the groups, because they had the opportunity to discuss their experiences with other women, they became aware of even more gender inequalities. Although recognising that they had learned a lot from the men, who had taught them about “politics”, they came to realise that they – as women – were afraid to appear unknowledgable, while men seemed to have no such fear:

Marguerite Quand je dis (qu'on apprenait) des gars. Nous, ça faisait pas longtemps qu'on avait commencé à parler ensemble. Nous, on

faisait de la cuisine, on parlait des couches, de la nourriture. Les gars, c'est pas qu'ils savaient tout – des fois c'est décevant quand tu les écoutes parler – mais ils ne savent pas qu'ils ne le savent pas!

Michèle Ils sont nés savants !

Marguerite C'est ça. Nous, quand on dit qu'on apprenait d'eux, c'est parce que là, on rentrait dans le salon. Et on ne parlait plus de couches ! On a appris ! Nous, on était dans la cuisine avec la vaisselle, les recettes, les couches !

Michèle L'éducation des enfants !

Marguerite Oui, l'éducation des enfants. Mais pour la politique, c'est avec eux. (...) Ça faisait des années qu'ils en parlaient !

Michèle C'était quelques leaders. Il y avait aussi des gars qui, comme nous, ne comprenaient pas.

Marguerite Mais les gars ne le disent pas ! Dans la salle, c'étaient les femmes qui disaient qu'elles ne comprenaient pas! Ou tu ne le dis pas parce que tu penses que tu es la seule !

In addition to this, they began to notice that although the women had a place in the groups, it was often difficult to get a word in edgewise, even if there were only a few men present in a room full of women:

Michèle On était pas trop conscientes dans le temps.

Marguerite Bien non ! On apprenait ! (...) Quand on a commencé à avoir des groupes de femmes et on s'est aperçu que s'il y avait seulement deux gars dans une assemblée, ils prenaient le micro, eux ! Ils arrivaient, prenaient toute la place...Mais qui avait mis ça sur pied, qui travaillait là-dessus ? C'était nous autres !

Not only did they take up all the space, but sometimes, some men even reinterpreted what the women had said, using different words, as if the assembly could not possibly have understood the initial intervention :

Michèle Les gars étaient tellement tout-puissants dans la Maison de Quartier (...) À chaque fois, les gars traduisaient ce qu'on disait ! « Elle veut dire que... ». Tu t'en rappelles Margo ? On était scandalisées toutes les deux ! On a une certaine capacité d'analyse, on n'est pas dépourvues ! Et eux, ils traduisaient ça dans d'autres mots !

These behaviours were more than simply those of “know-it-all university-educated” agitators, there was a definite gender dynamic as well:

Michèle Les filles universitaires étaient pas comme ça. Linda Savory a été à l’université, Lorraine Guay aussi... C’était le propre des gars. (...) Ça fait chier ! La colère me remonte !

Moreover, they started noticing that while groups were often set up by women – who were often volunteers – when it came time to hire a worker, they would hire men!

Michèle Quand un mouvement partait, c’était souvent des femmes. On était toutes autour de la table, comme ce soir, juste des femmes. Et on se battait pour donner naissance à un mouvement quelconque, je pense au PEP par exemple. Et là on se battait, et on disait « Faut aller chercher du financement ». Un coup qu’on avait le financement et qu’il fallait payer du monde...

Louise C’est la gang d’hommes qui arrivaient !

Michèle Tu engageais le directeur général !

Madeleine C’est ça !

Michèle Un gars ! C’était les gars qui se pointaient et qui avaient les jobs. Parce qu’ils étaient plus instruits probablement. (...) Pas une femme qui a postulé ! (...) C’était une description de direction générale, c’était correct. Moi je serais pas gênée d’appliquer là-dessus aujourd’hui!

In a similar vein, an article by Terri Aubé (Notaro at the time), a GMAPCC activist, in the Poor Peoples’ Paper<sup>331</sup>, decried the fact that when it came time to elect representatives, women would elect men:

We had a strange experience in one group where the women took all the real leadership of organising the group and were very strong in their commitment to see the struggle through to the end. But when the time came to elect representatives to negotiate with the landlord, two of the three representatives chosen were men. We are not sure whether the women in that group were even conscious of what had happened. When the time came to declare who were the real leaders of the group,

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<sup>331</sup> Notaro, T. (July 1972). Poor Peoples’ Paper, 2(5), Fond de St-Columba House, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

the positions were relegated to men, even though they weren't necessarily the real leaders (...) in order for women to participate equally, we must first stand up and demand respect. We must regain our identity, begin our real self-development, take the initiative in the struggle and most importantly, recognise our intelligence and ability to make decisions.

When we asked the English group why this kind of thing would happen, here is what they said:

Maureen I think it was brain washing from day one. You were brought up with that. That men were the dominant species, that they ruled. And you follow. And I think that was bred into us right from the beginning. (...)

Anna Ya so I guess women would elect men because the men are the ones who are the leaders in society, and women are not.

Myrna Yes. Well that's what we thought.

The participants also talked about the power imbalances in the groups, about who had the power of influence, and who did the work "behind the scenes". The power imbalances were not only between male and female members, but also between male organisers and female members, and between male and female organisers:

Maureen There were women professionals, but it was the men who dominated. At least in the English section (...) There was a whole lot of them. (...) While (the professionals) were good for the organisations, there was that drawback – that it had to be men.

Denise They still maintained control.

Maureen Women were good supporting, but it took the men. Needed them to be leaders.

Michèle agrees with this analysis, claiming that many women leaders, although they worked hard, were not often in the lime-light:

Michèle Je suis convaincue de ça. Avez-vous déjà vu Lorraine Guay ou Linda Savory en avant ? Rarement! Mais elles travaillaient fort !

In the excerpt below, Maureen and Myrna, share their frustration at the lack of recognition of their behind-the-scenes work:

Maureen The Minister (of St-Columba House) had the power.

Myrna He did.

Maureen (...) It's awful to say, but I'm sure still today he claims that he started the Alternate school when I damn well know I did! It's true! He paid a woman from the community to go out with him door-knocking. And we both went our separate ways. (...) I went out and did my door knocking and organising for the parents for this Alternate school. In the end, on the final day, when we'd have to come to staff meetings, the Minister would come in and say, "I got 15 people today! How many have you Maureen?" "Two". "Oh okay, all right". It was almost like, "you'll catch on". On the day that school started, every single mother and child present were people I recruited. He didn't have anybody, but the French person that he hired to go door knocking with him! In the end he was still saying, "I organised the Alternate school"

Anna You were the woman behind the man.

Maureen Yes.

Myrna It's like Hand in Hand. He might have suggested it, but he didn't do any of it.

Anna But wasn't it the two of you worried about your own kids?

Myrna Yes.

Maureen Yes, yes, yes. But you see, he allowed it to happen. Many others wouldn't have even considered it for a second. So it was good in that respect, that he was open to all this stuff.

Myrna Yeah, he was open. But he didn't do any of it.

So even though the participants recognise that certain men did help out, they decry the fact that the women, who worked most often in organising roles, did not get full, *public* recognition for their activities.

All of these realisations, about gender inequalities in the groups they were part of, were part and parcel of their emerging new awareness. Today, the participants explain these phenomena by claiming that men at the time had more formal education, therefore more credentials; that because of socialisation,

women lacked the confidence to take the step to apply for jobs, or to hold their own in an election; and that they often ended up doing the housekeeping tasks of organisations while men did the formal representation and negotiation roles. All of these observations are in line with sociological analyses of leadership in grassroots organisations (Sacks, 1988; Robnett, 1996; Robnett, 1998). That women as bridge-leaders, or center-women, tend to do the “housekeeping work” of an organisation, while men tend to be the public leaders, doing the “public persona” work of an organisation. The latter of course being more visible, often leads to greater influence and power.

#### WHY IS THE WOMAN IS ALWAYS BLAMED?!

The participants also shared stories about how they came to realise that often women were blamed for their plight, be it the behaviour of their children, their financial situation, the state of the home, or even sometimes, the violence they were subjected to by their husbands.

- Anna Michèle, tu disais qu'à l'école on avait tendance à blâmer les mères pour les comportements des enfants ?
- Michèle Bien oui! Toujours la mère! (...)
- Marguerite Oui. « Dans le couple, s'il y a séparation c'est à cause de la femme. » « Si le gars boit, c'est à cause d'elle ! » (*with sarcasm*)
- Michèle Le phénomène des femmes battues, au départ, « c'est la faute des femmes ».
- Marguerite « Elle le cherchait ! »
- Michèle C'est sûr ! Qu'est-ce que tu veux, c'était ça!
- Marguerite Si le gars trompait sa femme, c'est parce qu'il avait marié une « pas d'allure » !! Qu'est-ce que tu veux? “Il pouvait bien la tromper !”
- Louise Les femmes le disaient « Je le méritais.»
- Isabelle La socialisation était bien ancrée.

In a similar vein, Maureen's story, below, depicts the anger that she felt when she would be subjected to sexist comments about women living on welfare:



Maureen The outside world, who is working everyday, and having their own problems or making it very nicely – they would see (forced work) as a great thing. “What do you want? To sit at home?” My husband was a salesman. I went to a party they were having at his company. I could not believe the attitude. It was incredible. It was, “if these bitches are going to stay home and have babies and sex, I want part of the action!”.

Anna Talking about welfare mums?

Maureen Yeah. These are well-educated big company men. Needless to say, did I blow my cork! Up to that point everything was lovely, you know. And I could not believe that anybody would have that, “I want part of the action”... “those bitches are going to sit home and have babies and sex, and do whatever they want. And have a salary coming in. I want part of the action. I’m paying for it”

These kinds of sexist comments, however, did not only come from men. The stereotypes about women were so ubiquitous and internalised, that women were also victims of the sneering of other women

Marguerite Sais-tu qui est la pire ennemie d’une femme ? C’est une autre femme. (...) Des femmes disaient « As-tu vu comment c’est crotté chez eux ? Il peut bien être parti ! » On jugeait. Tout ce que le gars pouvait faire de travers, c’était à cause de la femme ! C’est incroyable comment on était dures !

Thus, in and through their involvement in the groups, the participants were able to break with the « woman-blaming » tendencies of our society. They came to recognise that women’s plight was not completely of their own doing, but was related to the stratification of our society, in particular in the domain of gender.

#### QUESTIONING WOMEN’S TRADITIONAL ROLES IN THE HOME...

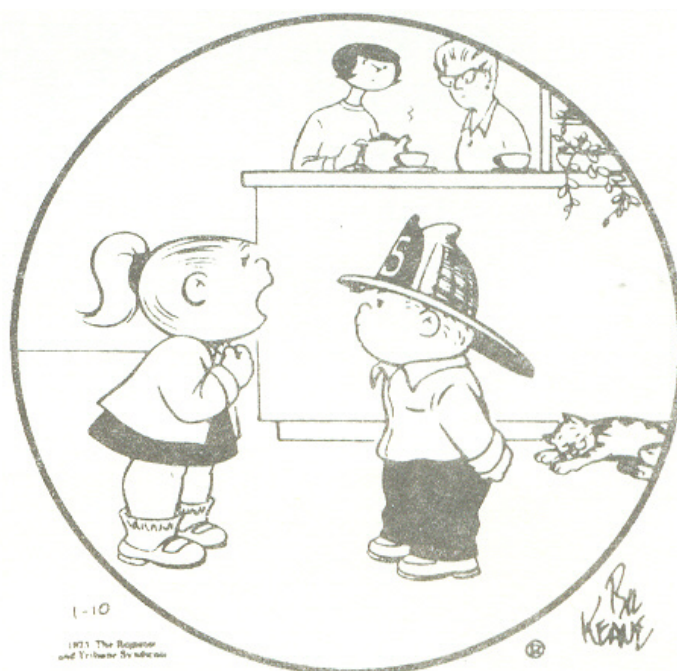
Moreover, through their involvement, the participants said that they were often forced into realising that there was a structural division of labour in society:

Thérèse Ce qui nous a aidé, c’est qu’on avait pris orientation au foyer,

mon mari et moi. C'est là qu'on a commencé notre engagement. La découverte de couples qui vivaient différemment de nous. On faisait des comparaisons, on a des bons côtés, d'autres à améliorer. Ça nous a permis de réfléchir sur notre vie de couple.

- Donna The education of the children, that's a domestic thing. That's a woman's thing. I think anything that has to do with the domestic, the house, and that, I think it's women. (...)
- Maureen The attitude was, "I go to work, I come home..."
- Donna "I want supper"
- Maureen "Everything must be laid out for me. The kids are yours".
- Isabelle "I give you my pay and..."
- Maureen Yes, exactly! "Later if I feel like it, I'll go out with the boys for a beer. I have a life. I have a right, because I work."
- Myrna "Like a man"
- Maureen Like, "what you do in the house is not work" (...)
- Anna So men were at work, and so the women...
- Maureen But even if they weren't! (...)
- Myrna Even if it was a welfare family, he had special status.
- Frances Yeah, he was the man.
- Maureen It was! He was the man!
- Myrna Yeah, that's true.
- Anna So why did he have this special status? What do you mean?
- Frances They wore the pants then, we didn't (...)
- Myrna Yes, true. But it was our job to make sure there was food on the table, even if we didn't have money.

Thus, through their involvement, they came to realise that while women were responsible for the children, and by extension the neighbourhood, the men were the breadwinners. And, with this came a realisation that society valued men's labour, while



"When I grow up I don't want to be ANYTHING! I'm just going to be a mommy and a grandma."

women's work was considered peripheral (See figure, adjacent<sup>332</sup>).

Donna My parents never discouraged me from doing anything outside of being a housewife. But I always got the feeling that so long as it was within the female area, a nurse or teacher, a female role. I have to admit, when my mother got married, it was agreed between her and my Dad that she was not going to work, she was to stay at home and take care of the children. And it was my vision of what I was going to be. That is all I ever thought of. Getting married and having children (...) Getting involved change that. Oh yeah! And even, I have one daughter, I am going to make sure, from day one, that she knows that she can do whatever she wants.

Anna So it changed also how you transmitted things to your kids.

All Oh yeah.

Maureen Big time. Well, first of all, it was very easy for me to get into the homemaker routine because I had 6 children 3 of them handicapped. I spent at least 3 days a week going to the Montreal Children's Hospital, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, neurology, you name it. It was just like constant. Even thinking about what was on the outside, didn't exist. (...)

Anna But the gender analysis, did it come from being in organising

<sup>332</sup> (August 1973). Up to the neck, 6(7), p.4, Fond de St-Columba House, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

- Maureen Oh yeah! Because that was my role. Taking care of the kids, and being in the house, and trying to keep a house going when you have 6 kids, and running. That was the role. That's who I was going to be. My husband was the money-maker. Certainly getting out and hearing about other partnerships, that were seen differently. In other couples. And that got me to thinking "no way"!
- Anna My couple can be more equal.
- Maureen Exactly.
- Donna As you were talking, for me too, even it went a step further in my religious beliefs. If I go back to the Bible, the wife has her place, the husband has his, and this is how it is in the Bible. And being involved in St-Columba House, we have a worship group there that Faye and Myrna had started, and I became involved in that. And, being involved and recognising, "no, I don't have to consider that the norm". The housewife, the mother. I am a person. I have a lot to contribute. And, as a woman, I believe God expects more of me also.
- Anna You were critical of the Bible.
- Donna Yeah. And, to the point that when I talk to people of God, I very consciously refer to God in the female. I say "she". I want people to think. I really believe, "who are we to say that God is male?" If I am a woman, and I am made in God's image, for crying out loud, God's got to be female somewhere! (...)
- Anna Gender analysis of the Bible!
- Donna Oh yeah!

These kinds of realisations were pervasive, and only became more frequent, when women started getting involved in women-only organising, as I will show below (see "women's caucuses").

#### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN...

It was also in the groups that women began talking publicly about violence against women. Conjugal violence, always a taboo topic, was talked about in the "safer" spaces of the groups:

- Anna Was Linda Savory a feminist at the time? Did she bring in women's issues?
- Maureen Yes, she did (...) For example, (one of the women) was having problems with her husband. Linda did some intervention there (...) She would talk to the women, about what their rights were and

stuff like that. I remember this woman's husband well. I used wear my hair up. And one day she asked me if I would put hers up too. I put it up. And he came in and said, "put your hair down! You have no class! You can't do that kind of stuff." It was like, "you son of a bitch!"

Anna So even though it wasn't necessarily a women's group, when there were issues, she would work with the women?

Maureen Yes.

The presence of feminist agitators helped women deal with issues around violence, but finding out that you were not alone, and finding the support from other women in similar situations, was crucial as well:

Myrna We found out that we weren't the only ones in that situation.

Denise By being involved in groups.

Myrna There was some support around, for if we were stuck. That was along time ago, and it was a scary thing to go through.

Isabelle They shared their stories or realities. (...)

Denise Knowing you're not alone.

Maureen To hell with this, Catholic or not, you don't have to take this crap.

Anna What kind of crap?

Myrna Well whatever, mental abuse.

Maureen Physical abuse, mental abuse. "I'm the boss, I earn the money". Even if it was a welfare check. "It's in my name, it's my money".

Myrna And it never failed. If you were on welfare. It never failed on welfare day, it was a fight. Oh geez, yes. He wanted the money, and you're trying to say, "I want to look after the kids, I have to pay the rent, buy some food". But do they care? When the landlady comes to the door for the rent, was the man ever home to say, "No rent"? No, God forbid! He was working after all. He had a job... just that day. At one point, I go to drop off my kids at my ex. Now he stays with somebody else. And he says to me, about her: "well I wouldn't let her have a dryer. She doesn't need to have a dryer, she can hang her clothes to dry outside!" Anyway, I'm thinking, as he says this: "that's why you're with her and I'm here!" So then I say, "I have to go". He says, "why aren't you going to stay and visit?" "No", I say, "I promised somebody I'd go

see them, I got to go”. I better leave while it’s safe.

Through discussions with other women, they came to realise that they did not have to take violence, be it physical, emotional, economic, or sexual. On the latter, Marguerite and Michèle remember having been shocked into new awareness by the stories they heard through their own involvement.

Marguerite La violence conjugale, jusqu’où ça peut aller. Jusqu’où ça peut détruire les femmes. Souvent, on connaît pas ça.. Un oeil au beurre noir, ça se voit vite dans le miroir. Tu dis « Coudonc, j’ai été battue... ». Mais il y a d’autres choses que tu vois moins vite et qui affecte, qui détruit la personne. (...) À partir des maisons d’hébergement ou je ne sais pas quoi mais pour que les femmes s’aperçoivent qu’il y a des moyens pour te rendre compte que tu es en train de perdre ton autonomie... (...)

Michèle Il faut en parler. Comme travailleuse communautaire, les femmes me racontaient ça, elles pleuraient. Elles étaient obligées de faire des affaires. Les films “Emmanuelle” et toutes ces niaiseries-là, ça n’avait pas de bon sens. Il y en avait un, sa femme était grosse et il lui disait « Regarde-toi! De quoi t’as l’air? ! » Il lui faisait prendre les même positions, les mêmes affaires, mais il la ridiculisait! Il y en a qui faisait ça avec des chums. Ils étaient deux, trois gars et ils les regardaient. C’était épouvantable!

Madeleine Il y en a qui écoutaient des films et qui se masturbaient devant leur femme. Toutes sortes de cochonneries !

Marguerite Ils les faisaient danser.

Madeleine J’en connais des amies qui faisaient ça.

Michèle La mettre à quatre pattes, sur la table...C’était épouvantable, ils reproduisaient le film porno finalement. (...)

Marguerite Quand tu es rendue les seins aux genoux, et tu es sur la table, tu as honte, c’est épouvantable. Moi, voir cette dame qui racontait toute cette douleur qu’elle pouvait avoir. La souffrance qu’elle racontait, la honte, elle n’était pas fière. Mets-toi debout sur une table, avec de la honte, de quoi t’as l’air, tu penses ? Lui, il te met de la musique et il faut que tu danses! Parce que dans le vidéo, c’est plein de gars qui font des blagues, assis avec la caisse de bière, qui regardent la fille danser. Lui, la regarder quand elle a 20 ans ça va mais si elle en a 50, c’est plus le fun, ça prend d’autre monde.

- Isabelle C'est pas juste l'allure d'une femme vieillissante. C'est la honte de la femme, le stéréotype de voir une femme jeune, ferme et tout et tout.
- Marguerite Oui, oui.
- Michèle Nous quand on voyait ces femmes-là, d'abord elles trouvaient ça effrayant, mais la pire affaire, c'était leur corps. J'en parle et j'ai encore le moton. Je les vois encore et il y en avait pas juste une, ça été une épidémie ! (...) On en parlait pour les premières fois. Ce n'était pas encore une priorité à la Clinique ou ailleurs. (...) Mais là, aux nouvelles, à toutes les semaines il y avait une femme qui se faisait tuer par son mari. (...) Dans ce temps-là, le phénomène n'était pas discuté. C'était caché. On disait aux femmes « Dites-le ! ». Les femmes arrivaient avec des bleus, des bras cassés... (...)
- Louise C'était tellement nouveau (...)
- Isabelle C'était pas un phénomène nouveau.
- Michèle Non, c'était un phénomène caché, qui sortait.

Because of the groups, women were talking about the violence they were subjected to by their husbands, in public, and in doing so, they pushed the gender analysis of many of the other women in the groups.

Along with conjugal violence, women were also realising that they were discriminated against, and often sexually harassed, by workers of State institutions. Members of groups, through discussions with others, realised that women going in to get their welfare check were getting sexually harassed by certain welfare officers:

- Maureen (People would get) screwed over. Basically. And intimidated. And, at that time women were being harassed (...)
- Denise The worker at the welfare, said that, "if you were nice to them..."
- Myrna They were nice to you.
- Frances Will you give them a rose?
- Denise For sexual services.
- Anna So, if I'm understanding correctly then, welfare officers actually insinuated that they wanted sexual favours in exchange for...

- Denise They didn't just insinuate it. They'd come out and hassle. It was bad. If we had never did nothing, they'd just let it go.
- Anna You reported it to the police?
- Denise Well, the police, no. Nobody really wanted to go to the police back then, you know.
- Maureen When people went looking to deal with the police, they went through the system, ha ha, to report him and say "this is what's happening and this is the people that it's happening to". And "pfut!"
- Anna Nothing.
- Denise He got away with murder. I mean he's literally drunk every day, he's going to the bar, drink, brag about who he got, who he didn't, and who he was going to get next (...)
- Maureen And in those days, in the early days, there were things that you could get, it was extras. "You need a fridge? Yeah? I can fix the fridge for you". "You need carpeting? I can do that".
- Myrna Pots and pans. Bedding. It was all extra stuff.
- Maureen Yeah. They could do that. Now it's a straight rate, and that's it. But then, he was in a position of power.
- Anna So he would ask for favours in exchange for theses extras.
- Denise Sexual (...) (They) were helpless. And, some women were actually scared enough to go along with what he said, you know.
- Myrna Yeah. Well that's all they had to live on.

Thérèse and Madeleine also remember this kind of harassment:

- Thérèse Une femme que je connais était allée au bureau du bien-être social parce que ça n'allait plus. Son mari avaient des problèmes de santé qui s'accroissaient et elle avait cinq enfants à ce moment-là. L'enquêteur lui avait dit : « Savez-vous que vous êtes assise sur une richesse, vous, madame? » (...) Elle était assise devant ce bonhomme et il lui a dit : « Madame, vous êtes assise sur un trésor! »
- Anna Sur ses fesses?
- Thérèse Bien oui! C'est clair ce qu'il venait de lui dire là. « Branches-toi, et tu vas avoir ce que tu veux (...) »
- Anna Ça te dit quelque chose ça, Madeleine?



Madeleine Mais oui! Mais certain! Moi j'ai des amies à qui on a dit à peu près ça : « Si tu veux être fine, tu vas avoir un beau chèque. Si tu as besoin de beaux meubles... ».

This sharing of experience and honing of analyses led women to realise that these kinds of relationships reflected the gendered and classed nature of the Welfare State. Not only was the State constantly interfering and controlling people using welfare, it was also perpetrating violence against women.

Thus, from an initial involvement in groups, motivated by practical gender needs, the participants, like many of their peers all over Québec, came to feminist analysis, and came to identify strategic gender needs<sup>333</sup>. It has always been easier to talk about, and organise around gender roles in groups and in the home, at the level of task sharing, or about work and daycares, than to talk about issues that touched women's bodies, such as conjugal violence, contraception, abortion, rape, pornography<sup>334</sup>. Although women in the Point were discussing issues that touched women's bodies in the small group context, with other women, it wasn't until the late 1980s that these kinds of discussions were put out in the public arena<sup>335</sup>. Nonetheless, in the earlier years, the sharing of these kinds experiences with other women, facilitated by feminist agitators, led many of them, for the first time, to name their oppressions and those of their friends and peers. This new awareness about violence against women, coupled with reflections about gender roles in the groups, about "mother blaming" and about unequal task distribution in the home, lead not only to a deconstruction of the master's tools internal to all, but also to individual and collective actions on women's issues.

## ACTION

This burgeoning feminist analysis lead to collective activities, as well as

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<sup>333</sup> Dumont & Toupin, 2003; Le Collectif Clio, 1982; Lamoureux, 1986

<sup>334</sup> see Lacourse, 1984

<sup>335</sup> SOS conjugal violence (1988). Violence in the home: A devastating crime. Point in Print. St-Columba House. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, SCH-01

to individual acts of courage, based on strategic gender needs. That is, as they journeyed in mixed community groups, women's new consciousness about their collective oppression, in the context of an effervescent feminist movement in Québec, lead them to take their actions beyond those of defending, as women and mothers, their families and their communities, to organising against the subordination of women to men. Although in Point St. Charles, as in many spheres of Québec society, feminist discourse, and especially radical discourse, did not take root per se, there is no question that women were taking on sexism and gender relations in the neighbourhood.

#### COLLECTIVE ACTION

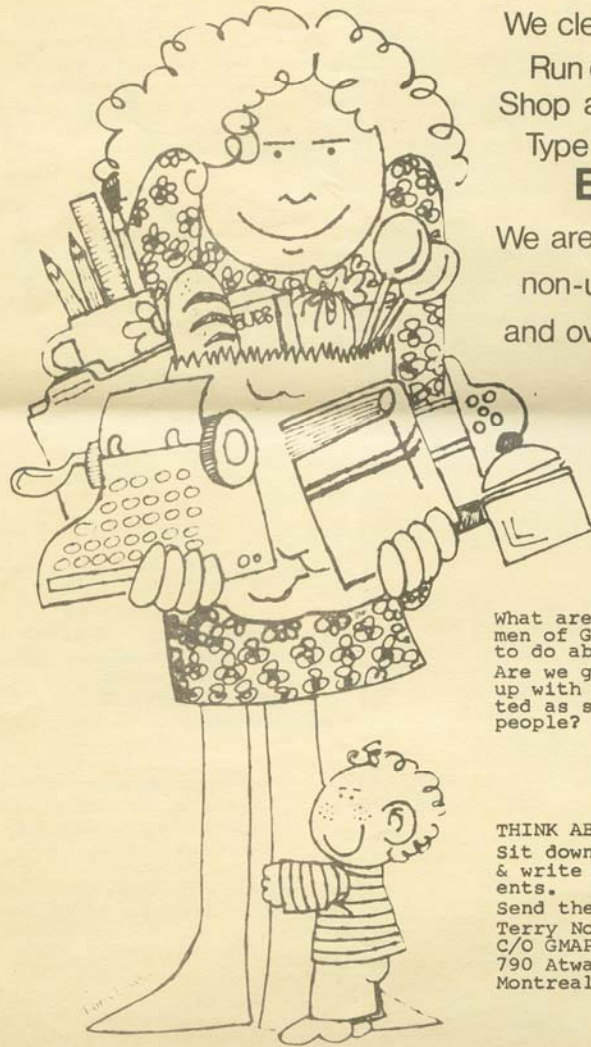
The collective actions that women organised in the Point were not necessarily those of confrontational politics, or demonstrations in the streets, and rarely did they occur under the banner of "feminism". In fact, even though many women in the Point were active around their strategic gender needs, these activities are often ignored or not considered "feminist" by many (versus status of women committees and autonomous women's groups<sup>336</sup>). Women in the Point, along with women all over Québec, beginning in the early 1970s, set-up daycares, women's caucuses in mixed groups in which to discuss women's oppression, women's groups, they did women's actions around welfare, they set-up a women's workers cooperative, and celebrated International Women's Day. The image below, published in a local newspaper in the early 1970s, is one such call to action<sup>337</sup>.

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<sup>336</sup> see Martine D'amours, cited in Bouchard, 1984

<sup>337</sup> (November/December 1972-1973). Poor peoples' paper, 2(8). Fond de St-Columba House, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

# WOMEN AND THEIR WORK



We clean house!

Run errands!

Shop and cook!

Type and file!

**BUT**

We are underpaid,

non-unionized,

and overworked!

SO!

What are we the women of GMAPCC going to do about this? Are we going to put up with being treated as second class people?

THINK ABOUT IT!  
Sit down right now & write your comments.  
Send them to:  
Terry Notaro  
C/O GMAPCC Press  
790 Atwater St.,  
Montreal 104, P.Q.

## Setting up daycares : « Les Enfants de l'avenir »

The Clinic, in the early 1970s, got a grant from the provincial government to set up a daycare in the neighbourhood<sup>338</sup>. Carole Welp,

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<sup>338</sup> All the information on the daycare comes from a personal communication with Carole Welp, founding member of the daycare, October 9th, 2003.

organiser at the Clinic, with a group of parents, set up the first “garderie populaire” in the neighbourhood – “Les Enfants de l’avenir”, located at the Carrefour d’éducation populaire. One of the first in Québec, the daycare was innovative in both its organisational form and program content; the programming was explicitly educational (social intervention), and the group was controlled by parents – Marguerite and Michèle were founding members. For every child who used the daycare, the parents had to provide three hours per week of volunteer labour. Moreover, a number of local folks, including Marguerite, were hired (on LIP grants), and trained as educators by Carole and Barbara Stewart (nurse at the Clinic).

Later, during the radicalisation phases of the community movement, the members of the daycare, spurred on by “radical lefties” within, were part of the movement that demanded free and accessible daycare, and used confrontational tactics to get their point across (see tensions section, below). Although the women set-up the daycares because of a practical gender need – “someone needs to take care of my children if I go to work” – the experience of the women who were active in the daycare led to increased politicisation around gender issues. Because the majority of members were women, the meetings at the daycare were in fact “women-only” spaces in which they shared their personal experiences, deepened analyses, and experimented with action. Moreover, by demanding free and accessible daycares, women were fighting for the recognition of childcare as valuable work, and “motherhood” as a task that should be shared with men<sup>339</sup>. Here is an excerpt from “La Vie Ouvrière”<sup>340</sup>:

Bien sûr, les garderies populaires ne vont pas “mettre à terre le système capitaliste » mais elles jouent un rôle certain de remise en question de quelques règles habituelles. Ainsi, réclamer des garderies, et en obtenir, veut dire que les Mères ne sont plus les responsables uniques de l’éducation des jeunes enfants. Exiger le contrôle des garderies signifie qu’on ne veut pas n’importe quelle sorte de garderie ; cela veut dire

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<sup>339</sup> Desmarais, 1980

<sup>340</sup> (March 1983). *Vie Ouvrière*, 168, p.30. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CEP-101.

qu'on veut décider collectivement – parents et travailleurs et travailleuses de garderie – des manières de gérer notre garderie. Étant entendu que l'État, c'est à dire la collectivité, doit acquitter les factures.

### Creating “spaces of our own”

At the same time, women involved in the daycare, but also in other community groups and citizens' committees, noticing and living more and more gender inequalities, were beginning to feel the need to create “spaces of their own” to share their experiences, strategise, practice, and gain confidence. They first set-up informal women's caucuses in mixed groups, and later, the Centre de femmes Madame prend congé, and the St-Columba Women's Discussion Group. It is in these spaces that women re-positioned themselves – as women – and were able to confront the power relations between men and women – by creating a common front, and by gaining influence due to increased confidence.

### **Women's caucuses**

Some women's spaces were set-up in reaction to “macho behaviours” that became apparent to women as they tried to become active members of groups, as I described above in the “new awareness” section. For instance, Michèle and Marguerite remember having kicked out the “intellectual” men from one of their meetings :

Marguerite e    Ça a commencé avec les groupes de femmes. De dire « Les gars, là, on les veut pas ! Si ils viennent, ils n'ont pas droit de parole ». Je ne sais pas si tu te souviens de nos premières grandes fêtes de la journée internationale des femmes ? On en voulait pas d'hommes.

Michèle    On les excluait complètement.

Marguerite e    Bien oui, parce qu'on avait de la misère ! On se rendait compte qu'ils venaient parler à notre place ! Comment ils étaient bon, comment ils nous comprenaient, comment ils étaient d'accord ! Ils prenaient toute la place, on n'avait plus rien à dire.

Michèle    Et c'était très drastique !

Marguerite    Il a bien fallu, un moment donné !

e

Michèle Je n'ai jamais été complètement d'accord avec ça mais je m'étais ralliée (...) J'ai été traitée de réactionnaire. (...)

Thérèse C'est la femme qui se prend en main !

Marguerit Parce que sinon les gars nous auraient pas donné (de place).

e

Michèle Il a fallu la prendre.

Marguerit Prendre notre place et dire « On veut être avec vous autres ! ». On va commencer entre nous autres pour se renforcer, pour être capables de dire et de comprendre ce qui se passe. Et être capables d'arriver avec eux et donner notre opinion.

Later, the women would actually meet prior to the meetings of the Maison de Quartier to plan their interventions and to motivate each other:

Michèle On s'était réunies et on se disait « Ça n'a pas d'allure! On va préparer la réunion avant d'arriver à la réunion. On se laissera pas traduire, on se laissera pas faire! » (...) On a fait ça quelques fois, quand on était trop tannées (...)

Marguerit Quand tu te prépares, tu n'es plus toute seule. Il fallait se préparer sinon ils prenaient toute la place. On finissait toujours par avoir l'air folles ! Mais quand on se prépare, c'est pas pareil !

Michèle Et quand il y en a un qui disait « Ce qu'elle veut dire c'est que... », nous, on disait « T'as pas besoin de le dire. Si tu comprends pas, les autres ont compris ! » (...) On s'était donné le mot "On se laisse plus traduire. On dit nos affaires et ils ne nous traduiront pas!" Ils redisaient dans des mots savants ce que nous, on disait simplement. On comprenait plus ce qu'on avait dit ! (...) On était pas des deux de pique! Il y avait des limites ! Je suis encore choquée ! J'étais révoltée !

So in these caucuses, women were sharing their experiences and analyses of gender roles in the groups, and experimenting with how they would intervene at the next meeting, to shift the power dynamic.

In fact, all over Québec at the time, women were creating their own spaces within mixed groups. The following is an excerpt from a discussion

about women's spaces in community groups, published in *Vie Ouvrière*<sup>341</sup> in 1984. Diane is a Point St. Charles citizen and founding member of the Centre de femmes Madame prend congé, and the other women are activists in cooperatives and community groups in other Montréal neighbourhoods:

Cécile Il faut d'abord se connaître entre nous, se parler entre nous. Eux, ils se sont rencontrés dans les clubs optimistes, ils se sont parlés dans les tavernes. Alors que nous, on est restées au foyer, sans possibilité de discuter avec d'autres femmes, sinon à sa voisine en étendant le linge.

Jeanne Au fond, on a peur. On a été élevées dans la peur et la soumission. La peur du curé, l'autorité du père, puis celle du mari. Il te dit quoi faire et tu le fais : c'est lui le boss (...) Alors, c'est la même chose dans nos groupes. On a toujours le réflexe de se dire : « Qu'est-ce qu'on va faire si les hommes sont pas là ? Ça va peut-être faire tomber l'organisation ! »

Diane Ça prend un certain courage pour faire partie d'un groupe de femmes. Au début à Madame Prend Congé, plusieurs se sont fait boycotter par le mari et les enfants, se sont fait dire: "T'as changé, tu nous négliges". C'est insécurisant aussi parce que si tu commences à te questionner, à vouloir prendre ta place, ça signifie que tu vas être obligée de changer des choses dans ta vie. Notre expérience d'une session non-mixte pour les femmes du MTC n'a pas été facile non plus. On s'est aperçues que des maris niaisaient leurs femmes pour qu'elles trouvent ça niaiseux à leur tour et qu'elles décident de ne pas venir. D'autres insistaient pour venir faire un tour le samedi soir, « juste pour voir »... Alors les femmes ont accepté d'avoir une rencontre non-mixte à condition que la prochaine soit mixte. Un an plus tard, on a proposé une deuxième session sur la condition des femmes, mais cette fois-ci, les militantes n'ont pas reparlé de la faire mixte. Faut croire qu'elles apprécient le fait de pouvoir se rencontrer entre elles. Mais moi et quelques autres, on a notre petite idée là-dessus. On s'est organisées pour se rencontrer entre femmes : que les hommes s'organisent entre eux. Après ça on verra s'il y a lieu de faire des rencontres mixtes sur cette question-là. Tant que les hommes n'auront pas réfléchi entre eux, ils vont continuer d'avoir l'attitude « venez nous conter ça, les p'tites filles ». C'est pas un échange ça.

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<sup>341</sup> (January-February 1984). Le pouvoir dans les groupes populaires : Un lieu à investir par les femmes? *Vie Ouvrière*, 175, propos recueillis par Martine D'amours, p.47-51. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CEP-101.

Cécile, Jeanne and Diane, like the participants in this project, recognised that although men sometimes reacted badly to women wanting to meet without them, the latter was a small price to pay for the advantages they gained. For many, this was the first time that they talked with other women outside the confines of the home, about their fears of failure, about their insecurities. These kinds of practice sessions, in the small group context, were essential for boosting their self-confidence and solidarity, which gave them the courage to act outside the caucuses.

These kinds of caucuses were also being set-up by women in the English groups in the Point. In GMAPCC, there was an explicit recognition of the importance of women-only spaces within mixed groups, as exemplified in this excerpt from the Statement of Principles adopted in 1972<sup>342</sup>:

For the right of women to organise, as women, in movements to make sure that radical social change includes radical change in the status of women as well as to give each other the strength and support to overcome the particular problems of women.

In fact, in the context of International Women's Year activities, women from PACC, including Maureen, participated in a caucus on wages for housework— a hot issue being debated in groups all over Québec in the mid to late 1970s<sup>343</sup>. This discussion was published – integrally – in a local newspaper in 1975<sup>344</sup>. This was a courageous action, not only because the women took the risk of discussing personal issues with other women, but also because their analyses were put out into the public arena, accessible to all. I include here long excerpts from that discussion, because it is extremely rare that the content of women's caucuses is available to the "public". And, in this excerpt, the spiral of change jumps out at the reader (note: Gwynne Basin and Sue Morehead, from Parallel

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<sup>342</sup> GMAPCC (1972). Statement of principles for the Greater Montréal Anti-Poverty Coordinating Committee, adopted by the GMAPCC Annual General Assembly, 27-29 october, 1972. Fond de St-Columba House, Les Archives Populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>343</sup> Guénette, 1984; Bouchard, 1984

<sup>344</sup> PACC (1975). The boiling pointe, january/february p. 3-6. Fond de St-Columba House, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.



Institute are “agitating”):

Gwynne Does your husband think that what you do is work?

Voices No!

Pat No way, I'm part of the furniture, like the Frigidaire or the stove.

Ann Because you're a woman, that's your job. You clean the house, and you don't get paid for it. (...)

Joan And it's not really appreciated. If it's not done, then that's a different story (...)

Gwynne Women are the only people that do work and don't get paid for the work they do. You get maintained, room and board. That's what you get.

Joan I don't know about your husbands, but I get his pay cheque and that's the last he sees of it really. He signs it, I cash it and I pay my bills, and then he gets his spending allowance out of it. So I can't complain as far as that goes.

Ann But we don't get spending money. Do you get the same amount of spending money as your husband?

Joan No.

Ann Well why shouldn't you? You're maintaining him. When he goes to work you get up and get his breakfast. Or you make his lunch for the day, or you have his clothes ready. So you're maintaining him and he's maintaining you by going out to work. But you don't get the same amount of spending money (...)

Gwynne The company is paying wages for two workers, not one; they pay the person who does the work, which is your husband, but the money also goes to pay you doing the job of keeping your husband going so that the company can get the work they want off him.

Joan I don't think so.

Gwynne Well then how does it work?

Pat My husband couldn't afford to pay me.

Ann We're not talking about husbands paying us wages.

Voices No it's not the husbands.

Joan No I don't see where a company is paying my husband to keep me.

Sue Well say if your husband didn't have you? If he didn't have a stable home, or if he didn't have someone who made sure his clothes were ready for work.

Joan He'd do it himself

Sue Yeah, but you're doing the job for him, so you're helping the company to have a worker.

Joan No I don't think so. I don't agree with you at all. How many single men are working? Who does their work for them?

Pat They run right to their mother.

Ann Yeah, their mother. It's the same thing, there's somebody maintaining them.

Joan Oh yeah maintaining them, yeah right.

Helen The money should be given by the employers. I think the workers should be given something extra for the wives (...)

Ann You take a guy, the wife's dead or she's left him, and he's stuck home with the kids. He goes to work, he's got to pay someone to look after those kids. Otherwise a wife is just there and she's expected to look after those kids. She doesn't get \$30 or \$40 extra a week. She's just there and that's her job. I mean how many times has a man said to a woman? "That's your job, I'm not going to help you".

Pat You know I asked Michael to take the clothes over to the laundry to wash them. He said "why should I do that? That's your job."

Ann Well, there you go (...)

Gwynne Everyone gets paid by the person who benefits from their work. That's the traditional boss-worker relationship. And whenever this thing wages for housework is brought up, people always start yapping, "well who's going to pay?" Well, who usually pays--the person who benefits. So we're not saying our husbands should pay us X dollars per week from their pockets. Sure they benefit from us, although sometimes they don't seem to think so. But we already said that it's the bosses who really benefit, so let them pay for our work.

Joan Yeah, but wouldn't it all come back to the same thing? Let's say the government is willing to pay housewives for their work, but who's going to pay for that in return?

Pat My husband's taxes.

Joan So where does it get you? It's just that you always hear this big thing about your taxes and no matter how you get it, the taxpayers themselves are really paying for it. So really you're going to end up paying yourself. Except that you are going to get the money.

Sue Why not tax the companies more? I mean the prices have gone up in the past two years just enormously, but the profits keep going up too. It's us who pay most of the taxes when it should be more the companies that make the profit.

Maureen I was just going to say that.

Sue So that it would be the companies. They pay your husbands to work. So they should also pay through the taxes more for the wives work, for the houseworker's work.

Maureen I just got the tail end of some kind of news bulletin. Did you see it last night? They had this diagram. It showed a scale of what the workers were making now and the increase they wanted. It was like one inch on this scale what they made now, and one and a quarter inches the increase they wanted, and like six inches the profit of the bosses. It was just incredible. Like they were making over 100% profit. That's where the bloody money for wages should come from. Why should they be allowed to make money like that? It shouldn't be taxed back to us so that the women are paying their own bloody wages, or their husbands are paying their wages. It should just be more evenly distributed, that's all.

Joan Another thing too, I don't think that a wife should have to go out to work to help support either, because then they're holding down two jobs. And where does your house go? To hell.

Gwynne That's true. When women go to work, they really are working 2 jobs. It's like double shift work they're holding down.

Joan Sure. Like I've done it with 2 small kids. And it wasn't too bad when the kids were in somebody else's house being minded. But it was shifted around, they were minded in my house, I had all that work to do on top when I came home from working.

Gwynne And when both people work it's still the wife's job to have the supper ready on time.

Joan While I was working, I can honestly say that it was 50/50. But as long as I'm not working, then it's my job.

Gwynne But a lot of women don't have that kind of deal, I don't

Ann I don't.

Maureen No, no. If I come in at 6:00, everybody is sitting like, "where were you?" Everybody's hungry.

Helen They'll sit and starve waiting for you to get home.

Ann I think too we can blame ourselves in a way for that. I blame

myself, I really do. I think even with Cliff, I think that I spoiled him.

Voices Yeah.

Maureen Yeah, but when you come to realise that sometimes I think that it's not even worth it at this point. Like I go through that all the time now, but by Christ my kids aren't. That's going to be an entirely different story, there's no way my daughter is ever going to be put in that position. Like, you know the hubby will say, "well Sharon you better learn how to do dishes, cause later on in life, that's your role kid." And she just tells them all to drop dead, like "you better learn to do them the same way I do, because I'm not doing any more than you are."

Gwynne There's so many ways to look at the whole idea of wages for housework. Now when PACC is fighting to get houses repaired we say we're fighting for better working conditions. Our house is our factory, it's where we work and women are the only workers who pay rent on their factories.

Sue Or when we go to the welfare, we go in demanding not our welfare but our wages! After all, we're doing a job.

Maureen That would shake them up. Can't you see dear old Lamoureux "WHAT? WAGES?" We should all go together, as a group, and say "we want our wages, not our welfare, our wages."

Pat You should also at the same time, demand an increase in your wages.

Helen Ever hear of the word, "mission impossible"?

Pat Right on.

Gwynne Yeah, it's too bad, you know. If there was some way that women could go on strike for higher wages.

Joan I was just thinking of that, yeah.

Helen We could, if we put our minds to it hard enough, we could.

Joan Yeah, but it would be called illegal.

Voices What we need is a union.

Pat Yeah, we're net unionised.

Joan It certainly doesn't pay you to go out and work. Because I know in my case it didn't because now my husband is over on his, what is it, the amount he can deduct for me as a dependent because I worked.

Sue And usually, there's so few daycare places, that women have to pay

a fortune either for daycare, or babysitting that they hardly have any left over. It's barely worth it. A lot of women try to make it on their own, they get paid so little in jobs that a lot of them end up going on welfare. Even if they tried working.

Joan Yeah, well that's it. You try to be independent, but you know, it's too hard. It's looked on that welfare is charity. As I was saying before if it was like a wage, because we're doing a job in the home, then we wouldn't feel like we would have to go out and work somewhere else and then come back and do our job at home too. In Ontario there's a man who has kids. His wife died. And he feels that looking after the kids, and looking after the house is a full time job, which it is. So he wants to stay home and continue to collect welfare. The welfare is trying to force him to go out and get a job. So then he would have 2 jobs.

Maureen But you talk to hundreds of men and that's the way they think. That housework is a charm, it's nothing. The men have their so called labels and pressures that are put on them too. Like that if you're a real man then you make enough that the little woman doesn't have to go out to work, and that kind of thing. He makes enough for the family. I think more and more that women are going out to work, and it's more of an equal thing financially. In the house it's not so equal. But that was a stigma almost at one time, that you know, the women went out to work, my God what's the matter, can't you look after your family?

Sue When it's not him, it's the company's not paying him decent wages.

Helen One's man's wage, today, is not enough to keep a family going.

Maureen I just figured out why they decided this is international women's year. It's true now, it's almost impossible for a man to support his family on his salary, because prices are getting so high. And so they decided that women should be working. Why not? Right. So they made international women's year, so that women will go out and work.

Gwynne Exactly, so I think that if you really look at it, so much of it has always been determined by government attitudes, which are governed by economics. During the war when the men were out fighting, well then there was nothing a woman couldn't do. I mean, she was in every factory, in every office, in every place.

Ann And they had daycare centres to look after her kids, for free.

Gwynne For sure. Because they needed the women to work. As soon as the war ended and all the men came back, they started "a woman's place

is in the home" and "there's nothing more sacred than motherhood," and this whole business; because it was time to move the women out of the labour market again. No more free daycare, and no nothing. Women back in the homes. But as soon as the situation gets tight again and they need women, because women have always been, let's face it, cheap labour, right. Because they get paid less usually, and they're the first to get laid off when the layoffs come, and all the rest of it. So whenever the government needs their cheap labour pool, they do a big campaign to get the women back out again to keep the economy running.

Pat I'm going to tell Harry that one. Gwynne said that I'm cheap labour. That's my next argument.

Ann You don't have to say Gwynne said. We talked about it this morning at our women's meeting.

Joan A woman never gets a chance to learn a trade.

Gwynne I think when you start looking at wages for housework, it's tied right in with everything else that we're fighting for in PACC. Bad housing, lousy welfare, bad education, it's all part of the same system that puts women in their place and it works to keep them there. And as we've learned from our fights with that system in the past, we're not going to be able to win any of our fights unless there's a lot of us—men and women— fighting together.

Throughout this discussion, facilitated by two feminist agitators, each woman shared her personal experience, new information was brought in by the “agitators” but also by the other women in the group, links were made and analysis (both gender and class) was deepened (on value of women’s labour, on production/reproduction in capitalism, on redistribution of wealth).

Throughout this spiral, the shifting positionalities are apparent, as the agitators, but also other women in the group forced each other to question the assumptions underlying their actions. The most obvious is Joan, who, at the beginning did not share the feminist analysis, but, by the end, was doing her own gender analysis. By the end of the discussion, the women were discussing how to act on this information. Maureen, based on the collective analysis, proposed actions – above and beyond transmitting new values to her daughter, she proposed an action at the welfare office where they would demand “wages”

for their housework! Other women jumped into the conversation, talking about unionising, demanding higher wages, and striking if necessary! Pat said she was going to tell her husband that Gwynne said that she is cheap labour, at which point other women jumped in and clarified that it was not Gwynne, it was all of them, because it was a collective discussion. Today, Maureen is an agitator, who can always be counted on to bring in both class and gender analysis to any discussion (as are most of the women in the group, who have participated in these kinds of discussions many times throughout their activist careers).

### **Madame prend congé**

Many women, however, felt that these informal women's caucuses within mixed groups were not sufficient for the true empowerment of women, as women. Building on the experiences of the first women's centres set up by radical feminist groups, it was in the mid to late 1970s that autonomous women's centres mushroomed all over Québec<sup>345</sup>. These centers aimed to provide creative collective solutions to problems of isolation, depression, and violence against women, but also to propose projects to increase women's self-esteem, skills, and to build and influence community<sup>346</sup>. It is in this flurry of innovation that women in Point St. Charles, stronger from their experiences in the women's caucuses and in the daycare, began thinking about setting up a women's center (1979). Marguerite was a founding member of Madame prend congé, and shares the very beginnings with the group:

Marguerite    Moi je pourrais raconter le tout début, avant Madame prend  
e                congé. Je travaillais à la garderie et j'allais au parc avec les enfants.  
Je voyais des personnes au fameux restaurant « Gousta ». Il y avait  
quelqu'un qui buvait toujours un café. Elle était là, elle regardait  
dehors. Je revenais une heure après, elle était encore là avec son  
café. Je me disais "qu'est-ce qu'on pourrait faire?" Il y a les AA  
mais il faut que tu aies un problème de boisson. Elle, elle était

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<sup>345</sup> Charbonneau, Charbonneau, & Larocque, 1985

<sup>346</sup> D'Amours, 1988

toute seule. Qu'est-ce que tu veux faire, toute seule au comptoir ? Tu as les Gamblers Anonymes, (...) tous les petits kits. Mais tout ça, il faut que tu aies un problème! Qu'est-ce qu'on pourrait faire pour ces femmes-là? Une place pour les femmes ? Pas pour dire « Viens-tu dans un comité ? » Pas pour rien leur offrir. Juste une place pour s'asseoir, pour qu'elles puissent parler, échanger. Il y avait le Carrefour mais quand tu vas là, il faut que tu fasses quelque chose. Au Club, il faut que tu embarques dans un comité. Il n'y avait pas d'endroit où on pouvait aller prendre un café, échanger, jaser. On peut aller plus loin après mais au moins la porte d'entrée est là...Je mijote ça. (...) En même temps, il y avait Hélène Parenteau et une de ses amies, Carole Tremblay, qui venaient de Black Lake (...) Là-bas, il y avait un groupe de femmes qui brodait qui s'appelait Madame prend congé. (...) Alors ces deux femmes-là sont dans leur cuisine, elles se trouvent seules et elles se disent « Ce serait donc le fun de partir un groupe ». Moi je ne sais pas ça! Je suis encore à la garderie mais je travaillais la même affaire de mon bord ! C'est le fun de savoir qu'en même temps, il y a des personnes qui réfléchissent à la même chose. Alors elles en ont parlé avec un curé. Elles ont eu des sous et elles ont fait ça à l'église St-Jean, au deuxième, au presbytère.(...) Moi je leur parle et elles me disent « On a un groupe de femmes, on se rencontre ! ». « Ah oui ? Je vais aller voir ça. »

Michèle Es-tu allée chercher la femme au café?

Marguerite Mais non ! (*laughing*) Mais là, ni une ni deux, il fallait que je sorte ça du presbytère ! Au presbytère, au deuxième, il n'y a aucune visibilité. Je suis allée chercher Serge Wagner parce que moi, je sais pas faire ça des demandes de subvention. En tout cas, c'est comme ça qu'on a parti notre groupe de femmes !

The founding members of Madame prend congé, very pragmatic, did what they had to do to get a women's space – even if it meant allying with the Church (one of the bastions of patriarchy!) to get physical space, getting help from male organisers, or allowing men into the space in order to get funding for the project:

Marguerite Mais pour avoir des sous, on a su qu'on ne pouvait pas prendre le nom « Madame prend congé ».

Michèle Parce qu'y en avait un à Black Lake !

Marguerite Pas du tout. Comment voulais-tu que les gens donnent de l'argent



- e pour que...
- All Madame prenne congé!!! (*everyone is laughing*)
- Marguerite Ça s'est appelé l'Éclaircie et on avait l'activité Madame prend congé. Au départ, on ne pouvait pas avoir de sous, à part les \$3,000.00 dollars de Centraide qui payaient le loyer, parce qu'on ne pouvait pas donner le nom.
- Michèle Ça se peut pas !
- Marguerite Parce que c'est des hommes d'affaires qui étaient là-dedans et ils disaient « Si tu penses qu'on va donner aux femmes, et que... »

The activity “Madame prend congé” was held one afternoon a week, and was a women-only time. The following are excerpts from the flyer from the time that the Centre was still “L'Éclaircie”<sup>347</sup>:

L'Éclaircie c'est:

Un local ouvert aux gens du quartier pour les amener à sortir de chez-eux.

Un endroit public où ils se sentiront bien et où ils pourront communiquer avec d'autres afin de se sentir moins différents.

Un lieu où développer un sentiment d'appartenance au quartier et découvrir leur propres ressources.

Un endroit où apprendre à connaître les autres organismes du quartier et les services qu'ils offrent.

Madame prend congé

Madame prend congé s'adresse à des femmes de Pointe St-Charles.

Ensemble, nous parlons de notre réalité de tous les jours. On se parle de l'éducation des enfants, des soins, de l'alimentation, de nos loisirs, de notre condition de femmes, d'épouses, de mères.

Cette mise en commun est un stimulant pour tenter d'améliorer notre situation.

By 1981, however, the Centre was no longer open to men, and its activities were organised around both practical and strategic gender needs. Pierrette

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<sup>347</sup> Éclaircie (1979). Flyer. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2000.03.009.02..

Boivin, one of the « agitators » at Madame prend congé, writes about the Centre, in 1981 in *La Vie Ouvrière*<sup>348</sup>:

Madame Prend Congé est un organisme qui s'adresse à des femmes du quartier Pointe-St-Charles. Il a été mis sur pieds dans le but d'amener les femmes à sortir de l'isolement auquel les confinait leur situation d'épouse et de mère. L'idée de prendre un congé au milieu d'une semaine de travail à la maison fut à l'origine du projet. Peu à peu, il y a eu une mise en commun des réalités vécues par chacune, et ce temps de congé est devenu un temps de partage des expériences.

Un temps pour prendre conscience de sa situation et se questionner sur les moyens de la maintenir telle ou de l'améliorer.

Un temps pour se parler de l'école et de notre implication au niveau du comité de parents.

Un temps pour se parler de la clinique médicale et de notre participation au conseil d'administration et à l'assemblée générale.

Un temps pour se parler de la pharmacie populaire et du logement, de la garderie et de nos enfants ; de l'alimentation et du comptoir alimentaire ; de nos loisirs et du Carrefour d'éducation des adultes.

Un temps aussi pour se parler de nos conditions de vie en tant que travailleuses domestiques, éducatrices, infirmières, etc., et pour trouver ensemble les moyens de mieux vivre.

Un temps pour se parler de notre rôle l'épouse et de mère, et réfléchir sur les schémas que nous impose la société.

Un temps aussi pour apprendre des techniques d'artisanat à travers l'élaboration de créations collectives.

C'est en partageant toutes ces réalités qui constituent le vécu quotidien des femmes que nous avons été amenées à agir sur lui. Que ce soit dans l'implication au niveau des divers groupes populaires ou au niveau du couple et de la famille, cette mise en commun est un stimulant pour tenter d'améliorer nos conditions de vie.

Women had these kinds of discussions in “consciousness raising” groups that were integral to the feminist organising approach. Below is a photo of one of the first consciousness raising group at Madame prend congé, Thérèse is on the right<sup>349</sup>.

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<sup>348</sup> Boivin, 1981, p.46

<sup>349</sup> (March 1981). *Vie ouvrière*, 152, p.33. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CEP-101.



It is through various kinds of activities that this “consciousness raising” was accomplished, including workshops on self-esteem, the family, the couple, racism, using innovative methods such as theatre and artwork. The very first project of the Centre was the creation of a collective patchwork (“courtepointe”):

Marguerite Qu'est-ce qu'on faisait? Une fois par quinze jours, une dame du quartier venait nous montrer comment rembourrer. Et puis on a fait une courtepointe (...) où on a toutes brodé notre nom (...) Mais c'était pas juste de la broderie pour de la broderie (...) C'était une activité collective (...)

Thérèse J'ai cheminé dans cet espace de temps de la courtepointe. (...) Mon nom est sur la courtepointe. À partir de là, les projets déboulaient. La garderie en arrière, « se reconnaître comme femme », j'ai participé à ces rencontres-là. (...) Les ateliers de formation, où on se découvrait en tant que femme, où on cheminait justement pour être capable de s'exprimer, de prendre notre autonomie. On s'identifiait, on était capable de partager certaines choses. Ça été extraordinaire cette révélation là ! On vivait des belles choses à l'intérieur de ça. Chaque semaine il y avait un thème nouveau et on vivait des choses nouvelles.

- Anna           Quels genres de thèmes?
- Thérèse       Les choses qu'on vivait. C'était la solidarité dont Margo parlait tantôt, c'est-à-dire qu'on partageait, (...) on regardait le progrès qu'on faisait, on cheminait ensemble. C'était une belle solidarité.
- Marguerite    On faisait des jeux, des mises en situation.
- Anna           Sur quelles sortes de thèmes par exemple?
- Marguerite    Sur la famille, les histoires de couple. Sur le manque de dialogue. Une faisait l'homme et l'autre faisait la femme. Après, on échangeait, on allait voir d'où cette idée était venue. On pouvait le refaire avec la vision d'une autre personne.
- Anna           Donc tu arrêtais, une autre personne s'ajoutait et jouait ?
- Marguerite    On pouvait, c'est ça.
- Thérèse       Un moment donné, on devait se bricoler un masque. On échangeait sur le masque qu'on avait bricolé. On se reconnaissait. C'était vraiment extraordinaire, tout ce qui a été révélé, ce qu'on osait dire à sa compagne. Qu'on reconnaissait qu'elle était belle femme, lui dire qu'elle avait des beaux yeux. Être capable de dire « Tu as des beaux seins et moi je t'admire dans ça, je trouve ça beau. » On était capables de dire ça, parce qu'autrement...
- Louise         ...C'était mal vu !
- Thérèse       Hey! C'était mal vu, une femme qui ose dire à une autre qu'elle a des belle jambes, des beaux seins, un instant !
- Isabelle       Ça portait peut-être à confusion !
- Thérèse       Oui, on le disait et on était comme gênée mais on arrivait à le faire à cause du cheminement qu'on nous avait aidé à faire, du cheminement qu'on avait fait.
- Thérèse       Il y avait un animateur, un jeune comédien, qui acceptait de partager son expérience de comédien avec des femmes comme nous qui sentaient le besoin de s'exprimer. Je vous dit qu'il en sortait des affaires là-dedans ! C'était très dur. Assez que j'ai débarqué de la pièce de théâtre une fois. J'ai dit « Je ne suis pas capable de prendre ça, moi. ». Il dit « Vous êtes des naufragés, vous êtes dans un chaland, une espèce de chaloupe. Vous êtes un groupe et il y a un noir avec vous et ci et ça. » Bon. Et là qu'est-ce qui se passe? Ça va bien au début, (...) mais une dame est à l'intérieur du chaland avec nous, et on s'exprime, et on se bouscule « Tu as pris ma place ! »

« Non, c'est pas comme ça, c'est pas de ce côté-là qu'il faut s'en aller ». Toutes sortes de choses comme ça. On est pour couler et cette dame-là dit « Le noir à l'eau ! »

Michèle Ah ! Non, non, non !

Thérèse Moi j'ai dit « Non. Je regrette mais moi je n'embarque pas là-dedans. Je débarque du chaland et tout de suite à part ça. Elle dit « Ben voyons! C'est une pièce de théâtre ! » « Je ne suis pas capable de le prendre ». J'ai débarqué.

Anna Est-ce que ça s'est discuté par après?

Thérèse On s'est expliqué après. Elle m'a dit « Voyons Thérèse, c'était pour rire, c'était une pièce de théâtre ».

Anna Mais est-ce qu'il y avait des discussion par rapport au racisme, tout ça?

Thérèse Oui, on en a parlé.

From the beginning, agitators were present, and were often called in to help out : social workers, organisers, local artists. The story that Thérèse tells about the play shows that they were dealing with issues of racism at the time, as well as class and gender. The following excerpts from a round-table discussion that was published in the *Vie Ouvrière* provide a glimpse into the kinds of discussions that were had at the time at *Madame prend congé*<sup>350</sup>:

Tu peux jamais faire une seule chose à la fois. Tu fais ton lavage en tendant l'oreille pour savoir si les enfants ne se sont pas fait mal en jouant dans la cour, en même temps que tu penses à ce que tu vas faire pour dîner (...)

T'as pas droit non plus aux congés fériés, ni aux vacances. Parle moi pas de la Fête des mères : c'est la journée où je travaille le plus. Quant aux vacances, il faut charrier la job avec nous-autres (...)

Il y a des maris qui s'impliquent en te disant quoi faire et comment le faire. Ils font comme leurs boss ! (...)

Puis il y a les exigences : des enfants bien élevés, une maison spic'n span, bons petits repas chauds. Pourquoi tant d'exigences? Parce que ma seule fierté, c'est de montrer que je suis une vraie femme. Si j'aime pas le travail de maison, j'suis pas une vraie femme (...)

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<sup>350</sup> (March 1982). Les maladies du travail ménager, *Vie Ouvrière*, 160, p.18-24. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, CEP-101.

Pour être une vraie femme aussi, il faut être belle, toujours sourire, jamais pleurer. Si tu souris pas, ton mari arrive, y sourit pas lui non plus. Y se demande : « Pourquoi elle sourit pas, t'as ben l'air bête ! (...) Moi je travaille à la longueur de journée pis il faut que j'accumule ça en plus ! » Alors tu peux rien raconter parce que le moral de toute la maisonnée repose sur toi. Ça fait que les tripes restent en-dedans ; t'étouffes avec tes tripes.

Ça m'est arrivé, surtout au début de mon mariage, d'accepter d'avoir des relations sexuelles avec mon mari pour lui faire plaisir (...) Je me rends compte qu'il y avait beaucoup de chose d'impliqué la-dessous : la peur d'être enceinte sans l'avoir voulu, les enfants qui pleuraient, ça m'énervait, etc. (...) Alors maintenant on s'en parle, on arrive à négocier nos goûts de faire l'amour, j'apprends à dire mes besoins, je suis parvenue à identifier que j'avais un besoin très fort de connaître mon corps.

Thus, in this space, women talked about the drudgery and long-hours of housework, the control of their husbands over their lives, the expectations that people have about the roles and responsibilities of women, the pressures to reproduce the image of the perfect, smiling, “always-available” woman, and the tensions around sexuality.

In addition to the various workshops and consciousness raising round-tables, women who just needed to talk could come to active listening sessions:

Marguerite Je suis allée prendre un cours en écoute active pour être capable d'accueillir les hommes, les femmes, qui avaient besoin de venir parler.

Michèle Qui avaient besoin d'un oreille.

Marguerite D'une bonne oreille et de prendre un café. On avait une petite salle en arrière pour les personnes qui arrivaient avec le cœur gros.

Louise Un trop plein.

Marguerite Un trop plein et pas le goût de parler à personne. Il y en a qui me disait « Mon Dieu, Margo, si tu savais comment ça me fait du bien ! Je m'en vais en arrière, personne ne vient me demander rien, je peux pleurer. Chez nous, je ne peux pas pleurer parce que mon enfant, mon conjoint, tout le monde me demande ce que j'ai. » Cet appartement-là, c'était vraiment pour les personnes qui avaient un trop plein, qui n'avaient pas le goût de parler, qui voulaient juste un endroit pour se libérer.

These active listening sessions were in fact, precursors, to what was fast becoming feminist therapy for women who were survivors of conjugal violence. In the excerpt below, Marguerite remembers the horrifying stories that she heard during these sessions:

Marguerite Aujourd'hui il y a des programmes à la télévision qui parlent de sexe, de toutes sortes d'affaires. Moi, à l'époque, je ne connaissais pas ça. Mais je vous dirais qu'il y avait des histoires que les femmes venaient raconter...

Michèle Ah oui, il faut dire qu'on en a entendu !

Marguerite Tu en apprends des vertes et des pas mûres. Tu te tiens après les barreaux de la chaise. C'est incroyable ce que les femmes peuvent supporter pour garder leur chum, leur conjoint. Je comprends ça que ces femmes-là n'étaient pas capables de faire partie d'un groupe. Elles voulaient juste être capables d'en parler. C'est incroyable ce qui s'est dit là.

Isabelle Tu parles de violence conjugale.

Marguerite Violence conjugale, violence sexuelle.

Isabelle C'est une forme de violence conjugale. Mais les femmes venaient ventiler une fois temps en temps quand c'était trop plein

Madeleine Mais elles avaient peur aussi.

From these excerpts, it is clear that Marguerite was shaken into realising that women were being beaten and abused by their husbands, leading to a deepening analysis of gender inequalities and to anger at these injustices. Notwithstanding the empathy that Marguerite was feeling for these survivors of conjugal violence, she still maintains that there was a split between the women who came for « écoute active », who were often survivors of conjugal violence, and « the rest of them » who did workshops « up front ». This categorisation comes back later, in the discussion about divorces (see “standing up to their husbands” section).

One of the first major activities of the Centre was a women-only trip to France, funded by the Office Franco-Québécois pour la jeunesse (OFQJ), to

visit other women's organisations. This event was quite an adventure for many of the 18 women who participated, including both Marguerite and Thérèse, as the French group describes :

Thérèse On a fait un échange entre les femmes de la France et les femmes du Québec (...). Ça été tout un cheminement à faire ! Tu imagines, oser penser qu'on irait en Europe ! Il y avait des femmes qui n'étaient jamais sorties du quartier ! Là, on parlait d'aller en Europe ! C'était tout un monde ça ! On s'est donné des moyens. Chercher de l'argent pour aider celles qui n'en avaient pas... Ça voulait dire sortir encore plus de sa maison. Tu n'avais pas juste ta rencontre à Madame prend congé ! Ça voulait dire qu'un samedi tu faisais un marché aux puces, ou tu faisais une épiluchette de blé d'inde. Ça demandait la participation de tout le monde. Il fallait que les femmes aillent dire à leur mari « Samedi, je suis à l'épiluchette de blé d'inde pour ramasser de l'argent ». Ça brûlait hein !? Ça brûlait dans les maisons, ça faisait pas l'affaire de ces messieurs !

Like many families in working-class neighbourhoods, most of these women had never had a « vacation » outside of the Point, much less on another continent ! As the women were preparing their trip, they often felt paralysed with fear at the idea of leaving their children, families, and community to go abroad for the first time – alone. This took immense courage:

Marguerite C'est très spécial. Ce qui s'est passé là, c'est un gros travail. Il se vivait beaucoup d'insécurité dès qu'il arrivait un petit pépin. « Je te l'avais dit Margo que ça marcherait pas ! Je ne pourrai pas y aller ». À chaque fois, à la moindre petite affaire, le signe qui venait dire « Tu vois bien que je ne pourrai pas y aller, ça se peut pas, je ne pourrai jamais y aller ». On est parties !

Marguerite Ça a pris un an. (...) Il y a bien des femmes qui ont trois, quatre, cinq enfants. Partir en France quand tu n'as pas d'argent, les enfants vont à l'école - on est allées au mois de novembre - ça a demandé une grande préparation.

Isabelle Et les femmes ont toutes les responsabilités, la maison, les enfants.

Marguerite C'est ça. Et les gars étaient en maudit ! Non, non, non, c'était épouvantable !



In fact, faced with a growing anger from the husbands (see tensions section), the women going to France decided to organise a meeting for the husbands, in order to calm certain fears and violent reactions:

Marguerite Les hommes, ça allaient mal. On a fait une rencontre d'hommes. Il a fallu! (...) Cette rencontre là a été assez extraordinaire. D'abord leur dire qu'on les comprenait. J'étais toute seule de femme, c'est moi qui animait. C'est moi qui les a rencontrés. Peut-être que Diane était là, je ne suis pas sûre, mais les conjointes n'étaient pas là.

Thérèse Non, nous, on était pas là.

Marguerite Mais l'important pour eux, c'était de savoir qu'ils étaient compris et que c'est vrai que ça pouvait être difficile à accepter. On a fait cette démarche-là et ça été très bon. Assez que lorsqu'on a fait un bazar, une danse, un repas pour 600 personnes, tous les hommes ont participé. Avant, la plupart des gars étaient contre, c'était pas facile! Ils ne voulaient pas que les femmes participent. Je ne dirai pas que ça a été facile. Le monsieur qui voulait me...

Louise ...Te voir au ciel !

Michèle Ou en enfer !

Marguerite Lui, il est venu jusqu'à l'aéroport pour torturer sa femme ! N'empêche qu'il a participé quand même. Mais il n'était pas capable d'accepter!

Isabelle Vous avez dû avoir une solidarité extraordinaire ! Ça devait être infernal !

Notwithstanding all the hurdles, they did make it to Europe. Once in France, they visited other women's groups, including some women's centres and daycares:

Michèle Avez-vous trouvé du monde qui vous ressemblait un peu? Des femmes semblables ?

Marguerite Comme groupe de femmes, on était plus avancé, c'est incroyable !

Michèle Ah oui ! En France, ils écrivent des livres là-dessus mais c'est pas avancé.

Marguerite J'étais surprise mais comme groupe de femmes, elles étaient toujours impressionnées des choses qu'on pouvait dire, de la façon qu'on les exprimait, se dire. Mais nous, ça faisait trois ans qu'on

travaillait à apprendre à être capables de se dire (...) On avait appris à s'exprimer. (...) Elles étaient impressionnées de voir que nous, on acceptait de parler de choses difficiles, et qu'on avait des mots pour nommer les affaires. Elles étaient bien surprises de ça.

The surprise, and pride following the realisation that the women from the Point were part of a feminist “avant-garde”, because they were able to name their oppressions, and discuss them openly, oozes from this excerpt. They did not, however, spend their entire time sitting around a table discussing their oppressions. On the contrary, the women took advantage of their short-lived “freedom” from family and community to play, to have fun, to dance. Here is an excerpt from a spontaneous discussion, full of laughter and pride, that we had at the end of a meeting while we looked at a series of photos of the trip that Thérèse had brought (collage below<sup>351</sup>):

Marguerite On était dans le métro et on a fait la lambada (*Marguerite is dancing in the photo!*) (...) On a assez fait les folles ! (...) On a exagéré ! (...)

Louise Tu n'es pas chez vous ! Personne va faire de remarques le lendemain ! Ça te permet de te défouler !

Marguerite Elles sont contentes, elles sont heureuses ! (...)

Thérèse On avait droit au déjeuner au lit (*Thérèse is in the photo !*)! Croissant et chocolat au lait !

Anna On va faire un collage, « femmes libres, déjeuner au lit, danse dans le métro...”

Thérèse Un party dans la chambre ! (...)

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<sup>351</sup> Photos donated by Thérèse Dionne.



Madame prend congé has been criticised by many inside and outside the Point as being conservative, and not really « feminist » because of the kind of activities it has offered over the years (focused most often on practical gender needs), the sporadic alliances with men, as well as the “watered down” discourse that it has used at times in the public arena. For example, if one looks at a list of activities – patchwork, theatre, parent-child relations – without delving into the actual experiences of the participants, one might conclude that because of the Centre’ focus on practical gender needs, it perpetuates women’s traditional gender roles. Similarly, the inclusion of men in the space in the very beginning, and the attempts to work with the husbands of members, may be seen as breaking with the notion of an autonomous women’s space. Finally, one might

criticise the fact that Madame prend congé was rarely seen out in the streets demonstrating around women's issues.

When one delves a bit deeper, however, it becomes clear that what was being put into practice at the Centre was definitely feminism – perhaps more of a working-class feminism – but feminism nonetheless (Haywoode, 1999). The active listening services for women survivors of conjugal violence; the consciousness-raising discussions facilitated by feminist agitators on women's gender roles, on violence, on sexuality, on the couple, on beauty; the exchange with feminists from France and their realisation of their “avant-garde” nature – all of these activities demonstrated that although the women were drawn into the Centre because of practical gender needs, very often, a feminist analysis ensued and strategic gender needs were identified. Moreover, many of these women acted on their new awareness of gender inequalities. For many, simply meeting with other women in a women-only space, was quite radical. The trip to France was without a doubt a liberating moment for the participants – away from home, dancing in the subway, having breakfast in bed, partying in the hotel room. Above and beyond the actions that women did with the actual group, their new awareness was also taken into their homes and the community, as I will show below.

### **St-Columba House Women's Discussion Group**

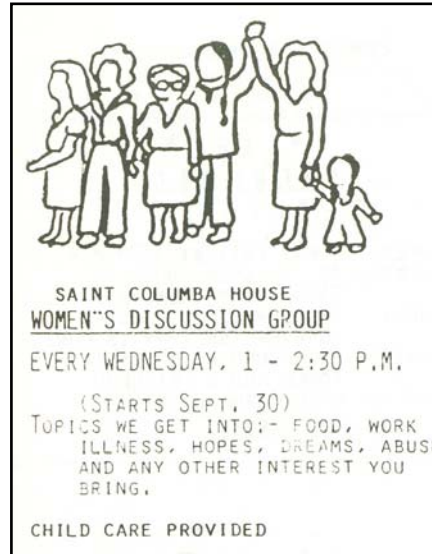
On the English side, the « St-Columba Women's Discussion Group » was set-up in the mid 1980s under the leadership of Faye Wakeling, the Minister at the time, and has been meeting once a week since then<sup>352</sup>. The topics discussed, as the participants tell below, are quite varied, but center a lot more than Madame prend congé on their children (see flyer, below<sup>353</sup>)

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<sup>352</sup> Chamberlain, Garbish, Leduc, Rose, & Wakeling, 1996

<sup>353</sup> (September 1987). Point in Print, 5th edition, St-Columba House. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, SCH-01.

Myrna We are about 10 or 12 people usually. It's a very different group from what we started out with. (...) Women are very supportive with each other. Like when there was the woman's march or anything else that's going on in the community, we have a representative that goes. (...) But it's a group that supports and helps. There is no pressure put on. When we have special topics or things that they want to talk about, "what's going on". Like lets say when the woman's march came on, we worked on that. Well let's say now, Thursday, when they come in, somebody comes in and they have a topic that they want to talk about, we'll do that. We can switch back and forth. It's being able to change. *And doing the support that that person needs at that time.* So it's a very different group than a group where you start out saying we come in and we help with the community. It's not that type of group.



Anna What kind of topics do you address? Like what type of support?

Myrna Housing was a big issue. Or, not that long ago, we had a woman who had lost a child (to child protection) due to no fault of her own and she got the child back. So it was that kind of group also. They put a lot of work in the safety around the Point. (...) Some of us women organised to make streets safer.. (...) We were talking about the different places that didn't have very good lighting. (...) People were talking about their lane ways too, about how the lighting was bad again. And talked about walking home at night, and that they would like better and more light. *It came from people's needs.* Then, we went around, sometimes with their children, and checked all the different parks and different streets. And they made a list of where the lighting was bad and what was missing. (...) About how contaminated they thought the ground was there for the children to play there. We wrote letters. We got some of the lighting changed. Some of it was made better. We didn't get everything. But there was a lot of changes made. They talked about the Shearer tunnel, at the time, it was open. And they wanted to know how they could make it more safe. We wrote letters to (the municipal councillor) Marcel Sévigny, to see if they could straighten up the tunnel under there, take out the curve,

or close it, because it was a hazard. They closed it. So it was part of our doing! The people went and checked 3 months after to see if it was done. We re-wrote letters, phoned the city and things like that. (...)

Anna So, your project, Myrna, was completely your own initiative. It came from women saying, “look we have problems with certain things in the Point. We want to fix it”.

Denise Most of the actions or projects were initiated by women here. (...)

Myrna Women Against Contamination, that was another project that came out of St Columba House, from the Women’s Discussion group. People were concerned about their children. At the time we had a woman there, and across the street from where she lived she had this bubbling pipe. It was always bubbling! This guck was coming out of it. And it smelt bad. Other people were concerned about why their kids had a lot of asthma and different things in the Point. So they started talking about some of the buildings. They were old buildings. Some might be paint chips, radiators and lead poisoning. They got together with (the Clinic). (...) And they did a survey of 50 or so families in the Pointe, and they did testing. (...) Melissa went often to do presentations and other stuff at different communities and different centres that wanted to know about contamination. And if they were going to start something, what they should look for. (...) We do a lot of fun things too, like we go to (the) Centaur (Theatre). We get free tickets and stuff like that. They also support in that they help with babysitting. And we support one another in that a lot of them are single parents. (...)

It is clear that the Women’s Discussion Group was, and still is about starting from the needs of the participants to initiate discussions and actions. Most of the women in the group identified practical gender needs such as housing, street safety and contamination, and, in line with the literature on women’s activism in working-class neighbourhoods, used their expertise as mothers to act on these issues.

Although it may seem, at first glance, that the focus of the group on issues revolving around their children, is conservative, or “maternalistic”, as certain feminists have referred to it, transversal to the focus on practical gender needs is a feminist analysis that leads to identification of strategic gender needs,

and to actions related to the latter. In this space, the women ended up discussing gender roles and power dynamics in the home and community, which lead to action. They have been active in the two Marches of Women, against poverty and violence, have discussed issues of violence against women, and decided to set-up a workers cooperative to make jobs for women in the Point.

### Making jobs for women

The idea to start up a place of employment, to create jobs for people from the Point, came from the St-Columba House Women's Discussion Group as well in the late 1980s:

Donna I was a founding member and Myrna was also on the committee. (...) If I go back to the women's discussion group, some years ago, we did an exercise. If we could have what we wanted in the Point, what would we do? And we made a mural out of materials. It was really fun. We had our dentist Clinic, we had our community Clinic, we had Lorne school back, cause it had been closed at the time, safe parks, all this. We had a business where people can have daycare, all that kind of stuff. That was the seed. It wasn't until some years later that it came to be. St-Columba house, every few years, would have a retreat where they can step out of the community and look at Point St-Charles and the needs. Are we, as a community center, meeting those needs? What can we do? We looked at the high unemployment rate and the unemployability of people. People who don't have training in a trade. So we formed a committee of people within the area. We looked at what we could do in the area that can offer training, but also a service to the community. We had quite a few meetings. (...) I think they were all Anglophones, now that I think about it. So we looked at different areas of providing services... making small appliances for elderly or handicapped people. For example, make a seat that could fit in the tub that could assist somebody. Because we know it's an aging community. Or to help people have a trade in general electric repairs, small appliances. An upholstery service was a third option. As people in the area, we know that having furniture can be expensive and therefore we thought maybe this might be the avenue to go. To be able to give the service and also have a training program. So when that was decided, we went to the community and asked who would be interested in learning this trade and hopefully

help them to be employable. They could now have something that they can go to, for a job. And so there was ten of us altogether who started it (...) We got our first initial grant from RESO.

Point at Work (PAW) initially regrouped two workshops, “Rent a Hand” and an upholstery workshop. In the fall of 1989, the upholstery workshop became the only activity of PAW, and although there were a few men involved in the initial phases, at this point it was only women. Functioning as a cooperative was challenging, but what a learning experience!

Donna So we had six women. (...) We officially called it a cooperative maybe a year or two later. (...) We set up goals that we wanted to have for PAW, they were to find a job for us, to provide a service for the community and to help us become employable (...) In the very beginning, we were coming one evening a week. Louina, who was our instructor would come in. And what we had decided, the six of us, was that at the end of the month, whatever money we had accumulated from paid jobs would go first to Louina for training us, then we'd pay our suppliers, because through her we were able to make contact with suppliers. And whatever was left in the kitty – we always called it “the kitty” -- we would have for us. (...) There were some months we didn't get anything because there was nothing to split, you know you put all this time and there's nothing! (...) We had decided that between the six of us we had to do at least 29 hours a month. It doesn't sound like a lot, but for us it was a lot, because we had other responsibilities... we had a family. So to take time out at night to come out and do this! And none of us knew about upholstery, none of us knew about running business! I started to do the accounting; I didn't know anything about accounting, “Good grief! Are you kidding?” So we had to learn along the way. And so as we started to learn. (...) And we were dedicated! This is something we really felt was important to do. They had a job-training program. So we started looking into maybe doing a job-training program. This is when I think we really started thinking this is a business, and we really have to be serious now. One evening a week is not going to do it. We want to learn a trade and we want to do this right, as professionals, we've got to do it right. So we got a job-training grant for six months, which got extended. Remember there is six women plus a trainer. So we had money. We could hire a trainer to come in full time, so this is 40 hours a week plus money to hire three of us to learn. (...) What we did is, we went around the group and we asked each other, “what



do we want out of this?” So for some of us we wanted full time work, for some of us this was a part time thing, they enjoyed it but they didn’t want a full time thing, they were happy with the way things were. So once we established that, we decided the three of us who really wanted to do this as full time staff, we got a full time pay. The kitty still remained there and got divided between the other three. And that was great, it was wonderful because we all decided that together. Also, out of that money that was allocated, we were able to take additional training. So this is when we had some professionals come in. One woman came in to teach us how to do some accounting. And again, what was interesting was that even though I was the one taking care of the books, I was doing the accounting, we all took the accounting training. So we all understood. Some of us had very specific responsibilities – one woman had to do estimates. We all did business management though. So we could understand what everybody was expected to do.

Donna Financially it has it’s ups and downs. Upholstery is something that unless you have constant contracts it’s hard to keep the money constant. We had a couple of women who had to find work elsewhere because it was getting difficult to support the family. And we had one who left because it was just physically becoming too demanding on her body. So there’s three of us now. (...) And sometimes too, it’s hard in terms of salary. Sometimes, even though we try to honour the salary parity, we still have some situations where we might have a grant only for one person. We’ll look at who is that grant going to help? We look at it in terms of our individual responsibilities in the cooperative and who needs constant, reliable financial support. (...) When Faye was there we always met on a regular basis. The six of us, with Faye, would meet, and this is where we were able to get input.

Running a cooperative is full of challenges, as described in the excerpts above, from being able to pay themselves after having paid suppliers and trainers, to juggling family responsibilities and work, to learning a new trade. However, these challenges were balanced out to a large extent by the flexibility that they are able to incorporate into their work, by organising things according to need and interest.

The cooperative has always been about more than creating work for

themselves. It is also about helping the community, and women specifically:

Maureen Your rates were different too. For people in the community you had one set of rates, for people outside, another set of rates (...)

Donna As jobs were coming in, to be able to fulfill the goal of servicing the community, we decided on the different rates. At first, what we did, is anybody on welfare, didn't matter where you lived, we gave one rate. Everybody else outside of Point St-Charles, who were working or whatever, we gave another rate. As the years went on, because we are also financially self sufficient – we were not paid through St-Columba house to do this – unfortunately, it wasn't financially realistic to do that. So then we narrowed it down to Point St-Charles. So anybody in Point St-Charles, if you're on low fixed income, we'd offer one rate, and then everybody else helped subsidise by slightly higher rates. (...)

Myrna There have been people who come in who have been in really desperate need. PAW helped them out. I've seen them take big pieces of foam, glue them together and put a nice cover on it, so they'd have things to sleep on. They had nothing to sleep on! One time I remember them sending out what looked like nice mattresses. They gave people who didn't have money, Chesterfields. They redid them. (...) I think PAW doesn't give itself enough credit some times for that kind of stuff that they do. Donna said they had their own business, but also they're very involved in the work that goes on at St-Columba house too and they help with many things.

Donna Later down the line, we wrote into our bylaws that as women we wanted to help other women. If ever we make profit, because again we aren't in it for the profit, we just want to make a living, we want to provide a service and that's all we want to do. So, if ever we make profit, we would like to use that as seed money to help women form their own collective of their own initiative.

By providing the service at a lower rate for residents of the Point, and by deciding that part of any surplus would go to help other women set up their own collectives, the members of PAW were breaking with the entrepreneurial capitalistic mentality of profit-making on the backs of others. Their labour would be justly paid, but any surplus would be used to service the community.

Donna talked about how this kind of work is “traditionally” a man's

job, how the men who were initially in the group left because of conflict over gender roles, and how being your own boss, in a women's-only space can be empowering.

Donna Traditionally it's not a women's job. It's traditionally a man's job, and we just thought it would be interesting to have a woman train us. She was very willing to do this. So at the beginning, we had ten of us, I think the ratio was 6 women and 4 men. We all knew that this was something we had to learn as a trade, it wasn't something we were going to get overnight. And we had to be in there for the long haul, so to speak. (...) All the men, they dropped out. They would be, "I want to do this now, I don't want to train". They weren't in it for the long haul. Then a couple of the women dropped out because they had physical problems or different things. (...)

Anna Did it actually officially ever become a women's workers coop? Did it ever become women only? (...) If a guy wanted to join would he be able to?

Donna No. Well, we've had a couple experiences with men actually doing stages with us and I think we've kind of decided that we don't want to go that route.

Anna Why? You've sort of decided you want to be a workers coop, why a women's workers coop?

Donna I think one thing, is to give women a break. Because I think some jobs that are out there are very demeaning jobs. I think when a woman goes out for a job I think most time she tends to get a job that - I don't want to say demeaning - but that a man wouldn't do it, because it's too below him to do it. (...) I think again we're in it for the long haul. I mean PAW has existed, this October, for 13 years. I've never seen a man do that. We've had a couple men come and do stages with us and they actually had a hard time. They had a hard time working with women.

Anna Why?

Maureen Cause they're supposed to be the boss.  
n

Donna There were personality conflicts.

Anna Was it related to what Maureen said? The fact that they wanted to be the boss.

Donna Yes.

Anna Not used to working in a sort of non-hierarchical.

Donna As a collective.

Maureen What could women know!?! (...)  
n

Donna I think it was the whole idea of working even as a collective. In this society you have your hierarchy.

Myrna And if they don't get enough work, they don't get any pay. But they know that, but then the other person couldn't accept that.

Maureen And it was a challenge. This was a man's field. And wasn't this great!  
n Women could do it!

Although the cooperative was not set-up initially as a "women-only" space, it became one, as the founding members were confronted with relations of domination/subordination around gender roles in their midst. Although difficult, their experience is, without a doubt, a very empowering one for the women involved:

Donna Sometimes we stand back and go "Wow! This is our own business!" That sometimes is scary! But we're our own bosses and so we get to say what we want. (...) And we get a lot of support from St-Columba House. So I think that without that support, if we were on our own outside, I have to admit we probably would have folded a long time ago. (...) Also, I think what makes it great is that we are all women. We've all had children, we've all been involved with St-Columba house. So if one of us has problems with her kids or our spouses or our partner, we have a sounding board at work.

Anna Like a support group at the same time?

Donna Yeah. Actually we used to kid a lot. Like when we first started, we used to just joke, joke, joke. Now we're down in the basement. Myrna is up on her second floor, and they used to hear us laughing!

Myrna They were supportive too in that if they had to bring a child to work, well who's going to say anything? There's three women. (...) You can bring the child to work! I mean if somebody's sick and had to stay home. You'll understand, you're women, you understand those things. Where it doesn't always happen the other way around.

Anna And they are their own bosses really.

Myrna That's right

They are sustained in their efforts because it is a women's workspace – the

support around childcare, the space for “ventilation” regarding their spousal relations, the fun that they have – all make for a challenging, but extremely empowering experience.

Again, as with the examples of Madame prend congé and the Women’s Discussion Group, PAW was set-up initially around practical needs – perhaps less overtly gender-related – of creating training opportunities and decent work for local folks. Quickly, however, came the identification that the practical need – of having a job – was gender-related, and the discussions within the cooperative, from sharing of experiences, to new information, to deepened analysis, led to the identification of strategic gender needs, and eventually to action – creating a women-only cooperative.

### Taking on sexism in State institutions

In parallel to this, many of these women who had set-up their own spaces, were still active in the mixed community groups. There is no doubt, however, that their analysis around strategic gender needs was also penetrating their activities in and around the neighbourhood. In the late 1980s, when the Québec government set-up “welfare police” (bouboumacoutes) to investigate recipients in order to reduce the costs of welfare, women – specifically targeted – participated in the actions against them. Allegedly, many fraudulent cases were uncovered, saving 150 million dollars in welfare spending<sup>354</sup>. Gilles Lesage, in 1987, wrote in “Le Devoir”, that the bouboumacoutes are here to stay<sup>355</sup>:

M. Pierre Paradis rappelle qu'une expertise interne estimait en 1985 à 18% le nombre de dossiers erronés à l'aide sociale. D'où le dégagement d'agents visiteurs à domicile, baptisés ironiquement les "bouboumacoutes". Le programme a très bien fonctionné et a rencontré ses objectifs généraux, dit le ministre, grâce à la discipline des fonctionnaires dans cette tâche délicate. (...)

Les visites à domicile aux assistés sociaux, (que le député péquiste de Verchères) qualifie de harcèlement, ont humilié et discrédité les

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<sup>354</sup> Lesage, G. (1987). Le Devoir. Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

bénéficiaires, en plus d'augmenter les préjugés de la population à leur égard.

The participants, who lived through this period, agree with the opposition – it was clearly harassment, especially of women.

Madeleine Les bouboumacoutes se promenaient , et même ils engageaient du monde, ils payaient le monde presque 20 piastres de l'heure, pour stooler les autres. Une de mes amies avait été approchée pour travailler pour le bien-être social pour, je pense que c'était ça, 20 piastres de l'heure. Elle a dit « C'est quoi mon travail? » C'était ça! Si elle connaissait du monde sur le bien-être social qui avait des chums, il fallait les stooler Mais elle ne voulait pas faire ce travail-là. Ça a été offert à bien du monde. Les bouboumacoutes passaient souvent à la maison, vous en avez sûrement entendu parler. À n'importe quelle heure! Je restais avec ma chum Carole qui avait lavé. Elle avait une paire de short, une paire de pantalons sur la corde. Quand ils sont arrivés, ils ont vu ça sur la corde! Ils vérifiaient dans les gardes-robes si tu avais du linge d'homme et tout ça. C'était effrayant (...) Elle leur avait dit : « Comment ça? Depuis quand je n'ai pas le droit de coucher avec un homme parce que je suis sur le bien-être social? » En tout cas, elle les avait mis dehors, elle les avait sortis! On était exploitées comme ça...

Anna Ils coupaient ton chèque s'il y avait un homme qui habitait avec toi?

Madeleine Bien oui! Bien oui!

Michèle Parce qu'ils supposaient qu'il te faisait vivre. Un homme doit te faire vivre (...) T'as pas le droit de juste coucher avec!

The excerpt above is interwoven with gender and class analysis, as is the following discussion we had in the English group on the same topic:

Maureen How much money did they spend on them, checking on welfare people?

Myrna To see if women stayed with men or if they had boyfriends.

Denise They'd look in the closets, they'd really check. They'd come into your house and they were allowed to check under your bed.

Myrna Check your sheets.

Denise Check your sheets, whatever. Anything. (...)

Myrna We were terrified of them though because, they were given a lot of

- power (...).
- Denise They were like the Gestapo. (...) They were walking in and taking over and checking everything, Gestapo. That's what I call them.
- Isabelle Les femmes qui avaient des chemises d'homme, mais qui étaient à elles. Tu dis « c'est à moi ! » « Non, non, non, non ! » (...)
- Anna What were the reasons that the government gave for these bouboumacoutes? Was it like, these peoples are lazy?
- Maureen Total abuse. They were doing their thing, publicity too.
- Denise They were saying to the public, "we're doing a good thing right now cause you're paying into this, you're paying for these people... So what we're going to do is go in there and get them"
- Myrna "These women are having babies and staying with their boyfriends" and all kinds of stuff.
- Maureen "And the boyfriends work".

Outraged at the fact that women were being targeted and harassed in this way again – remembering the harassment by welfare officers in the early 1970s – the mobilisations against the bouboumacoutes provided a space for the women in and around the groups to take their analysis of gender inequalities to another level – to a realisation that they were not only present in the home, and in the groups, but also in the relations of women with the State.

The mobilisations of the welfare rights movement against the bouboumacoutes is well documented elsewhere<sup>356</sup>. Less documented, however, are the women's commandos that Michèle talks about here:

- Michèle On avait fait des escouades. Je travaillais à l'ADDS dans le temps...Les femmes nous appelaient : « Il arrive! » Et là, on y allait à 7-8, et on se croisait les bras et on le regardait.
- Anna Vous regardiez le bouboumacoute comme ça?
- Michèle Oui, et il n'allait pas dans la chambre, et il n'allait pas dans le garde-robe. On faisait de l'intimidation!
- Anna Vous étiez des commandos!
- Michèle Oui, oui, oui, c'est ça! Mais ça n'a pas duré longtemps parce que ça

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<sup>356</sup> Barnabé, 1987

marchait pas tout le temps, d'être toujours 7-8, prêtes à partir...

Isabelle Mais quand vous l'avez fait, ça fonctionnait?

Michèle Ça fonctionnait.

In the early 1970s, when women were being harassed by welfare officers, women in the groups, sharing experiences, had come to realise that the state was controlling women in a way that was different than men. By the 1980s, however, women who had been active in women's spaces, were able to take their feminism into action in the welfare rights movement. Stronger because of their burgeoning feminist analysis, they were able to join forces to take on the system, increasing their own power, shifting their positionality from "victim" to "survivor".

### Celebrating International Women's Day

Although International Women's Day has been celebrated sporadically in Québec since the 1930s<sup>357</sup>, its celebration became wide-spread and popularised when the cause was taken up by a coalition of the status of women committees in the unions, the daycares and the ADDS in 1974<sup>358</sup>. As elsewhere in Québec, spurred on by the declaration of 1975 as "International Women's Year", and in the midst of increased activities around strategic gender needs in the neighbourhood, the first International Women's Day activities were organised in 1977 in Point St. Charles (see the flyer used for the occasion, below<sup>359</sup>).

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<sup>357</sup> by the "Ligues féminines ouvrières" in the 1930s, in the 1960s by the "Voix des femmes" and the "Ligue des femmes", and in the 1970s by the "Front de liberation des femmes" and the "Centre des femmes" (Marie-Géographie, 2003).

<sup>358</sup> Marie-Géographie, 2003

<sup>359</sup> (1977). Dépliant du 8 mars, 1977, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles, 2001.02.043.05.



L'émancipation des femmes n'est pas une lutte dirigée contre les hommes mais une lutte contre le système en place.

En période de crise économique comme nous vivons présentement, la femme a de moins en moins de chance de se trouver un emploi, alors que le coût de la vie pour une famille demande de plus en plus deux salaires.

De la façon dont notre société est organisée, les travaux domestiques retombent toujours sur le dos des femmes. Celles qui travaillent à l'extérieur ont un double emploi: les travaux domestiques et son travail extérieur.

Pour que tous soient sensibilisés à la situation de la femme dans notre société ainsi que la lutte de cette dernière pour son émancipation, les questions suivantes vous sont proposées: *(page suivante)*

- 1) Quand la femme travaille ou sort de la maison:
  - a) Qui fait les travaux ménagers? (vaisselle, ménage, lavage, repas)
  - b) Qui s'occupe des enfants?
  - c) Qu'elle est la réaction du mari?
- 2) Quels moyens les femmes ont-elles trouvés pour se libérer ou se "déloger"?
- 3) Donnez-vous les mêmes tâches et avez-vous les mêmes exigences pour vos garçons et vos filles?
- 4) Pourquoi les femmes vont travailler?
- 5) Pourquoi les femmes sur le marché du travail ont-elles les emplois les moins payés?
- 6) Des partis politiques proposent le salaire à la femme au foyer. Qu'en pensez-vous?

The activity was organised by a coalition of groups – the daycare, the Clinic, the Carrefour d'éducation populaire, the citizens' committees from Point St. Charles (none of the English citizen's committees however) – and drew a huge number of people, estimated at 250-300! The French group remembers International Women's Day activities in those early years:

Marguerit C'était au Carrefour et à la Clinique. On avait des soirées

- e extraordinaires ! Même, on allait à l'université du Québec. (...) Il y avait des ateliers, c'était une fête ! Des belles journées d'échange et de réflexion (...) Maintenant, il y a le Carrefour qui continue (...)
- Michèle Une année, les femmes avaient annoncé à la télévision et à la radio « La grève des soupers. 8 mars. Les femmes, on fait pas le souper ! » Les enfants chez nous, le 8 mars ils disaient « Tu fais tu encore la grève ? Papa va faire venir du poulet ! » (...)
- Thérèse J'ai participé à toutes ces fêtes-là. (...)

In the Point, over the years, mobilisations around International Women's Day have been central to providing an "agreed upon forum" for public discussions and actions around women's issues, and more recently, around violence against women.

#### INDIVIDUAL ACTS OF COURAGE

At the same time, women involved in collective actions around both practical and strategic gender needs, as they were exposed to new information and deepened their analysis, continuously repositioned themselves, as women. Many took a public stand, denouncing sexism, questioning unequal gender practices, speaking to reporters, or even writing their own pieces in local newspapers. Some women also took a stand against men in positions of authority within the Church and the State. Most brought their new awareness into the home, and demanded equality with their husbands, sometimes choosing divorce to get out of an oppressive relationship. All of these women were "gutsy", and many of them were revered in the neighbourhood as women with a "Reputation".

#### Writing in local newspapers

Already, in the early 1970s, women active in the citizens' committees were publicly denouncing the sexism they were observing in the groups, calling on other women to come forward, and to do something about it. In doing so, these women were quite courageous in that they were taking great risks –

especially in the earlier years, when second wave feminism was only emerging. Terri Aube (Notaro at the time) was very vocal about women's rights, and wrote several articles for the Poor Peoples' Paper. These articles reflect the kinds of discussions that women were having in the groups, and are strong in both their gender and class analysis. The underlying message was that as women, they were fighting a system called "patriarchy" – as Terri wrote about men's power in the law, in welfare, and also, in the groups themselves. Here is sampling of these articles<sup>360</sup>:

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<sup>360</sup> Notaro, T. (September 1972). Poor peoples' paper, 2(6), Fond de St-Columba House, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.



## EQUALITY FOR ALL

Last month Helen Bastien wrote an article in this paper which people interpreted in their own way.

I signed my name to this article along with others that I am sure feel the same way I do that unless women band together as a group against our standards of society (which are presently set by men) we will never get out from under. We classify ourselves as being equal to men and we demand our rights be respected at every level.

The ridiculous part of it is that the oppressors are also oppressed by the standards which they have set. For example, men must live up to the role of being strong and aggressive while the women must be dainty and succumbing.

The definition of the words man and women taken from the "Winston Canadian Dictionary for Schools":

MAN: a human being; also, the Human race.

WOMAN: an adult female of the human race.

NOTE: She is not classified as a human being.

Sure some men get up tight when they read articles written by women who are tired of being treated as secondhand humans. I agree that these articles usually sound discriminating against men, but ask yourselves: DO WE HAVE A CHOICE?

We fight for our rights in law ; We're fighting men who are  
again the ones in power.

We fight for our rights in welfare - We're fighting against  
men, they hold all the  
decision making positions.

We fight for our rights in government - again it's men, men, men

Therefore any male who feels discriminated against by this type of movement must either be part of or brain washed into agreeing with a completed male dominated society that keeps us women oppressed. Otherwise he will understand the need for a strong women's rights movement and support us in our fights against the the controlling power for he must realize that we will never succeed in attaining our goals without attacking our oppressors - the ones in power, which happen to be men.

Let's hear what others think and feel about this issue.

7 *Larry Motaw*

By TERRY NOTARO

In 1918 Canadian women won the vote after half a century of struggle. Women of Quebec didn't win the Provincial vote until 1940. AND THE FIGHT GOES ON.

This is just one example of how women have always been treated like second class citizens. Come on WAKE UP this is 1972 we're in the modern era where people are supposed to be more aware than ever both politically and socially.

Why don't we get equal wages?

Why aren't women allowed in taverns or have taverns just for women?

Why is it that single men on welfare are allowed to room in a house that's already occupied by a woman, but a single woman on welfare is not allowed to live in a house that's occupied by a man?

I'll tell you why, most women have gotten soft. It's easier to submit than to fight for our rights.

People look on women's LIB as a farce. I agree that the largest part of the present movement and most of the available reading material on the subject is (14)

geared to middle class women but, we don't have to work within the framework already set up for us. We've had the guts to stand up for our rights on welfare. I think it's time we realize that the women make up the majority of the membership in almost every militant citizen group. Unless we are ready to go all the way and demand our rights for equality we won't accomplish much.

Let's start thinking seriously about getting together and discussing what we can do about bringing about change in our present society.



In the second article, Terri highlights the class dynamics in the women's movement, as she refers to "women's lib" as a farce because of its bourgeois nature. And, she calls on working-class women to form their own groups, and to set their own agenda. Taking a public stand in 1972 for feminism - working-class feminism - was a very courageous act. Not only was Terri, in writing

these pieces, questioning the men in and around the groups in the neighbourhood, but also the women in the women's liberation movement.

Madeleine, from the French group, shared a more recent example. She wrote an article for the newsletter of the Carrefour d'éducation populaire to denounce the control of the Caisse populaire by local elite:

Madeleine La caisse populaire ! Moi, un moment donné, j'allais aux assemblées générales. Des amis qui étaient là me suggéraient d'entrer au conseil d'administration. Ils ne m'ont jamais pris ! Premièrement parce que j'étais une mère monoparentale, deuxièmement parce que j'étais sur le bien-être social. Ils ne le disent pas mais... J'ai écrit un article là-dessus et j'ai marqué mon nom, Madeleine Richardson. Je ne me rappelle plus quelle revue mais la journaliste était venue ici et elle m'avait fait parler de ça. Je ne suis jamais rentrée au conseil d'administration parce qu'ils prenaient des gros, à ce moment-là, parce qu'il était policier, un autre parce qu'il avait un commerce...

Madeleine, through her involvement in the groups, had come to develop both a gender and class analysis, and was able to interpret her failure to get on that Board as related to those very dynamics. In taking a public stand – in this case against the local elite – Madeleine was not only contributing to the collective narrative, but she was also increasing her own individual empowerment.

### Standing up to men in positions of authority

Both Madeleine and Terri, in publishing their gender and class analysis in local newspapers, were standing up – publicly – to men in positions of authority, taking a great personal risk. The experience of many women, however, was not written about. For example, Maureen, in the excerpt below tells the story of her job interview – in front of twelve Ministers from the United Church!

Maureen And then I got hired at St-Columba house on a temporary kind of thing. I nearly died. I went in for an interview, and there were twelve ministers there! There was one woman I think! I was so scared when I went in, I thought, "oh my God, what am I doing here? What the hell do I know about organising?" But Linda had



pushed all the way. “You can be an organiser, go! Go! Go!” And I went and one of the ministers didn’t know it, but he did me a real favour. (...) He got up, he actually got out of his chair and came over to me – I’m sitting down – and he said, “what if I come on strong to you? What can you do?” I stood up to him, noses to noses, I don’t know where it came from, but I just said, “hell of a lot more than you!” Tom Edmonds (the Minister of St-Columba House at the time) was there. He stamped his foot, he clapped... (...) I thought I was going to get kicked off on my ass for doing that, you know, but that got me the job! Every time I met that minister after that, like at presbytery or whatever; he’d say, “you were the one I was afraid couldn’t speak up and say what she had to say... Boy did I learn!”

Maureen’s excerpt highlights the importance of the encouragement of agitators. Linda Savory’s support was an important ingredient in the mix, helping women like Maureen flourish into local leaders with guts who, despite their fears, stood up to men in positions of authority and, in doing so, increased their own empowerment.

While Maureen stood up to the men of the Church, Denise was taking a stand against men working within the State bureaucracy. In the excerpt below, Denise shares how, angered by the sexual harassment one of her friends was subjected to by her welfare officer, she took the situation into her own hands:

Denise     So I went in and pretended that I wanted some welfare. And I was no dog meat, I mean I looked good. (...) And this guy, he comes right out and tells me. He said, “You’re good looking, what are you doing here?” He said, “you could be making all kinds!” On the street. And he said, “anyways, I can help you though”. He says, “if you’re good to me, if you’re nice”, he says, “I’ll be good to you”. That’s all I needed to hear. I had a run in with him after. It was really bad. He came over to the house, and I had this friend of mine staying there, and she was on welfare. And he came in and started harassing her, and then sexually harassing her. And then I came into the room. I kicked him outside. And this was on Liverpool street near Coleraine. And back then there was a lot of people! Summer, they’re all outside, their chairs, their TVs, you name it, you know, in the street. (...) This guy is drunk. This guy used to drink all the time. He’d want to sow his oats and then leave. And then, you’d have your check, or you’d have a little surplus. Something that the

others wouldn't have if they weren't "nice". And that's the truth. And I came out of that room like a raging lion, I went after him! I mean this is a big man, and he went out, and I'm kicking him out. And I'm cussing, and I puff, there's nothing I didn't say to this guy. To humiliate, embarrass him in front of everybody on the street. To let them know, you know, that he was sexually harassing. And I said to him, "don't ever" I said, "touch her", and, "her check better not be cut, because we have witnesses". Anyways, she was never bothered with him after that.

Denise, along with Maureen, and many other women who were part of the confrontational welfare rights groups of the early 70s, often had to stand up to welfare officers and the police, always men. They were well informed and ready:

Maureen Well at one point in PACC, we studied how far the government bureaucrats were allowed to go. There was an action at the unemployment insurance. We studied the law... how long it would take before they would read the Riot Act, why we'd have to get out, and all that kind of stuff. And stupid me, I got so hyped up and into it that the guy came out and he said "your going to have to leave" - I'm reading - "tadadada" - and I said, "bullshit, you can't do that, you have to read us the Riot Act first". And, "it's not supposed to be you. You have to bring somebody in to do it!" I'm telling him everything!

Anna And it worked?

Maureen Oh yeah! We stayed.

Anna You got to know your rights.

Donna Now this woman knows her business! (...)

Maureen And the cops came in and they try pushing. I don't know that I could do it today, you know, 'cause one pushed me. I took my elbow and I stuck the guy with it. I said, "don't you push me!" I'm sure he would have loved to belt me one! But it was on camera. And immediately he made them turn off the camera. And he was like, "you do that again lady and..."

Although Maureen had it in her to be assertive, she has another side to her persona, the "nicely dressed lady with the white hair". In the following excerpt, she describes how she actively (and strategically) used her positionality as



“lovely lady” to get funding from the Church, but had no problem shifting that positionality to “assertive leader” to tell the welfare officer off:

Maureen One time, way back, I saw myself on TV and I couldn’t believe it! (...) At one point, one of the welfare workers – a big burly man – came out. And he started to push. Physically pushed. I was the first in the line. And I pushed back! And I couldn’t believe it when I saw it on tape. I never wanted to go to the Church because they like to think of us as “lovely little ladies”. And I had pushed him right back and said, “you son of a bitch! You move your hands off of me! You push me, you get it right back buster!” When I saw it on TV, I thought, “Oh my god!”

Anna Now there’s evidence!

Maureen We didn’t show that one at the church!

Anna The United Church was funding you. (...)

Maureen When you’re asking for money...

Denise you got to put your best foot forward!

Maureen You know, you don’t want them focusing on bad language or aggressiveness or whatever. You want them to come through with the money, so you do the kinds of things that...

Myrna you’re supposed to do.

Maureen Yeah exactly

Myrna Some church-people supported and went to demonstrations. But then there is the “little old ladies”, the church ladies or whatever you want to call them... We have to, we told a lie. In this kind of work, you have to know how to do that!

Maureen often used her positionality strategically to win a cause, as is evident once again in the excerpt below, in which she describes how she was invited along to a meeting at the School Board because they thought that her presence, given her “Reputation” would help pressure the Board into meeting their demands:

Maureen I remember going to the school board. That action was led by Elisabeth and Faye. The rest of us staff would go, as a group, to support. And, you know, to try and get things going. I had a rotten reputation. Well, good from our perspective! Rotten from the school board’s perspective! “That Mrs. Ryan!” At one point, they

weren't exactly sure they were going to get anything, just how responsive the school board were going to be. And they asked me to come. I wasn't to open my mouth! I was just to be there! And I remember so well, wearing these platform shoes that made me like six feet tall! It's like, "I'm here! You better watch out!" I was laughing inside. But it was the threat – I think what I represented was demonstrations – this groups was trying to negotiate, and whatever, and I was there just for the threat, the pressure!

There were many other women in the neighbourhood who were pillars of the early citizens' movement, like Margaret Hunt, and Helen Bastien, all proud leaders, who took on men in positions of authority, but were caring, helpful and very considerate toward their peers:

Myrna     Thirty-five years ago. At time that I was going (to St-Columba House). (...) At the time I was on welfare. (...) And I had to go to the welfare office. Margaret Hunt. I go into the welfare office. She was a wooman ! (*non-verbal emphasis that denotes her physical size, her imposing presence*)! I didn't know her. So I'm going in the welfare office, bad enough I had to go to the welfare office, and face them! I had to sit in the waiting room. In the waiting room, who's there with the coffee table and the stuff? Margaret Hunt! And, she gets in there and I don't know what happened, something. I was so damn scared! She said, "the fuckin' son's of bitches!", and she kicked the garbage can from one end of the room down to the other and I said, "Oh my God! What's happening?!!!" I almost had a heart attack! Anyway, needless to say, you could of been thrown out of there! She was, like you said, she was a biiiig woman! And you know, I was not innocent, but man, I couldn't believe it! When she said f-off, she kicked that garbage -bang - the garbage flew all over the place! She didn't care!

Frances    I seen her pick a man up and just move him out! (...)

Myrna     Oh yeah, but she was very concerned. If you went in and asked for help, you know, 'cause you could go in and ask for help there, at the hospitability booth. After I got to know her. I mean she would help anybody and she was really kind and considerate. But when you got used to it, man I tell you!

Maureen   And the funny part of it was, she used to drive a little moped. The seat was tiny, and Margaret was hanging over on both sides!

Myrna     And she didn't care! That's what I liked about her! After I got to know her. But she didn't care. She was who she was, and said what

she wanted.

Frances She wasn't afraid of anyone.

Myrna Well, she stood up for what she believed.

Along with Margaret, was Helen Bastien, who also had a Reputation as a local leader not to be messed around with (see Chapter 4, welfare advocate for PERM). Margaret, Helen and Maureen were gusty leaders in the neighbourhood, and were greatly respected, as is clear in the way that the women talk about them. Although they seemed invincible and fearless, there is little doubt that for many of them, their actions took much courage. Spurred on by agitators and peers, there is also little doubt that the more they stood up to men in positions of authority, the more they themselves became empowered, and repositioned themselves as leaders.

### Standing up to their husbands

While they were taking on men in the groups, and men in positions of authority within the Church and the State, many women were also bringing their new-found gender analyses into the home. The participants talked about how everything was targeted: childcare, housework, sex, ownership, and even the marriage itself.

Marguerite (Une de mes amies) est à une rencontre où on commence à dire qu'il faut prendre notre place et que les hommes prennent la leur avec les enfants. Que les hommes n'étaient pas là pour garder, que c'était leurs enfants. Ça fait que ma copine s'en retourne chez elle en se disant « Je vais organiser un souper-causerie ! » Le téléphone sonne, c'est son mari qui dit « Je m'excuse, je pourrai pas être à maison parce qu'il y a une rencontre du syndicat ». Elle dit « C'est pas de mes affaires, tu appelleras une gardienne ! ». Et elle ferme la ligne ! Lui, il est au travail, il ne comprend rien ! Ça a jamais été dit avant ! Elle était prête pour son souper-causerie ! Je le vois qui rappelle et qui demande le numéro (de la gardienne). Elle le pense son ennemi, là, elle !

Michèle Moi une fois, il m'avait dit « Ton souper est-tu prêt? » J'ai dit « Oui ! » Je me sers mon assiette et je lui mange au nez !

Anna Vous êtes en train d'expliquer exactement ce que veut dire l'agir dans la vie personnelle. Les femmes sont arrivées chez elle et ont commencé à revendiquer dans la maison.

Marguerite C'est ça. T'arrives chez vous, tu t'assois dans le salon, pareil comme lui, tu prends un verre !

Sharing of household tasks and childcare, however, were not the only demands made in the home. Some women demanded changes in their sexual relations<sup>361</sup>:

La femme était soumise sexuellement, il fallait que ça soit quand l'homme voulait, et à son service. Souvent les hommes pensait que la femme était toujours prête. C'était notre devoir d'être prête. Nous, on disait jamais non, on était toujours prêtes ! Je connaissais pas ça, le mal de tête, moi! Je me souviendrai toujours quand j'ai dit à (mon mari) « À l'avenir, j'aimerais ça être d'accord, moi aussi ». « Ah ben ! Maintenant c'est quand madame va vouloir !!! » Pour lui, j'étais toute détraquée! Il trouvait que je charriais pas mal. C'était pas facile. J'ai été capable d'en rire mais les femmes qui n'ont jamais été capables d'aller jusque-là... Ça pris les groupes de femmes pour découvrir ça.

Moreover, many women, through their involvements, came to recognise their vulnerable state of financial dependence, and some began demanding shared ownership of property:

Marguerite Un moment donné, je prends conscience que je n'avais rien. J'avais demandé à mon mari que la maison soit aux deux noms « Voyons donc Margo, tout ce qui est à moi est à toi ». J'ai bien vu ça ! Je dis « C'est correct »...Je le vois, il est au plafond en train d'arranger quelque chose et je dis « Ok. On va faire un petit exercice. Moi, je meurs demain, toi, tu vis encore. J'ai mon jonc, j'ai ma bague, j'ai ma chaîne et j'ai mon dentier ! » Il a manqué de tomber en bas ! « Voyons donc, qu'est-ce que tu dis là ! ». « Si je meurs demain, c'est ça qui est à moi, mon dentier, mon jonc, ma bague et ma chaîne ! Qu'est-ce que tu veux que je donne (à mes 4 filles) ? ». On a pris rendez-vous et on a mis la maison aux deux noms ! Ça n'a rien changé mais bon ! C'est des prises de conscience comme ça qu'on faisait et c'était pas facile pour personne, ni pour nous, ni pour les gars! Mais, tu sais, j'ai un compte à la Caisse populaire (...) Nous (les femmes), on met notre argent pour habiller les enfants, y'a rien qui reste!

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<sup>361</sup> The participant requested that this passage remain anonymous.

Louise L'argent n'est pas dans le capital. Tu ne paieras jamais l'hypothèque de la maison! (...)

Marguerite C'est ça, une fois les dépenses des enfants, tu n'as plus rien! (...)

Isabelle Les femmes ont les enfants, les hommes ont les biens.

Michèle Hé! Ça c'est fort. Ça devrait être le titre!

Although these demands created tensions that were difficult for all (see “tensions” section below), many of these individual actions in the home led to changes in mentalities and practices of their husbands. In the excerpt below, Marguerite argues that at *Madame prend congé*, attempts were made to improve communication in the couple, in order to improve the chances of success, when the women demanded changes to unequal gender relations in the home:

Marguerite Ce que je veux c'est être capable de travailler avec des hommes et des femmes. (...) On a travaillé fort les femmes, juste pour être solidaires entre nous, apprendre à savoir ce qu'on aime, ce qu'on n'aime pas, et comment le dire. C'était pas une façon pour amener un divorce, c'était pour apprendre à se parler.

According to Marguerite, this strategy was successful in many ways, in that many of the husbands did change their mentalities when faced with the demands of the women. Below, however, she alludes to the fact that many women stayed with their husbands because they blamed themselves for the unsuccessful relationship, and that one of the ways to break with this kind of thinking is to be able to say “this is not acceptable” and to act on that:

Marguerite J'avais pris conscience du fait que, par exemple, tu es avec ton conjoint, tu vis des choses difficiles, et tu te dis, « Je ne suis plus capable ». Ça dénote une faiblesse de ta part. Tu ne dis pas « Ce n'est pas acceptable », tu dis « Je ne suis pas capable », donc c'est une faiblesse. Si en plus tu es une personne dont les parents sont séparés, tu penses « C'est bien sûr que ça va aboutir là. » C'est ça ton expérience. Tu comprends? Si la femme a été dans une famille où il y a eu une séparation ou un divorce mais pas le conjoint, tu ne remets jamais le conjoint en question. C'est toi qui n'est pas

correcte. Moi, j'ai appris à 56 ans les mots « Ce n'est pas acceptable ». C'est extraordinaire !

Anna À la place de « Moi, j'en peux plus ! »

Marguerite Oui, c'est pas de ta faute ! Mais tu penses que tu n'es pas assez forte, qu'il te manque quelque chose.

Louise Être capable de dire que la situation n'est pas acceptable.

Marguerite Oui, ça donne une force.  
e

Michèle Ce n'est pas sur tes épaules. (...)

Marguerite Ça été très important pour moi.  
e

For many, this break with the feelings of guilt at not being able to continue, and of blaming oneself for the failure of the marriage, and the fact that their demands often fell on deaf ears, gave them the necessary boost to leave their husbands. The Legal Aid services were always there to help out. The English group analyses this :

Myrna And then there were the divorces.

Anna Divorces?

Maureen I met a sister in law of mine in Lasalle recently – I hadn't seen her in years and years – and she said, "I'll never forget what you did for me in my divorce with the legal aid". I stood there like, "what the hell did I do for her?" I helped her out with the legal aid and they helped her all the way.

Anna So a lot of the women were getting divorces at the time?

Myrna Well I don't know if a lot were, but I know I was at the time.

Denise I was one of them, their statistics. (...) (a legal aid lawyer) helped me. 'Cause I mean even though I worked, I didn't make a lot of money, I had two kids, and I'm trying to get a divorce and everything. So I mean I was stuck in between, I'm not poor but I'm not rich either. And they helped cases like that too. So it was great. (...)

Myrna I went, let's say December the 3<sup>rd</sup> and I had my divorce by the next December the 3<sup>rd</sup>. That's how fast it went (...)

Anna This is in the early seventies. I guess there was not that many people getting divorced at that time yet, that was sort of at the beginning.

- Denise The daring ones that were going on their own there. The daring women, because a lot of women probably would have gotten divorced but didn't just, didn't think that they could do it, you know.
- Anna And what made it such that women at that time were able to start getting divorced. 'Cause I remember talking to Terry Aubé, previously Terry Notaro, before she died, she said, "that was the time of the divorces". What made it such that women could get divorced?
- Maureen Legal Aid
- Myrna Well it was that too, but I think it was that a lot of women stayed home before that. And when the kids started to go to school, we would meet other women and find out that we weren't the only ones in that situation. (...) And you know there was some support around if we were stuck, because I mean that was a long time ago. And it was a scary thing to go through.
- Isabelle Share your story or reality (...)
- Myrna I was divorced six months before my mother knew I was divorced. Well separated, I shouldn't say divorced.
- Maureen And it wasn't (considered) right. There was a higher percentage of Catholics too. A higher percentage of people who were catholic, and divorce is a no-no, you know. So that I think it took the groups, and women's groups and talking. And getting out of the home.
- Denise Knowing you're not alone.
- Myrna I mean you know there's advantages and disadvantages to being alone and things. When you think of the pros and cons. Like if you had a bad relationship, you have to realise that it's true. Like I'm going on holidays at the end of the month. I don't have to say, "well do we have money for me going on holidays and that. Is it all right if I go, do you mind?"
- Anna You have a certain independence (...)
- Myrna When you got kids how do you just go and leave them home alone?
- Denise Exactly you know it's like you're responsible. The men could say "I'm going away, I need a vacation I'm taking off". No problem.
- Myrna They just go, that's right.
- Denise It's the women, the ones that should stay home and take care of the kids.

- Myrna Because we're responsible. I don't know what it is. Women are responsible for their children, for their house, for their
- Denise Husbands.
- Myrna Wellbeing. That too.
- Anna So women take on the responsibly or women are forced to take on the responsibly?
- Myrna I think it was, well we're talking a long time ago, I think that was bred into us, that's how we were brought up, that was our thing.
- Denise If you didn't take the responsibility, then nobody else would. So might as well take it.

Throughout this analysis, the participants attribute the wave of divorces of the early 70s to discussions with other women in the groups which led to new awareness about gender roles in the home, to the help of the agitators, and also to the availability of Legal Aid Services. They posit that some women chose to stay in the marriage, and live with the gender inequalities, because of the challenges related to raising your children alone, as well as to the inbred belief that childcare is the sole responsibility of women. Many women in the groups, including some amongst the participants of this project, in the end, chose to take the steps to leave their husbands – to brave the challenges – financial, moral and emotional – related to breaking with the traditional nuclear family, the values of their religion, and the “proper” role of wife and mother. The latter is an individual action, a break with the family relations that reproduced gender inequalities – an action that led to increased autonomy, and empowerment as women.

All of these actions, from the daycares, to the women-only spaces, to job creation for women, to taking on the Welfare State, to individual acts of courage in the public arena and in the home, were the result of a new awareness of strategic gender needs. Although many women acted on their new awareness, there is little doubt that there were many obstacles along the way, as I will show below (in the “tensions” section). On the street one day, Donna



mentioned to me that she felt that in the group we sometimes tended to get so caught up in the stories that we forget to mention the real fear that they all lived with. I had suggested to her that day that she bring it up at a next meeting. She did here, during a discussion about fear:

Myrna I went on many demonstrations and I was scared to get picked up and put in jail!

Voices Yeah.

Anna It took a lot of courage.

Donna That or insanity! I don't know!

Myrna I've always been petrified

Donna I mentioned to Anna, after our last meeting, that it's not hard to get hyped, you know, hearing all the different stories. It was really fun. But then I thought it was really important to say, I know for myself, and now I'm hearing it from you, I don't think it was easy for anyone of us to do this. And, and to know about the consequences behind it. Please excuse the expression; I'm sure we were scared shitless!

Myrna We were.

Donna I think it was just important, that that should be said. You know, I mean, it's nice to reminisce and to talk about it all and to laugh about it. But to remember that there is fear.

Along with fear however, were all the emotions that assailed the women as they faced the negative or knee-jerk reactions of people around them to their actions in and around the neighbourhood.

### TENSIONS

In effect, by acting on their strategic gender needs, the women involved in the groups were pushing the "accepted" boundaries of their positionalities. In fact, they were, and still are, (re)constructing their narratives of belonging – as women, as mothers, as wives, as organisers, as leaders. They were doing politics, going to work outside the home, organising, excluding men, talking publicly about their own oppression. All of these actions were about making "the

personal political”. And, these kinds of actions, around strategic gender needs, because they are related to the personal, tended to elicit inter-related emotions, such as scorn, anger or contempt, but that often hid underlying emotions such as fear and guilt. It is not only the targeted men who reacted in this way to women’s demands and actions – everyone – other women, neighbours, friends, and family also reacted. These reactions are part and parcel of a transformative process, especially when the changes sought affect mentalities and ways of doing and being in the personal sphere. In addition to these kinds of reactions from friends and family, there were also tensions with professionals, and with agitators. As I will show below, the former, school teachers and social workers in State institutions, did not always take kindly to the “power to the people” way of doing things. Moreover, some of the “ordinary folks” in the groups, feeling bulldozed by their ways of doing things and/or by ulterior motives unaired, ended up turning against the very agitators who had coached them. Others, shaken up by radical discourse that was not integrated into a popular education process, ended up feeling personally targeted in their roles as mothers and wives.

#### WITH HUSBANDS AND CHILDREN

*Plus on s'engageait, plus les hommes découvraient, plus ils devenaient résistants.*  
-- Thérèse

The participants’ newfound analyses related to gender inequalities, and their actions around strategic gender needs, led, for most of them, to tensions in the home. As the women took their new found confidence into the home, as they shifted their positionalities by refusing to accept assigned roles, be it with respect to household chores, childcare, sex, or violence, their husbands reacted.

Maureen I think there was some resentment on the men’s part too (...) When you started developing a different kind of thinking. They say, “how come when I met you, you were so naïve, you never had any of these crazy ideas, what’s the matter with you, what makes you think you are so smart now?” “Because I am, up yours jack!”. This

was common. Once they realise its not a threat, that the woman can be a full person without threatening the marriage, then it can cool off. But often, when you talked to women at the time, in my age group, it was “oh I would never get away with that!” “oh no, can’t do that!”

Louise D’abord, elles apprenaient à se libérer, parce dans le fond la femme était encore tellement soumise, tellement ignorante de tous ses (droits), du pouvoir qu’elle pouvait avoir, d’être autonome. Quand on regarde les autres pays, la femme soumise, la femme qui travaille, la femme qui...Bien, on était ça ! Et c’est la libération de ça qui a fait peur aux hommes !

Some men, angered by the fact that their wives were spending less time in the home, doing housework and taking care of the children, actually took their anger out in the public arena. For one woman, active in GMAPCC in the early 1970s, it was far from easy, as her husband, seeing that locking her out of her own home did not work, actually came to a general assembly, dropped a bag of dirty laundry on the floor, and demanded that she come home “to do her job”<sup>362</sup>. Michèle remembers this incident:

Michèle Hey! À une assemblée syndicale de la Clinique, un gars est venu chercher sa femme « Viens t’en à maison tabarnaque! »

Although some of the reactions of husbands were out in the public arena, most occurred in the intimacy of the home. Most of the participants talked to their husbands about their activism, and some demanded changes in the home. One participant<sup>363</sup> claims that although her husband seemed quite supportive on the surface, he often alluded to the fact that he considered her work in the community to be simply “women’s stuff” – “if it had to do with the kids, education, that kind of stuff”, unimportant compared to his breadwinner role. Although he did not stop her from doing her activism, he did put

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<sup>362</sup> Interview with a PERM and GMAPCC activist, conducted by the School of Social Work, McGill University, September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

<sup>363</sup> This participant asked that this statement be summarized and anonymous.

limits on it, reminding her that she had a responsibility, as wife and mother, to take care of *her* children:

After all, they were *your* kids (...)

“I’m stuck babysitting, again”

How come it was always babysitting for them but it was okay for us?

Maureen and Myrna remember having had similar experiences with their husbands:

Maureen I could talk to my husband and his reaction was “go get them girl!”  
But, “you go get them, but don’t do it more than two nights a week. The rest of the time let someone else”

Myrna And not at supper time.

Maureen No stopping that supper! You don’t change your plans, like the shopping night that was very important, Thursday night!

Myrna It was a no no.

Maureen It was major fight if there was a meeting or something I had to go to and the dates were changed that day. (...)

Similarly, Michèle and Marguerite talked more about the tensions caused by the demands they made in the home:

Michèle Mon chum raconte toujours que c’était l’enfer le mercredi soir au souper, parce que j’avais un groupe de femmes l’après-midi et quand il arrivait le soir, je lui défilais toutes mes bibittes !

Marguerite tells the story of how the women who were involved in Madame prend congé started taking on their husbands in the home, and about how this caused tension.

Marguerite Il fallait faire attention parce que c’est moi qui était à Madame e prend congé et on préparait notre voyage en France. Les gars...Il y en avait un qui chauffait un camion, il est mort aujourd’hui. Lui, la seule affaire qu’il voulait, c’était me frapper ! Oui ! 5 enfants, sa femme partait en voyage, il travaillait, pas de garderie, les enfants allaient à l’école ! Ce que je veux dire, c’est qu’à force de « Non, non, on y va, on va prendre notre place... » Les femmes arrivaient chez elles et bombardaient leurs chums ! Un moment donné, je commence à voir ça et je dis « Attendez une minute ! Quand vous

allez revenir de la France, c'est avec lui que vous allez vivre ! Vous partez, vous êtes en guerre mais c'est le gars avec qui tu veux vivre quand tu vas revenir. Il faut toujours bien être capable de discuter, d'échanger, de savoir que pour lui c'est pas facile ! » Je vois (une des femmes) qui dit « Attends un peu ! On dit qu'il faut qu'on prenne notre place, qu'il faut être capable de prendre des décisions, tout ça, et tout d'un coup ?!... » Elle trouvait que je virais mon chapeau de bord ! Elle ne comprenait plus rien ! Moi je voulais adoucir les coins un peu. C'est ton chum et tu dis que tu l'aimes, faut essayer de voir...Moi je parlais de partage. (...)

Louise Vous étiez dérangeantes, aussi. C'est un peu à cette époque-là que les divorces ont commencé...Quand les femmes ont commencé à exiger certaines choses, ça a amené des discussions. Il y a des hommes qui sont partis et il y a des femmes qui sont parties.

Isabelle C'était la structure établie ! Quand une des bases de la structure commence à vouloir l'ébranler...

Louise Ça brasse !

This excerpt highlights an interesting tension, that of the long-term consequences of demands made in the home. Recognising that it was hard for the men to absorb all these new ways of thinking and doing things, Marguerite tried to convince women to not come on too strong, and to open up the dialogue with their husbands.

This, however, is easier said than done. The English group discusses whether or not it was easier to dialogue on these issues with husbands who were themselves involved in the groups:

Maureen You know, it snow balls because when the men were in the groups the women had less problems, those women had less problems.

Anna In what sense?

Donna The husbands were more supportive.

Maureen If their husband was in the group. Yes because they were getting the word from the other people in the group. And hearing other women say "I wouldn't put up with that crap". You know, it's different when it doesn't come from the wife. It helped them evolve just a little bit, you know. But if there was a husband and a wife, the husband was still the one that wanted the power. They didn't want the women taking over.

- Anna So you're saying the women who had activist husbands had it a bit easier, because the husband were there...
- Maureen Better educated.
- Myrna And they sure didn't want their wife coming and saying something about them, or that they didn't do this or that they didn't do that (...)
- Myrna And there was education going on. No matter what man or woman you are, you're hearing this stuff, I mean you have to get educated a little bit.

Although in a way, this may be true, the dynamics between women and their activist husbands on changing mentalities around gender roles were nevertheless tense. Marguerite herself lived some tense moments with her activist husband:

- Marguerite Le voyage en France. Parce que mon mari est militant, jamais je n'ai pensé qu'il trouverait ça difficile que je parte. Pas du tout ! Je pensais qu'il était d'accord. Quand on a voulu faire une rencontre de gars, je lui ai demandé « Veux-tu les rencontrer » ? Moi je l'ai toujours tellement trouvé extraordinaire mais là, je réalise que mon mari n'est pas capable de me laisser partir ! (...) Les maris militants sont mal placés. Ils ne sont pas capables de le dire parce qu'ils sont supposés être ouverts. Mais ça ne marche pas juste avec la tête ! Il y a plein d'émotions, plein d'affaires qui se passent qui font que le gars est pas capable. Sauf qu'il doit montrer qu'il accepte et qu'il comprend. Pareil pour l'ouverture pour que j'aille travailler. « Vas-y Margo, moi je vais lâcher ma job ! » Deux jours par semaine à la garderie, je gagnais pas cher ! Lui il était à 5 jours. Il n'était pas capable de me dire, parce qu'il est militant, qu'il n'est pas à l'aise avec ça. Que c'est lui qui est supposé de me faire vivre !
- Isabelle Est-ce que c'est une forme de contrôle ?
- Marguerite Bien sûr, c'est ça ! S'il avait pas été militant, il n'aurait pas souffert avec ça ! (...) Il fallait qu'il fasse semblant !



Caricature published in the Poor Peoples' Paper in 1972<sup>364</sup>.

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And, although many marriages did not survive, some husbands did shift their positionalities by changing their mentalities and their actions (see impacts below).

Although, as I will show in the section on “impacts”, the participants’ children developed a social conscience, and many have even become activists in their own right, there were still tensions around mother-activist:

- Maureen    Our children were raised in families that the politics is in everything. And it’s like, “don’t bother me with that!”
- Frances    Yeah, they won’t go to the groups
- Denise    I think my activism turned them against it, because they said I was burning myself out with all this.
- Frances    You are always gone (...)
- Denise    We try to convince you the kids that we care
- Donna    It’s kind like I have now learnt to pick the issues that if I am going to be involved in. Because it was the same thing like Maureen, and Myrna. Every single night I would be out. My kids got to the point like, “You are going out again? When are going to see you?”
- Frances    Do I have to make an appointment to meet you?
- Donna    What’s for supper?

These kind of dynamics – with their children, not understanding why their mother is so absent from the home – with their husbands, shaken up by demands around gender roles in the home – were difficult to live with.

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<sup>364</sup> (July 1972). Poor Peoples’ Paper, 2(5), Fond de St-Columba House, Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles. Reprinted from the Cambridge tenants’ paper Hard Times.

Constantly struggling against guilt – yet knowing that they had the right to be active outside the home, to recognition, to task sharing – the women would discuss these tensions in the groups, and deepen their analysis once again, taking their newfound assertiveness to, again, a higher level.

#### WITH TEACHERS, SOCIAL WORKERS IN INSTITUTIONS, AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINERS

As women organised alternative services and businesses run for and by the members – the daycare, the group for intellectually handicapped adults<sup>365</sup>, the workers' cooperative – they were demanding that certain tasks that had always been of the private sphere (child rearing, care of loved ones) be taken on by the collective; they were breaking the idea that social service provision had to be given by university-trained professionals; and they were busting their way into male-dominated work spheres. In breaking down the border guards of difference in these areas, they elicited many a negative reaction from those who felt that these women were invading their “turf”.

When people were first confronted with the fact that early child care and education could be done outside the home – in parent-run daycares – not all reacted positively. The parents active in the daycare were faced with criticism from other parents, but also from the grade-school teachers :

Anna        Tu disais que les professeurs étaient contre les garderies ?

Marguerite    Pas que les professeurs, c'était nouveau pour tout le monde ! Il y avait plein des préjugés. Les parents eux-mêmes, entre parents. « Moi mon enfant ira pas à la garderie, c'est moi qui va faire l'éducation des enfants ! » On connaissait pas ça ! Et on disait toujours que les seuls éducateurs, c'étaient les parents. Les professeurs n'étaient pas différents. C'est par expérience qu'ils ont vu tout ce que ça pouvait apporter à l'enfant. (...)

Louise        C'était beaucoup les parents qui étaient impliqués au service de garde. C'était pas des éducatrices spécialisées ou formées, c'était des mères de famille qui partaient de la maison et qui travaillaient un

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<sup>365</sup> This is the group set-up by Myrna, and two other mothers of intellectually handicapped adults, described briefly in Myrna's biography in Chapter 3.



peu au service de garde. Plus tard, ça a été les éducatrices qui ont commencé à rentrer à l'école, au service de garde.

Michèle Mais moi je te parle quand ils rentraient en maternelle la première journée. Tu allais les mener et l'enseignante pouvait dire « Ah lui, je peux le dire, il est allé à la garderie. Elle, elle est allée à la garderie...! » Les enfants n'étaient pas gênés. Ils étaient bien. Mais elle, elle disait ça d'un ton bien péjoratif, c'était pas admiratif. Pourtant, c'était des beaux enfants débrouillards !

Although the teachers were reticent at first, they eventually came to see the relevance of daycares. Thus, through their actions, and the tense relations with the teachers, these women contributed to the changing mentalities around early childhood education.

Moreover, many of the women active in alternative service groups, building on lived experience, trained on the job, and ended up doing the same kind of work as many social workers. Some of these professionals did not take too kindly to this “de-professionalisation” and resisted the changes. At one point, Myrna was telling the group about Hand in Hand, an organisation for adults with handicaps, that she set up with Maureen and has coordinated ever since:

Myrna We had a social worker who came in and said we had to move this man out of our program. She says, “he is ready to have his own apartment and we will put him in work placement”. I said, “he’s not ready”. “Yes he’s ready. You just don’t want to let go”. I said “he’s not ready”. They took him, they put him in his own apartment, put him in a work placement. He committed suicide (...) I could’ve been wrong. I suppose. But you know, by the feel of somebody that’s been there for a while, you can tell if they’re ready or not ready okay?

Isabelle J’aimerais savoir d’où il venait ce travailleur social là. Et c’était quoi l’interaction? Parce que vous, vous êtes du monde de terrain, vous connaissiez ça. L’interaction avec les diplômés...J’imagine qu’ils ont commencé à rentrer de plus en plus et qu’ils ont voulu prendre la place ? (...)

Myrna A lot of times, they have, at Ville-Marie Social Services, well – as they call them – “clients”. They phone me and ask, “will I take them into my program”. (...) It’s a referral. Until there’s a place for

them to go into work placement . And that's what we'd like, but only when they're ready to move on after. But because I don't have a diploma, I never studied to be a social worker, and all this stuff, "Myrna you're just overprotective". (...) that I didn't want to let go because he was like a son to me (...) I didn't want to let go" (...)

Maureen That social worker walked in (to Hand in Hand) and said, "They got nothing here". With that fellow that committed suicide, they said "We got to get him out of here. He's learning nothing". (...) He loved it! He loved every minute of being there. He couldn't wait to come back. That's what they wanted in the first place! Some place that he would enjoy, and be part of . Before, he never stuck to anything. Didn't want to do anything. And here he was in there, enjoying every minute of it

Myrna Never missed a day

Maureen "Got to get him out, got to get him out". (...)

The scorn of the social worker is palpable in this story, implying in her words that women – "uneducated women" -- can't possibly have the skills and know-how to determine the best strategy to help a user of the service. As women like Myrna, with no formal education but loads of experience, began providing services with a different approach – a community approach – they were shaking up the traditional case load approach, and the supposedly objective relationship between worker and "client". The social worker's scorn is likely caused not only by a lack of understanding of the kind of work that Myrna was doing, but also by a fear of incursion into her profession.

Finally, as women like the founding members of PAW, decided that women could and would do re-upholstering – traditionally a man's domain – they were, once again, pushing the boundaries of gender roles in the workplace. They also were the target of scorn:

Donna So (at PAW) we took a course. I won't mention the name of the company cause it isn't sweet! The trainer normally did his seminars in hotels. He was to teach us how to refinish the surface of wood and how to repair materials. So we could actually, if we ever wanted to, strip down furniture and refinish it and do a really good job. So Faye (the Minister of St-Columba House) was setting

this up for us. And again, bear in mind that this man normally did it with gentlemen in hotel settings. So his first reaction to Faye was, “Well! What am I going to do with these six housewives? What are they going to learn?” (...) So, it was a six-week course. The first day he came, we had curlers in our hair with slippers on our feet and our house coats! (...) So when he saw the curlers, he just kind of stood there. We didn’t stay like that very long, we just wanted to make a point! After that we got serious, “you’re here to teach us... so teach us”. And that’s what we did.

Shocked to hear that six women would commission his training program, the trainer responded with a sexist and classist comment. Interesting, however, is that the women did not let themselves get discouraged by this, and instead, turned their anger into a creative action, which aimed to shock the trainer out of his sexism. Although it is impossible to know if they changed the trainer’s notion of what “housewives” could do, but the training did occur, and it is clear that the act in itself was empowering for the women involved.

#### WITH NEIGHBOURS, AND ESPECIALLY, WITH OTHER WOMEN

As if the scorn of professionals, and the tensions in the home were not enough, the women were also subjected to nasty comments by people from the neighbourhood, men and women alike. Stories of sexist, racist, homophobic comments, as well as Red-baiting abound:

Michèle Un matin, j’étais en train de diffuser La Forge (...) à la Consumer Glass. J’étais avec Madeleine Desnoyers et il y a un gars qui lui a dit « Hey ! la p'tite mère ! Va donc éplucher tes patates !! »

Michèle Une femme du quartier disait que celle qui passait des tracts pour la garderie, c’était « l’immigrée du coin ». « Ils avaient besoin d’une garderie parce que les immigrées ne s’occupent jamais de leurs enfants ! ».

Maureen We lived a lot of pressure. Even from the community. The other women in the community. We’ve all been through stages where, “I thought they were nuts!” Myrna thought we were nuts. And I remember going up the street, and Ann White, who also got people

after her, was with 3 women. People were saying; “there’s the leader of the rat-pack” We were with PACC. We were known as the rat-PACC.

Myrna The other thing that was often said, and it wasn’t very nice, and nowadays we wouldn’t say that because it’s discrimination, but I’ll just say it because a long time ago, people would say it. “Oh I know why you like going to St-Columba house! It’s a bunch of lesbians! That’s why you like going over there”. People used to say that all the time. (...)

Maureen Oh shit no! I never heard that.

Donna The women’s discussion group.

Denise Well at the Clinic, it’s a bunch of communists. “Communist” written on the walls, and the toilets. On the street, on the walls at the Clinic.

Myrna But you know, when you stand up for yourself people will say anything if they think they can get a rise out of you.

In the first case, you have men, working at a local factory, insulting the women because they are breaking with traditional gender roles. In the other cases, it is neighbours, who are calling them names, attempting to discredit them. It takes great insight, coupled with a “hard skin” to see these comments for what they are without becoming demobilised. From the excerpts above, made explicit by Myrna’s comment at the very end, it is clear that the women are aware that these kinds of reactions are visceral ones, caused by the fact that the women were, often for the first time, standing up for themselves publicly.

The most difficult thing for the women to take however, was the scorn of other women. The women in the groups were pushing the boundaries of their positions, and other women, on whose behalf they were fighting, were putting up road blocks. This lack of solidarity among women is reflected in the following excerpt:

Marguerite Moi je dis que le pire ennemi des femmes, c’est les femmes. Je ne dis pas que toutes sont comme ça mais les femmes qui sont allées à l’université ont d’autres façons de se voir. Mais nous, c’était de faire à manger, d’entretenir sa maison, d’être une bonne maîtresse au lit. Mais si la femme n’entretient pas sa maison, qu’est-ce qu’on lui dit ?

Je l'ai tellement entendu. « Son mari peut bien pas rentrer ! As-tu vu comment elle tient la maison !? ». Qui dit ça ? C'est pas le gars. C'est la belle-sœur ! (...) C'est épouvantable comment on n'a pas été solidaires.

Louise C'était les jugements qui étaient là. (...) Mais quand tu commences à revendiquer, t'es celle qui vient faire la bisbille parce que ça va emmener d'autres femmes à réagir. Tu vois l'enchaînement que ça fait autour de toi ? Des ménages qui vont peut-être se séparer ? Des femmes qui vont se remettre à travailler pour ne pas être dans la maison ? C'est dérangeant ! Le jour où une femme prend conscience qu'elle a le même problème que toi et que toi, tu réagis, ça l'oblige à réagir aussi.

In line with this, Thérèse remembers with pain the tensions she lived with her sister when she decided to leave for France even though her husband was still in the hospital:

Thérèse C'était pas juste des hommes !? C'était des femmes contre d'autres femmes ! Moi, ça a été mes propres sœurs, par rapport au fameux voyage. Mon mari a été hospitalisé un peu avant que je parte. Je m'attends à ce qu'il sorte dans les jours qui viennent mais ce sera plutôt 2 jours après mon départ pour la France avec Madame prend congé. Mes sœurs sont sur le téléphone « Alors Thérèse, comment ça va ? » « Germain est à l'hôpital et moi je suis en train de préparer ma valise. » « Hein!? Voyons donc ! Tu ne vas pas partir ?! » J'ai dit « Écoutez les filles, un voyage de même, ça ne se défait pas comme on veut ! Germain n'est pas en peine, il est sur le point de guérir. Il va sortir de l'hôpital et j'ai vu à ce qu'il ait des soins s'il en a besoin ». Germain était consentant et sa sœur restait l'autre de côté de la rue.(...) J'avais prévu tout ça. Ma sœur la plus vieille a dit « J'ai mon voyage, je ne pensais jamais que tu serais allée jusque-là ! C'est le bout du bout ! Des plans pour que maman se lève dans sa tombe !! » C'est épouvantable la culpabilité que j'ai dû vivre...La femme ingrate que j'étais de m'en aller pendant que mon mari était malade, c'était impensable !

Thus, women who were pushing down barriers were pained by the reactions of their sisters, their friends, their neighbours. Again, although very difficult to take, they continued their actions, they did not fall into guilt-ridden paralysis (see below, “what sustains you”). Today, they analyse that other women, faced

with these kinds of revelations, were forced to look at their own lives – and once they saw the injustice, they needed to act. Seeing the private sphere for what it was, was, and still is, a scary endeavour, and some women chose to react to other women’s liberation with scorn instead of looking at themselves. What this shows, is that it is not because women share the same biological sex that they are all “solidaires”.

#### WITH THE AGITATORS

By definition, agitators “agitate”; that is, they push people to question, critique, and analyse. Through their discourse and action, they chip away at the ideas and practices that people are used to – and people are shaken out of their ordinary routines – forced to look at the injustices around them, and in their own personal lives. Although, as I showed above, this kind of process often leads to new awareness and action, it also leads, almost inevitably to tensions with the agitators. Because the master’s tools are ingrained in everyone, many people react viscerally to critique of the status quo. If, however, agitators, in their “agitating”, are doing *faire avec* (pre-figuring *power with*) – not *faire pour* (related to *power over*) – then there is much more chance that people’s initial reactions will be transformed into creative energy, critique, analysis, and action. This theme was ever present in the stories of the participants, as they talked about how some women reacted to feminist agitators who came on too strong in the beginning, and later, how the methods of the Marxist Leninist groups were not, by any means, about real popular education, even though their message was inspiring.

In the excerpt below, Thérèse tells the story of her sister, who had just begun coming out into the neighbourhood, who was taken aback by the discourse of a feminist agitator at Madame prend congé:

Thérèse L’animatrice était bien fonceuse. Elle commence à raconter comment on devait prendre notre place nous, les femmes. Je revois ma sœur Rita qui commençait à peine à se pointer un petit peu dans le quartier. Elle vient au groupe de Madame prend congé cet après-midi-

là et ça adonne que ça tombait sur le sujet de la place des femmes. L'animatrice commence à témoigner en disant « Moi, en tout cas, il fait son lavage et moi je fais le mien ! » Rita me dit « Veux-tu bien me dire où est-ce que tu m'as emmenée ? ! Qu'est-ce que c'est, cette histoire-là ? Voir si on va mettre le linge de notre mari de côté et qu'on va l'obliger à laver son linge ! » Elle était toute insultée ! « Quelle sorte de femme c'est ? ! Elles charrient !! » Assez qu'elle ne voulait plus revenir ! Elle est revenue après une secousse mais ça l'avait vraiment insultée. On était en train de lui enlever son rôle de mère, de femme. On était en train de lui dire qu'elle n'était pas correcte !

This event is but one of many of the same kind, where a tension emerged because an agitator pushed some buttons by questioning the housewife role. In making her point about her own situation, the agitator inevitably called into question the other woman's situation. For many women, keeping house was their grand-mothers' and their mother's job, and was now their job. Often, in this role, they had control over their lives, and the lives of their loved ones, and they took pride in the work they did in the home. To question this role, and to claim that her husband should share this role, was to question the woman's identity as "the one who runs the household", but also to destabilise her small bastion of power.

In line with this, Isabelle tells of an experience, also at Madame prend congé, where two feminist workers come in to the décor, and without having taken the time to understand the dynamics of the neighbourhood, or to start from the experiences of the women in the group, started to agitate:

Isabelle Il y a plusieurs années, j'étais sur le conseil d'administration de Madame prend congé. À l'époque, on avait engagé 2 filles de Verdun. Je pense qu'elles venaient du Centre des femmes de Verdun, qui n'a pas du tout la même dynamique que le centre de femmes de Madame prend congé. Ça n'a pas marché, les filles ont donné leur démission. Je pense que tout le monde était bien content qu'elles donnent leur démission. Parce qu'elles sont rentrées trop raide dans le bateau. Elles n'étaient pas dans la dynamique d'ici et elles ont voulu commencer à parler, entre autres, de violence conjugale trop rapidement. Ici, le monde se connaît, on ne peut pas parler de n'importe quoi, n'importe

comment. Ça rentrait trop dans les vies, trop vite ! Les filles sont parties fâchées en disant « Coudonc, elles ne sont pas parlables ici ! Elles ne veulent pas parler des vraies affaires ! » Mais ce n'était pas ça ! Elles rentraient dans une structure, dans une place établie, qu' il faut connaître.

In the Point, a small place where everyone knew each other, where class solidarity often superseded gender solidarity, open discussion about conjugal violence was not yet the norm. The agitators left, frustrated by the reticence of the women around this issue. This event highlights the importance of taking the time to work with people, from where they are at. Time and time again, agitators have hit brick walls in their attempts to get people to buy their political agenda without having taken the time to work through the popular education spiral.

In fact, the experiences with the male organisers from Parallel Institute, with the university-educated male social animators at the Maison de Quartier, and with the Marxist Leninist agitators, men and women alike, are all examples of tensions around the advancement of a political agenda and doing *power-with*. Ironically, as the women became empowered, through their participation in collective actions and through their individual acts of courage, they also began to criticise these agitators, many of whom had coached them. Having learned how to take a stand for their rights, to identify a clear class enemy, and to read relations for gender dynamics, these, and many other women began identifying the contradictions between the discourse of the agitators and their actual actions.

As I showed above, in the French group, the women began to name, criticise and act on the tendency of university-educated male agitator to take up all the space in the groups. Later, they criticised the ways of the Marxist-Leninists, for their dogmatism, lack of respect for process, and purely ideological stances on many pragmatic issues (see Chapter 4). By the late 1970s, there were many more women in the role of agitators, and it is the tensions that



emerged between ordinary women, and these Marxist Leninist – women – agitators, that were the most difficult to live, because women who had worked together in the groups, and had helped each other journey as women, were tearing each other apart (see Chapter 6). Similarly, on the English-side, as I discussed in Chapter 4, the local leaders, trained by the professionals of Parallel, ended up pushing them out of the neighbourhood, claiming that they were pushing their agenda onto the community, too fast and without enough popular education. Although these tensions were not specifically around women’s issues or actions, these kinds of dynamics were often gendered and classed, in that the agitators with whom the women had most issue were university-educated men (see “gender roles”, above).

### SUSTAINING FACTORS

Even with all these tensions, and after all these years, most of the women in the project are still involved in community groups. We asked them why they stay involved even though there are hard times. The most ubiquitous answer, was that they contribute to change – that their actions have an impact (see below). Above and beyond these impacts, however, are other factors that help sustain them through tensions that are part and parcel of the change process. These include, first, their feelings of anger at injustice and their determination to get rid of it, fed by an intense feeling of responsibility to act, but also by a need to give back to others, to take pleasure in seeing them journey towards their own emancipation. Second, at a more visceral level, the participants claim that they are sustained by the gang they are part of, and the fun they have in their activism. I turn to these now.

### ANGER, DETERMINATION, AND SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

For most of the participants, once their “eyes wide open”, were spurred on during hard times by their anger at the injustice that they saw everywhere,

and by their determination to play a part in the elimination of those injustices.

In other words, “They aren’t going to get us! Watch out, here we come!”:

Maureen I think at first it’s very demoralising. But I think there’s a stage that comes, of determination – that come hell or high water, your going do it. And I think that’s probably happened for everybody. It’s not going to get to you, you’re going to keep going at it. In fact, I think that sometimes, the more angry I got, the more active I got. (...) Anger being built up. Being turned off. (...) “You don’t count, so we don’t have to listen to you”.

Denise If you really believe in something, you’ll go ahead no matter what. You’ll go through any obstacles. All the way.

Anna So it’s like justice

Denise Determination (...)

Donna Sometimes we felt it was a system that failed the people in the area. (...) We have rights, as a person, (whether we are from Point St. Charles or Westmount) And that made it important to fight. (...) We have the right, we’re people too!

Denise And we’ll fight for that right if we have to.

Maureen It’s the little joys of pissing the government off! (...) There was an organiser once. I never even thought of it that way. But he described me as “that one that sits a foot above her chair”! I get so excited, you know? We’re going to get them! (...)

Denise What a thrill though! What a rush! It’s nice. (...) But it’s the cheering. It just goes through you, you know? When we are singing, the people are really together. You feel that strength! A power. You have to live through it to know what it’s like.

Michèle On n’a jamais pensé lâcher. Parce qu’on a trouvé des choses, en s’engageant dans notre société, dans notre milieu. On a trouvé notre compte aussi là-dedans. L’estime de soi qui remonte, la dignité qu’on retrouve. C’est des acquis qu’on a et qu’il faut qu’on partage ! On ne veut pas garder ça pour nous seules ! C’est ça qui nous tient ! On va être en train de mourir et on va être encore à défendre une cause quelque part !

Thérèse Une fois, une amie m’est arrivée avec ça « Je ne comprends pas Thérèse, comment ça se fait que vous continuez tout le temps !? ». « Parce que ça vient de l’intérieur ». Pour ma part, c’est quelque chose que j’ai à cœur. Je suis née ici. Je regardais évoluer mon quartier et je trouvais ça tellement beau, tellement extraordinaire

(...) J'ai eu la chance, moi, Thérèse Dionne, de participer à cette évolution-là. Ça m'a toujours tenu. Je me suis toujours dis « Tu n'as pas le droit de lâcher, Thérèse, regarde le monde autour de toi. C'est du monde ça qui ce serait assis sur leur perron, ou la chaise sur le trottoir pendant l'été. C'était le plus loin qu'ils allaient. Aujourd'hui je les retrouve dans les groupes, je les retrouve debout devant un micro. C'est presque un miracle de voir tout ça bouger comme ça. Alors c'est ça qui me motivait ! « Tu n'as pas le droit de lâcher. Ton quartier est en évolution, tu dois évoluer avec, tu as ton mot à dire et il faut que tu le fasses. » Pour moi, c'est une fierté et un sentiment intérieur de solidarité. C'est très fort. Je vais avoir de la misère à marcher et je vais encore avoir l'air d'être une de ceux qui sont debout ! Je ne pourrai plus mais je vais être solidaire ! (...) Quand tu as eu la piquête de l'engagement, c'est tellement ancré en toi, tu ne peux pas lâcher. Ce n'est pas possible, ça fait partie de toi !

Michèle and Thérèse, above and beyond determination, talk about an ingrained feeling of responsibility, not only to act, but also to share what they have lived – the impacts of involvement – with others. They take pleasure and pride in seeing others journey through the spiral of change.

#### BEING PART OF A GANG, AND HAVING FUN!

For most of the women, however, anger, determination, and feeling a deep sense of responsibility, may not have been enough to sustain them through the most tense times in their decades of activism. Most important was the support network that they found in the groups. Groups were about more than political talk. They were also about social time, about exchanging informally, about having fun, about having a sense of belonging to a gang.

Frances What keeps me going? Well, I like being where there's people, first of all. And we did have a group with good communication. Back then, you were friends. (...) And I liked what I was doing because I met people. Well, I'm not originally from the Point. But when I came to the Point, I had a big family and I met a lot of people. I still meet them on the street. I found it was because we were a group and we could fight for what we were going for. And we weren't as scared. We would go to places and not be as scared if the place would take you. And we had kids. And our kids would come and

they would wait for us...

Anna Yeah, so friendship...

Frances And my children knew the other children. (...)

Maureen That was definitely there (...) And I know it was a pain for you, Myrna, cause you were working' in the kitchen and we'd be in and out looking for coffee, disturbing your cooking (...) But people dropped in every day at St-Columba House. (...) You know, there didn't have to be an action. There didn't have to be a meeting. They just came in. That was all part of it and that was a good part (...) And being together, you encouraged each other.

Frances Well that's it. There was always somebody to say, "hello". And if you needed help they were there. Yeah, and lots of us had big families and we needed help.

Anna So there is also the support.

Frances Oh yeah, there was lots of support.

Anna Breaking the idea that you're all alone...

Frances Well this is what I thought. I was alone too. But, no, I found out I wasn't. And thanks to the girls, I mean lots of them. They were right there.

Anna I think it's still like that today in groups isn't it? I mean for me it is.

Frances Not as much

Anna Well maybe not as much, or in the same way. I'm active in my groups because of the people around for sure. They sustain you. When there's hard times and stuff like that. If the people around you aren't there to support you...

Myrna In the Women's Group at St-Columba house, I'm not just giving. I get as much from the group as I give. I get more! It's a very supportive group. (...) But the women - I found my greatest support was from women at St-Columba House.

Through the groups, and the people within, they sought and received support, mutual aid and encouragement. Many of the women developed lasting friendships through their activism And the fun, the pleasure of activism, as Myrna explains below, is also part of the reason they continue:

Myrna You put a bunch of women together, now tell me you don't have fun!

Anna That's true.

Myrna How can you not have fun? It's fun going on the bus. It's fun walking in the demonstrations. We have fun. We're signing or laughing. It's true!

The fun, and the feeling of being part of a gang, are important dynamics in community organising, and without them, activism is very difficult to sustain over the long haul, no matter how successful the actions are at other levels.

### IMPACTS AT ALL LEVELS

*Des femmes d'une trentaine d'années qui commençaient à sentir ce que ça voulait dire  
être autonome et être une femme libérée  
-- Thérèse*

What kind of impacts did all these actions around strategic gender needs have? Some have and might continue to dismiss many of these activities as not effecting real social change because of the lack of coordinated political vision and/or the refusal to claim themselves of the “feminist movement”<sup>366</sup>. In fact, after all these years of organising, women are still being beaten by their partners, harassed by their bosses, raped by their dates. Pornography is still rampant. Women are still paid less than men for equal labour. Women are still underrepresented in the political sphere. Women still do the majority of housework and childcare. Women are still over-represented in community groups and still do the house-keeping tasks of those organisations. How is all this liberating<sup>367</sup>?

Although less sexy than the “bra-burning”, radical feminism that makes the news, the kind of activism the participants are involved in is grounded in communities, and is essential to neighbourhood democracy, and local empowerment (see Ackelsberg, 2001; Kaplan, 1997). In fact, according to the participants, there are significant impacts, not only at the macro-level of society

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<sup>366</sup> see Nicole Tremblay, cited in Bouchard, 1984

<sup>367</sup> D'Amours, 1985c; D'Amours, 1985a

and community, but also at the level of individual empowerment, and organisational culture:

Myrna Sometimes, you will be wondering if it makes a difference. I think sometimes we have to stop and think about the winning and the loosing. I used to think we expected too much. All the little wins add up to a lot you know! And that helps us keep going too. “We’ve got a lot done since last year”. You chalk it up on the board, you see what happened. It’s not this big, big change, but it’s been a lot of small changes. That’s really helps the group itself.

Maureen You’d just get so far and you seemed to have your feet kicked out from under you. But then we’d start listing. “We got this, we got this, we got that”. And all of a sudden, “hey where’re not doing too bad!”

It is this “chalking up on the Board” that I do in this section, dividing the impacts into three inter-related levels: macro, meso and micro.

#### MACRO-LEVEL : IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY, PUBLIC OPINION, GOVERNMENT

Most obviously, are the new service and advocacy groups that were set-up to meet women’s practical and strategic gender needs in the neighbourhood, and that continue to contribute to quality of life for everyone, especially women: the daycare, the women’s centre, the Women’s Discussion Group, the workers cooperative<sup>368</sup>, the group for adults with handicaps, and the alternate school. These groups have survived over the decades, and are still run by women from the neighbourhood. Moreover, building on the gains of the past, other groups that respond to strategic gender needs have since emerged in the neighbourhood, including several other daycares, a battered women’s shelter, and a group for young parents (mothers). Also, International Women’s Day continues to be celebrated yearly, and many women from various groups in the neighbourhood participated in both women’s marches, “du pain et des roses” in 1995, and the World March of Women in 2000. Women from the neighbourhood also participated in the feminist action against globalisation at

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<sup>368</sup> PAW closed its doors due to financial difficulties in November 2003.

the Summit of the Americas on the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) in Québec City in 2001. In the last decade, as elsewhere in Québec, the issue of violence against women in the home, in québécois society, but also internationally, is ever more present in the public arena.

These experiences, are part of a larger Québec-wide movement, and have contributed to the consolidation of alternative service and advocacy groups over the years, and to the increased recognition of strategic gender needs as important, not only by other women, but also by the general public and by governments. As the grassroots of the Federation des femmes du Québec, and the Marches, these local groups have helped ground the demands of the broader feminist movement around violence and poverty. Collective responsibility for childcare and education, violence against women, unequal resource distribution based on gender, to name a few issues, although most definitely not the highest priority, are nevertheless present on the public agenda. Over the years, the provincial government has, to some degree, operationalised certain demands of the movement in government policies, and in deciding to use taxpayers money to fund these kinds of initiatives (e.g., less expensive daycare, funding for women's centres, status of women councils, salary-parity).

#### MESO-LEVEL: IMPACTS ON ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES AND CULTURES

Beyond the obvious – the existence of groups that improve quality of life, however, are the impacts of women's activism on organisational structures and cultures. As I described, as they spiralled through their journeys, they named women's oppressions, they helped stimulate new awareness of gender issues, they forced community groups to open up to women's strategic gender needs, and they pushed people to see the unequal distribution of tasks. Moreover, by their very actions, they showed everyone that “women can do it”. In taking on leadership roles, in becoming media spokespersons, in negotiating with elected officials, they were in fact shifting their positionalities away from the “behind the scenes” roles that are generally assigned to women.

By bringing in these demands and acting on their strategic gender needs, through constant pressure, they forced members, men and women, as well as organisers/animators to question their own internalised sexism and “classism”, and change their behaviours. In doing so, they brought the personal into the political (and vice-versa), and forced changes at the interpersonal levels, but also contributed to the deconstruction of traditional hierarchies within organisations.

One of the most important lessons that the participants drew from their experiences in this spiral, and that has affected, without a doubt organisational form in neighbourhood groups, is the importance of the *approach* to organising. Through their criticism of certain animators/organisers/agitators, they pointed out the contradictions between their discourse and their practice, and claimed that to effect real social change, the organising style had to be *faire, faire avec, faire faire*, and not *faire pour*. Tied to this is the need to balance service and political action – while they were agitating for the revolution, there were concrete needs that needed to be dealt with, from the education of the children, to the health of local folks, to housing needs. Oppressive social processes were under fire, and as women demanded, and pre-figured other kinds of social relations, they were in fact shifting the power dynamics in the groups they were in, contributing to a democratisation of structures (see Kaplan, 1997).

In fact, the participants, and many other activists, have continued to experiment with non-hierarchical organisational forms, and with the *faire, faire avec, faire faire* approach to organising. All of the participants in the project became agitators (albeit oftentimes quiet ones!) themselves, and are constantly influencing the groups and their members through their continued involvement. All of them are staff or volunteers in community groups, and their learning is now being transferred to other women. Marguerite, who works at the Club populaire des consommateurs, describes here the pleasure she gets out of this role of hers:



Marguerite Nous on travaille encore dans ce domaine-là. Quand on fait la Journée Internationale des femmes, je travaille avec elles pendant un mois, un mois et demi, et elles prennent conscience de tout le travail qui a été fait. Parce que la plupart n'ont pas cette conscience-là. Elles ont envie de dire « Je le mérite » et « On doit fêter » (...) Mais quand elles font la démarche, ça devient « Ce que les femmes ont gagné! » Moi je trouve ça intéressant. Les gens sont valorisés, sont intéressés à préparer cette journée-là (...) C'est de les voir rayonner à travers ça. Écoute, moi je peux dire plein de choses (...) mais ça devient important si elles y croient (...) Voir ce qui a déjà été fait, et dire « Nous, maintenant, qu'est-ce qu'on va faire ? » (...)

Isabelle C'est le retour du balancier. Vous avez appris beaucoup. Maintenant vous êtes celles qui apprennent aux autres. Qui reçoivent, mais qui donnent (...)

Marguerite (...) Mais elles ont le goût de s'impliquer.

Isabelle Parce qu'il y a des gens qui leur donnent le goût de le faire! Comme il y a eu des gens qui vous ont donné le goût de le faire.

Marguerite C'est ça.

Michèle, for her part, spent many years working at RÉSO, trying to help people find work. Louise is still involved in the collective kitchens, which have now amalgamated with Le Garde Manger pour tous. Madeleine, was active for many years at the Carrefour d'éducation populaire, and the Projet St-Charles, and was a founding member of her housing cooperative, "Les Naufragés". Thérèse, has continued her involvement in her communauté de base, and is a member of many groups in the neighbourhood, including the Carrefour d'éducation populaire. Both Frances and Denise continue to work at the Clinic, still committed to its survival and mission. Donna was at PAW until recently, works with the St-Columba House After-School program, and is still active with PACE and the St-Columba House Worship Group. Myrna is also a member of the latter, and is still coordinating Hand in Hand and the St-Columba House Women's Discussion Group. Maureen, after having worked

first as organiser and later as program coordinator for St-Columba House for many years, retired to St-Gabriel de Brandon, but has recently returned to the Point. She has, along with Donna and Denise, recently become an active member of the Board of directors of the Archives.

The participants are everywhere. Their discourse is everywhere. There is no question that they are impacting the organisational cultures. Although there has been an amplification of backlash against feminist organising in the past decade, within community groups there is a certain sensitivity to unequal gender roles in the organisation itself. If by no means wide-spread, the idea of women wanting to organise into caucuses to discuss their common concerns, the notion of gender parity on Boards or in staff composition, and the use of male-female speaking lists, are not completely foreign to the functioning of the movement. Although men continue to dominate on assembly floors, and continue to be the preferred formal representatives, there are many more women in positions of power in groups (e.g., coordinators of organisations, in executives of boards). Several groups in the Point, including the Carrefour d'éducation populaire and Madame prend congé are widely recognised as exemplary experiences in non-hierarchical organising with a *faire avec* approach. Although these meso-level changes may seem small in the context of wide-scale world-wide oppressive forces, there is no question that if society is to change in an era of globalisation and loss of faith in representative democracy, this kind of neighbourhood politics, which attempts to pre-figure in a way the social relations of a better world, are essential. It is by practicing the revolution today, following the lessons drawn from the project, that real social change will occur.

#### MICRO-LEVEL : IMPACTS ON FAMILY AND SELVES

Finally, the transformations at the micro-level were and continue to be highly significant. Not only did the spiral-like journey of women through history have an impact on their families, but it also contributed to personal

empowerment. As I showed above, their collective and individual actions led to many tensions in the home – no one, however, came out of these tensions without having shifted in some way. For some of the participants, their demands in the home contributed to changes in the mentalities and, in the ways of doing things, of their husbands.

Marguerite Quand mon mari a pris conscience qu'il avait sa part à lui à jouer, sur le partage des tâches, il a fait son chemin. Il faisait le lavage. Il a appris à plier ! Il avait du linge plus blanc que le mien ! On faisait nos réunions aux six mois pour faire le partage des tâches. Toute la famille. Les enfants aussi.

For others, these changes did not occur, and the participants liberated themselves from the control of their husbands by separating or divorcing. These women, in daring to break with the status quo, paved the way for their daughters, who now have the liberty to divorce their partners without great difficulty.

Moreover, for most of the participants, their involvement had a positive impact on their children. For many of the women, it was common to bring their children along to the groups, and, because there were often kitchen meetings, children were hanging around the meetings:

Marguerite Dans mon engagement j'ai aussi impliqué mes enfants. (...) Mes enfants jouaient « aux réunions ». Au lieu de jouer à la mère ou de jouer au magasin, ça jouait aux réunions ! Elles avaient leurs thèmes, et là il y avait eu une exploitation, ou c'était trop cher...Elles mettaient des perruques ! Elles jouaient aux madames quand même mais c'était des madames en réunion !

Michèle Chez nous ça jouait aux réunions aussi ! J'ai été dans les communistes un moment donné. C'était fini mais j'avais une pile de Forges ça de haut. Mon fils les avaient mises sur le trottoir, avec sa table, et il les vendait ! Et les voisins les achetaient ! (...)

Marguerite Je me souviens qu'on avait visité des ateliers de couture. J'avais amené les enfants voir ça. Ils étaient fiers ! Ils regardaient les coutures (sur leur linge). C'était peut-être leur mère qui avait cousu ça ? (...) On faisait le tour des métiers. (...) On est allé visiter des usines. On a fait beaucoup de choses comme ça pour que les enfants apprennent à apprécier le travail que leurs parents

faisaient. Et respecter leur travail. Pas le travail du boss, mais celui des travailleurs.

Most of the participants had their children with them in their groups, and some, as did Marguerite and Michèle consciously chose to teach their children about injustice and class oppression. Moreover, many of their children, as exemplified above, in their early years imitated their mothers; instead of playing house, they played “meetings” and “newspaper selling”, developing, in a way by “osmosis”, a gender analysis and putting it into practice, through their games. Marguerite and Michèle claim that their children were influenced by this early exposure to activism, because already, at a very early age, the children were recognising injustice, and had no qualms about identifying the contradictions between their parents’ discourse and actions.

There is no doubt that all this early education, explicit or not, contributed to the shaping of adults with a critical consciousness, and of women who knew that as women, they “could do it”. In fact, today, although some of their children are not involved in the groups, most have a social conscience, and some are actively involved in different ways:

Madeleine Marie-Claude (la fille de Marguerite) est bien impliquée, elle travaille dans le communautaire. Mon gars aussi.

Thérèse Mon fils est impliqué mais pas de la même façon que moi. Tout à fait différemment mais il est là et je le sens très vivant. (...)

Marguerite Je regarde Marie-Claude avec les gens du quartier (...) Les gens se sont sentis respectés et compris. Elle est capable de les comprendre et elle est capable de continuer à admirer chaque pas qu’ils font.

Michèle Elle croit à ce qu’elle fait.

Madeleine Elle est beaucoup aimée dans le quartier<sup>369</sup>.

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<sup>369</sup> Marie-Claude Paradis drowned in August 2003 in the Red River near Labelle. At her funeral, the Church was filled to cracking with all the people she had influenced in her young life. No words can do justice to the pain that all of us felt, her friends, her peers, her family, at her leaving us so soon.

- Myrna I think that if you stop to think, all of us who have children, our children look up what we've done. And they also are doing things now. And standing up for what they believe. So that makes a big difference too. (...) They believe in what's right. And they carry that on also. Even if they don't always go out and fight for things. In their hearts they know it's the right thing.
- Maureen My daughter worked with the handicapped. My son is an educator in a group home. So it has been passed on.
- Donna I'm thinking back, when we were talking about Maureen, how your kids were involved. Jessica came with me actually on a couple of demonstrations when we went. It might not have been a lot but she was there with us (...) I remember when we fighting for Lorne school to keep it open and we were fighting for PACE, my youngest, who was an infant, I used to bring him to the board meetings and would be excused cause I had to feed him. But every meeting he was there with me. (...) I think my daughter has a social conscience. Yes, she does.

Most of their children, as adults, see injustice for what it is, and tend to stand up for their rights, and for rights of those around them. Having been exposed, early on, to poverty, and to different ways of doing things in the groups, those that have become professionals, have brought their lived experiences into their work, and because of their respectful way of doing their work, tend to be very appreciated by the people they work with. The same goes for those who have chosen to continue in the footsteps of their mothers, giving back to the community what they received through their mothers.

The impacts of their activism, on themselves, however, is perhaps the most remarkable. After we had reviewed the folder of analysis on their spiral-like journey through history, as women, we asked the participants to imagine what their lives would be like today, if they had never been involved in community groups. Here is what they said<sup>370</sup>:

- Michèle Je serais retraitée de l'enseignement. J'aurais été un professeur de carrière.

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<sup>370</sup> Madeleine Richardson did not participate in this discussion, because she passed away in June 2002, one week after the end of Phase I of the project.

- Marguerite Moi j'aurais fait une dépression. (...) Ça m'a donné vie. C'est incroyable. Tout le monde chez nous en a profité.
- Marguerite J'en ai parlé avec les enfants. Des fois je me tapais un peu sur la tête parce que je n'étais pas assez présente. Marie-Claude disait « Qu'est-ce qu'on aurait fait nous ? Tu as changé ! Tout a changé ! Du fait d'avoir une mère qui est contente, qui a quelque chose à dire. » Même si on n'a pas toujours des victoires, il y a tellement de choses qu'on apprend. On évolue à travers ça, on apprend des choses. Ça change. Veux, veux-pas, dans la maison, avec tes enfants, il y a toujours des petits pas. Et dans la rue. Moi je trouve que ça nous valorise (...) Le plus triste, c'est quand je ne peux pas être à une manifestation. On a besoin d'être ensemble.
- Anna Qu'est-ce que tu veux dire quand tu dis que tu as changé ?
- Marguerite Moi j'aurais été déprimée. Être dans une maison, avec tes chaudrons, c'est épouvantable ! Tu vis pas. Il n'y a pas de vie là-dedans ! Et je ne suis pas une femme de voisinage ou de magasinage. Je ne suis pas une femme pour jouer au bingo. Qu'est-ce que j'aurais fait dans ma maison ? Tourner en rond, avec les difficultés qu'on avait ?
- Michèle Mais si tu n'avais pas été engagée dans la garderie, dans le Club des consommateurs et tout, tu aurais été une femme à la maison, une femme qui aurait déprimé.
- Marguerite Ce qui m'a aidé, c'est quand on s'est impliqué dans les comités de citoyens (...) Mais avant ça, la vie était très difficile (...) Les enfants vont dire qu'ils ont commencé à mieux vivre quand on est arrivés dans la Pointe, et que j'ai commencé un peu (...) à partir une garderie (...) J'étais toujours dépassée par les événements (...)
- Isabelle C'était le lot de beaucoup de femmes de ton époque, de faire cette vie de femme au foyer. Il y en a qui réussissait. Plusieurs faisaient des dépressions, d'autres se faisaient prescrire du valium.
- Marguerite Mais on parlait pas (dans ce temps là) de se séparer. Moi c'était compliqué.
- Anna Tu es allée chercher de la force dans les groupes ? (...)
- Marguerite Ça m'a donné de la force. (...) Les enfants, ça leur apporte quelque chose (...) parce que moi, j'ai quelque chose à dire. On parle beaucoup à la maison, mais c'est encore plus intéressant parce que je suis à l'extérieur et j'apporte d'autres réflexions (...) (De savoir que tu peux faire autre chose que juste le lavage, les couches, parler de bébés. On n'est pas des enfants. On fait partie prenante de la société. On n'est pas juste à la maison, comme si on n'est pas

capable d'apprendre. Comme si on n'est pas capable de devenir consciente et de prendre des responsabilités. Là tu deviens une femme plus autonome. Je ne suis pas une enfant !) Tout (la personne que je suis aujourd'hui) vient de mon militantisme. Ce n'est pas chez nous que j'ai appris ça. Ce n'est pas dans ma vie de couple non plus. (...)

Thérèse      Moi je serais en chaise berçante (...) En soumission totale. (...) L'économie domestique et ses enseignements, c'était moi ça. C'était dans mes années. Moi en 60, ça faisait déjà 10 ans que j'étais mariée, avec la mentalité qu'il y a dans ces enseignements. C'est ça que j'avais eu de ma mère. « Tu dois faire ci, tu dois faire ça, pour ton mari. C'est comme ci et c'est comme ça. Même si ton mari boit, même s'il fait toutes sortes d'affaires, n'oublie pas que c'est ton mari. C'est lui le boss. Il te donne à manger. Et il mène. Toi, tu dois faire ce qu'il dit. C'est lui qui est responsable. C'est lui qui paye. » Alors moi je faisais partie de cette gang-là. (...) Pour ma part, ça a été ma valorisation de commencer à sortir dans le quartier. Penser que oui, j'avais le droit de dire ce que je pensais. Même si j'avais juste une 5<sup>e</sup> année, j'avais de l'allure quand je parlais puisque les gens m'écoutaient. (...) Ça a changé ma vie, ma vision de femme qui se prend en main. (...) J'ai dit « Moi (...) je retournerai pas dans ma cuisine ! » (...) J'ai fait mon secondaire à 40 ans. À 50 ans, je suis allée au Cégep et à 60 ans et plus, j'ai continué à l'université du troisième âge ! (...) Mais si je n'avais pas fait ça, et bien je serais assise dans ma chaise berçante, à attendre que mes enfants viennent me voir (...)

Anna            Tu es devenue une femme autonome.

Michèle        On aurait toutes pu être des femmes dépendantes. On aurait toutes pu vivre pour d'autres valeurs.

Thérèse        Une fois que tu es engagée, tu ne peux pas reculer.

Donna           I probably would have ended up nowhere (...) I would have learned no skills, educational skills, I hate to say it – a classical welfare bum (...) I might have gone that way. If I look at my life today, I feel very rich, maybe I'm not financially better off, but with all the experiences I've had, I'm that much richer (...) I got to meet people, be involved with people, learn more about my community, being involved with my children, other people's children. The life experiences that I have learned. I have a high school education, that's it. But I feel that in terms of life, I've gained so much! I got to go to Guatemala! Mexico! I got to write a book, two! Those are things I would have missed out on! So, I'd

never trade it for the world!

Frances St-Columba House brought me a future. My life was dead. St-Columba House and the Clinic got me into the groups. A long time ago. At meetings, on the Board, and in the clothing room, and at kitchen meetings. Having a big family, they were my friends, people to talk to. (...)

Anna What did you get out of that?

Frances I got a job. I've been there 30 years.

Anna Do you think you would've got that job if you hadn't gotten involved in the groups?

Frances No. Because I wouldn't of went for it. Eight children at home. I didn't think I had time to be away from the house. My place was to cook and wash, like lots of women do. And when I started volunteering, all of a sudden, they opened the job, and I went for it!

Anna So it opens up opportunities.

Frances Sometimes. It did for me (...) I got to meet a lot of people.

Anna To sort of build a network of friends

Frances Oh yeah! (...) When I came here, I never thought I would go any further than, go out the door, saying "bye kids, have a good day in school", then come in (...) I would have been a housewife. I never thought I'd work! (...) I love it! I'm still there! After 30 years (...)

Maureen I think I would be a homemaker, working periodically, when it was necessary, in offices or whatever. Raising the children. Being very frustrated. Because the involvement in the schools was what started me in the first place. And, thinking that getting the school committee would solve the problems. Your giving your time, but it is going no where. And, I don't think, like Frances, when the job came up at St-Columba House, I would never have applied. There were men applying! It's true! I would've thought, "I don't have a chance! They are the leaders of anything that was going on anyway!". (...) I think it would've been dull. Because, in the fighting, in the fighting for justice, fighting for your kids, fighting for better life, made me feel like I was alive!

Anna What about you Denise, where would you be today? (...)

Denise I was hardened very young. I was very bitter about the world. About how it was for women. I didn't want to grow up, to be a woman, to have to suffer (...) I wanted to be different. Of course, a lot of the things I did were unacceptable at the time. I was put down a lot. (...) When I married, it wasn't an agreement that I would stay home. I was working. And I was doing my own thing, and "don't tell me what to do". I didn't cook all the meals. So it didn't look good. People didn't see it as looking good, at the time that I did this, in the 1960s. It was unacceptable to act the way I



did. (...) And, so when I got involved in community and activism, to me it was different. I was something I could do to help out without getting into trouble, the way it was before.

Anna It was okay to be different.

Denise It was okay to fight the government (...) It was a different way of doing things. Yet, still being present, still making a difference, doing my share with the rest of the people (...)

Myrna I think people grow some if they don't get involved. But it would've been dull! Wouldn't have done all that foolishness! Demonstrations! I think you are a stronger person for what you learn. I wouldn't stand up for what I believe. I think I'd still be pushed around. Cause I wasn't a strong person. (...)

Anna So you gained self-esteem, self-confidence

Myrna Yeah. After all this time, I should! But if I really believe in something, I have no qualms in saying it (...) There are many people who aren't involved. I wouldn't want their life. I do envy it sometimes, because they aren't in the hustle and bustle. And most of them have husbands, and there have security. Better than me. I am alone still. That part of the deal, I like. But all the other part, no. That life is dull. What are you going to talk about every day? "How are the kids?" "They're fine". "What did you do today?" "Washed my floors. Bought a new dress".

Maureen "You need to try liquid Tide"

Most of the participants, had they not been involved in the groups would have led a life that was status quo – most as homemakers, some as professionals – involved in mainstream parent committees, without affecting serious change. None of them today would exchange their lives – although stressful and financially precarious at times – for material richness and routine. They were able to channel, into their activism, their frustrations, their pain, their rebellion; instead of being marginal, depressed, or lonely, through their activism they became alive, their lives gleaned meaning. Most of them claim that their lives are all the fuller, sighing with relief that they managed to cut short the hardship, boredom or dullness of their previous lives. They would not have developed a critical analysis of society in general, and specifically, of their plight as women, and they would not have learned to stand up for themselves and those around them. This new awareness, and the actions that

ensued transformed their lives by opening up many opportunities that would have seemed impossible had they not become involved. The “school of life” of community group involvement, and the support and encouragement of agitators and other women within, helped them develop and hone skills which for most served in getting them paid work in the community sector, and for others in opening up the possibility of returning to school. Along with all this, the learning, the valorisation, the increased self-esteem and self-confidence, is the simple pleasure of activism, the network of friends, and the feeling that they belong to a movement, and the mutual aid and solidarity that comes with being part of a community, or a gang.

#### PERFORATING THE BORDERS, TRANSFORMING THE GUARDS

The participants were involved in activism in the neighbourhood, doing “women’s stuff” (Lerber, 1997; Steedman, 1994; Brownill & Halford, 1990; Staeheli, 1995) in a sphere that is constructed as an extension of the patriarchal home (Ackelsberg, 1988; Bullock, 1990; Burnonville, 1992; DeSena, 1998; Dominelli, 1990; Dominelli, 1995; Finn, 1998; MacDonald, 1996; Smith, 1987), motivated initially by practical gender needs (Marouli, 1995; Moser, 1989) related to their responsibilities as mothers and care-givers (Bell & Ribbens, 1994; Cockburn, 1977; Dabrowski, 1983; Delhi, 1990; Gilkes, 1980; Kaplan, 1982; Krauss, 1998; McCourt, 1977; Naples, 1992; Ruddick, 1995; Susser, 1988). Within their organisations, their “behind the scenes” organising (Finn, 1998; Hanmer, 1977; McAdam, 1992; Panet-Raymond, 1981) was often undervalued, while male, university-educated organisers often held the formal leadership, were elected to office, and were hired to do paid labour (in line with Bernal, 1998; Lawson & Barton, 1980; Némésis, 2002; West, 1981).

Notwithstanding the latter, as they journeyed through the making of history, from being involved in groups because of their practical gender needs, to gaining new awareness, often stimulated by the agitators in the groups, to taking collective action, as well as action within the home, the women were not

only transforming themselves and their groups, but also their community and society in general (Chouinard, 1996). Applying Anthias to this, the women, through the spiral-like process, were in fact working at eliminating the border guards of difference (Anthias, 2002c). As they gleaned new awareness of their own oppression – from analysis of gender roles in the groups, to realising that mothers and women were often being blamed for the oppression they were subjected to, to questioning the gender roles in the home, to naming violence against women as unacceptable – these women were actively reconstructing their own narratives of belonging, shifting their beliefs and practices, not only around gender, but also around class (in line with Brandwein, 1981; Clark, 1994; Cohen, 1997; Finn, 1998; Hayden, 1981; Haywoode, 1991b; Krauss, 1998; Naples, 1998b; Seifer, 1973; Sklar, 1985; Valk, 2000; Weil, 1986; West & Blumberg, 1990). They put into question many dichotomies (processes of relationality) that oppressed them: women are responsible for the children/men for bringing in the revenue; women are sexually passive/men are sexually active; women are dependent/men are independent; women are of the private sphere/men of the public; women do pink collar jobs/men do blue collar jobs; welfare recipients are powerless/ welfare officers have the final say; women with no formal education are not worthy/educated folks are always right; wives are the doers/men are the sayers.

I will illustrate the transformative process using the example of the dichotomy “women are homemakers/men are breadwinners”. Through the sharing of their experiences, the new information, and analyses, in the groups, the women put into question the idea that this dichotomy was somehow “natural” (processes of naturalisation). Instead, they came to see that it was in fact a social construction of an unjust society (in line with Barnabé, 1987; Lacourse, 1984; Morgen & Bookman, 1988; Rose, 1998; West, 1981). They noticed that their role, as homemakers, and their work in the community – an extension of the home – was less valued than men’s work (processes of

hierarchisation), and that they ended up with less resources – be they material (financial dependency), political (less say on public issues), cultural (less opportunities) than men (unequal resource distribution). They came to the conclusion that they had internalised these ideas (processes of inferiorisation), and that to fight them, it meant working to de-construct them not only within themselves, but also within their friends, their families, and the public opinion. In fact, by the very fact that they were *acting* outside the home – as activists – they were breaking with the idea that *all* women are naturally homemakers, *all* men all naturally breadwinners (processes of homogenisation). Many of them began demanding wages for housework, and others began working outside the home. This process can be applied to all the dichotomies listed above.

This process, of transforming the border guards of difference, was occurring at all levels – from the experiential, to the intersubjective, to the organisational, to the representational (Anthias, 1998). At the *experiential level*, the collective narrative was continuously being reconstructed as women redefined themselves as autonomous, knowledgeable, capable activists (in line with Abrahams, 1996; Clark, 1994; Cockburn, 1977; Collectif d'écriture du Centre des femmes des Cantons, 1987; DeSena, 1998; Krauss, 1998; Marouli, 1995; McAdam, 1992; McCourt, 1977; O'Malley, 1977; Pope, 1990; Rabrenovic, 1995; Seifer, 1973). In doing this, they used their identity markers – those assigned to them by the processes of differentiation and stratification – as resources in their struggles (e.g., “lovely ladies”). At the *intersubjective level*, through the education and actions of the women, and the tensions that ensued, boundaries were perforated as relations with husbands shifted, sometimes the latter sharing homemakers tasks, and at other times, ending in divorce (Blee, 1998; Brown & Ferguson, 1995; Hamilton, 1990; McCourt, 1977; Seifer, 1973; Seitz, 1998; Valk, 2000), as women with no formal education provided social services, as “housewives” did non-traditional labour, as children learned to follow in the footsteps of their mothers, and as these women, becoming

agitators themselves, stimulated other women in their networks to activism (McCourt, 1977; Marouli, 1995).

At the *organisational* level, boundaries shifted as women created spaces for themselves, carved out leadership positions (Sacks, 1988; Robnett, 1996; Robnett, 1998), took on organising jobs, changed the organisational culture around gender parity (Ackelsberg, 1988; Melucci, 1989; Smith & Valenze, 1988), forced government officials to stop their oppressive practices, won government policies that met their strategic gender needs (in line with Naples, 1998b; Piven, 1984; Valk, 2000; Susser, 1986). At the representational level, as they released their re-constructed identities, fractured and fissured, into public discourse, others around them were forced to re-think and re-construct their own narratives of belonging, and to revise their ideas about the dichotomies that abound in our society (in line with Krauss, 1998; Naples, 1998b; Susser, 1986; Valk, 2000;).

In the stories that the participants told, and that I analysed in this Chapter, there is more than information on their journeys through community activism. There is also the story of the transformations that ensued during the history-making process. That is, as all of us, Isabelle and I included, moved through the process – conceptualised to reproduce the very spiral that has emerged from their involvement in the groups – we were transformed. As we shared our experiences, brought in new information, deepened analyses, and experimented with action, transformations emerged not only at the individual and interpersonal levels, but also at the collective levels. It is to these transformations that I now turn.

## CHAPTER 6: SPIRALLING THROUGH THE HISTORY-MAKING PROCESS

In this chapter, I describe the transformations that emerged out of the history-making process, at the individual, interpersonal and collective levels. I show how personally, I have come a long way in taming my guilt of “the privileged” and in understanding the dynamics in shifting social relations. Each of us, out of this process, gleaned a new awareness of many issues, from the history of the neighbourhood, to new analyses of old stories. Moreover, throughout the project, as we “made the personal, political”, we re-affirmed our feminism, and (re)constructed a narrative of belonging. I end the section on individual transformations by describing how the participants came to identify, as the process moved along, as historical actors in their own right. Next, I discuss the many interpersonal transformations that occurred. I describe how through the naming and discussing of past conflicts – on tensions around the Marxist Leninist phase, and on linguistic tensions – the participants were able to resolve them. In addition to this, through respectful dialogue around the tensions that ensued during the project, in the present – between Isabelle and the English group, between Isabelle and I, and between the participants and I – we shifted and shook up the binaries that separate, divide and essentialise each of us. The transformations at the collective levels are but starting to be seen, but as I demonstrate in the last section, the lessons we have drawn during this project, about organising, are already beginning to circulate in the neighbourhood, the stories have sparked the curiosity of younger neighbourhood women, and women’s contributions to community activism have already begun to be recognised and celebrated locally. I conclude this chapter by discussing how the participatory history-making methodology, that borrows from feminist community organising practice, made these transformations possible.

Although I present this analysis in a linear fashion, the journey is better represented by a spiral; that is, the different areas of analysis, being interrelated, are continuously in interaction, influencing each other. The spiral in the process is very similar to the one discussed in the previous chapter. It goes something like this: we share experiences, discuss them, bring in new pieces of information or analysis, disagree on certain things, try to understand the other person's point of view, name the lessons, see that we actually do have an impact, recognise that we are historical actors, feel proud to have contributed, feel relieved for having mended old hurts, feel stronger because of relationships built, feel motivated to continue, bring these analyses into our various places of involvement, talk about the project to other people, other people become interested in their own history, they do something about it, we are proud of that, we are re-energised, we act, and so on...

## INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATIONS

### MY SHIFTING POSITIONALITIES

As I discussed in Chapter 3 (“my positionality”), 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, as I interact and develop relationships with people in the neighbourhood in general, and with the participants and Isabelle specifically. I have been positioned, at different times, since my arrival, as professional, outsider, radical feminist, anarchist, neighbour, student, staff person, friend... In this section, I highlight some of these dynamics in an effort to show how I have changed during the process.

Before I started working on the project, I had already experienced some tensions with neighbourhood folks around differing positionalities. For example, there were some latent tensions between the coordinator of the women's centre and myself as we worked together on local organising for the

World March of Women, and later as I interviewed her for the exhibit “du foyer au quartier”. Recently arrived, I was working with a team of (pro-feminist) organisers whose objective was to contribute to the creation of a feminist network in the neighbourhood. It was my job to coordinate the feminist concerted-action roundtable. Positioned at the time as “university-educated feminist outsider working with the team of organisers at the Clinic”, I often butted heads (not always explicitly) with the coordinator of the women’s centre who positioned herself vis-à-vis me as “working-class representative of the women of Point St. Charles”.

After the World March of Women, I moved into a housing cooperative in the neighbourhood, and made Point St-Charles my home. I quickly became active in many community organisations, including the Community Clinic. My positionality was shifting – although still an “outsider” due to my only recent arrival, but also to my levels of formal education, I was beginning to fit-in and was definitely developing a sense of belonging. In fact, during this time, the coordinator of the women’s center recruited me to the Board of the Centre, and when I finished my mandate, she thanked me for having contributed my feminist discourse to the meetings. Today (fall 2003), when I listen to the interview that I conducted with the coordinator when I first arrived in the community, I notice that I rarely, if ever interrupt or question her, or even engage with her when she sends jabs my way about how the March was organised (today I recognise some of the errors we committed!). With the changing context, both of us have come to shift our positionalities in such a way that the boundaries that separate us are now blurred.

During the first phase 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. In fact, still today, many people in the neighbourhood think that I work at the Archives. The university and its regulations were quite far away, and did not interfere much with our work on the project (except some minor issues



around the ethics guidelines). Notwithstanding all this, during the first year of the project, 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. And, understanding that guilt is never productive, I made every attempt to not fall into paralysis, and instead, to transform these feelings into creative energy that would contribute to a shifting of boundaries, and to transformative imaginings in dialogue.

When Isabelle and I began working on the project, in January 2001, I had much of this experience and reflection behind me. In my mind, as I explained in Chapter 2, I saw the facilitation of the oral history interviews, and the co-construction process as one of “pivoting the centre” (Aptheker, 1989; Brown, 1991). That is, one that allowed for our voices, as coordinators, to be heard throughout, along with those of the participants. However, when I presented the methodology to my doctoral committee, one of the members asked me where my voice was, another told me not to let myself be submerged by my guilt. During the first interview with Megan Bochner in October 2001, just before the actual meetings with the participants began, but after having lived some initial conflict with Isabelle around differing power dynamics (see below, in interpersonal transformations), she asked me how I would deal with potential critique, and how I was dealing with all these contradictory feelings. Here is what I said:

I really feel that I am legitimate in what I am doing, I've gone through the major guilt feelings that I had at the beginning of this whole thing. Eric sort of kicked me in the ass and said, “Anna look, you're bringing a lot of labour for the community group, and your intentions are good”. (...) I have to have a stronger “carapace”, a thicker skin, to some extent. And not be personally insulted, realise that the role I have because of who I am in society, is not necessarily the person I am. Separate the role.

I need to listen to it too. If it comes out a lot, maybe I am you know “oppressing through my privilege”, think about it, and deal with it.

At the next interview with Megan, in January 2002, after having lived more conflict with Isabelle, I continued in the same vein: “I have to learn to stand up for my rights as well. (Isabelle) actually said once, ‘why don’t you get mad sometimes!’ (...) I think my skin has gotten thicker. (...) I think it is a good thing”. At the last interview, in July 2002, after the first phase of meetings with the participants was over, Megan read back to me the comment above, and asked me how the process has impacted me, I said “(Isabelle has) always been ready to confront me on things. It is always difficult, to be confronted, but it’s always useful. (...) So I’ve learned how to take criticism, better (...) And I’ve realised that there’s a certain value in having a thicker skin”. The “thicker skin” theme emerges as central, and reflects my personal issues with guilt.

My positionality shifted once again when I decided to move out of the Archives. At the time, I had been elected President of the Board, I was part of the workers’ team, I was a “volunteer”, but I was also starting to write my thesis, in earnest. These multiple hats were beginning to become quite difficult to manage, and I decided that it would be best if I removed myself physically from the space. The project was firmly rooted in the organisation, and I could continue working on it as an ordinary volunteer, someone who comes into the office when needed, but who is not part of the inner dynamics of the workplace. This has clarified things quite a bit, and now I am writing my thesis from my home (in the neighbourhood), and working, in parallel, on the vertical analyses of each of the themes for the project.

Also during Phase II, when I submitted two academic articles I had written on the methodology to the participants and to Isabelle, my positionality became more difficult to manage. These articles were a metanarrative on the process, and especially on the relationships between myself, as academic ally, and the people working on the project. 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. When I met with Isabelle<sup>371</sup>, she said 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, “en le bouleversant, le déconstruisant, en agitant les structures” (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.,

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<sup>371</sup> My heartfelt thanks goes to Isabelle Drolet for her insightful critique of earlier versions of this chapter. Through her critique, she has helped me to write about the process in a way that is more coherent with my conceptual framework, and my politics. I also thank the anonymous referee from *Nouvelles Pratiques Sociales* who identified the “judeo-christian guilt” in my paper, forcing me to re-read myself with this in mind, and therefore contributing to a much improved analysis.

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, have guided the actual writing of my thesis, especially this chapter on transformations in the process.

### GLEANNING NEW AWARENESS

The entire process was a learning experience for all of us, at many levels. Very pragmatically, this was the first time that any of us had been involved in the making of history. We were constantly readjusting our methods, from the reading of transcripts, to the collective readings, to the assembling of the excerpts into folders of analysis, to the review of the latter with the participants. Isabelle, at the staff evaluation of Phase I, said that the experience with the Archives in general, and with the project in particular, was a learning experience:

Isabelle Ce que j'ai probablement appris, c'est comment le coucher sur papier (...) Le dire que collectivement (...) on pond un projet, on trouve une manière de faire ça, de structurer ça. (...) La première formation que j'ai eue avec toi, sur l'histoire orale et comment structurer une entrevue, (...) m'a plus servie pour « Des manufactures au quartier ». (...) Créer, suivre une méthodologie. (...) Moi j'ai des pratiques que j'avais travaillées avant, mais ce qui est intéressant, c'est de les réutiliser. Ça faisait longtemps que je ne l'avais pas fait. Je suis partie des Maisons (d'hébergement) il y a un moment. Mais travailler aussi serré avec une autre personne, une interlocutrice, et débattre, et chercher, c'est la première fois que je fais ça. J'ai beaucoup aimé ça. Beaucoup, beaucoup, beaucoup ! (...) Et aussi d'apprendre à dire mes affaires (...) Dans le cadre du processus je sentais que j'avais la place pour le faire, je sentais aussi l'importance de le faire. Parce que ne pas le faire pouvait nuire au processus. (...) C'est sûr qu'il y a des choses très techniques que je n'avais pas brassées depuis longtemps. (...) L'ordinateur ! Écrire ! Je me rends compte que je n'étais plus capable d'écrire ! Je n'ai pas une grande facilité, ça ne sort pas facilement mais j'ai eu beaucoup à le faire pour « Des Manufactures » et pour ça

(CourtePointe).

I also learned the intricacies of pre-figurative team-work (e.g., power-sharing, transparency), how to organise and read piles and piles of transcripts, how to transform the latter into interesting content for others to read, how to juggle tense social relations. Above and beyond these kinds of learnings, however, is the historical, sociological, psychological new awareness that we all gleaned from having shared our experiences, and from having analysed new pieces of information and concepts.

Because we all participated in collective readings of the stories, we ended up going beyond the simple telling of facts and anecdotes. Instead, the process is more akin to an extended participatory history workshop, where each person contributes from their own experience, learns from the others, makes links, analyses, and draws lessons. Often, we engaged in sophisticated socio-historical analysis, taking the discussion beyond the descriptive into the explanatory. The collective analysis that we developed, about the process of social change, described in Chapter 5 – about the role of agitators, the new awareness, the collective and individual actions, the tensions, the impacts – is perhaps the best, but not the only example of this process. Many times, as participants shared their experiences, they made links between them, and even brought in new concepts. For example, in the English group, the women came to the conclusion, after hearing each of their stories, that most of them were motivated to action because of their children. The following series of excerpts from our first meeting, exemplifies this realisation:

Maureen I got involved in the beginning because my children were going to Lorne school and not being very satisfied with the education. I got involved with the school committee, became chairman. (...)

Anna So you got involved because of your kids.

Maureen Education, that's what started. (...)

Frances I got involved, I suppose, in the same way. Maybe a tragedy too. I had nine children and I had to put two of them into day school (...)

With the children, I think that most of us, it's with children, that get us into these places

Maureen Yeah

Donna You're right, I think it's with our children. I first got involved at St-Columba house. I'd heard about the alternate school. (...)

Myrna What was interesting was, it's true we go through with our kids. My son who's 39 now, went to the head start programme at St-Columba house.

At a later meeting, one of the women came up with the term "women's stuff" to refer to community work, stimulating a discussion on the gender-specific nature of the latter, and on the reasons behind that.

Moreover, as the excerpts in the previous chapters demonstrated, many times during the process, one or another participant asked questions to clarify stories, expressed that this was the first time she had heard so-and-so story, or heard a particular analysis or explanation. For example, at the evaluation of Phase I, we asked the participants about this learning process by making reference to the time that Donna had explained the lesser sense of belonging of younger Anglophones to the neighbourhood, by arguing that since the closure of the last English Protestant School, most children are bussed out, and have their friends in other parts of Montreal, necessarily affecting their sense of belonging to their immediate environment. Here is what they said:

Maureen When she said that, it hit me like a lightning bolt! "How can you have not seen the changes?" Too close to the forest to see the trees. So clever!

Donna But when I said that, it was like, "Ah! my goodness! Of course! That made so much sense!"

Not only did Donna have an "ah-ha" during our discussion, but it was shared with the rest of us and added an element to the reasons behind the lack of interest of younger people in community action.

Not only were women with a great deal of experience sharing their stories and analyses, but we were also bringing in to the discussion the stories of

other actors – via historical sources written by social animators, organisers, other activists – sources that most of the women had never seen (e.g., the social animators’ objectives in setting up the first citizens’ committees). The confrontation between the latter and the memories and understandings of the participants increased the complexity and nuanced the “drawing of lessons” from the past. The discussion around linguistic tensions in Chapter 4, as well as the one on relations between organisers and “ordinary citizens”, are examples of the kind of confrontations of points of view about the past that occurred during the process. The process was, in fact, a drawn-out “bilan” (evaluation) of the last 30 years of neighbourhood organising, which not only contributed to our own education, but will also serve future generations of organisers and activists (see “collective transformations”, below).

In fact, when asked explicitly what they got out of the project, and why they decided to continue, several women said that they had learned a lot. Louise came into the movement a bit later, and experienced the awakening period, and the Marxist Leninist period from the periphery, and had never really understood what all the euphoria and tensions were about. Throughout the process she asked many questions, and often said that she was learning a great deal from the stories. Here is an excerpt from the evaluation of Phase I:

Louise Je suis arrivée plus tard. (...) Alors pour moi, ce que j’ai appris, bribe par bribe un peu partout vient renforcer les détails que j’avais. Ça me remet dans l’histoire au complet

Anna Comme un cours d’histoire?

Louise Tout à fait!

Thérèse, who was active during all those years, expresses below that she learned a lot from reading the stories of the English group :

Thérèse Moi je peux vous dire que j’ai fait des découvertes en lisant ça (...) Les Anglophones, jusqu’où y sont allés! (...) C’était toutes des affaires qui m’étaient pas étranges (...) C’était pas dans l’inconnu (...) J’ai rodé autour d’eux autres. Je les voyaient dans les groupes. Mais j’ai jamais pensé que leur implication était aussi forte que ça, avec des

orientations aussi graves que celles-là. Je découvrais. Mon Dieu! Je trempais la dedans!

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!

Thus through their participation, the women were coming to an understanding of the explanations behind past actions, which helps augment, as Donna points out, their feeling of belonging and pride to the neighbourhood, and to its activist circle.

Finally, Isabelle and I, as co-ordinators and facilitators of the project, but also as women of a younger generation, also learned a great deal, as the following excerpts illustrate:

Anna Le contenu qui sort à chaque fois, ça m'épate ! Vraiment ! Je vous le dis, j'adore faire ça ! Moi et Isabelle, quand on travaille là-dessus, on grimpe sur les meubles ! C'est vraiment le fun. On y passe des heures.

Isabelle C'est vrai ! (...)

Anna Et je pense qu'il y a beaucoup de contenu pour des jeunes. Pour moi ! J'apprends, j'apprends ! Quand on a sorti les leçons, je me disais « Wow ! C'est génial ! » J'avais déjà vu dans un livre comment faire de l'organisation communautaire. Mais ce n'était pas la même affaire. Ça ne me rentrait pas dans la tête de la même façon. Mais quand ça vient de vous, je trouve ça épatant. Je vous remercie. (...)

Isabelle Effectivement, j'abonde dans le sens de Anna. Les discussions qu'on a après les rencontres, c'est vraiment quelque chose ! C'est vraiment formateur effectivement. Moi c'est une belle expérience que je vis.



Both Isabelle and I are experiencing this project, viscerally, “dans nos tripes” (personal communication, Isabelle Drolet, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003). We are thrilled and honoured to be part of a process with women activists of such long experience. Not only are we learning about the history of our neighbourhood and about community organising practice, but we have also been given the rare opportunity to see into the personal lives of the women who made that history.

Thus, each of us, through our participation in this project – akin to a participatory history workshop – gleaned new awareness. Beyond the pragmatic learning that comes from the actual doing of the project – collecting narratives, collective reading of transcripts, collective confirmation, pre-figurative team work – we have all benefited from the shared stories and collective analyses of 30 years of activism. 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 in general, and about gender and class in organising, in particular. In fact, as each of us shifted our understanding of gender and class, we participated in the (re)construction of our individual and collective identities as women activist in Point St. Charles. Part and parcel of this identity is a sense of belonging and pride that all of the participants, including Isabelle and myself, strengthened and developed as the process moved along.

### MAKING THE PERSONAL POLITICAL

Although the project was conceptualised as explicitly feminist, there were moments, during the process, where the feminist common thread was on shaky ground. For instance, early on in the process, Michèle expressed unease with the feminist lens, worrying that the products, in focusing on women, may end up “male bashing” or leaving out the contributions of their male counterparts:

Michèle     Le livre, évidemment, c’est sur la place des femmes.  
                  Personnellement, je ne veux pas que ça devienne une charge contre

les hommes. Il y a des hommes qui nous ont supportées dans tout ça et je ne pense pas que ce soit l'esprit du livre. Là, on fait ressortir les affaires des femmes.

Isabelle Mais même en le faisant ressortir comme ça, trouves-tu que ça a l'air d'une charge contre les hommes?

Michèle Non ! Non, non, non !

Thérèse Non. C'est la femme qui se prend en main.

Michèle Oui, oui, je suis d'accord avec ça.

Thérèse L'évolution de la femme.

Marguerite Parce que sinon, les gars ne nous auraient pas donné ça !

Michèle Il a fallu le prendre.

The interventions of the other women in the group end up convincing Michèle that the feminist lens, and the presentation of the spiral-like journey in this way, does not mean that we are “male bashing”. In the English group, very quickly, the participants took on the feminist lens, and often made feminist analyses, as I showed in Chapter 5.

Isabelle and I always facilitated with a feminist lens, and by the end of Phase I, and especially during the review of the folder of analysis on their spiral-like journey's through history, all the participants were quite comfortable with the feminist lens. The following excerpts highlight this (re)appropriation of the lens. Marguerite, in reaction to a document outlining the gains of the feminist movement prior to the 1980s decries:

Marguerite Ça a pris du temps avant qu'ils décident qu'on était des personnes !  
Avant ça il y avait des questions sur le fait qu'on avait un âme !  
Imagine ! (...) C'est juste les hommes qui avaient ça !

Similarly, Thérèse notices an excerpt from the English group, and brings it in for discussion :

Thérèse Les Anglophones disent que même les femmes éalisaient les hommes ! (...) C'était elles qui mettaient les hommes en place !

Marguerite Bien sûr ! C'est eux qui connaissent ça. Ça fait longtemps.

Thérèse Les femmes les mettaient en nomination !  
Michèle On avait trop peur d'être nommées ! Ils étaient tellement plus fins que nous !

Again, an analysis of the English group, on oftentimes observed phenomenon that men have the real influence, and end up getting all the glory, stimulates a reaction from the French group :

Isabelle Même si c'est les autres, en arrière, qui font l'ouvrage, principalement les femmes, on a l'impression que ce sont les gars en avant qui ont fait le travail.  
Marguerite Oui, c'est exactement ça.  
Isabelle Les bénéfiques tombent sur eux.  
Michèle On dit des affaires, mais ce n'est pas reconnu. On n'a pas la même écoute si c'est un homme qui le dit.  
Marguerite C'est encore vrai.

Because the participants were sharing these experiences in a group context, they were making links between their personal lives and broader gender dynamics. Underlying the excerpts above, and those in Chapter 5, is a definite gender analysis, which shifted as the process moved along.

The following discussion on violence against women is indicative of a shifting awareness on the issue. Spurred on by her reading of the analysis in the folder on women's journeys through history, Louise takes the risk of asking questions of clarification about the issue of violence against women:

Louise Quand on parle de la violence des femmes, est-ce qu'on est capable de la relier au fait qu'il était en boisson, ou que c'était fait gratuitement, consciemment ?  
Marguerite Ça n'a pas d'importance l'histoire de la boisson. (...)  
Isabelle Il y a des gens qui essaient de justifier la violence conjugale par des faits extérieurs, au lieu de regarder ça de façon sociale. On vit dans un système patriarcal. Ce sont les hommes qui dominent, qui mènent. (...)  
Michèle C'est pas parce qu'il est saoul, qu'il a pris une brosse...Ça ne l'excuse pas.

- Marguerite Tu as moins de retenue. En boisson, si je suis une personne vulgaire, ça va sortir.
- Louise Ça va sortir plus, mais tu l'as à la base.
- Marguerite C'est ça qu'on va donner comme raison. On va dire « Il est si fin, si gentil ! C'est seulement quand il boit ». Et ce n'est pas vrai (...)
- Isabelle Ça, c'est la notion que la violence physique est pire que tout. Parce que souvent, ce qui va ressortir si tu es sur l'alcool ou sur les drogues, c'est la violence physique. Mais toutes les autres formes... (...)
- Louise En tout cas, moi j'en connais des femmes qui virent la violence morale du revers de la main. Si c'est physique, elles vont réagir un peu plus.
- Michèle C'est odieux la violence morale.
- Louise Oui, elles finissent par le croire (...) Quand c'est physique, elles vont réagir parce qu'elles ne se feront pas donner quatre, cinq volées.
- Marguerite Bien sûr qu'elles vont s'en faire donner quatre ou cinq ! Mais l'autre, la violence morale, elle n'est pas si visible que ça.
- Louise Elle peut durer 30 ans.
- Michèle Physiquement aussi ça prend bien du temps. (...) Parce qu'ils font comme si c'était de leur faute à elles ! (...) À bas la violence conjugale!

Throughout this discussion, each of us brings in different pieces of information and analysis to help deepen the collective analysis of the issue. Together, we deconstruct the idea that alcohol explains violence against women, discuss the other forms of violence, and end up denouncing it as unacceptable, alcohol or not. In the following excerpt Louise recognises that she has learned a great deal about women's issues, and specifically about violence against women:

- Louise Comme tu le vois, je n'ai pas parlé bien souvent mais j'ai appris de ça. J'étais à distance mais c'est des choses que je pouvais sentir même si je ne les voyais pas. Le dire, ça se faisait effectivement. Même si on voulait l'ignorer. Même si on ne voulait pas savoir que c'était vrai.
- Anna Quoi ?

Louise Que les femmes étaient peut-être battues.

Marguerite Pas peut-être !

Thérèse Non, pas peut-être.

Louise C'était encore tellement tabou que ça ne sortait pas beaucoup des familles ou du milieu. Il n'y avait pas d'accusations. Il faut se remettre dans l'époque. Tout le monde le savait ! (...) Il faut que ça se dise. Un peu comme moi, il faut que les gens réalisent. (...) Qu'on le dise pour une fois! Je pense que c'est en même temps admettre qu'on a évolué un peu à travers ça. On s'est donné des moyens, des maisons d'hébergement... Des choses qui serviront de leçons pour aider les prochaines générations.

The fact of actually seeing these analyses on paper helped Louise realise that violence against women was, and still is, out there. Recognising that it is still a problem, spurred on by Marguerite and Thérèse, she argues that we have named it, and that we can contribute, through the publication of our book and the activities that emerge from the project, to increased awareness.

Finally, as I showed in Chapter 5, there were many times where the women exchanged personal stories that lead to gender analysis in the group.

The following discussion around sexuality is but one such example:

Marguerite Moi je n'ai pas de père. Donc l'histoire des chambres à coucher des parents, ça n'existait pas. Un moment donné, j'étais supposée me marier. J'étais jeune. La dame voyait que je ne connaissais rien. Elle me parle des relations sexuelles. Moi je dis « Hein ? ». Je suis supposée me marier deux semaines après ! Elle dit « Voyons donc, Margo ! Ta mère ! » « Ma mère ? Jamais ! ». Je m'en vais chez nous et je regarde ma mère...

Louise Tu n'es pas née du Saint Esprit ! (...)

Marguerite Je n'ai jamais connu mon père. Alors quand je me suis mariée... D'abord, je ne connais pas ça d'avoir une jouissance. On ne m'a jamais parlé de ça. Moi, voir que mon mari est content, qu'il est de bonne humeur, je n'en demande pas plus. Plus tard, j'ai appris c'était quoi la jouissance ! Ça faisait 15 ans que j'étais mariée et je ne connaissais pas ça ! Ça dépend d'où tu viens ! Moi, je n'ai pas eu de père, je ne savais même pas comment c'était fait un homme !

- Michèle      Moi, ma mère nous avait expliqué que quand un gars était excité, il avait un érection. On dansait collés, collés et on avait un signal pour une érection, « chou-chou » ! (*laughter everywhere* !)
- Louise        Des agaces pissettes !
- Michèle      Non ! Ma mère disait toujours « J'ai eu 5 minutes de plaisir et 30 ans de malheur ». Moi je disais « Je ne serai pas comme elle ! Je vais avoir 30 ans de bonheur ! »
- Marguerite    Quand je me suis mariée, l'histoire du pénis, ça a été bien énervant pour moi. C'était effrayant ! Je passais mon temps à surveiller ça !

This exchange about a very difficult issue is full of laughter. Because of the trust in the group, the discussion becomes quite personal, but is also inflected with gender analysis.

Thus, as the process moved along, in the collective reading, and culminating during the review of the folder of analysis on women's spiral-like journeys through history, each of us (re)affirmed our feminism. The participants decided to make the feminist lens theirs. Through exchanges with the other women, on personal experiences, we made links, brought in new information, and deepened our analysis of issues like gender roles in groups, the representation of women in society, and violence against women.

#### CONSTRUCTING A NARRATIVE OF BELONGING

As we constructed a collective narrative of the neighbourhood and of its activism, each of us began to realise the import of the culmination of everyone's activities. As we put all the small experiences, small victories together, the breadth of neighbourhood activities and activism became clear. As the following excerpts illustrate, as the process moved along, this collective realisation resulted in an increased sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, and of pride in our past, but also of our future. This is an excerpt of a conversation we had during the evaluation of Phase I of the process in the English group:

Maureen    I think it, in the beginning, I was kind of apprehensive. Like is this

one more thing that's going to go shhhhshhhhh (*makes movement as if something is being pushed aside*) that we spent a lot of time with (...) But I thought it was important enough to be part of, and see what happens. And as I went along, I enjoyed it. Hey listen, I have never been on time for anything in my life! But here, I haven't been late once! That says it all! I've enjoyed it. And I think it was more enjoyment for me, because after being retired for 9 years and being out of it and coming back to the Point and feeling, "what the hell is going on here?! I don't know anything anymore!" *Then to be part of the group and bring it all back and refresh. "This is why you did it kid!" Yeah, it is very very important for me.* And you know, I had a whole different life. Going to Saint-Gabriel, a whole different setting, a whole different life. That was good to do, it was restful. It was you know entirely, entirely different. I needed it at that point. But coming back was almost like a whole new surge of life again. (...)

Denise Well after so many years, doing all kinds of community work, you question, I guess I question myself. "Did I do the right thing?" Like today, I could be pensioned off if I would've stayed at the Northern Electric, I would of been well off in that sense you know. But then look at what I would of missed out on! I don't regret it. I don't regret making choices like that to continue and work for the community and with the community, and live there. And I think that this, talking about it in a group and that, makes *you realise you're really proud of what you did in your life!* It brings it out you know!

All yeah!

Denise "Yeah, right! I was there. Yeah, I did that!" You know its nice to remind yourself that is was not useless what you did, but that you did something that you know has made an impact. And I guess that's why I'm still into it. Still at the Clinic. I guess I needed that little reminder there and that brought it out, being with the group and talking, and doing this book. *I'm so proud of it!* Its got to come out good, cause we're not going to accept less than great, we don't accept good! (rires)

Isabelle Je suis bien fière de participer à ce projet. Très fière. Je suis contente de connaître d'autres personnes aussi. On a des peintures dans la salle! (Anna translates) (...) Je suis en train de me rendre compte de quelque chose. Dans 6 ans, ça va en faire 21 que je vis à Pointe St-Charles. C'est ici que je vais avoir vécu le plus longtemps de ma vie. Ça devient vraiment ma communauté.

Frances    its your home

Isabelle    Je fais partie du processus mais c'est vraiment une intégration de plus. Je suis un peu émue!

These kind of comments abound in the narratives – as spontaneous comments, as well as thoughts that emerged from the evaluations of the process. There is no doubt that the realisation of the import of past activities, and the sense of belonging and pride that was (re)ignited, contributed to the acceptance, by the participants, of their role as actors of history.

### BECOMING A HISTORICAL ACTOR

Although Isabelle and I recognised, from the very beginning, that each woman was a historical actor, and felt honoured to work with them on this project, most of the participants began the process with the worry that their stories would not interest anybody and that there was no way there would be enough content to build a coherent history. As the process moved along, however, the participants came to see the importance of their experience, and that they are, in fact, historical actors.

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. At one point in the process, Donna, recognising that Maureen and other women like her had paved the way for her own involvement in the education of her children, explicitly expressed her thanks. Similarly, at the last meeting of Phase I, during which both groups were together, Thérèse publicly thanked Denise for having helped her in the early years at the Clinic when she was training as a community health worker, and in



doing so, had contributed to stimulating an educational journey which has lasted over 30 years:

Thérèse J'ai un merci spécial à faire ce soir à Denise. Un gros merci parce que je suis très fière de lui dire que je vais aller chercher mon premier certificat universitaire. Ma graduation se fait le 8 août et je lui dis un gros merci. Quand on a dit qu'il y avait des personnes qui partageaient leurs talents pour nous aider...Denise, c'en est une. Je te dis merci ma grande ! (*clapping*)

This kind of explicit recognition of past contributions by other participants contributed, without a doubt, to the realisation that they are historical actors, even though they are not "famous ladies".

For some participants, however, it was more difficult to recognise their contributions. From the very beginning, and throughout the entire process, Frances from the English group, did not feel at ease in the role of historical actor. Very timid, in general, she often commented that she felt she had little to contribute, and once even suggested that she leave the group. When Frances missed a meeting once, the group discussed the fact that Frances was important to the group, and decided that if, in the future, one person couldn't make it, the meeting would be cancelled. At the evaluation of Phase I, Frances expressed her feelings that she was not a valid historical actor. Below is the discussion that ensued, during which the other women in the group attempt to convince her of her import:

Anna Did you ever think about dropping out? (Frances nods her head).  
Yeah, Frances, you thought about it ? What convinced you to stay?

Mauree We would of broken her arm!  
n

Denise We weren't accepting your resignation! You were part of it, you just can't walk out on us!

Frances Nah, but sometimes you figure, "what am I doing here?" You know, "this one has done so much, and that one has done so much. What have I done?" But I have done things, but you know, it didn't seem important

Mauree I think the difference was, Frances, you thought you haven't done

- n that much! We had always known you did do that much!
- Denise We made you realise you did more than you thought! There you go!  
(...)
- Anna It seems to me you were more hesitant in the beginning
- Frances Well I want to be part of it! I don't just want to be sitting here, you know, and not really getting into it. I'll try my best!
- Denise You still don't feel comfortable
- Frances Its not that I don't feel comfortable. You know, like lots of the actions that I remember, I remember going to them, but I don't remember saying, "I was up in front". I'm a follower more than a pusher.
- Denise You were there! That's what counts!
- Frances I'm a follower, I'm a follower.

Frances, although she enjoys being part of the group, obviously feels that she has little to contribute, especially relative to the other more visible leaders. The other women jokingly try to convince her that she did contribute to the movement. The other women then go on, arguing that all groups need people to work behind the scenes:

- Donna Maybe, how can I put this? It's not the quantity, is the quality. And you're right, I started thinking. When people, and even over the years, as a kid growing up, its like I see you, I see the Clinic. You are synonymous with the clinic.
- All yeah
- Donna That's something (...) For Myrna and I its Saint-Columba House. That's where people see us. "Obviously they're out doing something!" I wasn't out at every single demonstration! (...)
- Anna I know it in your case, everybody in the group was pretty insistent, I hope it wasn't pressure in a negative way, that made you think (you should stay)
- Frances No no no (laughing)
- Denise We want you to feel good about it. Sometimes I worry about you. I worry when you didn't show up. I know you felt like you didn't have input, like you didn't have enough to offer. And I remember you telling me that, and I talked to you about it, and said you shouldn't think that way.

Anna Just wait till you see the next chapter, we're working on the health one next

Frances I know I'll be a lot there

Donna Well again, as I say, the first pair of glasses I bought as an adult was with you. She helped me pick them out and everything (...)

Maureen and I'm sure there are people who went there, I knew that's how I felt, if I was the one in the eye clinic while Frances was there, I could always ask her this and that. She'll fix them, put them in, screw it up! I'm sure it was the same for everybody!

Frances I still got the screw drivers here (pulls them out from the drawer)

Anna You're joking! You still got the screw drivers, look at that, you got the screw drivers., that's hilarious! That's great!

Denise in a little box

Frances As a matter of fact, I fixed glasses last week!

Anna I'll see mine need to be tightened during the break!

Throughout this excerpt, the other members of the group try to build up Frances' 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 are in fact recognising that "bridge-leaders" are central to organisations, as illustrated by the fact that when people think of the Clinic, Frances' face pops into their minds. By the end of the discussion, Frances seems to be feeling more sure of her role in the group as she pulls out her tiny screwdrivers with obvious pride.

A similar phenomenon occurred in the French group. At the evaluation of Phase I, one of the questions was whether or not they talked about the process to those around them. The first to speak said, "no", they did not talk to people around them, justifying this at first as following our agreements about confidentiality. Isabelle and I were surprised at this, at the fact that they seemed to have applied our agreement not to talk about confidential subjects very literally. As the discussion moved along, we noticed that latent to this was a generalised feeling of humility:

- Isabelle Aussitôt qu'on me demande ce que je fais de ce temps-là, j'en parle! J'en ai parlé à ma famille. Mes amis sont tous au courant (...)
- Michèle On est un peu gênées.
- Anna Dans quel sens?
- Michèle Moi je suis un peu gênée de dire qu'on est en train, nous, d'écrire l'histoire des femmes à Pointe St. Charles. C'est gênant! J'aime pas ça. Je suis bien fofolle comme ça, là, mais je n'aime pas ça être en avant comme ça. C'est vrai, c'est là que j'ai une retenue, tu sais? « Qui es-tu, toi, pour faire ça... »
- Marguerite Moi aussi c'est comme ça.
- Michèle Tu sais, on porte notre fardeau de femme!

Although both Isabelle and I brag about the project to everyone, the women are shy about their participation, recognising that this is probably related to their “burden as women”. Michèle continues, claiming that she did it because it had to be done, not wanting “glory”, and feeling unsure about the quality and quantity of the material:

- Michèle Ce qu'on a fait dans notre vie, on l'a fait parce qu'il fallait le faire. On aurait pas fait autre chose! Puis là, tout à coup, ça nous permet de voir ça avec du recul et tu te dis « Mon dieu, y'a-t-il de quoi en faire un plat? » Puis, quand on rattache tout ça, je me dis que oui, il y a de quoi!. Mais parfois j'ai des doutes.
- Isabelle C'est un impact de ce processus-là, le fait de déterrer des vieilles histoires ou ce qui nous semble des vieilles histoires.
- Michèle Qui nous semblent bien normales.
- Isabelle Oui mais en même temps, on construit une partie de ce quartier! Ce qui a eu une incidence sur l'histoire. Une partie de l'histoire du Québec. Il ne faut pas se le cacher! Ce que je comprend dans ce que vous dites, c'est qu'il y a une espèce d'humilité. Des fois, aussi, des manques de confiance en soi.
- Michèle Oui, oui, oui.
- Isabelle De pas se donner ce qu'on a fait. Tu dis « Est-ce que c'est aussi important que ça ? » Et tu dis aussi « Oui, quand on met tout en ligne, il y a de quoi ». Il y a comme un doute.
- Michèle Oui! Oui! C'est un doute. J'imagine que quelqu'un qui est en train

d'écrire un livre, il doit douter aussi? Vous, vous devez douter aussi quelque part, non? « On vas-tu réussir ? »

Isabelle Non (*laughing*)

Anna Non (*laughing*)

Michèle Non! Pas du tout !?!

Through facilitation here, Isabelle names Michèle's worries, as humility and lack of self-confidence. Marguerite builds on this:

Marguerite Moi, hier je crois, (...) j'ai écouté un programme. Janette Bertrand était interviewée. C'était la première fois que je faisais un lien avec nous. Ils racontaient l'historique de ses débuts à la radio, comment elle était une personne d'avant-garde au niveau du couple et tout ça. Elle disait « Quand on le faisait, on apprenait comme on pouvait. » Nous aussi on était en recherche, et nous aussi, on cherchait à prendre de la place. C'était un peu ça notre démarche comme femmes (...) C'était pas facile à ce moment-là pour nous de prendre notre place comme femme. Et Janette Bertrand disait que pour elle aussi, c'était pas facile, qu'elle revendiquait des affaires et qu'en fin de compte, elle s'en servait dans son programme mais que c'était aussi une recherche personnelle. (...) C'est un peu ça, toutes les démarches qu'on a faites, dans le quartier, avec le monde. On ne peut pas parler seulement pour nous parce que ça aurait l'air drôle. (...) Je veux juste dire que ça a été une grande démarche que les femmes ont faite partout dans le Québec. Et on était là dès le début de cette démarche-là. C'est pas nous. On était dans cette vague-là dès le début...C'était du débroussaillage.

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 C'est pour ça que ça pourrait être intéressant si on voit le lien. Que je demeure dans Centre Sud ou ailleurs, je vais me reconnaître!

e Parce qu'on va sentir que des femmes de chacun des quartiers populaires ont fait le même cheminement. (...) C'est important ce qui se dit, ce que l'une a vécu dans le quartier, *c'est l'histoire du quartier, qu'est-ce que tu veux!* (...) Moi ça m'intéresse parce que c'est toute l'évolution. On parle du quartier mais c'est la même histoire ailleurs. *On fait partie de l'histoire du Québec!*

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.

To conclude then, above and beyond the practical “history-doing” skills that we developed and honed in the process, each of us came out of the “extended participatory history workshop” with an increased understanding of the past, and in particular with a feminist analysis of women in community. This knowledge did not emerge from magisterial style teaching; on the contrary, the history emerged from each woman’s individual lived experience, juxtaposed with voices of other historical actors (via archival documents). In fact, through this small group process, we brought in and pushed our feminist analysis of the past, and in doing so, each of us shifted our identities as women. This drawn-out “bilan” of the past, seen through a feminist lens, contributed to an increased sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, and of pride in the past. The latter, led, as did the exchanges on the pertinence of their actions, to the recognition that each and everyone one of us is a historical actor.

### INTERPERSONAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Because the history-making endeavour was collective, the transformations went beyond the individual to the interpersonal. Through the dynamic exchanges during the process, participants named and resolved

conflicts from the past. Moreover, Isabelle, Francophone, and the English group blurred and shifted boundaries that separate and oppress them, as I did with all the participants and with Isabelle. As I will argue at the end of this section, all of these transformations were made possible because of the respectful dialogue that the process allowed for.

### NAMING AND RESOLVING PAST CONFLICT

As I have demonstrated throughout, all activism is fraught with tensions, and often, these tensions cause conflict that is not resolved because of the high-paced reality of community organising. Being constantly on the front line, reacting to government policies, attempting to build democratic organisations, leaves little space for time-consuming dialogue on inter-personal dynamics and conflict resolution, especially when the latter is not functioning within a feminist framework (Isabelle Drolet, personal communication, July 2003). All too often, when conflict does emerge, people are hurt, angered, or submerged in their guilt. Because of the lack of space to discuss these emotions, as well as the ideological divides, relationships run the risk of breaking down (see Chapter 2). As discussed in Chapter 3, this feminist history-building methodology was designed to create a space for respectful dialogue. The latter 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 discuss two examples in the next section: the tensions around the Point St. Charles Community Clinic at the time of Marxist Leninist politics in 1978, and the linguistic tensions around the time of the election of the Parti Québécois in 1976.

### “REVOLUTIONARIES”, “ÉTAPISTES”, AND “ORDINARY FOLKS”

In the French group, we had an emotion-laden discussion about a painful event that had split the community into political factions over 25 years ago. Louise and Madeleine were outside observers of the event, but Michèle,

Marguerite and Thérèse had been directly involved, each of them part of a different faction. Marguerite and Michèle, great friends, had a falling out because of this period, and Michèle and Thérèse, who were not necessarily friends, but peers, ended up in battle as well. They told us that this event had resulted in ruptures among friends – friends who had been mentors and apprentices in political education – and although they had continued to be civil with each other, they had never spoken of the event again. It was during our process in the “safer” space created to talk about the past, that these women were able to express their differing points of view on the event.

The event in question was a general assembly of the Point St. Charles Community Clinic, at the height of the Marxist Leninist phase of the late 1970s, nicknamed “La Journée Noire”. This assembly was the culmination of tensions during which citizens were against staff, MLs were against the “étapistes”, and the coordination was in the middle of it all. Marguerite had worked with others to organise a series of kitchen meetings in a massive popular consultation on the orientations and services of the Clinic. The results of this consultation were devastating for the Clinic and its staff. People did not want doctors talking to them about the revolution when all they wanted was a prescription, they wanted their doctors to exchange their jeans and sandals for lab coats, and they wanted curative services above all. These results elicited reactions from Clinic staff, many of whom were committed to a preventative social change mandate. Moreover, radicals within and around the Clinic did not take kindly to the insinuations behind the results of the consultation. Although the participants now recognise that this consultation had not been well structured, and that they had missed the mark by not doing a real popular education process with the people consulted, at the time, the tensions were high.

Although I do not want reproduce the entire discussion here, the following excerpts highlight the emotion laden nature of the discussion on this



event. Marguerite, “ordinary citizen sympathetic-to-but-critical-of the ML 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 part of the problem, had been excluded from the process that Marguerite had organised with the “ordinary folks” from the neighbourhood. During the 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    Après l’assemblée, les gens n’étaient pas contents. C’était à  
e                couteaux tirés. Là, j’ai été désolée. Mes amies, les gens qui m’avait  
aidé à cheminer, Michèle, Noëlle Samson... je venais de les perdre.  
(...) Je comprenais pas. (...) En tout cas, je suis contente que l’on ait  
la chance, je ne sais pas pour toi (*speaking to Michèle*) mais pour  
moi... C’est la première fois qu’on en parle si ouvertement

Michèle        Ah oui, ah oui ! (*silence*). Je suis comme cicatrisée de tout ça Mais il  
y a des affaires que je comprends mieux ce soir, avec ton  
explication.

Marguerite shares her pain at having lost her friends and mentors during this period, and confides to Michèle that she is glad that they had this opportunity to discuss it openly, for the first time since the late 1970s. Michèle, whose wound has scarred since then, finally understands Marguerite’s point of view.

At the same time, throughout the entire discussion, Thérèse, “ordinary-citizen-étapiste”, also member of the MTC, remained quiet – which is quite unlike her. At one point, Michèle, expresses, with hurt in her voice:

Michèle        Moi, je me souviens m’être levée pour aller au micro. Et on m’a dit  
« Toi, va t’asseoir ! Tu ne viens pas de la Pointe ! Et tu es une  
maîtresse d’école ! » Ça faisait 10 ou 15 ans que je restais dans la  
Pointe et j’ai enseigné trois ans !

Marguerite    C’était les citoyens ! Pas nous !  
e

Michèle        Oui, mais se faire crier des noms ! Le monde allait parler et il se  
faisait crier toutes sortes d’affaires, c’était épouvantable !

Later, during the evaluation :

Michèle C'est toi (*pointing at Thérèse*) qui m'avais dis « Tu n'es pas du milieu ! »

Marguerite Ah oui, c'est toi Thérèse ?

e

Toutes Àh oui...

Thérèse Je ne dis pas un mot. Je vous écoute (*nervous laughter*). Je revis.

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 “nous autres”, 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 Ce que j'ai trouvé un peu plus difficile, ce sont les échanges qui nous ont fait revivre ce bouillonnement. Parce que je suis restée avec mes affaires anciennes ! (Michèle) a mentionné quelque chose et c'est pour ça que j'ai gardé le silence, c'est pour ça que j'écoute. J'ai vécu ça et ça bouillonnait, alors j'aimais mieux rester tranquille et écouter. Et tout à coup, pouf !, j'ai décompressé et je me disais « C'est épouvantable, c'est effrayant, mais ça ne nous a pas désengagées ! » (...)

Isabelle Thérèse, est-ce que tu vas dormir cette nuit ?

Thérèse Oh oui.

Isabelle Parce que tu as mentionné que tu avais un petit peu moins aimé ce point de la soirée...

Thérèse Je suis fière d'avoir continué.(...) Ça bouillonnait, ça venait me chercher.

Michèle C'était une très grosse discussion ce soir mais moi je suis contente.

Thérèse Oui je suis contente moi aussi.

Michèle Parce que tu ne peux pas faire l'histoire et ne pas parler de ça. Ça va être au centre de tout ce qui va venir

- Marguerite Quand (Isabelle et Anna) m'ont rencontrée, je leur ai dit que je ne savais pas si je serais capable d'en parler. C'était une peur que j'avais.
- Michèle Mais il faut en parler.
- Marguerite Mais j'étais inquiète. Je ne connaissais pas cette histoire. C'est à dire que je n'avais pas entendu tout ça. (...)
- Louise Par contre, ça vous a permis peut-être de faire ce que vous n'aviez pas fait depuis 25 ans, le verbaliser .
- Marguerite On n'en a jamais parlé.
- Louise Je pense que tout le monde est reparti de son bord, peut-être en discussion avec les amis proches (*everyone agrees, laughing*).
- Michèle On en parlait juste avec ceux qui pensaient comme nous ! (*laughter*)  
C'est ce qu'on a fait tout le monde !
- Thérèse Oui, oui.
- Marguerite On ne pouvait pas s'en parler, ça ne se pouvait pas, c'était quelque chose de terrible.
- Madeleine C'est ça qui est arrivé.
- Louise Dans le fond, vous étiez peut-être d'opinions différentes à ce moment-là. Aujourd'hui vous avez un côté mature et avec le recul, vous êtes capables d'en parler sans vous lancer des balles. On prend le temps de respirer. *C'est sûr que ça fait mal quand on déterre des choses comme ça mais en même temps il n'y a plus de rancœur à côté de ça.*
- Marguerite En tout cas, moi, de ma part, il n'y en a pas.

In this excerpt, Thérèse expresses her hurt, and shares with the others that this discussion had brought back pain from the past, but that now she is able to see through the emotion. Marguerite shares with the others her fear at having to confront these past demons in the group. 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 (see Chapter 7), including a reaffirmation of the importance of spaces for dialogue, that allow people to name their emotions and resolve their conflicts.

#### “SPEAK WHITE !” VERSUS “FINI LA TRADUCTION!”

We had another transformative series of discussions around the thorny issue of French/English relations. Over the years, we facilitated discussions on the historic tension-filled alliances between the English and the French, in an effort to identify causes of the decline in English participation, and to find concrete solutions. The excerpts in Chapter 4, on linguistic tensions, are inflected with emotion, as the women related conflicts caused by a rapid swinging of the pendulum, away from English to French political power (this is relative). The discussions are interesting in that there is a constant “va-et-viens” between rational power analysis of processes and relations of domination, and visceral reactions related to broken friendships and solidarity. Some Anglophone women who had worked hard to set-up community groups felt pushed aside when translation was no longer provided in certain groups. Others didn't understand why “we just couldn't all get along”, especially because most of the folks from the neighbourhood, be they French or English, were poor, and therefore had common class needs. Thus, throughout this discussion in the English group, although Maureen attempts, several times to bring in an analysis of power relations between the French and English in Québec, the discussion often swings back to personal feelings of betrayal. What emerged from this discussion is the complexity of the positionalities of the people involved, as class and language intersect. They concluded that the English, positioned as privileged vis-à-vis their French counterparts on the basis of language were

erroneously blamed for the oppressive role that the rich English businessmen chose to play in Québec society at the time.

However, at a later meeting of the French group, Isabelle and I decided to bring back some of the ideas that had emerged in the English group with respect to these linguistic relations, and found out that the situation was much more complex than this. According to the French group, it was not only the rich English businessmen that were to blame, in that some English working-class folks refused to recognise that they also benefited from the system because they were part of the privileged “English” group. This stimulated a discussion about the tensions at the time, and some analysis about linguistic and class relations. This discussion is reproduced integrally in Chapter 4, here I simply draw out a few excerpts to show how the discussion progressed. It started out with recognition that there had been some « tassage », and that there were some “’nationaux’ qui disaient ‘On est au Québec, apprenez le Français!’” when English folks spoke their mother-tongue. Quickly, however, the participants nuanced their memories, remembering that there were English folks who had put fuel on the fire: “Il y avait de la traduction en anglais mais quand une personne a fait une proposition en français, quelqu’un s’est levé et a dit ‘Speak White!’ Ça veut dire de parler en anglais”. Thérèse brought in the issue of unequal life chances based on language « j’ai été obligée de parler anglais pour gagner mon pain plus facilement, alors que l’anglophone, on a jamais, mais jamais exigé qu’il parle le français pour avoir la job. Les anglais, ils apprenaient le français pour se cultiver, pas pour gagner leur pain! », which brought Michèle to say, tongue-in-cheek, « Le Christ y devait parler l’anglais! ». At one point, Isabelle intervened, attempting to bring in the issue of class, « Ce qui a relié les gens entre eux ici, c’est la misère, l’extrême pauvreté ». Michèle responded, again with sarcasm in her voice, « Une chance qu’on a ça! ».

At the beginning of this discussion, the French group was empathising with the English women’s feelings of betrayal. However, as the discussion

progressed, the tensions related to both class and linguistic relations came to the fore, shifting the tone from empathetic to frustrated. We struggled in the discussion with the fact that under English power, English workers often had it easier than French, with the nationalist politics, with the “racism” that some of their English neighbours harboured and used against them, with the stubborn pride of the English (e.g., scorning the English leaders who chose to speak French for political reasons), with the cultural differences in organising styles (i.e., pragmatic versus ideological). Although Isabelle and I tried throughout to add a class element to the discussion, we had little success with the French group, perhaps because the wounds related to linguistic tensions are still too fresh, and because the neighbourhood lacks spaces for ongoing respectful dialogue which would allow for these kind of wounds to be named and mended.

However, even though the issue was not resolved, what is clear is that there is a will to try to work together across linguistic differences. It became quite apparent throughout the process that each group wanted to read the other group’s ideas and analyses of history. Michèle, making reference to having all their discussion on linguistic tensions in print, in the book, said “J’ai hâte de voir comment les anglophones vont porter ça. Elles vont en parler elles aussi ». Thérèse shared her amazement at the courage of the women in the English group, that she discovered after having read what they had to say about their journeys as women:

Thérèse Je voyais Maureen raconter des choses. Je ne peux pas croire qu’elle a fait ça ! Je ne peux pas croire qu’elle soit allée jusque là ! Elle est courageuse ! Je n’aurais pas été capable de faire ça ! Ça m’a dépassée ! Ça m’a émue de voir l’appel de l’engagement aussi profond que ça. Par rapport aux anglophones, je parle. Je ne l’aurais jamais pensé. Parce qu’on pense que c’est juste nous !. (...) Nous, on connaît ça l’engagement. Mais quand tu lis l’histoire de ces femmes là ! Elles l’avaient l’appel ! Elles l’avaient l’engagement. Ça m’a émue. J’étais heureuse et j’ai compris pourquoi le quartier à bougé si fort que ça. Ça paraît que ça bûche des deux côtés ! Je peux leur dire

« Chapeau ! » aux filles.

In the English group, after we had presented our initial idea that the book be in both languages in the sense that the English excerpts remain in English, and the French in French, in an effort to preserve the words of the participants, Myrna expressed disagreement. She preferred that it be translated into both languages, arguing that unless it was, she would not be able to read what the French group had to say. Here is an excerpt of that discussion:

- Myrna I thought that the French would be translated into English so I would get their stories and they would get my stories. (...) You know we're doing it together. It's important what they had to say. (...) It's important what we have to say. I want to be able to read what they say. I can't read French. (...) I want to hear what the Francophones have to say. (...)
- Donna It's different perspectives. And you're going from one group to another group. I think what Maureen was saying too, those perspectives are going to be lost. You're only going to get one side.
- Myrna If our book goes into Ontario or the States or somewhere, it's important that they hear what our Francophone friends have to say, as the Anglophone friends. You're going to lose something too if you're using it for teaching manual. That person, say it's a Francophone person, they can't read English. (...) I would like to know what (the francophone group) thinks of that, okay? Because I could see them wanting to read what we had to say too.

The tone in the excerpt above is one of openness to the ideas and perspectives of the French women. And even though the two groups were rarely face to face, because Isabelle and I were bridging the two groups, bringing content from one group to the other, they felt an increasing solidarity as the project moved along.

In fact, this feeling of solidarity was explicitly named at the joint meeting, with both groups present, during which we focused the discussion on renewal, and lessons to be left for present-day activists. Here are a few excerpts from the evaluation of the meeting, that illustrate that the participants really appreciated the opportunity to have both groups together:

- Marguerite Moi j'ai bien aimé la rencontre, je suis aussi contente d'avoir la chance d'être vraiment l'équipe au complet avec les personnes francophones et anglophones. C'est notre première rencontre toutes ensemble. Ça a été une belle rencontre. (...)
- Thérèse Je dis « Merci mon Dieu d'être ici ! » Et la soirée à été tellement enrichissante ! Ça faisait tellement plaisir de les entendre ! Je me rappelais « Ah oui ! Elles étaient là à telle affaire, elles étaient là ! » (...)
- Myrna I have to say I loved meeting separate, and we got a lot done. But the best part, I loved doing a joint meeting. Because I think it reassures us of the togetherness that we have, and that it's always been there. (...) So tonight has really reinforced that. Thank you.

Explicit in these excerpts is a generalised feeling of pleasure at being together again. In addition, however, the participants recognised that in coming together to discuss the past, memories of past struggles and of past alliances are triggered. These kinds of positive memories are sometimes forgotten, while those around tensions are ever present. The sharing of these memories re-forged the relations that had been dormant over the years.

From their experience during the process, they drew lessons about dealing with French-English relations in general, and specifically on the necessity to create spaces for dialogue:

- Michèle Moi j'ai particulièrement appris le soir où on a rencontré les anglophones. J'ai une tristesse que l'on ait pas fait ça dans notre action, que l'on ait pas réussi à travailler plus ensemble.
- Thérèse On a fait des bouts ensemble!
- Michèle Oui, oui, oui! Mais il y a eu régulièrement des affrontements avec les anglophones! Il y avait du monde qui jouait là-dedans et avec le nationalisme qui montait, et tout ça... (...) On aurait été bien plus forts, des fois, si on avait été ensemble. Je le réalisais le soir (de la rencontre avec les anglophones). Je voyais Myrna, Maureen, la gang, et je me disais que ça semblait tellement simple de se parler. C'est quoi qui fait que là on est capables? Même aujourd'hui on a cette difficulté de les avoir avec nous ou nous, de s'impliquer avec elles.
- Louise Elles apportent une culture qui est tout à fait différente de la nôtre. Comme quartier, on aurait gagné à mettre les choses en commun. Même aujourd'hui, on a cette difficulté d'aller les chercher et de les



avoir avec nous.

Because the English and French groups were dialoguing (via Isabelle and I, via the folders of analysis, and via the joint meeting), they came to realise that they *can* dialogue. This realisation led them to conclude that if they had dialogued more in the past, the neighbourhood and its activism would be all the more stronger today, having drawn its force and strength from its diversity. It is within the “safer” space of the small group, that participants felt comfortable talking freely about the emotions they had lived, and still harbor, around the French/English issue.

Above and beyond the transformative effects discussed above, some of the women in the English group have started becoming involved again in some of the groups that English citizens had deserted (e.g., Clinic). Moreover, three of the women from the English group, stimulated by the preservation of history – French and English included – are now on the Board of the Archives. This dialogue, however, is not concluded, and will continue into the future (see collective transformations). There remain discussions to be had, and lessons to be drawn, on class and linguistic privilege, on the complexity of working within diversity, on the changing demographics in the neighbourhood, to name a few.

#### 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. Although none of us were complete strangers at the beginning of the project, Isabelle and I did not have “history” with each other, or with the participants, in the same way as the participants had amongst themselves. The extended respectful dialogue that was this process allowed for the naming, blurring and shifting of relations between Isabelle and the English group, between Isabelle and I, and between myself and

the participants. Throughout the process emerged many (creative) tensions which we dealt with in various ways, and which allowed us to shift our positions in such a way as to push the boundaries that stratify us, and transform them.

#### BETWEEN ISABELLE AND THE ANGLOPHONE GROUP

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. She expressed, several times throughout the process<sup>372</sup>, that having participated in the English group has led to a nuanced understanding of the reality of the English community, has nuanced her “radicalism” on the French question, and has fostered an empathy for what the English may have lived when the pendulum began to swing from English to French political power. As the excerpts below illustrate, these transformations emerged out of dialogue around contradictory emotions that were often latent in the dynamics.

Although Isabelle has been in Montréal for over 20 years, she comes from an area of Québec that is entirely French. A few months into the process, Isabelle shared the following with the English group:

Isabelle Je me rends compte que je vais vivre une expérience avec vous parce que moi je viens de Chicoutimi. Et quand j'en suis partie à 22 ans, je ne connaissais même pas les mot « heavy » ou « fun ». Il n'y avait pas de télévision en anglais, il n'y avait rien. Je ne connaissais pas l'anglais. Là, je comprends la grande majorité, je dirais 90%, de ce que vous dites mais je me rends compte aussi que je ne connais pas les anglophone dans leur monde, dans leur vie communautaire, leur histoire communautaire. (...) Je ne connais pas votre histoire. Ça fait des mois qu'on en parle mais c'est comme si je me rends compte maintenant que je vais connaître l'histoire. C'est pas juste que je vais l'entendre en anglais. C'est l'histoire aussi des anglophones. Je suis super contente. (this is followed by my translation)

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<sup>372</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

Donna She came to the Point to learn!

Mauree She's got a lot to learn.

n

Denise She'll learn more English. You might learn bad words!

Isabelle admits that during all the years that she has been in the neighbourhood, she has had little contact with the English community, and shares that she looks forward to learning English, but also to finding out about their culture, their ways of doing things, their forms of activism. This comment opens the door to dialogue, and the women willingly accept the invitation, as their teasing comments indicate.

Notwithstanding this 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. As I showed above, much of the discussion in the English group had centered around their having felt pushed out by the French, 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.

At a later meeting, nearing the end of the process, Isabelle came in with some comments that brought some of the responsibility back to the English community:

Isabelle Moi je suis francophile. Mais parce qu'on vit dans un quartier où les deux grandes majorités sont là, il faut en tenir compte. Mais je vois

aussi du monde à la Clinique qui me reproche, qui me dise « Les Anglais sont victimes ! On les a assez aidés, qu'ils fassent leurs bouts ! »

In doing this, she named the tendencies toward victimisation that had been frustrating her during other discussions. This then opened the door for me to come in with the following, after having translated her statement :

Anna But there is the individual's responsibility too. So what can people do? Can we never hope to see the Anglophones involved again?

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<sup>373</sup>:

Isabelle Je ne sais pas ce qui appartient aux francophones et ce qui appartient aux anglophones. Mais moi ce soir je trouve ça extraordinaire qu'on puisse parler de ça. Je ne pense pas que ça arrive bien souvent.

Myrna Pourquoi pas? Je comprend pas, des fois, pourquoi on ne peut pas parler ensemble?

Anna Isabelle is saying that as a francophone, she asks herself what she can do and she wonders what Anglophones can do themselves, what is our responsibility. She thinks it's great we are talking about this.

Myrna To exchange. That we can do it together.

Isabelle Moi je viens de Chicoutimi. Il n'y en a pas d'Anglais.

Anna She comes from Chicoutimi, where there, nobody speaks English (...)

Isabelle Je dis souvent à Anna que des fois, si vous dites des choses et que je ne suis pas certaine, je n'ose pas intervenir parce que je suis pas sûre de ce que je comprend pas.

Anna She said she lived that situation here, that you are talking about. In

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<sup>373</sup> I've included my translation, because without out it the fact that Myrna is making a real effort here to understand what Isabelle is saying is lost.

this group she doesn't understand everything and doesn't

Myrna Want to jump in cause she might have heard wrong

Isabelle Une dernière chose. On a parlé souvent ensemble des relations anglophones/francophones. Je n'ai jamais vécu autant la notion des « deux solitudes » que depuis quelques temps. Je trouve ça passionnant.

This discussion, during which Isabelle shared her fear of being « dans le champ » 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. In fact, the dialogue continued as the process moved along:

Isabelle Mais une fois que les anglophones disaient qu'elles ne comprennent pas bien le français, je leur ai dit « Je sais parfaitement ce que vous vivez. Je suis ici à toutes les rencontres, je ne suis pas bilingue, je comprends à peu près 80% de ce que vous dites. Quand je perds un mot, je deviens perdue, je ne sais plus où j'en suis. Mais je n'ose pas intervenir et poser des questions parce que je ne suis pas certaine que je vais être dans le cadre de ce que vous dites! Je vois que c'est important et je ne veux pas nuire. Ça fait que je me la ferme! ».

Louise On le fait toutes individuellement.

Isabelle Mais le dire, ça nous permet de commencer à se connaître. De temps en temps, je parle à Myrna, ou à Donna. Elles parlent un peu français mais elles le comprennent plus qu'elles ne le parlent. Comme je comprends plus l'anglais que je le parle. Ça fait que je parle en français et elles me répondent en anglais et on se comprend! Comme ça se faisait beaucoup avant!

Here Isabelle shares with the French group the dialogue that occurred in the English group, arguing that since the dynamics were named, there has been an openness on the part of everyone. The channels of communication have opened

up significantly between Isabelle and the English group, but also between Isabelle and each woman individually. At the joint meeting, with both groups, at the end of Phase I, Isabelle brought it up again:

Isabelle Une des autres choses qui m'a profondément marquée aussi c'est la rencontre avec les anglophones. On a eu des bonnes discussions avec les anglophones. Ça change énormément la perception que je peux avoir d'un radicalisme francophone ou anglophone. J'en ai discuté aussi beaucoup avec Anna par après, l'idée de dépasser la politique et de parler à un être humain en face de moi. Ça, ça été fascinant, ça été une grande, grande leçon pour moi.

Thus, in this space for respectful dialogue, Isabelle and the participants in the English group were able to name their fears, their frustrations and their hopes. In doing so, they were able to move beyond generalisations about the other "solitude", and to blur boundaries between them as individuals. In dialogue, they got to know each other, reducing the fear related to the unknown, breaking down stereotypes, learning about the culture of the other. This increased understanding, on all sides, led to openness to hearing, listening, witnessing. Because of this, everyone shifted in their analysis of the linguistic tensions, Isabelle bringing nuances to her radical ideas, bringing in a class analysis, and some of the English women moving beyond the role of victim, and realising that they are part of a privileged linguistic group.

#### BETWEEN ISABELLE AND I

Creative tensions also emerged between Isabelle and I, 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 pretty soon, 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.

Above and beyond my own shifting positionalities (see above), the context within which we were working contributed, in part, to our tensions. The last few years have been quite difficult at the Archives, as we have constantly struggled to obtain, unsuccessfully as of yet, a steady source of funding. Because of the funding crisis, the employees are contract workers, and sometimes we end up with only one employee, making it such that the Board has to be quite involved in the internal, administrative functions of the organisation. The latter makes it difficult for employees, including Isabelle, who are never really sure whether they will have a job next year. This is difficult for me as well, in that I have, over the years had the role of Board member, “staff”, volunteer, and academic ally. These multiple hats sometimes lead to mixed messages and contribute to occupational stress for all, as the following discussion will illustrate.

It is in this context that tensions around “ownership” of the project, as well as around academic privilege emerged. I found myself falling into “internalised academicitis” in the first case, and “spurious identification with other” (Patai, 1991) in the second. The complex emotions that emerged from these tensions were very painful for both Isabelle and I; however, we were able to avoid paralysis because of the space we had created for respectful dialogue. We were able to take these tensions, work with them, and use them to shift the boundaries between us (Isabelle Drolet, personal communication, July 2003). Moreover, as I will show below, Isabelle, in her anger, acted as a “critical guide”, helping me to learn and journey through my contradictions, by

confronting me on them (Eric Shragge, personal communication, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2002).

### Internalised academicitis

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 will have 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<sup>374</sup>. 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 who? 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.

### **Spurious identification with Other**

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

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<sup>374</sup> 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.

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.

This exchange reflects the kind of emotions that people working across difference often experience but rarely voice to one another. 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.

### "Classe contre classe"

Both of the conflicts described above occurred during Phase I of the process. During the bilan of Phase I, Isabelle and I addressed the latter in a section called "les non-dits". The following excerpts show that Isabelle's role, as "critical guide", 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 Il y a aussi une espèce de fierté dans le fait de « gosses » des universitaires. (*laughs*).

Anna Qu'est-ce que tu veux dire? (*laughs*)

Isabelle Il y a quelque part un petit plaisir là-dedans. C'est pas fin mais...

Anna Parles-tu de moi?

Isabelle Oui, bien je veux dire, il ne faut pas toujours le prendre personnel. Tu sais, tantôt j'ai un peu ri de toi quand tu dis « C'est comme de l'organisation communautaire » (...) Je ne sais pas si c'est la rébellion du petit monde contre celui des universitaires mais tu sais, le côté « Hey! Penses-tu qu'on a besoin que tu viennes nous dire comment faire? » Il y a un peu de ça. Le monde universitaire avec du pouvoir, versus du monde qui n'en a pas. C'est un peu naïf. (...) C'est pas grave, je vis avec. Pas juste pour moi, pour plein de monde. (...) « Tu ne nous en passeras pas! » Un petit côté drôle là-dedans! (...) Mais quand même, concilier les deux mondes c'est le fun. Quand les deux mondes font leur bout pour rentrer dans l'autre monde, ne pas s'enfermer dans les affaires.

Anna On a fait du chemin sur la construction des alliances, je trouve. Entre moi et toi, mais aussi entre moi et les femmes anglophones qui étaient plus méfiantes. Je pense qu'on a établi une certaine relation de confiance.

Isabelle Oui, oui. Mais au niveau personnel aussi. (...) C'est intéressant de pouvoir vivre le conflit, pas intergénérationnel, mais de classe comme tu dis. Même difficile, c'est intéressant. Ça fait partie de la patente, qui est le fun. (...)

Anna Les alliances entre moi et toi, moi j'ai tellement appris. Travailler avec du monde qui ne te ressemble pas exactement. (...) Moi j'ai trouvé ça bien enrichissant, j'ai beaucoup appris et je pense que c'est en grosse partie à cause de toi qui m'a confrontée à plusieurs reprises sur plusieurs affaires.

Isabelle admits that she was, in a way, rebelling against the system that attributes more resources to university educated people, and that I was in the

line of fire because we were working closely together. She recognises the importance of working together across difference, insinuating that respect of different kinds of knowledge is key to this kind of dialogue. 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 Il y a eu des choses difficiles. Ce que j’ai toujours regretté c’est le ton, pas les propos, mais la manière de dire ces propos.

Anna On est quand même passées à travers (...) On a mis en place certaines choses pour que ça se dise. Ça a aidé, mais tu es une personne qui est capable de dire ton affaire.

Isabelle (...) Même si parfois ça a été difficile. Tu dis que je n’ai pas peur du non-dit, mais *c’est parce que je sens qu’il y a de la place pour le dire aussi*. Aussi brutal que ça puisse être. On se ramasse. Moi je pense que dès le départ, (...) qu’on s’est parlé du projet, on a senti une complicité, l’une pour l’autre et par rapport au projet. (...) Pour moi, des différences sont sorties, m’ont achalées, et sont venues bousculer ma réflexion. Il ne faut pas tomber dans l’auto-congratulation, mais si quelque part je peux me sentir en sécurité, je vais le dire.

Anna Je trouve que souvent on ne se donne pas assez d’espaces pour dire les affaires. C’est pour ça que des alliances qui pourraient se développer ne marchent pas. Parce que le non-dit, si ça ne sort pas, ça continue à fermenter.

Isabelle Oui, effectivement. C’est parce que des fois on mélange le partage d’idées et la confrontation, ou la confrontation d’idées et la confrontation de personnalités. (...) Les gens ont peur. Je pense qu’on a toujours fini par converger, à part quelques petites affaires. Il y a des affaires sur lesquelles on n’est pas d’accord mais pour le but commun, on réussit à y aller ensemble. Des fois avec toi, tu sais, on part d’un point, on fait le tour pour aboutir au point de départ mais là, on est 4 fois plus solides qu’en partant.

Anna Tu prends le temps.

Isabelle Prendre le temps d’avoir une compréhension. (...) Moi j’ai adoré ça ce machin-là. C’est sûr que la première fois que toi tu m’as dis, après que j’aie fait le contact avec les femmes francophones, que tu avais l’impression d’avoir à apprendre à laisser partir le bébé... (...)

Anna On a toutes les deux une appartenance au projet. Mais moi j’ai vraiment carrément changé ma mentalité après qu’on a eu cette crise-là (...) Tu m’as fait réaliser que mon sentiment de perdre mon bébé, ce

n'était pas juste dans ma tête mais dans mes actions aussi. Ça, ça m'a beaucoup aidé à cheminer parce qu'après ça, je pense que j'ai lâché prise. J'étais toujours en confiance avec toi mais là, je me suis dit « Qu'est-ce que tu fais là, Anna. Isabelle est super compétente (...) ». C'était dur pour moi (...) J'ai trouvé ça rough. (...) Ça m'a vraiment bousculé mais de ça est sorti, comme tu dis, le cercle. Moi je te remercierai de ça, parce ça prend du courage de nommer des niaiseries de même.

Although she admits that part of her ability to name latent conflict may be related to personality, Isabelle argues that she had been able to name things because of the “safer” space we had created for dialogue. Referring to the two major conflicts we had had, we agree that sometimes it was difficult, and time-consuming, but that in the end, when we came to an understanding of each other's point of view and positionality, our relationship was ever stronger.

Not only is our relationship stronger, but we have shifted the boundaries that separate us:

Anna    Moi ça m'a donné espoir. Parce (...) qu'on est capables de travailler ensemble comme on a fait. Les gros discours sur la démocratie participative, le vivre pour vrai, et ça marche, c'est le fun. Ça fait deux ans qu'on se connaît et on s'aime encore. (...)

Isabelle  Ça fait bien, bien, bien longtemps que je n'ai pas parlé avec quelqu'un de façon si intense, sentie. Et à part quelques virgules, sur la même longueur d'ondes (...) On a des différences (...) mais on arrive à un discours semblable où on dit que si on veut trouver du monde pour changer le monde, il faut qu'on parle des mêmes affaires. Je pense qu'on ce l'est dit avec une réelle intensité. Et c'est sûr que je n'ai pas envie de retomber toute seule. La force de ce projet, c'est déjà beaucoup ce qu'on a fait mais ça va être aussi beaucoup ce qu'on va en faire. Ça sera plus que juste moi, juste toi, mais on verra bien jusqu'où on est des grandes gueules dans le futur.

This discussion opens the doors to future action together.

Isabelle and I, in our differing positionalities, have been working together very closely for 3 years, attempting to pre-figure *power-with*. The conflicts in the first phase of the project, although very trying for both of us, have led to a stronger working relationship today. Because of the “safer” space

created for respectful dialogue, and the tools we had put into place to dismantle the master's house within each of us, we were able to name the social processes and relations underlying our conflict. It was through dialogue that we realised that Isabelle was angry at the fact that I had more access to resources because of my formal post-secondary education and life experiences. And, it is through emotion-laden discussions that I was able to name the master's house within myself, and work to deconstruct it. Although these realisations, and the blurring of boundaries that ensued did not, by any means, lead to increased resources for Isabelle or the people from the Point, hopefully in working together on local struggles we will be able to change things in a small way. Moreover, in the actual recognition of the « savoir populaire » in my thesis and in the history-making process, we are breaking with the processes of stratification that lead to the attribution of lesser value to that kind of knowledge (Isabelle Drolet, personal communication, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003). Finally, by naming these kind of dynamics, we have dealt with many of the ethical dilemmas that plague feminist historians struggling with power dynamics in research projects.

#### BETWEEN THE PARTICIPANTS AND I

Similar underlying dynamics were present between the participants and myself throughout the process. Although more subtle, the tensions around our differing positionalities were present, and were aired throughout the process, generally through teasing, as I will show below. Most of these women have had numerous experiences with university-educated allies, therefore my presence in their midst was not new to them. 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.

Because of the tools and strategies put into place to foster respectful dialogue, the tensions related to our differing positionalities were named, and dealt with. 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. Through the excerpts below, one can detect a certain amount of “healthy mistrust”, that is related through friendly teasing. As Isabelle noted, when she read an earlier version of this chapter, “qui aime bien, châtie bien!” (Isabelle Drolet, personal communication, July 2003). The atmosphere of respect and dialogue made it such that instead of reacting defensively to their often teasing comments, I was able to laugh at myself, and therefore (re)construct my own narrative, my own identity. Moreover, through this respectful dialogue we collectively blurred and shifted the boundaries that divide and separate us, and have, without a doubt forged relationships which pre-figure emancipatory processes and relations without domination.

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 (see Chapter 4). In response to my question as to why they come, the following discussion ensued

Mauree 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 n 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.

The series of excerpts above illustrate the tone of the dynamic with the participants, but especially the English group. The naming of difference through teasing comments allowed for the “healthy mistrust” to be aired and dealt with.

Isabelle and I discussed this phenomenon at the bilan of Phase I of the process:

Isabelle Des bouts, je trouvais que c’était de la méfiance. Je pense à Maureen entre autres.

Anna Ah oui, et Myrna aussi (...) « On sait où vous habitez! »

Isabelle Oui, oui. Et « Vous ne nous passerez pas n’importe quoi! » Comparativement au groupe francophone où il y a aussi cette inquiétude-là, mais je pense que les autres ont affirmé leur assentiment à ce que Michèle disait « Là, avec ce que vous nous ramenez, on ne sent pas que vous nous bourrez ».

Anna Oui, les 2 ou 3 fois qu’on a présenté les grosses analyses, c’était vraiment « Ah, c’est exactement ça! »

Isabelle C’est ça. Mais l’inquiétude est restée, même dans le groupe francophone, jusqu’à la fin.

Anna Et ça continue.

Isabelle Oui, ça va continuer jusqu’à temps qu’elles voient...

Anna Le produit final.

Isabelle ...les ébauches de livre. Il y a comme une crainte mais en même temps le désir de faire confiance. Toujours un peu entre les deux.

Anna Ah c’était vraiment ça, avec Maureen et Myrna. Tu sais, en ré-écoutant ça, c’est vraiment ça « On te fait confiance mais tous les étudiants de McGill, de Concordia qui ont cogné à la porte et qu’on a jamais revus... On sait que tu ne fais pas ça, mais... on sait où tu habites! » (...) Moi je trouve, en ré-écoutant les cassettes, que les anglophones, même s’il y avait cette méfiance, elles nous taquinaient.

Elles me taquinaient. C'était une espèce de méfiance mais...

Isabelle Mais il y a toujours une part de vérité.

Anna C'est ça que je veux dire! Mais elles auraient pu ne pas le dire du tout.

Isabelle Oui, oui, oui.

Anna On l'a catché. Moi je l'ai catché (...) Je pense que l'atmosphère qu'on a créée, les évaluations, l'espace, faisaient en sorte qu'on pouvait dire les vraies affaires sans que ça blesse trop. Ça m'a blessé un peu mais ça, c'est ma culpabilité à moi.

This discussion with Isabelle illustrates the important 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 which were had quite recently (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.*

Frances Yeah, professional comes in

Maureen 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. Although there is no question that my increasing sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and my active participation in the groups has also contributed to their trust in me, the space for respectful dialogue that we created in the project was a crucial element in the forging of the relationship across difference.

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

It is through a process that pre-figures *power with* that all these individual and interpersonal transformations were made possible. The latter are central to lasting collective social change. That is, 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, as we draw lessons from the past and others realise that they can use these lessons; as younger generations become intrigued by the stories and become motivated to action; and as women’s contributions to history begin to change the representational realm.

### 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 “bilan” of several decades of activism done by ten women who have been involved in organising for most of those years. Although community organisations have a tradition of using evaluations to learn from past errors and successes, rarely do they have the time to do socio-historical analysis in order to draw lessons for

organising (Bessette & Larocque, 1985; Fisher, 1999). The space we created for the project allowed for such discussions, and for the drawing of lessons that will serve in campaigns, in mobilisation, and in organisational development. More than that, however, this extended “bilan” 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 “bilans” 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.

In the following excerpt, Isabelle sets the stage for the bilingual meeting at the end of the first phase of the project, by explaining the spiral-like process in the “results” but also in the process (at this point being referred to as “voir, juger, agir”), and brings in the issue of collective transformation:

Isabelle Vous vous souvenez au départ, quand on a parlé du projet, le but c’est de documenter une histoire, vos récits, des récits de femmes. Cette histoire, *on veut aussi la transmettre*, ce n’est pas juste pour nous ici, il faut la transmettre et *on veut que ça devienne un outil pour l’action communautaire du quartier*. On veut que ça serve, donc ce n’est pas juste un beau livre qu’on va laisser sur le coin de la table. Ce dont on s’est rendu compte en relisant tous les récits, moi et Anna, c’est que la démarche que l’on fait, c’est un *Voir, Juger, Agir*. C’est connu entre autres dans l’action catholique (...) Faire le « juger », c’est comprendre un peu pourquoi l’histoire a été comme ça, pourquoi le mouvement communautaire a été comme ça. On va faire un retour sur les leçons que l’on a pu tirer de tout ce que vous nous avez raconté (...) pour essayer de trouver des pistes de solution pour continuer l’action communautaire 30 ans plus tard. *Qu’est-ce qu’on lègue aux gens qui nous suivent ou même à nous qui sommes encore là ?* (...) (Plus tard) dans le processus, on verra notre *Agir* à nous, à cette table. Qu’est-ce qu’on va faire, comment on va distribuer le livre pour qu’il serve. Ce sera un peu le *Voir, Juger, Agir*. C’est un peu la dynamique que l’on s’est donnée, qu’on retrouve à travers tous les récits, qu’on retrouve aussi dans notre processus.

Thus, from the « voir », which was the telling of the stories, to the « juger » which was the continuous analysis and drawing of lessons, we would figure out ways to « agir ». From the beginning the participants expressed the hope that the lessons drawn from their experience would serve the movement:

Louise C'est un héritage à ceux qui vont nous lire. Pouvoir reprendre ces mêmes formules et les appliquer, à leur façon et avec les demandes d'aujourd'hui qui sont différentes de celles de notre temps. Il faut garder l'espoir en des possibilités de reconduire ces choses-là, adaptées aux besoins d'aujourd'hui. Je pense que c'est quelque chose que les jeunes vont apprécier quand ils vont nous lire et qu'ils vont dire « Ça part comme ça quand on veut faire des changements dans une société ».

Thérèse Nos maisons dont on est fiers parce qu'on a des douches, parce qu'on a des bains, parce qu'on est bien. La qualité de vie est toute autre. L'amélioration de cette qualité de vie là, la fierté de ça, d'avoir obtenu ça, il faut la communiquer à nos jeunes.

Marguerite Présentement, quand on fait des animations sociales, on parle des manifestations et tout ça (...) Avec un livre comme ça, on peut dire « Oui, on peut faire quelque chose. Ça se peut. Regarde, ça s'est fait avant et ça a été gagné ». Alors ce livre-là ça nous sert, ça vaut la peine. (...) Quand je vais à Action-Gardien, ce n'est plus les gens qui étaient là dans les années 70, et ils disent toujours « On marche sur des acquis. Comment ça se fait que dans ce temps-là, ça marchait. Comment ça se fait que ça ne marche pas aujourd'hui ? ». C'est parce que c'était à partir des citoyens, pas à partir des employés. C'est ce que ça dit dans ce livre-là, qu'il faut partir des citoyens.

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. That they take pride in the successes of

the past. 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, these lessons will be transported into the larger community formally via the multiple products (see Chapter 7), but also informally as each of us participates in different local organisations – all struggling with the problem of renewal. In fact, although there are still many historical products to produce, the lessons gleaned from this project have already begun circulating informally. Both Isabelle and I have been drawing on our experiences with the project to understand and act on our current activism. Here Isabelle talks about using the insights gleaned from discussions with the Anglophone group to find ways to reach out to the English community :

Isabelle J'apprend énormément sur la communauté anglophone (...) Je me rends compte que quand je discute de certains points, de militantisme, que ce soit aux Services Juridiques, que ça soit à la Clinique Communautaire, quand je pense aux projets aux Archives, je ne pense pas de la même façon. Pour pouvoir inclure, pouvoir aller chercher du monde anglophone. Moi, je ne suis pas bilingue, alors ça devient une préoccupation plus grande (...) C'est important entre autres, parce qu'un moment donné, il me semble que c'est Myrna qui avait dit « C'est bien beau les tensions mais il faut être capable de dire bonjour à son voisin ». Et moi je pense que les changements sociaux, la révolution, ça commence par dire bonjour à ton voisin.

Personally, as my sense of belonging to the neighbourhood increases, I have become more involved in local activism. On the Board of the Community Clinic, we are working on revising the programming according to the needs of the citizens. The errors and successes from the past are greatly contributing to my reflections, and therefore to the whole revision process. Moreover, Denise told us that when she talks about the book, people immediately ask her how they can get a copy:

Denise (When I talk about the book), some people right away will say “when's it coming out?” You know? “I'll take one of those copies”. Not even knowing what was going to be in it! But there's a good

reaction (in the neighbourhood). (...) I'm proud about it. I'm proud to be part of this crew. I think what we're doing is something good, it's something worthwhile and hopefully this will be useful. Yeah I'm proud of it! Of course I'm talking to everybody! And you'll hear about it for sure!

Denise, in talking about the book is not only creating a sense of expectation, but she is doing the marketing!

### 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 an impromptu intergenerational dialogue on renewal with the camerawomen (Catherine and Caroline) that ensued at the final meeting. At one point in the meeting, we were talking about the lesson that "the activity is often the pretext for political education", and that often social animation in groups makes people want to get involved in other groups. I spontaneously asked one of the camerawomen the following:

Anna        Catherine as-tu quelque chose à ajouter ? Ta participation à Paradoxe, est-ce que ça te donne envie de participer au communautaire ?

Catherine Surtout vos réunions.

Anna        Ah oui?

Isabelle    Wow! (*laughter*)

Anna        Our meetings. Pourquoi ?

Catherine Parce que toutes les choses (les groupes, les droits) sont déjà là. Il y a plein de choses auxquelles j'avais jamais pensé. Comme par exemple, je sais que mon Hydro ne sera jamais coupé l'hiver. Mais j'avais jamais pensé qu'il y avait eu une lutte pour ça.



- All C'est ça.
- Catherine Plein de choses qui pour moi sont super évidentes, tout d'un coup, c'est comme « Il y a plein de monde qui a lutté pour ça ! C'est du monde ordinaire ! C'est pas René-Lévesque qui a tout fait ».
- Isabelle Ce sont elles ! (*pointing at the participants, laughing*). (...)
- Catherine Ce serait le fun que ce que vous faites soit montré dans les écoles. Parce que justement, on ne se rend pas compte que des batailles ont été faites.
- Caroline Que ça donne quelque chose.
- Catherine Oui, ça donne quelque chose. Je pense que les gens se sentent vraiment impuissants par rapport à ce qui leur arrive, les choix de politique actuels. On ne se sent pas puissants par rapport à ça. On ne sent pas qu'on a de pouvoir ou d'impact. Et on ne sent pas qu'on puisse s'unir pour faire quelque chose. On cherche les moyens de s'unir, justement pour dire « non » à telle ou telle affaire. On ne sait pas comment se regrouper, s'investir ensemble. On ne le sait pas.

In this excerpt, the camerawomen confirm our analyses that younger generations sometimes take things that were fought for, for granted, and that they sometimes feel overwhelmed by the largess of the problems. That learning about past struggles, put together in an interesting way, can push them to realise that grassroots, local change is not only possible, but desirable. They even suggest that this history be transmitted via the schools.

The older women expressed how they found it encouraging to hear what the younger women were saying:

- 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.

All the women in the group felt the pride that Maureen talks about here. And some reiterated as did Maureen, that as older women with years of experience, it was their responsibility to share the lessons from the past with the younger generations. In fact, as I will show in the Chapter 7, the participants have many ideas on how to use the analyses from this project to stimulate renewal.

## 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. Thérèse in the following excerpt reaffirms this goal:

Thérèse J'ai assez hâte que les gens prennent (le livre) dans leurs mains et disent « Hey, je te dis que ça a bougé dans ce coin-là! Hey je te dis que ces femmes-là, elles savaient se prendre en main! » C'est cette fierté-là que j'aime! Mes gars disent toujours « Ah! La mère et sa Pointe... » Ils ont raison! C'est effrayant comme je suis bien, je suis heureuse, et j'aime ça!

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 first project, "du foyer au quartier" 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. 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 decided to recognise the contribution of women activists by naming the building after two

long-time activists, one Anglophone, one Francophone<sup>375</sup>. When it came time to choose the names, however, the candidates got together and refused to have the building named after two women because, they argued, community activism is always a collective process, the result of team-work, and that choosing only two people seemed counter to the values underlying their very activism. Instead, it was decided that commemorative plaques would be set-up in the building, recognising the contributions of all the candidates. The Maison St-Charles used the same criteria as we had used for our project, and therefore most of the women in courtePointe were honoured in this way, as well as many others. 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 based on our project, “Les femmes sont l’épine dorsale de notre société” 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. We have, through these various experiences, developed an expertise in the matter, and are now considering the possibility of identifying this expertise officially in our strategic planning.

The impacts have also extended beyond the immediate neighbourhood. Isabelle and I have attended a number of activities at the Université du Québec à Montréal during which we had the opportunity to talk about the project, and specifically about the women’s contributions. During the Summer program of

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<sup>375</sup> 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.

the Institute in Management and Community Development (Concordia University), which brings together yearly hundreds of community activists from Québec and Canada, we have done workshops, and shown the exhibit.

In conclusion to this section on collective transformations, although most transformations are yet to come, with the distribution of the multiple products, already, as we have spiralled through the process, transformations are occurring. Each of us, individually and collectively stronger because of our own transformations during the process, continues to participate in the drawing of lessons from the past for future activism. As “multipliers” of knowledge, some of us have begun bringing these analyses into our various places of involvement, and have been doing the “marketing” for the historical products that are to come. Moreover, through the process, we have seen the potential for the results of this project to be used to stimulate renewal – the camerawomen’s reactions, as well as the learning that the younger members of the project (Isabelle, Donna and I) have gleaned throughout, are indicative of that potential. Finally, women’s contributions to community activism, not really of the representational realm prior to the work of the Archives, has started to filter into the collective consciousness of the neighbourhood, and beyond.

## 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, 1991a). 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, 2001a). 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 (Anzaldúa, 1990; hooks, 1990b; Lorde, 1992), we were engaging in “translocational imaginings in dialogue” (Anthias, 2002a), blurring the boundaries that separate and stratify us, thus building stronger relationships, that will serve us in common struggle (Anthias, 2002a).

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, 2002a) 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 & Lavoie, 1996; Panet-Raymond & Mayer, 1997; Piven & Cloward, 1977; Shragge, 1999; René & Panet-Raymond, 1984; Wharf & 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 & 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, as I discussed in detail in Chapter 3, through the community grounding, the choice of actors, the collective dyad, the small group “à l’image des participantes”, 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, 1990b; 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-viens” (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 & 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 and 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 (Anzaldù, 1990; Bunch, 1990; hooks, 1993; hooks, 1995; Pheterson, 1990), “objectifying” the participants (Patai, 1991), benefiting on their backs (Patai, 1991; Sangster), 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, as I will allude to in the conclusion of the following chapter, we have but seen the tip of the ice-berg as to the transformative potential of this project. Before doing that, however, in the last chapter, I summarise my thesis.

## CHAPTER 7 : LESSONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

In this chapter, I do an overview of the main findings and analyses of my thesis. Into this I interweave the lessons on community organising that I drew throughout the chapters on the journeys of the ten women activists through four decades of activism, and on the journeys of those women, Isabelle and myself through the history-making process. I conclude with ideas for future perspectives.

### WOMEN'S SPIRAL-LIKE JOURNEYS THROUGH HISTORY

Because it deals with “women’s stuff”, community activism in Point St. Charles is, in large part, the domain of women, as is the case all over North America. This overrepresentation of women is explained by their positioning within a context where resources are allocated based on gender, class and ethnos, and within which, because of processes of hierarchisation and inferiorisation, women are “limited” (and “limit themselves”) to the community, extension of the patriarchal home. Notwithstanding this, however, within the space of community activism, these women were able to transform selves and family, community groups themselves, the neighbourhood, public opinion and government policy. They did this as they spiralled through the history of a unique urban working-class neighbourhood. In Point St. Charles in the 1960s, citizens organised with the help of university-educated and religious animators/organisers to improve living conditions that were deteriorating because of the flight of industry and massive layoffs of those years. From citizens’ committees around concrete needs, to political activities, to alternative services and advocacy groups, the organised activities of the citizens from the Point were central to the (re)birth of Québec society, and made of the neighbourhood a pioneer of the autonomous community movement in Québec.



## FROM SILENCE TO GENDER ANALYSIS

All of the participants in courtePointe were involved in some way in the activism in their neighbourhood. Although most of them were initially motivated to activism by practical gender needs, all of them came to identify and act on strategic gender needs as they journeyed through the spiral of change. Stimulated by the presence of “agitators” in community groups, and by the other women around them, they gleaned new awareness about unequal resource distribution and inferiorisation due to lesser life conditions/chances because of their positionalities as low-income women. They came to realise that they played the role of bridge-leaders in organisations, less valued (less political resources) than the formal leadership roles played by men, especially university-educated men. Moreover, in sharing their personal experiences with other women, they noticed that women were often blamed for the plight of their children, for unhappiness in the home, and even for the beatings that they suffered. They began, often for the first time, talking publicly about the violence that women were subjected to by their husbands, and with the help of feminist “agitators” in the groups, were able to begin to break with processes of inferiorisation, and shift their understanding of the root causes of violence. Also, they realised that the roles that they played in the home, that of homemaker and caregiver, were less valued (less material, cultural and political resources) than the role of breadwinner, played by their husbands. All of these realisations – really about differentiation and stratification in our society, especially in the domains of gender – led to action on strategic gender needs.

## FROM ACTION TO TENSIONS

Building on the informal networks that existed already in the Point, the sense of pride and solidarity that is the hallmark of this “urban company town”, and their experiences in the mixed community groups, the participants organised and participated in collective and individual actions around their strategic gender needs. They set up a daycare to free up mothers’ time and to be

able to engage in wage labour, and in doing so, participated in shifting ideas about caregiving as the sole responsibility of women. They created spaces of their own in mixed groups, as well as women-only groups, in order to have a place to “make the personal political”, to increase self-confidence, and to organise amongst women. They created jobs for women, took on sexism within State institutions, and brought women’s issues to the fore by celebrating annually International Women’s Day. In and throughout these actions, participants and women around them, empowered by their journeys, began taking a stand – individually – on strategic gender needs. With great courage, some took to writing editorials in local newspapers, publicly questioning differentiation and stratification in the realm of gender. Others took on men in positions of authority – be they Church Ministers, police or welfare officers – often surmounting great fear. Finally, most of the participants took their new awareness into the home, demanding changes in traditional gender roles, some, faced with the refusal of their husbands to change, took the ultimate step – divorce.

Because they were questioning, through their actions, processes of differentiation – relationality/dichotomy, naturalisation, and collectivisation – and processes of stratification – hierarchisation, unequal resource distribution, and inferiorisation – they were shaking up the status quo, and therefore elicited reactions from people around them. In this case, through processes of hierarchisation, men benefit at the expense of women because resources are unequally distributed in the domain of gender, therefore they may feel that they have “something to lose” by women’s emancipation. Moreover, through processes of inferiorisation, many women have internalised the status quo, and therefore react to others who are attempting to deconstruct and shift the boundaries that oppress them. Because of this, tensions emerged from all sides: families, teachers, social workers, neighbours, and even the agitators in the groups.

In the home, some of the participants were faced with knee-jerk reactions from their husbands, understandable perhaps given the fact that these kinds of feminist demands were only beginning to become part of the public discourse. Some denigrated their work in the community, others refused to share household tasks even though their wives now had other commitments outside the home. For some, their children reacted negatively to their reduced presence in the home. Moreover, some of the participants were confronted with the contempt of teachers, social workers and other professionals, as they took on roles that were generally not those of mothers, and especially of women with no formal post-secondary education. They also faced negative reactions from neighbours – and of other women – often having to live with name-calling in the streets. Finally, some even ended up having conflictual relations with the agitators who had helped jumpstart their spiral-like journeys. As they gained self-confidence, they began to question the disparities between discourse and practice of some of the organisers, leading to tensions within the groups.

### TO TRANSFORMATIONS

It is through these tensions, however, that transformation emerged. It is in the questioning, blurring and shifting of boundaries and processes that oppress, and in the pre-figuring of social processes without domination, that social change occurs. At the macro-level, many of the groups that were set-up to deal with strategic gender needs still exist, and continue to contribute to improved quality of life in the neighbourhood. Moreover, women's actions in the Point contributed to an overall shift in public opinion and government policies with respect to women's roles in the home, in the workplace, and in politics. At the meso-level, they contributed to the now accepted organisational form in community groups that attempts to reduce hierarchies, that allows for women's-only spaces, and for tools and strategies to break with processes of inferiorisation.

At the micro-level, the impacts on families and selves are perhaps the most important. All of the women broke with traditional gender roles in and through their journeys. For some, their husbands changed their mentalities and behaviours regarding gender roles. For many, because of their constant exposure to activism, their children developed a critical mind, an awareness of injustice, and some have even followed in the the footsteps of their mothers. Most of the participants would never go back to how they were before their involvement in community activism, recognising that the strong, self-confident women they are today is in a large part due to their journeys through history. Today, after several decades, sustained by their anger, their determination and their sense of responsibility, and by the sense of belonging to a “gang” and the fun that they had, all the participants are still involved in their community.

#### OUR JOURNEYS THROUGH THE HISTORY-MAKING PROCESS

Through the participatory history-making process multiple transformations have emerged, at the individual, interpersonal and collective levels. These transformations were made possible because of the bridging of historical methodology with feminist anti-racist organising principles. Thus, not only did we develop feminist objectives and questions that did not take for granted traditional knowledge benchmarks, but we also dealt with issues of authority, narrator/researcher relationship, reading of the narrative, audience, “who benefits”, and truth and transformations by building a history-making methodology that pre-figures *power-with*. The latter was operationalised by drawing on micro-processes from feminist anti-racist organising practice.

#### PRE-FIGURING “POWER-WITH”

That is, in using the “collective dyad” as organisational form for Isabelle’s and my teamwork, and the small group “à l’image des participantes” with the participants, and all the tools to “dismantle the master’s house within each of us”, we were able to deal with many of the ethical dilemmas that

feminist historians struggle with in their efforts to do transformative history. In sharing power with Isabelle and the participants on facilitation and questioning, around reading of the narratives, on review of the folders of analysis and by integrating constant evaluations, we greatly reduced the chances of objectification of the participants under the “knower’s gaze”. Power shifted (the center pivoted) from one participant to the next, from Isabelle to me as we juxtaposed voices (positionalities) of activists, historians, and organisers, from the beginning to the end, voices that are kept in the text in spite of the “messiness” that this creates in the historical piece.

In juxtaposing these different voices, by grounding them in a socio-historical context, and by constructing a patchwork (or jazz piece) of history, we are doing history that is coherent with the hybrid approach to history in general, and with feminist life history methodology in particular. The spiral-like pattern that emerged out of the process – around their journeys in the groups and around our journeys in the history-making process – is one that *exists*, and can be applied in other contexts, but is “continually reworked”. All of us, positioned differently, experience this spiral in different ways, at different moments in time. And, because this process and analysis emerged from a participatory process, each of the participants was an actor in her own transformation (and not objects). In fact, all of the busy women are still committed to the project<sup>376</sup>, are proud to be participating in the making of their history, and have claimed ownership of the process. It is *our* project.

In line with the latter, in collaborating with the Archives, and in sharing power with Isabelle on the coordination of the project, we reduced the chances of my benefiting from the project – as academic – at the expense of the community. These collaborations also helped ground the project in local activism and culture, reducing the chances that the outcomes of the project will wittle away when I am no longer involved in the project. In addition, the

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<sup>376</sup> And, quoting my supervisor, Eric Shragge, “people do vote with their feet”

multiple products, for multiple audiences made it such that everyone, including the community and myself, will benefit from the project. Moreover, because we chose women with many years of experience in community action, and because we created a space for respectful dialogue that extended over a long period of time, which allowed for the confrontation of ideas, we reduced the chances of nostalgic recounting of the past, ending up instead with a historical text that is full of lessons drawn from the tensions of the past. From the very beginning the women stated, explicitly, that they were not interested in simply “celebrating the Point” – instead, politically motivated, they aimed to draw lessons that would lead to social change. In line with this, the women stimulated each other’s memories, questioned them, reflected on them, and drew lessons, often bringing in a different perspective on local legend, collective remembrance, and written historical sources (often written by organisers/animators). In going beyond the descriptive, by asking “why”, we were able to get at the processes of differentiation and stratification that underlie the experiences related in the stories. Also, in documenting these women’s stories, we tapped into “new” areas of memory, bringing in issues that impacted their personal lives (e.g., effects on their lives, transmission to children, relations with husbands, sexuality).

### THE CAVEATS

Even though we put all these tools and strategies in place, there were still limits to our project. The biggest caveat was the time factor. Although we knew, from the beginning that this kind of participatory process could not be done in a hurry, we were still caught off guard by the amount of work involved, and by the inevitable delays in scheduling. We were also confronted with the very real dilemmas caused by outside pressures from funding agents, and the university. The former do not take kindly to the argument that a participatory process to “build citizenship” takes time, and instead, want to see quantitative results and performance indicators. Although my doctoral

committee was extremely supportive of the process, there came a time when I had to change the content of my thesis, and to write it before the process was over, because the project was taking much longer than planned.

A second difficulty emerged during Phase I when Isabelle and I realised that we were censoring ourselves in our questioning during the meetings with the participants. Whether it was a time factor, feeling intimidated, self-censure, it became clear that although we had agreed at the beginning of the process that as facilitators, we could intervene if we did not agree with what was being said, we had let slide certain comments that could be qualified as anti-union, classist or anti-feminist. Luckily we had a second phase to come back on these kinds of issues, but we never did feel completely comfortable pointing out all the contradictions in messages. In hindsight, however, it is quite possible that the initial “censoring” that Isabelle and I engaged in may actually have contributed to the success of the story-telling and co-construction; that is, perhaps if we had intervened with our opinions on these controversial issues early on, the participants would not have felt comfortable bringing in their points of view, and may even have censored themselves.

Finally, during Phase II of the project, the balance between my academic work and the popular education mandate of the Archives was more difficult to manage. During Phase I, the kind of work we did – meetings with the women, planning facilitation, organising fun activities – was clearly that of the tradition of community groups. Moreover, the actual writing of my thesis was still far away, and therefore did not interfere in any way in our work. The hat I wore – vis-à-vis Isabelle – during this phase was more that of colleague or camarade, than of “doctoral student”. As we got into the second phase, however – of doing the readings of the narratives and organising into folders of analysis – the work began to resemble that of academia. Although Isabelle and I eventually found a method that allowed for collective team work during this phase, after many trials and errors, we still found it quite difficult given the solitary nature

of analysis and writing. Moreover, because the “data” collected and analysed during this project was also for my thesis, we ended up doing more research, and more detailed analyses, than we would have done if it had been solely for the Archives. Given the limited funds at the Archives, and given that Isabelle’s time had been taken up by this work, the organisation ended up being more internally focussed during this year than it might have been if Isabelle had been out in the neighbourhood doing her task of organiser. Finally, by the end of Phase II, I was into the writing of my thesis full-time, and this meant that I was less present at the Archives. Notwithstanding these caveats, in and through the collaborations on this project, we still managed to create a space for respectful dialogue, and many “translocational imaginings” emerged.

#### INDIVIDUAL, INTERPERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

Individually, as personal experiences were shared – as the personal was made political – each of us deepened her understanding of processes of differentiation and stratification, and actively (re)constructed her positionality. My own positionality shifted as we went along, we all gleaned new awareness, participated in the construction of a narrative of belonging and, most notably became historical actors. At the interpersonal level, because of the tools we had put into place to facilitate respectful dialogue, latent conflict related to differing and stratified positionalities were named, analysed, and blurred. Between Isabelle (Francophone) and the women in the English group; Isabelle (grassroots activist and knower) and myself (university educated); and between the participants in general (activists of great grassroots experience) and myself (activist, academic, neighbour). Moreover, in this pre-figurative space, old conflicts around political factionism, and around linguistic relations, were aired and dealt with. All of these dynamics, although difficult at times, have resulted in the blurring of boundaries and the elimination of some border guards.

Finally, but not least important, changes have already begun to emerge at the collective level even through the multiple historical products have yet to



be released. The lessons we have drawn from the past are already beginning to circulate in the neighbourhood as each of us takes our new awareness into our places of involvement. Moreover, groups are anxiously awaiting the multiple historical products that will be produced. Also, we can sense that the stories collected during the project have the potential to spark an interest in the younger generations. Already, women's contributions to community activism is beginning to infiltrate the representational realm, as different groups begin to publicly recognise and celebrate their contributions, putting to rest the idea that women are somehow apolitical. By writing these women's experiences into history – that of organising in the neighbourhood and of Québec in general – we are transforming the public collective narrative that, to date, has been constructed without them.

#### LESSONS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANISING

The expertise of these women is invaluable. From this spiral-like journey we have begun to draw lessons on community organising, especially with respect to organisational form and other internal popular education processes. Although the participants recognise that the tensions that they lived with their husbands and children, professionals in the education and caregiving fields, neighbours, and the agitators had their positive impacts, they claim that the politicisation and transformation that occurred may have happened with less pain, less ruptures. Fundamental to social change, they argue, is the maxim *faire, faire avec, faire faire* (and not *faire pour*), or in the language I have used throughout, doing *power-with*. The revolution, they claim, will not succeed if everyone is not on board (propaganda won't do it). They claim that *real* popular education, in which the process is as important as the results is essential, a process that takes time and much effort. They argued, in line with the literature, that this education must begin with the needs and experiences of the citizens, best done on their turf (go to where the citizens are at, in their kitchens, on their streets). That it is through the sharing of these needs and

experiences in the small group context that people will come to new awareness. The participants often reiterated the importance of “analysis” (“du juger”), claiming that unless people truly understand the issues at hand, difficulties will emerge. With this new awareness (and analysis), “eyes wide open”, they become motivated to act against injustice of their own volition. Their involvement in various neighbourhood actions then brings them to deepen their analyses, to discover other kinds of injustice, and so on. All of this leads to increased sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, and responsibility, essential elements in social change, according to the participants.

In addition to this, the participants claim that any community activity, should be a pretext for political education, be it a daycare, a collective kitchen, or a health clinic. Although they argue that it is never enough to simply manage an alternative service, that there needs to be constant political education with members, they warn that there must also be a balance between the provision of services and political action. They suffered greatly from the pressures to put aside their work on concrete, immediate needs in the community, to “go to the barricades”, especially when these pressures took the form of tagging them as “reformist” or “étapiste”. Moreover, they say that political education, does not always need to be of the rational realm, and can also emerge from spaces in the neighbourhood for gathering, partying, celebrating. The participants reiterated many times, in line with the literature, the importance of celebration, human contact, recognition of work well done not only to break with isolation and fear, but also to pre-figure the kind of society we strive to develop, “one in which we can dance”<sup>377</sup>. They also argued that women’s contributions to organisations – often done in the background – must be recognised and valued, but also that men need to make a concerted effort at equalising the power dynamics in the groups.

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<sup>377</sup> Emma Goldman was known to have said, cleverly, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution!”

Overall, the message of the participants to organisers and activists is that social change must be done *with* and not *for*. Anyone wanting to effect change, they argue, should take the time to get to know the neighbourhood and the organisational cultures of the movement, take the time to have fun, and to put into place all the tools and strategies that allow for the true doing of *power-with*. Together, these lessons, drawn from the experiences of the participants in their journeys through history, reflect the pre-figurative processes in general, and the popular education spiral in particular, that are central to feminist anti-racist organising practice. In fact, these processes are really about creating spaces for respectful dialogue within groups, within which, as Floya Anthias has argued, translocational imaginings can emerge. An organisation that is full of active, truly politicised members, working together on common struggles – across difference – is all the stronger in its fight for justice in the neighbourhood, and beyond.

#### FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

There is a growing concern in the neighbourhood, as in other activist and academic circles (e.g., Ion, 1997; Quéniart & Jacques, 2001) on the lack of renewal in community groups (“manque de relève”). The participants often reiterated their worry that the groups they set-up and the activist culture of the neighbourhood would be lost if ways were not found to reach the younger generations. Following the lessons we had drawn during the project, the participants argued that organisers and activists should now go out into the neighbourhood to find out what the most pressing needs are of the younger folks in the neighbourhood. Perhaps the needs that motivated the participants to get involved in the 1960s and 1970s – housing, health, welfare rights, to name a few – are not those of a generation that grew up not only with the alternative service and advocacy groups that these women helped set-up, but also with a social security net (relative access to state health care, education, and less repressive welfare practices). Perhaps, in the context of seemingly unstoppable

neo-liberal globalisation, concentration of the media, dismantling of the Welfare State, work and learn-fare, and ever increasing institutionalisation of community groups, younger people have identified different strategies than local community action (e.g., “anti-globalisation” movement). Maybe young people are less involved because the groups have not adapted to the times?

Or, maybe they don’t have the same sense of belonging and pride that tie the older activists to their neighbourhood? Factories and many local businesses have closed, people have to leave the neighbourhood to find work, many kids are bussed out of the Point to go to school, younger people grew up in families living on welfare, many folks who could left the neighbourhood (many English). The demographics have been shifting in recent years with the arrival of non-White immigrants, and people with more financial resources, changing the atmosphere of a neighbourhood that has always had a village-like feel. How do these changed dynamics affect the sense of belonging to the neighbourhood? Do these changing dynamics require a different organising strategy? The older women activists, analysing the changing times, wonder what it would take to get younger women involved in community groups. What are their most pressing needs? What makes them angry? How can this anger be channelled into local community action? These are the kinds of questions that need to be answered. The material collected through the project will be used to get at these issues, *with* the younger folks<sup>378</sup> in the neighbourhood.

The participants have many ideas of how to use the material collected to get younger folks interested in community action, above and beyond the coffee-table style book which will be launched in March 2005. Some ideas emerged during the process, others when we asked them to brainstorm, without

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<sup>378</sup> “Younger folks” is used here to refer to children, teenagers, and young adults. The latter group extends into the thirties and fourties because, if one uses the past as benchmark, it is often when people have settled down in a neighbourhood, with their children, that they become involved in community groups.

censorship, on potential historical products, including getting younger people to produce a film based on the stories that the women told:

Maureen I think personally, if you're interested in working with young people – and that's where it starts – I think it has to be through entertainment and things that they like. And work into it a little stuff about what's around them. But just to hit them, you know, “we got to fight for change, we got to do this”, well forget it (...) It doesn't work. But if you get them in, I don't know, movie making, something that would be fun for them, and then you're able to pick issues. You know, “well let's find out!”. You have them do the work about finding out what this is all about. (...) And not handing them the information, let them work for the information, you know, that they feel their ownership. “I checked this out, I know what this is all about”

Isabelle Ça pourrait être intéressant que les jeunes montent un film a partir ce que ces femmes là ont dit, mais qu'après ça, ça pourrait peut-être les amener à dire « nous autres, asteure, qu'est-ce qu'on a à dire? » Après avoir vu ça, qu'il fasse eux autres une démarche (...) (followed by my translation)

Maureen And, once you get the kids through entertainment or dances, however the hell way you get them, I find competition – while I hate – works very well. You know when we had Block organising, each block was trying to out do the other. How many people they brought and how many they were promising for an action all that kind of stuff. So you have the same thing. One working on housing, one working on welfare, and another group on something else. Then they all come to one place to present their group

In this excerpt, the participants are applying the lessons gleaned from their past activist experience to a new project with younger people. They reiterate the importance of starting from where the people are at, of having people partake fully in the planning, discovery, actual research and distribution of the video, and especially, of having fun. Later in the discussion they talked about the possibility of re-creating the successful film festival that the Archives organised with St-Columba House in its early years, but this time, with the work of the younger folks. They insisted on the importance of discussion time around the films, arguing that this time for collective analysis is crucial if one is aiming to

stimulate community involvement. All of these tricks reflect the kind of participatory methodology we have used for this project.

In a similar vein, the French group came up with the idea of a play, “à la Michel Tremblay”, activities for children, training in cooperatives, and even a televised series!

Michèle Une pièce de théâtre ! (...)

Anna À la Michel Tremblay.

Thérèse Oui, à la Michel Tremblay ! (...) Brillante idée, madame ! (...) Si on avait des contacts avec l’Office National du Film (...). On engage des comédiens et envoie donc ! Mais l’idée de la pièce de théâtre, je trouve ça bien, bien correct. Je pense à David Fenario qui a écrit Balconville ! Tabarnouche qu’on se retrouve là-dedans ! » (...)

Michèle Faire une petite pédagogie avec les jeunes. (...) Comment faire pour que ça se transmette ?

Louise Aux adultes qui ont à se prendre en main. (...)

Isabelle Moi je suis sensible au fait d’aller chercher les jeunes (...) J’aimerais ça qu’on monte un petit sketch pour le montrer à la deuxième génération de monde dans les coopératives, qui n’a jamais vécu ailleurs (...) L’idée de théâtre est sortie un peu en farce mais moi je trouve que c’est une bien bonne idée. À l’école primaire, les jeunes aiment ça. Tu leur donnes un thème. (...) Où des minutes du patrimoine, comme à la télé (rires), (...) une série sur l’histoire du quartier. (...) Quand (on) a fait l’activité avec les enfants sur l’autobus 57, un p’tit cul a dit à sa mère « Maman, savais-tu qu’il y a eu des batailles pour la 57 ? »

Also, one of the projects for the near future includes setting up intergenerational workshops, which could, in fact integrate many of the creative ideas enumerated in the excerpts above<sup>379</sup>. With the Archives, we are planning to recruit young women through the daycares, the schools, and the leisure activities, to participate in a series of interactive workshops based on the stories that emerged from courtesPointe. Based again on the popular education

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<sup>379</sup> I have been awarded a post-doctoral fellowship from the « Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture » to collaborate with the Archives on these intergenerational workshops (2004-2006).

spiral, we will start from their self-identified needs, to build a training program on current issues, using the lessons drawn from the past, in an effort to spark their interest for community activism.

Beyond the specifics of reaching out to younger folks, are ideas about using the material to train newcomers to the neighbourhood, especially new workers, and about how to get the stories and lessons out of the Point. In line with the objective of drawing lessons and sharing them with organisers, the English group brought up the idea of using the book as part of the initiation of new workers to the neighbourhood and to their specific organisation.

Denise It could also be used for the newcomers, like at the Clinic. They are not all the same kind of people that we've had in the past. We try to hire from the Point, but that's not always possible and that's in every group now. (...) And some people they don't have these values and they commit to something, but they're used to working in hospitals. (...) They're from different walks of life. So it could be used in different community groups as some kind of training tool for new workers.

This idea has already made some headway, as we have discussed at the Board of the Clinic that the folder of analysis on the Clinic could serve as a tool for incoming workers. This is applicable to most community organisations in the neighbourhood, as our folders of analysis are organised by sector (e.g., housing, welfare, food security, adult education, schools) and will eventually be available for consultation at the Archives. I will be also be contributing in a small way to this, as I write-up the lessons gleaned in article form, and perhaps in a teaching-manual, with the dual objective of sharing the learning with other community activists, or organisers-to-be, and of influencing the way that transformative feminist history, and history in general is done.

Moreover, the participants had ideas about how the coffee-table-style book could be used to share the lessons drawn with Montrealers, Québeckers, but also with people all over North America. For example, they talked about the idea of having a kiosk on the banks of the Lachine Canal, for people from

outside the Point. They are proud of their neighbourhood, of its history, and want others to recognise and understand their activism, and the feeling of solidarity that underlies it:

Louise Le développement du canal Lachine va peut-être amener beaucoup de monde dans le quartier. Qu'est-ce qu'on peut apprendre dans ce quartier-là? (...)

Isabelle Toi, tu viens de vendre 5000 copies d'un coup ! (...)

Madeleine On pourrait avoir un kiosque !

Louise Si ce livre peut intéresser les gens pour qu'ils puissent se situer, comprendre le quartier populaire, ce qu'il est devenu, où est-ce qu'il s'en va... Les gens vont connaître l'histoire. Tandis que si c'est juste pour nous...

Marguerite Si on peut arriver à expliquer la solidarité. Quand on a passé au feu (...), t'aurais dû voir le quartier se mettre en branle. Et pas seulement la voisine d'à côté!

They also discussed the possibility of organising exchanges with other organisations in order to share experiences on strategies and tactics with other groups across Canada:

Maureen Maybe that's dreaming too big! How about exchanging info, how, for example across Canada or whatever. How other groups got started, their activities, the sharing of information and strategies, and tactics.

Denise A group could go somewhere else and present this, and they can send a group down here to present their presentation. That could be interesting! (...) Or any community group that would want to start up somewhere and they're not sure how or where. That would be very helpful to them

Maureen Also give an incentive to people who think that nothing can be done. People who think, "oh that's too big! We could never accomplish a thing like that! It would take hundreds to do that!" (For them to know how things) got started. Very educational

These experiences, from silence, to new awareness, to deepening analysis, to experimentation, to action, both through the history of community action in



Point St. Charles, and through the history-making process, need to be shared with others. The ideas on how to do so are not lacking. It is now up to neighbourhood activists, myself included, to put them into practice.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: CONSENT FORM FOR PHD THESIS AND ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS/PRESENTATIONS

At the beginning of the project, each participant involved in “courtePointe” signed a consent form that stated that “the book, along with an analysis of the process surrounding its creation, will constitute the doctoral dissertation of one of the project coordinators, Anna Kruzynski, student in the School of Social Work, McGill University and Université de Montréal”. Moreover, you agreed that “the audiocassettes, videocassettes, and transcripts will serve three purposes : the production of a community book, the writing of a doctoral dissertation and academic publications/presentations by Anna Kruzynski, and the creation of pedagogical tools”.

The thesis is almost finished (date of submission, January 5<sup>th</sup> 2004). The thesis is composed of 7 chapters on the following themes:

Chapter 1 : Introduction

Chapter 2 : Conceptual framework and review of the literature

Chapter 3 : Methodology

Chapter 4 : The Point through the decades

Chapter 5 : Women’s journeys through history

Chapter 6 : The impacts of the participatory process

Chapter 7 : Lessons and future perspectives on community action and participatory history

In all the chapters, except Chapters 1 and 2, there are excerpts from the meetings. Here is a summary of how I used your words:

#### **Chapter 3**

The excerpts that I used in the description of the methodology are drawn, in large majority, from the evaluations of the meetings, including the « bilan » that we did at the end of Phase I : on the import of participatory processes (citizens involved in the process from the beginning to the end), on the way we proceeded to validate the analyses of the stories, on the pertinence of doing evaluations, and on your sense of belonging to the project. This chapter also includes your biographies, written up based on the questionnaire that you filled out to this effect.

#### **Chapter 4**

The excerpts on the Point through the decades and on the « period of awakening » were validated at our meetings in fall 2003.

## Chapter 5

Most of the excerpts on the journeys of women were validated by you at our fall 2003 meetings. There are a few excerpts, on Madame prend congé, the Women's Discussion Group, the daycare « Les Enfants de l'avenir », the impacts of your involvement on your lives, and on what sustains in your activism, that have not yet been validated (see pages 31-54; and 97-109).

## Chapter 6

This chapter is based on the academic articles that I gave to you in October 2002. It has been modified based on Isabelle's comments. The chapter now includes three sections on the impacts of the process that are supported by excerpts that come mostly from the evaluations and the « bilan », but also from our discussions on French/English relations and on the dynamics between professionals and citizens. :

- The impacts on each of us, individually (my own journey; the new awareness we all gleaned during the project; the feminist analyses we made by linking the personal and the political; the realisation that each of us is an actor in the making of the history of Québec in general, and of the Point specifically).
- The impacts on our interpersonal relations (the “rapprochement” between Isabelle and the English women; the resolution of past conflict (for example, the « Journée Noire » at the Clinic, the relations between the English and French); the “rapprochement” between Isabelle and I; and the “rapprochement” between the participants and I).
- The impacts on the community (drawing lessons; stimulating renewal; jump-starting recognition of women's contributions to community action).

## Chapter 7

In this chapter, I present the lessons that we have already begun to draw during Phase I of the process (at our joint English/French meeting in June 2002, for example). I also draw lessons on the participatory process that we lived together. That is, I conclude that it is important to do history in a participatory way, integrating principles of community action (which reflect the lessons that we have drawn from the past) in the methodology (overall, the idea of *doing with* instead of *doing for*). I finish it up by enumerating the different ways that we could diffuse the lessons we have drawn during the process in the neighbourhood and beyond, and, most importantly, in order to stimulate renewal amongst the younger generations. This last section reproduces the ideas that we came up with during the “bilan” of Phase I of the project.

**My thesis is available for those who would like to review the excerpts in which their name appears. Any request to keep a part or the whole of her statements confidential will be respected.**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read this form and agree  
that unless I indicate otherwise, my name will be associated with my statements  
in Anna Kruzynski's PhD thesis, and in any academic  
publications/presentations based on the latter.

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Signature

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Date

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Date



## APPENDIX 2 : CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROJECT

After having done interviews with a number of neighbourhood women, the members of the Point St. Charles Popular Archives realized that, for many women, being involved in the community had a significant impact on their personal lives, making them into stronger women. This experience led them to take on, full force, the often difficult issues of community action, and to build their community. Our project, briefly described here, will use life stories to document the history of community action.

### **Description and objectives of the project**

The project consists of two groups of women (Francophone / Anglophone) from Point St. Charles who will meet regularly over a 6 to 12 month period to talk about their involvement in community action, via their life stories. After each meeting, the coordinators of the project will transcribe these stories, and do an initial "reading" of these transcripts. The themes that emerge from these readings will form the basis of discussion of the following meeting. This cycle will repeat itself until we have woven, together, these lives, this involvement, this history of community action into a quilt of stories. This quilt, woven from patches of consensus and contraction identified during the process, will represent the history that we will have constructed together.

One of the objectives of this project is to recognize 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 realization is energizing. 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 recognizing the leadership role that Point St-Charles played in the development of community organizations 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.

Once woven, the team of the Archives will transform the quilt into a book. This book will be produced, from beginning to end, in close collaboration with

the participants, who will have a say as to its content and form. Moreover, the book, along with an analysis of the process surrounding its creation, will constitute the doctoral dissertation of one of the project coordinators, Anna Kruzynski, student in the School of Social Work, McGill University and Université de Montréal.

### **Selection criteria of participants**

You were chosen to participate in this project by a committee of the board of the Popular Archives of Point St. Charles, from a compilation of names from many different sources, using the following criteria :

- Community involvement for 25 to 30 years;
- Ideally living or still involved in the South-West.
- Originally motivated to get involved in community action by personal need and living conditions.
- Cover a wide range of sectors (education, justice, health, welfare, daycare, etc.).

### **Details of participation**

If you decide to participate in this project, you accept the following :

- A first individual interview to take place before August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001 (if you have not been interviewed by us before), to talk about your reasons for getting involved in community action. This interview will last about two hours, it will be recorded on audiocassette transcribed, and analysed for themes.
- As of September 2001, regular meetings of a group composed of 5 or 6 women over a 6 to 12 month period. The frequency, dates and times remain to be determined, by the group, but we estimate that 10 meetings of 2-3 hours each will be necessary. The meetings will be facilitated to ensure that each participant is able to express her point of view, and to highlight the differences and the consensuses. These meetings will be recorded on audio and videocassette.
- After each meeting, the discussions will be transcribed, and emergent themes, as well as relevant information found in different sources will be brought up for discussion at the following meeting in order to stimulate reactions and debate. This cycle (meeting, transcription, interpretation, meeting...) will continue until the group decides on what interpretations of history we choose to retain as our history.
- The linguistic reality of the neighbourhood (60% Francophones / 40% Anglophones) is a longstanding characteristic of the Point that sometimes provoked tensions, and most definitely impacted the very fiber of the community movement. These relations between the two communities will undoubtedly emerge from the discussions of the groups. As we near the end of the process, we will bring the two groups together for a few meetings to discuss specific issues. The process will be flexible, adaptable, and if necessary, simultaneous translation will be made available for these joint meetings.

### **Possible benefits of the project**

In addition to the obvious benefits of this project for the community, this collective undertaking to construct our history is likely to lead to personal empowerment for many, if not all, of the participants. Affirmation, self esteem, self-confidence, collective creativity, rekindling of old friendships, hanging out, remembering together, talking loud, crying, laughing... All this, and more awaits us, each of us taking from the project what she wants!

We must be aware, however, of the potential for negative consequences. Although we can't, at this point, predict all the difficulties we may encounter, we can identify a few possibilities: reliving difficult life events, impacts of some of our stories on neighbourhood residents not involved in the project, group conflict... If any such situation should arise, participants are encouraged to discuss them with the group, and/or with one or both of the project coordinators. At all times, participants can bring their concerns to the Board of the Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles.

### **Voluntary participation/withdrawal**

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate, or even change your mind and withdraw from the project after consenting.

### **Confidentiality**

In order to recognise your contribution to community action in Point St. Charles, it may be pertinent to use your name in publications. This decision, however, must be taken by each individual participant. In order to help you make an informed decision, a discussion using concrete examples of potential repercussions and issues associated with confidentiality will be organised. Thereafter, each participant will decide whether or not to have her name associated with her words.

Notwithstanding, once the process has begun, any request by a participant to keep a part, or the whole of her statements confidential will be respected. Moreover, you can, at all times, decide not to answer a question, or abstain from giving your point of view. Finally, you can request that recorded excerpts of meetings be destroyed.

### **Use and conservation of content**

The audiocassettes, videocassettes, and transcripts will serve three purposes : the production of a community book, the writing of a doctoral dissertation and academic publications/presentations by Anna Kruzynski, and the creation of pedagogical tools. There is the possibility that a partner community organization will make a documentary film using the material from this project; if this project comes to fruition, we will invite you to sign a second consent form specific to the film.

The audiocassettes, videocassettes and transcripts will be conserved at the Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles in a closed file, following the regulations of the organisation. However, as participants in the project, you have the right to consult these materials in the offices of the organisation.

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You are encouraged to ask any questions you may have regarding this project, or consent form. You will received a copy of this form to keep for your records or to discuss with anybody you may want to. If, at any time during or after the completion of the project you have any concerns and want to talk to the coordinators of the project, you should contact us at the number below.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read this consent form and agree to participate in the project described within.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of project head

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Projet coordinators**

Anna Kruzynski (B.A. Psychology, B.S.W., M.A. Psychology)  
Doctoral candidate in the joint programme in Social Work, McGill University  
and Université de Montréal.

Secretary, and member of the Board of Directors of the Archives populaires de  
Pointe St-Charles.

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Isabelle Drolet

Intern at the Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles

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**APPENDIX 3 : PHASE II : ANALYSE ET VALIDATION DES THÈMES,  
ÉCHÉANCIER DES RENCONTRES 2003-2004**

(au 10 septembre 2003)

<b>Thème abordé</b>	<b>Rencontres</b>
Préambule (explication du processus)	Sept 2004
Biographies	Octobre 2003
La Pointe à travers les décennies	Novembre 2003
Le cheminement des femmes à travers leurs luttes individuelles et collectives	Déjà validé
Le droit au logement	Décembre 2003
L'éducation, un droit à tout âge	Janvier 2004
Au-delà du dépannage alimentaire	Déjà validé
La prise en charge de l'économie du quartier	Déjà validé
Rester en santé malgré les tensions de toutes sortes	Déjà validé
Citizens take on welfare : from advocacy to action	Déjà validé
Women taking care of our urban living space	Déjà validé
Leçons et perspectives d'avenir	Février 2004
Faire l'histoire en processus participatif (bilan)	Mars 2004

Anna Kruzynski et Isabelle Drolet



APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW GUIDES WITH AUTHOR

{Establish the reasons for the methodology of the project}

## Interview Guide 1

Interviewer: Megan Bochner; Interviewee: Anna Kruzynski; October 22,  
2001

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Key Words/Subquestions</u>
How did the idea for this project first formulate?	Motive Relationship with academia Grassroots experiences Other projects with similar methodology?
<b>Community-based...</b> What are the advantages to basing this project in the Archives Populaires/ in the Point? Why use academia to do a grassroots project? Do your responsibilities to academia influence the project? In what ways?	Why not reject academia? Compliance with university PhD standards? Constraints, interests, expectations
<b>Collective work...</b> Why did you choose to work collectively With the subjects of your project? In partnership with the Archives populaires	Positioning of researcher in relation to subjects
In deciding to work collectively, did you consider the possible conflicts that might arise?	Issues: ownership, differences in power, vision, expectations, roles & process negotiation, perception, tools, style, culture
If so, how do you plan to navigate these issues? Is there a compromise you foresee yourself making?	Balance, rhythm of work, agenda,
<b>Co-construction...</b> Your position as a PhD candidate awards you certain power and privileges that most of the women involved in this project (workers and participants alike), do not have access to. Your	Impact on life

involvement in the community as an activist and now as a resident places you in a unique position to gain respect and trust.	
In what ways might this position be problematic?	<b>Proximity to project,</b>
How do you plan to negotiate your insider/outsider status?	Distance while remaining militant/active
How do you plan on co-constructing history when you may have such different versions?	Negotiated from onset? Renegotiate during process <b>Equivalent vs. Equal</b>

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Key Words/Subquestions</u>
<b>Role...</b> How do you envision your role(s) and responsibilities to the subjects, organization, process and outcome of this project?	Role as <b>critical intervenor</b> Creative, constructive, and challenging criticism Supporting women while being reflective, critical and improving the outcome
<b>Outcome...</b> If all goes according to the Protocol, what is your ideal vision at completion of the project?	Anna's vision - actualization/articulation in product Authors that have incarnated her vision? What are your hopes/fears/expectations for the first group meeting?

{Establish the evolution of the methodology during the project}

## Interview Guide 2

Interviewer: Megan Bochner; Interviewee: Anna Kruzynski; January 16, 2002

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Key Words/Subquestions</u>
How is the project going? How are you feeling about it?	Expectations Obstacles Support Surprises Disappointments
What has been the biggest surprise? What has been the largest obstacle? How have you worked towards overcoming it? What hopes/fears/expectations have been realized? <b>Co-construction...</b> <i>"They're going to interpret their own stories..."</i> How has your initial vision of the process of co-construction been realized/not realized?  <i>"I think there is a way to write that book without reinterpreting what they've already interpreted by putting it into a larger social context"(Anna Kruzynski -Interview 1).</i>	Bringing back readings Pulling out themes Responsibility to women's voices/stories Negotiating... Power differentials Insider/Outside status Different versions
How has the process of pulling out themes and bringing them back (with readings) worked?	Common tools Response of women Issues of interpretation Consensus
<b>Co-Facilitation...</b> <i>"Are you really sharing? Is your discourse and your intention different than your practice?"(A.Kruzynski - Interview 1).</i>	
How has sharing facilitation with Isabelle been going?  <i>"...I hadn't really thought this out before that I was tending to want to have my fingers in everything, and that I was doing it without realizing it"(A.Kruzynski - Interview 1).</i>	Issues: ownership, differences in power, vision, expectations, roles & process negotiation, perception, tools, style, culture, balance, rhythm of work, agenda expertise

*“It’s impossible for us to work as a collective...well, we can work as a collective but we need to recognize the structural inequalities that exist and work within that”*(A.Kruzynski-Interview 1)

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Key Words/Subquestions</u>
<p><b>Role...</b></p> <p><i>"You need to work on oppressing...the least possible...equality is not your goal"</i></p> <p><i>"I really feel that I'm legitimate in what I'm doing anyway"</i></p> <p><i>"I have to have...a thicker skin...and realize the role I play is not necessarily the person I am"</i></p> <p>Has your role(s) and responsibilities to the subjects, organization, process and outcome of this project evolved?</p> <p>How have you dealt with issues concerning your role?</p>	<p>Equivalent vs. Equal</p> <p>Impact on life</p> <p>Proximity to project, Distance while remaining militant/active</p> <p>Negotiated from onset?</p> <p>Renegotiate during process</p>
<p><b>Anna's Thesis...</b></p> <p><i>"...I've put into perspective...about how there's a lot out there that I don't know about and that probably nothing we ever do is original...I just need to get over that and realize that there's going to be discovery as I go along"</i></p> <p>How have the meetings and the process of the project influenced your thesis?</p> <p><i>"The newest idea for my thesis was to talk about the community archives, about what kind of group it is, and the...political vision of the group in terms of what you do with history, why it's important to do community history. And then to talk about CourtePointe as a project of the community group, talk about the multiple products that are going to come out of it. And then maybe talk about the lessons we learned about community history from these women's stories..."(Anna Kruzynski -Interview 1).</i></p>	
<p>How has your vision of your thesis and the goal to impact academia changed?</p> <p>Have your responsibilities to academia impacted</p>	<p>Supervisor</p>

upon the project?

support/influence  
Compliance with  
university PhD standards  
Constraints, interests,  
expectations

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<u>Questions</u>	<u>Key Words/Subquestions</u>
<p><b>Outcome...</b>  <i>"...it's going to be a community product with co-authorship of all the people who are involved in the writing of it"</i></p>	<p>Anna's evolving vision - actualization/articulation in product</p>
<p><i>"The project CourtePointe is a project of telling stories, interpreting history, reading history, collective process over a year, which is going to have multiple products...multiple products for multiple audiences"</i>            (Anna Kruzynski -Interview 1).</p>	<p>Dealing with change</p>
<p><i>"The project...it was...built in the idea of change as we go"</i>  <i>"...because I'm an organizer, I like to be very planned out ahead of time"</i>            Is all going according to your Protocol?            What are you hoping to accomplish before the end of the project?</p>	

{Reflect upon the methodological process upon completion of the meetings}

## Interview Guide 3

Interviewer: Megan Bochner; Interviewee: Anna Kruzynski; July 5, 2002

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Key Words/Subquestions</u>
How do you feel now that the meetings are finished?	Achievements Obstacles
What has been the biggest surprise?	Surprises
What has been the largest obstacle? How have you worked towards overcoming it?	Disappointments Expectations realized
What hopes/fears/expectations have been realized?	
<b>Co-construction...</b>	
<i>"They spontaneously said, 'You read us really well'"</i>	Bringing back readings
<i>"...we decided to go and get some specific stories about specific people that we knew they had stories to tell...After that meeting we figured that we needed to have strategies in mind for getting people to tell stories"(A.Kruzynski - Interview 2).</i>	Pulling out themes Responsibility to women's voices/stories Negotiating... Power differentials Insider/Outside status
How do you see these strategies and the process of pulling out themes and bringing back your analyses as being congruent with co-construction?	Different versions Common tools Response of women
How did the original "mefiance" or mistrust of the English group with respect to you and Isabelle influence the process of co-construction?	Issues of interpretation Consensus
<b>Co-Facilitation...</b>	
<i>"I have taken a certain distance with respect to the...working in collective" (A.Kruzynski - Interview 1).</i>	Issues: Hurtful comments Passing judgements Stress of funding
<i>"I guess it's important to take into account when you work in a collective different personalities"</i>	Tight deadlines Personality conflicts Working with like-minds
<i>"So maybe it goes back to the whole idea that you work best with people who are like you"</i>	
Now with some distance from the meetings, what is your understanding of the difficulties you	



experienced in co-facilitation?  
How did these difficulties affect the facilitation of  
the meetings?

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Key Words/Subquestions</u>
<p><b>Role...</b>  <i>“One of my hypotheses is that the French groups have been more institutionalized than the English groups. So people who are in the French groups are more used to having professionals and university people in their groups and have accepted them”</i> (A.Kruzynski – Interview 2).</p> <p>How has your hypothesis influenced the role you played in the meetings?  Do you envision this issue influencing the final products (Community book, academic book, thesis)? How so?</p>	<p>Criticism  Legitimacy</p>
<p><i>“It’s true that I have way more money than anyone in the Point”</i> (A.Kruzynski – Interview 2). (...)</p> <p>Did this difference in class and power influence your role in this project? How?</p>	<p>“Mefiance”  Issues of power  With groups  With Isabelle</p>
<p><i>“I think people feel that I have a commitment to the neighbourhood, which I do because I feel like I want to stay here”</i>  <i>“I think my skin has gotten thicker...and I think it’s actually a good thing”</i></p> <p>What kind of impact has the project had on you personally?</p>	<p>Insider/outsider status  Proximity to project  Distance while remaining militant/active</p>
<p><b>Anna’s Thesis...</b>  <i>“I feel that the part about women and community organizing is important...to write about that for academic purposes and it has become more important...there’s a lot of need for that”</i></p> <p>Do you envision any problems in publishing a book about this project apart from the co-constructed book?  How have the meetings and the process of the project influenced your thesis?</p>	<p>Interest shown in publishing book on women and community organizing</p>



<u>Questions</u>	<u>Key Words/Subquestions</u>
<p><b>Anna's thesis (cont.)</b>  <i>"...she felt it was what the women want or what academia wants...and that didn't get dealt with very well..."(A.Kruzynski- Interview 2).</i></p> <p>The vision of your thesis has changed dramatically throughout this project. You mentioned that your advisory committee suggested that you hold off on planning your thesis until the meetings were finished. You mentioned at various points in the last interview your struggle with Isabelle concerning the issue of your position as academic and perhaps academia in general. She also argued that you should not be teaching and should spend more time on the project.</p> <p>Did you feel that there was a tension between "what the women want" and "what academia wants"? If so, how did you juggle these conflicting demands?</p> <p>How much of an impact has your responsibility to academia had on this project?</p>	<p>Supervisor support/influence  Compliance with university PhD standards  Unstructured project vs. structured PhD thesis  Constraints, interests, expectations</p>
<p><b>Methodology...</b>  <i>"One of the things we are constantly struggling with is this idea of not knowing where we are going"</i>  <i>"We have no idea where we're going but we feel like we are bien encadre"</i>  <i>"When there's changes, we're integrating it as we go"(A. Kruzynski - Interview 2).</i></p> <p>In the last interview, we talked about the tension between your methodology of "change as we go" and your own tendency as an organizer to plan. Now that the meetings are finished, how do you feel you dealt with this challenge?  What would you do differently next time?  Sticking to the Protocol...  <i>"One thing that did change was the "tendances academique"...we were orginally going to the academic literature, pulling out the academic literature and bringing it back to the group...the</i></p>	<p>Anna's evolving vision - actualization/articulation in product</p> <p>Tension between "change as we go" and "planning"</p>

*English group clearly told us they don't want the blah blah...Isabelle was very reticent... I decided not to do it anymore and Isabelle was happy with that...Apart from that change I feel that we're pretty much on par"*

Do you feel as though you kept to the Protocol throughout the project? How was the Protocol helpful/hindering?

Questions

Key  
Words/Subquestions

**Outcome...**

*“In terms of themes that we want brought up, we haven’t really done a brainstorming of the themes we want brought up, that haven’t been brought up...we’re more going with what comes out of the interviews”*

Do you feel as though you covered all the themes?  
What do you feel is missing? Will you bring this in yourself?

*“The only thing that’s bugging me a bit is I’m wondering how we’re going to do the book”*

How has this issue changed?  
Now that you have all this content, do you plan to continue the process of co-construction for the products? How so?

*“...it’s going to be a community product with co-authorship of all the people who are involved in the writing of it”*

*“The project CourtePointe is a project of telling stories, interpreting history, reading history, collective process over a year, which is going to have multiple products...multiple products for multiple audiences”*  
(Anna Kruzynski –Interview 1).

Did you succeed in staying true to this description?  
Describe how.

What are your hopes and goals for the future of CourtePointe?

What changes would you make next time around?  
What have you learned?  
Has this project so far been a success?

## APPENDIX 5 : EVALUATION OF PHASE I

### Preparatory document

#### Evaluating the first phase of the project

Although we don't want to re-hash the evaluations that you have already done with Jill, we have listed a few questions that you have already dealt with just in case you have something to add. It is important to identify both the positive and the negative points so that we can use that information in our preparations for the second phase of the project.

We also want to document the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of process in doing history so that others can follow our example. In order to do this, we also need to know if the project has had any impacts...

Here are some questions to guide you in your preparation for the meeting...

#### **Our good moves and our less than brilliant moves**

In the evaluations you did with Jill, you talked about the following themes... do you have anything to add to what you have already said? Do you have any suggestions to improve the process?

- The overall functioning of the meetings
- The evaluations at the end of each meeting
- The presentation of themes and analyses from the previous meeting

In these evaluations with Jill, we did not talk specifically about the following themes... Did you like... if so, why? If not, why not?

- The presentation of the first draft of the book (on the Bristol boards)
- The skeleton of the book (the paper version that we delivered to you in June)
- The more formal evaluations (with Jill)

#### **Impacts of the process**

When you talk to your friends, your family, your neighbours about the project, what do you say?

- As we moved along in the project, did your way of talking about the project change?
- Did it ever happen that you caught yourself thinking about the project in between meetings? What did you think about?

- ❑ What have you gained by participating in this project? Did you hear stories or analyses you hadn't heard or thought of before? Did you learn?
- ❑ Do you feel that the group has influenced you, and vice-versa?
- ❑ Often, in these kinds of projects, participants drop out before the end of the project. Have you ever considered dropping out? If so, why did you choose to stay? If not, why not?

#### Brainstorming on how to transmit our stories to others

Image the neighbourhood in a couple of years... how has the project contributed to the community movement? Do you have any ideas on how we could go about transmitting our stories and analyses (No censorship! Let your imagination fly!). Videos? Workshops? Conferences?...