

WHO IS THE NORTHERN WOMAN?

FEMINISM AND PLACE IN THE *NORTHERN WOMAN JOURNAL*: 1974 -1980

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies
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ABSTRACT

**Who is the Northern Woman?
Feminism and Place in the *Northern Woman Journal*: 1974-1980**

Julie Rouse

The aim of the present study is to explore the interplay between theory and practice in a small feminist and regional journal, the *Northern Woman Journal*, during the period 1974 - 1980. It attempts to situate the text within a social, cultural and theoretical framework - both in terms of its regional *locale* and the broader feminist movement.

After analyzing major theoretical frameworks (liberalism, socialism, essentialism and post-structuralism) as they relate to concepts of 'woman' and 'north', an interpretation of the 'northern woman,' both as a social category and as a text via the *Northern Woman Journal* is put forward.

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INTRODUCTION:

"North" and "woman" are meaty concepts, layered with often contradictory sets of meanings. Because of the multiplicity of their use, as categories by which to measure objective reality, both are highly suspect as fixed categories. Physical geographers have mapped the Canadian Shield and said that it is north. Historians, human geographers, politicians and sociologists have argued over what "north" means. Similarly, biologists, feminists, psychologists and the census have said that being a "woman" is being something. Both sets of meanings are often in dispute but meanings nonetheless are there.

But neither biology nor geography exists in abstraction, set aside from concrete societies and historical contingencies. Theory is always at play in the stuff of daily life, active in all human relationships and, in this sense, is fundamentally an exercise in myth-making. For in order to explain one's relationship to the world, one's habitual walk through places and over time, one must rely on stories, both traditional and utopian, to find a way. One may imagine oneself as an author of these stories, and imagine that they are true. We make them true in the telling of them, and perhaps they are true for a moment. Perhaps we do create ourselves and become our own creation through our stories. We play with history, we change it, we form it in our own image, and then let it go. We do this in endless repetition, imagining reality as a reflection of our own experience of ourselves, our own memory of how things were, and our own vision of how it should be.

It may be imagined that such dreaming is a solitary project. Or such dreaming may be considered common to many 'like us' and thus we seek them out for company. But in both instances we trade in the currency of things made outside ourselves a million times over. When we ask the question "why?" we know that in the course of human history an answer has been given for almost everything. We can

adopt the answer contained inside the dominant discourse of the time and act as agents of its social reproduction. We can critique the

answer and become agents of dissent or change. In either case, we are always employing theory to authenticate ourselves, a way of finding a place in relation to, or in opposition to, a cultural tradition already in process.

The subject of this thesis, through which I will explore this fascinating interplay between theory and practice, myth and reality, is the *Northern Woman Journal*: a feminist regional journal and a mythologized character. The *Journal* began in 1974, following two years of intense feminist activity in northwestern Ontario. In 1972, the Women's Liberation Group¹ invited women from Thunder Bay to attend a meeting to consider the feasibility "of organizing a regional women's conference" in Thunder Bay.² During the planning stages, the expectation was that approximately 60 women would register for the conference. In fact, close to 600 women showed up from across Northwestern Ontario to listen to speakers who were active in the growing second-wave feminist movement in the south.

The Conference was a springboard to a flurry of feminist activity in the north over the next decade,

¹ The Women's Liberation Group was affiliated with Lakehead University and had worked throughout the late 1960s toward establishing a birth control clinic at the university. Susan Vanstone points out in "Young Women and Feminism in Northern Ontario" *Changing Lives: Women in Northern Ontario* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1996), pp. 325-334, that young women have been an important force through contemporary North American feminism in general, and feminism in Northern Ontario in particular. A number of the early "liberationist" groups of the 1960s were formed by students who had experienced sexism from men in leftist movements. Community-based women's liberation groups also drew considerable support and membership from students and other young women.

² Fiona Karlstedt, *Northwestern Ontario Status of Women Initiatives 1973-1987* (Toronto: Secretary of State Program and Ontario Women's Directorate, 1987), p. 7.

including the establishment of a Northern Women's Centre and the *Northern Woman Journal*. The *Journal* emerged first in 1973 as a newsletter to keep the Conference participants in touch with one another. By 1974, the newsletter's collective felt a need to reach out to all women in the region to help them in their struggle for personal and political emancipation:

Embattled and beleaguered, without public support, we became an oasis for the woman who had reached the end of her endurance and needed the support that only women who genuinely care can give. The newsletter bound us together and in its pages we poured out all the rage and frustration that comes when we are surrounded by an indifferent, uncaring, and sometimes malicious public.³

In 1975, the format changed from a bi-monthly gestetnered newsletter to a roughly-hewn tabloid and the *Northern Woman Journal*, as it now appears, was born amid a flurry of grassroots feminist publishing across the country.⁴ It emerged thus, as an awkward marriage of feminism and regionalism, and has published, against all odds, for over two decades since.

The *Journal* has gone unnoticed as a significant record of feminist thought in Canada,⁵ but it is

³ NWJ Collective. "Our Herstory," *Northern Woman Journal* 13:1 & 2 (1990), p. 3.

⁴ See Margie Wolfe, "Working With Words: Feminist Publishing in Canada" in *Still Ain't Satisfied: Canadian Feminism Today* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1982) for a good discussion of the press that grew out of the radical feminist movement in the early 1970s, including periodicals: *The Other Woman*, *Kinesis*, *Broadside*, *Upstream*, *Images*, *Optimist*, *Room of One's Own*, *Makara*, *Branching Out*, *Atlantis*, *Healthsharing*, *RFR*, and *Fireweed*; and book publishers: Press Gang and the Women's Press.

⁵ In the course of my secondary research, I found the *Northern Woman Journal* mentioned only twice, in name only. I note that it has been misunderstood as a rural vehicle of feminist thought and ignored by all other disciplines.

Margie Wolfe makes brief mention of it on p. 267 of "Working with Words": "Rural women communicated with each other and with their sisters across the country through the *Northern Woman's* [sic] *Journal*, the *Optimist* . . ." This is misleading. The *Northern Woman Journal* was produced by urban women in Thunder Bay for a regional audience. Rural women did communicate with each other through letters to the editor, articles, etc., but in my view, the *Northern Woman Journal* is primarily an urban, regional phenomenon. Further, the use of the term "rural" in the context of Northern Ontario, seems to overly conflate single-industry resource towns with small farming communities elsewhere.

nonetheless fascinating in that it was able to draw its influences from outside the boundaries of its regionalism and yet, simultaneously engage with the meaning and location of the "northern woman."

In the post-war era, multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary⁶ endeavours have characterized a fundamental paradigm shift toward the inclusion of the subject of research. Canadian Studies as an area of inquiry is idea-driven and problem-oriented, allowing the student to ask questions which have been neglected or remain unanswerable in disciplinary work. Further, Canadian Studies is open to shifting the criteria

Lois Pike, in "A Selective History of Feminist Presses and Periodicals in English Canada," similarly makes a most fleeting reference to the *Northern Woman Journal*. However, she is more accurate in her observations, noting in particular that "it was founded in April 1973 at a major women's conference in Thunder Bay."

For further discussion of feminist publishing in Canada see: Betty-Anne Lloyd, "Hearing Women into Speech: the Feminist Press and the Women's Community in Canada," *Canadian Woman Studies* 8:1 (1987) pp. 29-32; Barbara L. Marshall, "Communication as Politics: Feminist Print Media in English Canada," *Women's Studies International Forum* 18:4 (1995), pp. 463-74; Philinda Masters, "A Word from the Press: a Brief Survey of Feminist Publishing," *Resources for Feminist Research* 20:1 & 2 (1991), pp. 27-35; Eleanor Wachtel, *Feminist Print Media* (Government of Canada: Secretary of State, 1985).

⁶ Jill Vickers, in "Where is the Discipline in Interdisciplinarity" *Essays on Interdisciplinarity and Canadian Studies* (Trent University, 1994), provides a useful framework for understanding interdisciplinarity. Firstly, the term interdisciplinarity may be used in two ways: as common parlance to describe non-disciplinary approaches and, more precisely, as a means of characterizing several particular forms of non-disciplinary teaching and research.

Multi-disciplinary research occurs when each participant in a group project acts as a disciplinary expert. Knowledge claims are based on the authority of that expertise and the final product does not attempt to integrate the various disciplinary contributions.

Interdisciplinary education and research may be either strict or general. Strict interdisciplinarity requires that where individuals choose research problems requiring extensive insights from several disciplines, they must have a full and colloquial understanding of the major portion of the second discipline. General interdisciplinarity asks that researchers trained in one discipline apply a "respectful and respectable" test, i.e. handling knowledge claims in ways acceptable to experts of the other disciplines.

Transdisciplinarity is a term used to characterize research which attempts to move intellectual thought outside the disciplines altogether. Examples are structuralism, semiotics, post-structuralism and post-modernism.

of relevance and validity from the university to the community. As a result, the Frost Centre for Canadian Heritage and Development Studies is a programme able to welcome the ideas I am exploring in this thesis - the naming of the subject "northern woman" - and to offer an interdisciplinary framework through which to understand them.

In this thesis, I have looked to a number of disciplines in addition to the broad perspective offered by Canadian Studies, most particularly geography, cultural studies, women's studies, and sociology. In searching for an understanding that acknowledges the complexity of the problem posed, Hugh Petrie has pointed out that there is a tendency in interdisciplinary research to products which boast a perusal of many fields, but reduce the level of analysis to matters of common sense.⁷ I have attempted to avoid this trap and be succinct in my integration of insights gathered from opening various research windows. But it is with the acknowledgement of this danger that I proceed.

Because it calls for transdisciplinarity, applying a feminist analysis to a feminist project is a difficult task, particularly when one is trying to maintain a critical eye. By the very nature of its politics, the growth and diversity of feminist thought in the university is not only interdisciplinary, but transdisciplinary. In identifying patriarchy as a social system, feminist theory crosses all disciplinary boundaries in the humanities and continues to be manifest in rival paradigms within various disciplines.

Therefore, to some extent, my thesis has engaged in transdisciplinary research, particularly in the area of cultural theory. I am interested in the *placing* of woman in the sense that feminist theory, with its

⁷ Hugh Petrie, "Do You See What I See? The Epistemology of Interdisciplinary Inquiry." *Educational Researcher* (1976), p. 35. Of course, this may be a tendency of research in general and it is therefore debateable whether or not it is more pronounced in interdisciplinary research.

eye on patriarchy, has included a series of attempts to identify the socially-constructed woman, and re-place her inside alternative historical, literary, and sociological frameworks. Chapter One, therefore, is an attempt to illuminate the theoretical ideas which have informed understandings of "north," "woman," and the *Northern Woman Journal* itself. In this chapter I identify the themes which will run throughout the remaining work by providing an overview of the major strands of intellectual thought which will be discussed and applied to the present study. I begin with a discussion of liberalism and then offer some socialist, radical feminist, and post structuralist critiques in order to provide a context for situating the *Northern Woman Journal* at various points throughout the 1970s. Where I do not state otherwise, this is the period to be examined in the present study.

In tandem with the growth of feminist theory, the *Northern Woman Journal* has existed as a grassroots attempt to put feminism 'in place.' A flurry of grassroots feminist publishing emerged in Canada during the 1970s, bound by an ideological tradition of volunteer-driven, non-profit, organizational structure. The conditions under which the *Northern Woman Journal* was produced drew heavily from the theories of radical feminism and subsequent critiques of the same are reflected in the economic and political struggles that have characterized its twenty-year history. This is due, in part, to the fact that the *Journal's* founders folded a regionalist element into the women's movement as it came north, defined largely in reaction to larger political and economic relationships that have historically shaped the culture of Northern Ontario. Chapter Two deals with this political context and the emergence of a feminist movement in Northern Ontario.

In terms of conceptualizing the region, I locate Northern Ontario as primarily a social construction,

emerging from colonial economic expansion and resource extraction.⁸ Traditional regional geography has underlined the role of measurable and visible physical attributes of an area in order to explain its regionalism. However, such an approach does not go far enough to explain the cultural construction of landscape and the possibility of transformation. In his overview of recent critiques of historical and regional geography, Anssi Paasi asserts:

The region . . . is an entity that cannot be experienced directly, but is represented in the everyday lives of individuals by symbolic means through political, economic, legal, and other institutions and the power relations associated with them.

Further, the institutional nature of the region is fundamentally different from ideas of *place*. The essence of place lies in the meanings that individuals associate with their physical, cultural and social environments. In many ways, regionalism may thus be seen as the product of the institutionalization of place, made possible by the larger, non-local web of social relations and hierarchies characteristic of modern society. In Northwestern Ontario, then, the identification of the region occurs both internally and externally. The reality of the region is an experience that is lived through, and regionalism is a response to the same. It is also an institutionally / economically mediated way of life far different from, and yet still linked to, mythic images of the northern wilderness so often touted as the central preoccupation of the Canadian imagination.

Further, landscapes and regions are not only socially constructed, but also gendered. This is evident in the dual function of the *Northern Woman Journal* as both a feminist *and* a regionalist text. In the pages of the *Journal*, one sees multiple allegiances. To the analysis borrowed from radical feminist theory, the early collective added a regionalism defined in reaction to the larger political and

⁸To this end, I rely heavily on the work of Anssi Paasi, a Finnish regional scholar. See Paasi, "The Institutionalization of Regions: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Emergence of Regions in the Constitution of Regional Identity," *Fennia* 164: 1, pp. 105-146. Helsinki, Finland, for an excellent review of the various critiques of historical and regional geography, inspired by social theory, which are now looking to the region as an institutionalized and mediated social construct.

economic relationships that have historically shaped the culture of Northern Ontario. Many of the women involved felt self-consciously *northern* and believed that theirs was a feminism rooted in the day-to-day realities of life in the North. They looked to the spatial and cultural diversity of the region, as well as its 'harsh' landscape and climate, as a distinguishing feature and a strength which set them apart from the larger feminist movement.

I am particularly fascinated by the fact that, to my knowledge, this is the only longstanding feminist journal in Canada which has a self-defined location. In attempting to understand regionalism as it exists in Northwestern Ontario, and as it is understood in the context of the *Northern Woman Journal*, my analysis has had to take into account the social and economic history of the area, and the importance of landscape in the action and imagination of those who live there.

Yet although the regionalist assumption that women living in Northern Ontario have concerns specific to their regional location may be true, the attempt to arrive at and project a unified regional *and* feminist voice was one riddled with contradiction and strife. Despite the fact that the *Northern Woman Journal* professed a goal of reaching out to *all* women in the area, issues of class, ethnicity, and race were rarely addressed. Native women, among others, are noticeably absent within and beneath the text of the *Journal*, yet they comprise approximately ten per cent of the female population of the region.⁹ The vibrant history of radical Finnish immigrant women living on Bay St. in the 1930s (where the *Journal* made its home) was similarly ignored. Ageism has been a major issue within the *Journal* collective, but was not explicitly discussed in the paper itself. Ideological differences have been painfully divisive. Letters to the editor have often pleaded for more attention to be paid to the

⁹ Statistics obtained from Brian Lorch and Brian Phillips, *A Census Atlas of Northwestern Ontario* (Thunder Bay: Lakehead University, 1991).

lives of women in single-industry towns.

Chapter Three will deal with the ideal of community and the fear of proximity in exploring the roots of these conflicts among a northern "sisterhood." Here I will problematize the *Journal's* attempt to speak for all women in the north and the assumption that there can be homogeneity and consensus among women based on their knowledge of a common place. Chapter Four is a profile of one woman, Gert Beadle, who grew up in Burris, Ontario and *became* a feminist at sixty. She went on to write prolifically in the *Journal* and is an interesting figure to follow throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.

My thesis, therefore, is an attempt to observe the ways in which discussions of feminist theory and the constructions of feminist and regional discourse are mirrored in the lives and words of a small group of women involved in the *Northern Woman Journal* in Thunder Bay. It may be argued that I have taken a blinkered approach by narrowing the scope of my study to the *Journal* itself. I do not explicitly deal with native women's issues in the region, nor do I discuss francophone women in remote Northern communities like Hearst and Kapuskasing. However, the *Journal* has a great deal to offer in terms of understanding the limits of radical feminism and the workings of a radical feminist collective over time. The absence of other women from this process speaks volumes and it is by pulling it apart a bit that I hope to understand the reasons for such strategic gaps in the story of the "northern woman."

Finally, I must acknowledge my own position in relation to this work. I grew up in Northern Ontario and am part of its myth. My family originally lived in Hearst and I was raised in Thunder Bay. My paternal grandfather and my father spent their childhood as part of an English minority in lumber camps outside Hearst, cutting trees, transforming north, part of the history and legacy of Canadian

settlement. My grandmothers are both unknown to me - one French Catholic, the other English Protestant. My brother and brother-in-law now work at Great Lakes Paper in Thunder Bay. My sisters work in the service sector. My childhood landscape was marked by the red and white stack of the mill, its smoke proudly blocking the view of Mount McKay, under which live the native people who knew it differently. I ate brunch every Sunday morning at the Hoito Restaurant on Bay St., underneath the Finnish Labour Temple. And now, I go home to the north about once a year, returning to Hearst for the first time this past July.

I first looked to the *Northern Woman Journal* in 1992 as the location of an identifiable "essence" that could help me to understand my mother, my sisters, the family stories, and myself in that place. I couldn't find it. Similarly, since coming south, I have listened to many ideas about what it means to be a 'woman.' I haven't be able to find that either. Therefore, part of the motivation for this thesis is an explanation of why the kinds of answers I thought I might find at the beginning of this project do not really exist.

CHAPTER ONE: Theoretical Strains and Political Context

A. Classical liberalism: Unified Self / Immutable Landscape

In his classic discussion of liberalism in 1911, L.T. Hobhouse¹⁰ described the "Liberalizing movement" throughout the modern world as assailing the old order by advancing various spheres of liberty: civil liberty, fiscal liberty, personal liberty, social liberty, economic liberty, domestic liberty and local, racial and national liberty. Historically, it was the first two (civil and fiscal) which brought about significant political revolutions from the 17th century onward.¹¹ A belief in social liberty (or social mobility) has allowed liberal societies to presume to be able to strip away the monopolistic and caste privileges (based on family or rank) which had previously existed in more or less accentuated forms throughout the western world.

Furthermore, from the earliest liberal philosophers there came a mind / body dualism which conceptualized reason and consent as the distinguishing feature of human culture. The human capacity to reason was considered in abstraction from social groups and circumstances, and the potential for reason was thus considered, in theory, to be common to all human beings regardless of their position in society. In practice, however, women, slaves and other non-whites remained notable exceptions to this general rule throughout the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries.

Similarly, the idea of domestic liberty depended on a dualism of public and private spheres of life.

¹⁰ L.T. Hobhouse, as quoted in S. Bottomley et al., *Law in Context* (Australia: Gaunt, 1994) p. 2. The introductory chapter provides an excellent overview of the historical emergence of liberalism and explores its core notions of liberty, autonomy, individualism, equality and rights as they are manifest in the "rule of law."

¹¹ The English Civil War, the American War of Independence and the French Revolution were all triggered by controversies over taxation: "No taxation without representation!"

The private sphere was an area where "the King's writ did not run"¹² and was defined as including not only familial, master/servant and affective relationships, but some areas of the market as well. The liberal project then, was designed to allow the "rational" subject, free from authoritarian regimes and intrusions into the private sphere, to make personal decisions according to his preferences. Primarily concerned with protecting the negative liberty and formal equality *of the individual* in the public sphere, each is to count for one and no more than one. In classical liberalism this freedom from interference is only limited by John Stuart Mill's "harm to others" principle:

... the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.¹³

i) Woman

The liberal concept of the private sphere is particularly interesting when considered from the position of women. More than a belief in limited government, liberal notions of the private sphere also show a belief in the limits to be placed on equality. From its inception, liberalism held that it was inappropriate for the state to protect the formal equality of all citizens in all areas of life. The areas of life excluded from the intrusion of positive law have historically been precisely those occupied by women. Because the areas of life excluded from state protection are those in which women are located, many feminist find liberalism and feminism to be fundamentally incompatible.

From the point of view of substantive equality, classical liberalism has been consistently criticized by liberal feminist writers, beginning in the 18th century with Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft

¹² Bottomley, *Law in Context*, p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

readily accepted the Enlightenment belief in progress and rationality but argued that liberal educational reforms be extended to girls in order that they too might develop their rational capacities.¹⁰ Writing a century later, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill conceived of rationality in both moral and prudential terms. They differed from Wollstonecraft by asserting that, more than education, women should be provided with the same civil liberties and economic opportunities as men in the public sphere, a very radical idea at the time. Whereas Wollstonecraft hoped that the rational and independent woman would perform her domestic duties "properly,"¹¹ rather than indulging her carnal desires, Taylor, in particular, denigrated the private sphere altogether.¹² Both Taylor and Mill agreed that women's concern with the immediate needs of a family served to reinforce negative traits (such as helplessness and narcissism) standing opposite to reason.

So-called "domestic liberty" (freedom in the home from state coercion) has continued, in our time, to be criticized for keeping women sheltered in the home, set apart from state action and public debate. In the *Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan promoted work outside the home for stay-at-home mothers, warning that in the absence of productive public-sphere activity, women would be driven to mania and depression, smothering their children with an obsessive-compulsive love. Friedan, like

¹⁰ If, as stated by male philosophers like Tallyrand and Rousseau, there was an inherent human rationality to be nurtured by education, Wollstonecraft argued that women should also be encouraged to develop their full potential. She denied that women were naturally more pleasure-seeking and pleasure-giving than men, reasoning that the more "emotional" traits exhibited by the women of her time were the result of a stunted intellect. Without opportunities to develop their rational powers, she said, women would remain members of a "feathered race" with nothing to do but "stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch." See "Champion of Womankind: Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)" in Alice Rossi, ed. *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (Northeastern University Press: 1988).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹² See, in particular, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, *Essays on Sex and Equality*, ed. Alice S. Rossi (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970).

Taylor, was not asking women to abandon marriage and motherhood, but to efficiently master both.¹³ Unlike her predecessor, however, Friedan did not advocate for structural changes to make this possible - the individual woman, through her own sheer effort, should simply strive to emulate the powerful sex class "man."¹⁴ Differences between men and women, according to this understanding, are to be denied or minimized.

ii) North

By the late nineteenth century, Northern Ontario had been settled by European-Canadians with the express purpose of providing resources to the mushrooming industrialization of the south. Liberalism, a philosophy coinciding with the industrialization of Europe and the resulting settlement of the new world, was manifest in a particular land-use ethic fuelled by a belief in progress and "nation-building."

Landscape is both a physical and symbolic realm. Northern Ontario, to colonial subjects inspired by liberal ideals at the turn of the century, was creative space -- a blank space evoking a creative response. Surveyors were among the first Europeans to travel the region. Along with fur traders,

¹³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1974), p. 69-70. Like Wollstonecraft, Mill and Taylor, Friedan's cure was to send women into the public sphere without demanding a corresponding shift of men into the private realm. Although *The Feminine Mystique* identified "the problem with no name," for white, heterosexual suburban housewives in the United States, it failed to deal with class and race issues as they impact on a woman's ability to enter the public sphere in the absence of major structural changes to both spheres of activity.

¹⁴ See Zillah Eisenstien, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986) for a critique of Friedan's atomistic approach to women's liberation. Although in *The Second Stage* (New York: Summit Books, 1981) Friedan considers the difficulties of combining work and family and calls for institutional changes like flex-time, Eisentien argues that retaining the assumption that women are responsible for the private life of the family limits the effectiveness of a radical feminist approach.

prospectors and government agents, they began the tradition of exploring and harnessing the north¹⁵ which W.L. Morton feels both reflects and inspires the uniqueness of Canadian history.¹⁶ Indeed, nineteenth century geographical discourse and methodology were instrumental in early organization of the material aspects of the North, reducing a largely untouched landscape to a static, stable entity capable of classification and, once classified, of a discoverable use.¹⁷

The history and political life of Northern Ontario is, consequently, rooted in the economy of the region, a traditional geographic concept based on the identification of cohesion in the material world. This geographical cohesion has been found in the 160,000 square miles of boreal forest. This remains the dominant landscape in the north, yet the legacy of the surveyor's art is to be found beyond the trees in clear-cuts and ghost towns. This was the beginning of the present human landscape,¹⁸ one born of

¹⁵ The famous fur traders Radisson and Groseilliers may have reached Thunder Bay as early as 1662. It is certain that Daniel Greysolon built a small fort at the mouth of the Kaministiquia River in 1679. The development of Ontario's near north followed the path of the canoe taken during these early days of the fur trade and broadened with the railway to include the mineral deposits and forests which dominate the landscape.

¹⁶ W.L. Morton, "'The North' in Canadian Historiography," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Series IV, 8 (1970), p. 40.

¹⁷ Anssi Paasi, "The Institutionalization of Regions," *Fennia* 164: 1 (1986) p. 115. Paasi suggests that geography became an institutionalized academic discipline at the turn of the century as a manifestation of external goals in society. As an instrument to be applied to the classification and organization of geographical information, regional geography emphasized the *material* world and ousted the subjective elements from geographical research (i.e. the ideas of people about their places, etc.).

¹⁸ The present-day economy of Northern Ontario is primarily dependent on resource extraction. Tourism, transportation and power generation also play important roles. The region is sparsely populated, with 2.7 per cent of Ontario's residents dispersed across half the area of the province. Sixty percent of those live in and around Thunder Bay. The remaining forty per cent live in relatively isolated single-industry towns. Native people make up one tenth of the population of the region, a figure which is eight times the provincial average. Many reserves are inaccessible by land. Those that are accessibly are usually found on the borders of white communities. Several communities also have significant francophone populations. Statistics obtained from Lorch and Phillips, *A Census Atlas of Northwestern Ontario* (1991).

appropriation of, rather than adaptation to, the wilderness.

The imposition of boundaries on the physical landscape of the north required dynamite to create rail and road linkages -- part of what Northrop Frye has called "the conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it."¹⁹ In order to give form to the fantasies that fuelled liberal philosophy and propelled the exodus from Europe, namely to create a better life in a new world, success was dependent on the ability of men to transform the wilderness into something else -- farm, village, road, railway, mine, factory, city and ultimately, urban nation. A culture / nature dichotomy, idealized and fuelled by liberalism, came to be manifest in part through a traditional geographic perspective which allowed little more than a technical interest in knowledge of the physical dimensions of the region, collecting information on the facts of an objective world in order to exploit it as a technical apparatus in the control of nature by society.²⁰

iii) Northern Woman: Whose Town? Whose Story?

The term "single-industry towns," used both to describe many particular resource communities in the north and as an organizing myth for regional political discourse, has been called a sexist concept

¹⁹ As quoted in John Wadland, "Wilderness and Culture," *Nastawgan: The Canadian North by Canoe and SnowShoe*. eds. Bruce Hodgins and Margaret Hobbs (Toronto: Betelgeuse Books, 1985) p. 224.

²⁰ Paasi, p. 107. In his article, Paasi distinguishes between the 'old' historical geography described here, and new trends in research that explicitly engage with modern social theory, implying a fundamental shift within the discipline from a *technical* interest in knowledge to a *practical*, and finally an *emancipatory* one. He describes the new "structurationist" conceptual framework as moving "from solely collecting information on the facts of the objective world, to understanding cultures and finally to determining the social and psychological 'fetters' which confine society and in this way to mastery over them and the releasing of people from their control." Key regional geographers who have worked to develop this conceptual basis for examining "place" are Nigel Thrift, Allen Pred, and Derek Gregory.

because it identifies a community with only the activities of its men.²¹ Indeed, the human landscape of the north, dominated by resource industries, has traditionally not reflected the experience, knowledge and concerns of women. Reference to the term "single-industry town," like the notion of "rural," does not capture the industry of women in the home, nor their work in providing the many community services which, apart from their efforts, are noticeably absent.²²

The majority of written histories of northern towns speak of women as an afterthought. What is said is usually brief and often patronizing, as illustrated by the following excerpt from Kenora's civic "Centennial Review":

No story of our town's history could be complete without a tribute to the pioneer women of the district. Cheerfully and without complaint they endured the hardships of the early days, and by their many sacrifices and enduring love built up for us the many social services of our town.²³

The authors then pay tribute to the much applauded and expected martyrdom of these women in choosing to end with the following poem by Eugene Field:

There are no girls like the good old girls --
 Against the world I'd stake 'em
 As buxom and smart and clean of heart
 As the Lord knew how to make 'em!
 They were rich in spirit and common sense
 And piety all supportin'
 They could bake and brew and teach school too,

²¹ Susan Heald, "State Regulation and Cultural Organizations: Being the Northern Woman" Ph.D. thesis (University of Toronto: Department of Education, 1988) p. 13. See also Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love*.

²² Northern Ontario is considered disadvantaged in terms of income levels, health care and education. Smaller communities do not have hospitals and there is often no resident doctor. With few exceptions, there are no bookstores or libraries in single-industry towns. Some have no laundromat and others have no cemetery. The majority of male occupants work in so-called "blue-collar" occupations. There are few opportunities for women.

²³ "Herstory Project," *Northern Woman Journal* 3:2 (1974) p. 12.

And they made such likely courtin²⁴

With the arrival of the second-wave of feminism in the seventies, many women began to disassociate themselves from the portraits and definitions written into history by men. This is why, in the mid-1970s, women throughout Northern Ontario came before the Royal Commission on the Northern Environment to tell *their* stories.²⁵

Women from Nakina pointed to the problem of isolation for women in single-industry towns where the majority of jobs are male-centred and women are restricted to the home by a lack of financial resources, transportation and child care.²⁶ They spoke of an alarming increase in mental illness which was attributed to the never-ending stress associated with caring for small children in cramped company houses or mobile homes. Men's experience of the same isolation often manifests as violence against women, and the top priority expressed by groups in countless communities was the need for crisis or interval housing.

The Kenora Women's Coalition stressed that the needs of women and children have been given only marginal recognition in past and present models of development. According to the Kenora-Rainy

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Women in Northwestern Ontario were not organized at the time of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) in the late 1960s. The groups who actively lobbied for the establishment of a Royal Commission were established organizations like the Voice of Women (Toronto, 1966), the Federation des femmes du Quebec (Montreal, 1966), Committee for Equality for Women (Toronto, 1966), all of which had been actively lobbying for the rights of women for some time. Written histories of the second-wave feminist movement generally emphasize the national origins and scope of the Royal Commission. See Sandra Burt et al. *Changing Patterns: Women in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988); Ruth Roach Pierson and Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Canadian Women's Issues, Volume II: Bold Visions* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1995); Nancy Adamson et al., *Women Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁶ These testimonies are excerpts from the report of the Royal Commission on the Northern Environment as quoted in "Life in a Small Town" *Northern Woman Journal* 5:2 (1979).

River District Health Council, the social impact on communities in the metropolis / hinterland economic model raises immediate concerns for women who, during long northern winters, are often alone at home and bear the brunt of aggravated housing problems, the pressures of overcrowding and the deterioration of public utilities.

Reclaiming the past was at the heart of the feminist movement, stemming from a strong feeling that women had been hidden from history, their voices silenced and their experience labelled inconsequential. In Northwestern Ontario, the Women's Decade Council initiated the "Herstory Project" in 1976 to redress this silence and remind women of the fact that they "came from a long, long line of brave and powerful women."²⁷

She stands in my mind as the invincible spirit of women. No one would have dared call her a lady, with all the connotations that implies. She lived in the real world, a world that took all her energy to survive. That she made it look like a grand adventure is the legacy that she left to me and yet she was a city school teacher before she and my grandfather came by ox-cart to take up homesteading within a raw wilderness.²⁸

Often overlooked, however, has been the experience of women who had lived in the "raw wilderness" for generations, before the arrival of schoolteachers in ox-carts. The fact that one of the biggest research holes in the Herstory Project was the absence of stories of native women is not surprising. Indeed, just as the term "single-industry towns" may be called sexist for obscuring the experience of women, the concept of "herstory" raises a similar question: Whose town? Whose story?

The Royal Commission on the Northern Environment found that while there was some contact between native women and white women, close friendships were very rare. This division exists to a considerable extent throughout the north. With the development of mines and forest operations,

²⁷ Gert Beadle, telephone interview, 31 May 1992.

²⁸ Anonymous, "Roots" *Northern Woman Journal* 2: 6 (1976) p. 13.

isolated and traditionally self-sufficient native communities have often been required to absorb an influx of white workers and their families. Once the industry has moved on, the native community is similarly left to cope with the environmental and social consequences.

Concepts such as private property and political subjugation were historically absent in native cultures. It has been argued that native women had a level of influence and autonomy within their own societies that was unknown in European-derived social structures.²⁹ As European laws and values replaced native traditions, the position of native women in their own communities was devalued. The influx of transient workers, beginning in the early twentieth century, has created further problems for native women:

We are concerned with the sexual exploitation of our native women, through the availability of alcohol and our communities being so close to the camps; the evidence of violent attacks on women, rape, illegitimate pregnancies, unwanted children, prostitution and venereal disease will rise beyond a social problem.³⁰

Many native women therefore experience a double isolation in the north -- having lost their traditional role in their families and communities *and* being forced to live on the margins of white society, set apart from other women and silenced by colonialism and race. Given that the Native population is very young (thirty-nine per cent under the age of fifteen),³¹ and that there is a shortage of employment and housing on the reserve, it is not surprising that many young native people (many of them women) are moving to the urban centres. A report prepared by the Thunder Bay Development Corporation in the 1970s on the needs of Native Women in Thunder Bay showed that 61.5 per cent of the women

²⁹ See Eleanor Leacock, "Women in Egalitarian Societies," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal et al (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), p. 27.

³⁰ Brief to the Royal Commission on the Northern Environment by the Ontario Native Women's Association, Geraldton as quoted in "Life in a Small Town."

³¹ Statistics obtained from Lorch and Phillips, *A Census Atlas of Northwestern Ontario*.

surveyed were single mothers, most of them unemployed and living on social assistance.³²

B. Socialism

In direct response to the contradictions of liberalism, a view of the working class in classical Marxist theory was developed through works such as the *Communist Manifesto*³³ and *The Condition of the English Working Class*.³⁴ These works were based on particular observations of the response of English workers to the new economic, social and political conditions that emerged with the industrial revolution. The Marxist paradigm offers a theory of the development of class society and the accumulation of capital in capitalist societies. In a capitalist society, production is important only to the extent that it contributes to profits derived from the capitalists' ability to exploit labour power. Such a relationship, according to Marx, gives rise to one class that owns the means of production, including factories, mines, mills, and raw materials, and another class that sells its labour power to the former in a free market exchange.³⁵

Marxism rejects the liberal theory that humans are distinguished from other species because of their capacity for rationality. Instead, Marx argued that it is the fact that humans produce their means of

³² Statistics from Thomas W. Dunk, *It's a Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture in Northwestern Ontario* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1991), p. 59.

³³ K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

³⁴ F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845).

³⁵ This relationship between classes may be distinguished from one where one class legally controls the other's labour (slavery), or one in which obligations are owed from one class to another as a result of tradition or status (feudalism).

subsistence through cooperative or social productive activities which sets them apart.³⁶ Further, Marxism challenges the liberal notion that capitalism is a system of voluntary exchange. According to Marx, it is primarily a system of exploitative power relations because of the difference between what an employer pays the worker for his or her capacity to work and the value of what the worker actually creates.³⁷ Marx predicted that these internal contradictions would generate class divisions so severe, and thus *class-consciousness* so acute, that a proletarian revolution would ultimately ensue.

i) Woman

Marxism argues that the liberation of women will only occur with the overthrow of capitalism. It is assumed that class conflict is *the* motivating force of history, and work is the key location of class conflict, hence resistance. Therefore, in a Marxist analysis, human beings are defined by their capacity for productive labour and consciousness flows from productive processes. Traditional Marxism has taken a narrow view, acknowledging the existence of reproductive labour in the home, but focusing primarily on men's work in the market. Marxist feminists, therefore, have re-focused on women's work and its relationship to capitalism and consciousness. In doing so, Marxist feminists have offered useful insight into the trivialization of domestic work and women's place in the home and labour market. However, an analysis of the nature and function of women's work in capitalist society offers only a partial explanation for gender oppression.

Though Marxism argues against the liberal belief in an innate human nature, it does not adequately

³⁶ The doctrine of *historical materialism*, developed by Marx, suggests that it is not consciousness which determines existence, but social existence which determines the individual consciousness.

³⁷ This is the *surplus value* from which employers derive their profits.

problematize the relations of production within the family. Marxism has little room for questions about reproductive and sexual concerns (contraception, abortion, pornography, rape, etc.) and is thus limited in the extent to which it can offer a full analysis of women's position in liberal-capitalist society. Socialist feminism emerged out of these limitations. Alison Jaggar, a leading socialist feminist, would say that socialist feminism attempts to synthesize a variety of insights from other perspectives without adopting the reductionism common to Marxist, liberal and radical feminist discourse.³⁸

In *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Jaggar explores the tension between socialist and liberal perspectives on the self. Liberals believe that the self is a rational, autonomous agent who comes to society fully formed. A socialist perspective, on the other hand, acknowledges that all human persons are always and already in human community. It is argued that the abstract individual cannot exist without reference to a social context. It is true, as the liberals say, that identity is determined, at least partly, by choosing according to our preferences. However, from a socialist perspective, those very preferences and wants, through which the rational agent makes individual choices, are socially constituted over time and place.

Posed as a challenge to traditional Marxist categories as they apply to individual women, patriarchy was theorized by socialist feminists as having its own social logic which could not entirely be explained by a historical materialist perspective. Heidi Hartmann, in "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," argues that "just as capital creates [economic] places indifferent to the individuals who fill them, the categories of Marxist analysis, class, reserve army of labour, wage-

³⁸ See Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totawa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983) 27 - 50.

laborer, do not explain why particular individuals fill particular places. They give no clues about why women are subordinate to men."³⁹ Patriarchy, a concept borrowed from radical feminism, was put forward by Hartmann as one of many non-material forms of oppression which determine who fills the "empty places" in the hierarchy of workers.

Socialist feminists have consistently argued that gender differences under capitalism are socially constructed and socially reproduced within patriarchal institutions. It is proposed that gender identity is currently rooted in a sex/gender division of labour that was not inevitable, since conflict had historically existed between men of different classes over the use of women's labour power. It is also proposed that both the structures of production and reproduction in capitalist society determine the conditions under which people, of a particular epoch, or a particular *locale*,⁴⁰ live their daily lives. For socialist feminists, patriarchy becomes an operable power base only in the sexual division of labour through socially constructed and recognized genders.

Classical liberals argue that the state is not to interfere with the *goodness* of the available choice-set and indeed that the choice-set is not socially constructed, but individually determined. However, according to feminist theorists like Jaggar, unless an end contributes positively to the human community, then it is likely bad and its badness is important when considering whether or not an

³⁹ Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union" *Feminist Philosophies*, Ed. Janet Kourany et al. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1992) p. 344.

⁴⁰ Here, the term *locale* is borrowed from sociologist Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1984) p. 118. In the context of regional geography, the region may be conceptualized as an "interaction structure" made up of a number of different, but connected, *locales* - or settings for interaction. *Locale* then is "the 'actively passive' meeting place of social structure and human agency, substantive enough to be the generator and conductor of structure [or, *discourse*], but still intimate enough to ensure that the 'creature like aspects of human beings are not lost.'" (Paasi, 108).

individual has a *right* to pursue it. In light of such criticism, some twentieth-century liberal feminists moved away from classical approaches toward the idea of "autonomy" - a concept which, in modern liberal thought, has captured not only the notion of positive liberty (freedom to...) but also some broader ideas about individualism and equality. I would argue that this move to welfare liberalism is a direct response to early twentieth-century socialist critique.

A more expansive view of harm and a stronger promotion of positive liberty (freedom to...) has led theorists like Joseph Raz to describe the modern liberal ideal of autonomy as follows:

The ruling idea behind the ideal of personal autonomy is that people should make their own lives. The autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life. The ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives.⁴¹

Although this shift in perspective does not seem to accept the socialist priority of *good over right*, it does represent a broader understanding of the impact of social context on an individual in terms of their ability to exercise their liberty. In classical liberalism, particular choices are irrelevant so long as one has the freedom to choose. In Raz's analysis, one cannot simply have theoretical choices - to be autonomous requires that one be given more than *a* choice.

Raz offers the imaginary case of "The Hounded Woman," trapped on a desert island and perpetually hunted by a fierce carnivorous animal. She may use her inner resources of mental stamina plus her physical fitness to keep away from the animal but she never has the opportunity to do or think of anything but escape. She is not the author of her own life. She does not have an adequate range of options to choose from. Indeed, her situation may be likened to that of women trapped in violent relationships.

⁴¹ Joseph Raz as quoted in Bottomley, *Law in Context*, p. 3.

This approach to "liberty," particularly when combined with substantive notions of "equality," has succeeded in blurring some of the sharper distinctions between liberalism and socialism, justifying interferences by the State in the liberty of its citizenry where the "harm to others" principle is unavailable. I am not arguing that the distinction does not remain, but merely that there is more common ground between welfare liberalism and socialist perspectives in the late twentieth-century than has existed previously.

ii) North

There is little doubt that contemporary theories of geographic determinism, informed by liberal understandings of the relationship between human society and the natural world, led to particular forms of social and economic organization in Northern Ontario at the turn of the century. One consequence of this history is the undeniably strong politic of disaffection in the north, a sense of grievance and alienation which has emerged historically and with the knowledge that the region is unable to do much on its own.

It is not surprising that the inhabitants who came to work on the railways and in the mines and forests were attracted to socialist ideals. Many Northern Ontario communities, trapped in single-industry economies, watch substantial profits taken out of the region in the interests of southern capital. Within this economic metropolitan-hinterland reality, liberal theories of the rational subject pursuing self-interest and self-fulfillment have historically not taken root in the consciousness of the region. In Northern Ontario, residents have continually struggled with the absence of the region from dominant theoretical discourse.

Indeed, a large proportion of the immigrant population, particularly the Finns, arriving at the turn of the century brought with it not the spirit of liberty, but a strong communal politic rooted in the industrial working-class experiences of Europe.⁴² In 1910, a group of *Helsingin herrat* (gentlemen from Helsinki), nicknamed "The Bay St. Boys," built the Finnish Labour Temple in Port Arthur as a space where intellectual radicals, coming with a solid foundation of political activism, journalism, and trade union participation, would affect change for Finnish workers in a Canadian context.

Having left Finland after the Finnish Civil War failed to bring about a socialist revolution, those who wandered into the milieu of the "Bay St. Boys"⁴³ were motivated by a desire to escape being workers for the rest of their lives. Union drivers were sent from Bay St. to the rural areas and lumber camps to tell workers, male and female, that their daily struggles for food and better wages were reflective of a social structure that would change only with a socialist revolution.

Alfred Hautamaki, a Finnish-Canadian socialist, union organizer and political playwright⁴⁴ in Port Arthur in the early decades of this century, offered that "even a moron can see that the pulp cutter gets very little of the natural wealth that the capitalist press, travelling imperialist-minded bishops, and

⁴² In the early decades of the twentieth century, the working class in Northern Ontario was fractured along ethnic lines. The division of labour among primary industries was roughly as follows: the railroad was English; Finns and Francophones worked in the lumber camps; Italians worked in construction; and Eastern Europeans worked in the freight sheds. Today, ethnicity among white-skinned residents is not a significant social marker, at least in terms of the hierarchies of occupation, residence and social class.

⁴³ I am focusing on the Finns as a particular example of the immigrant working-class of Northern Ontario because of their significant involvement in socialist organizing in the region and the importance of Bay St. as a *locale* for this activity. Bay St. is a prime example of the kind of *locale*, or setting, of which Giddens is speaking.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of Hautamaki's plays, performed in the Finnish Labour Temple on Bay St. in Port Arthur in the early 1930s, see Julie Rouse, "Eramaiden Orjat / Life in the Wilderness" unpublished paper (Trent University, 1994).

retiring governors rave about."⁴⁵ Workers, then, were called to unite and act, with their "brotherhood," in the struggle of labour against capital. Finnish workers - the workingmen's associations and Finnish trade unions - became part of a radical political program for social change by the 1930s - leaders in the socialist community of Northern Ontario.⁴⁶

The socialist tradition continues in the north. While researching male working-class culture in Northwestern Ontario, where Thomas Dunk asked what it was that made Thunder Bay different from other cities, he was told:

It's a working man's town. Everybody carries a lunch bucket here. That's what it's like in northwestern Ontario.⁴⁷

Grace Hartmann, speaking in Sudbury in 1976, noted the historical and modern absence of union leaders from formal discussions of the social impact of economic development in northern communities. Efforts by unions to demand reasonable wage increases in step with average cost-of-living have been consistently blocked by corporations and largely ignored by the provincial government in the south:

In the age of monopoly mining corporations and scientific exploration on a continuing, large-scale basis, the chief risks in mining are not borne by the [southern] companies. They are borne by hourly-rated employees, who . . . are subject to massive (and) re-current layoffs, frequent physical danger and steady erosion of their health.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Alfred Hautamäki, as quoted in Satu Repo, "Rosvall and Voutilainen: Two Union Men Who Never Died" *Labour / Le Travailleur* 8/9 (1981/82) p. 101.

⁴⁶ According to the pre World War I press, "foreigners" were responsible for a series of violent strikes and demonstrations in Port Arthur. The socialist Finns, in particular, were targets because of their sophisticated national organizing and prolific publishing program, carried out with the express purpose of furthering the labour movement as a whole.

⁴⁷ Thomas W. Dunk, *It's a Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture in Northwestern Ontario* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1991) p. 47.

⁴⁸ Grace Hartmann, "The Social Impact of Economic Development of Northern Communities" *Boreal* 5 (1977), p. 80.

There has been a close relationship between big business and the provincial government since the 1930s. During the depression, companies such as Algoma Steel, Great Lakes Paper, McIntyre-Porcupine Gold Mines, General Motors and Ontario Hydro largely determined public policy. In some cases, statements were prepared by the companies and signed by the Premier.⁴⁹ Because of the narrow economic base of the region, the power of the institutions of government and big business is enhanced. This pattern of development is encouraged by the government through a myriad of programs, tax incentives and deferral of responsibilities like pollution control, community services and health and safety regulations.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the trade union movement remains a deeply entrenched facet of the social structure of Northern Ontario. In the living of daily life, the securing of a reasonable wage increase is far more pressing than debates about a "northern wilderness ethnic" so common in the south. Michael Nash of the Sudbury Environmental Law Association addressed this reality in 1973 when he said:

A one-horse town obviously suits the man that owns the horse just fine. If you want to use his horse, you have to be nice to him. And when he decides there are greener pastures elsewhere, the poor old town doesn't have any horse left at all.⁵⁰

iii) Northern Women – Finnish Domestics

And what of Northwomen in the 1970s? The earliest European women to come to the area had been trader's wives, missionaries and teachers who came during the second phase of "civilizing," once it

⁴⁹ H. V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines, and Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario 1849 - 1941* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974) p. 487-8.

⁵⁰ Hartmann, p. 80.

had been surveyed and mapped by those canonized as voyageurs and conquerors -- strong and powerful men enshrined in the myths of adventure or conquest. Then came the miner's wives, bullcooks and prostitutes⁵¹ after the building of the railway.

Trade unionists in the north, employing the socialist discourse of Marxist class analysis, have long been asking "economic development for whom?" Marxism maintained that only in the development of capitalist society did women lose their public role and become relegated to the position of proletariat within the family, reproducers of "use-values" in the interests of capitalism, and servants excluded from the processes of economic production. Therefore, a political program theoretically premised on a Marxist critique of women's oppression, of women's *place* in capitalist society, proposed that a change in the position of women would come only come through a change in material

⁵¹ In *Defiant Sisters* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1988), Varpu Lindstrom-Best documents the history of sex-trade work by Finnish immigrant women in Northern Ontario. Many were married women who ran bootlegging operations (*koiratorppas*) with their husbands. Among politicized Finnish socialist women, prostitutes were divided into two groups. Those who received no sympathy were those who owned property, often lived with a man, were bootleggers, and did not appear to be motivated by economic necessity. The opposite view was taken of single women, "driven to prostitution" because of tragic circumstances, working in the sex-trade as a last resort (p. 111).

Lindstrom-Best pieced together a profile of the 'typical' Finnish prostitute from the descriptions of clients, social workers, and other observers. She usually had a better than average education, noted as walking with her head held high - "the most beautiful woman in town." A woman who, in the late twenties and early thirties, had nursed three young prostitutes dying of syphilis in Timmins, noted that: "They were all women who had good education in Finland, but in Canada they could not find their own kind of work. Being frail and unaccustomed to hard physical labour, they became prostitutes. The money was good, they could continue to buy attractive clothes, and all of them had nice homes" (p. 112).

This profile stands in contrast to studies done of turn-of-the-century prostitutes which indicate that most were between fourteen and twenty-five years old, youth being a highly marketable commodity. Finnish prostitutes were primarily mature women, in their thirties and forties, who served almost exclusively their own communities. They enjoyed the protection of their clientele and the community, in many ways, shielded them from the authorities in order protect the general image of Finns in Canada. Lindstrom-Best also asserts that the *koiratorppari* had no counterpart in Finland and bootlegging and prostitution were natural outgrowths of early immigrant life in the North.

circumstances.

Women themselves had not been written into the myth of the "True North," nor was their existence broadly acknowledged in the popular socialist history of strength and struggle. A notable exception, however, was the experience of Finnish women active in the northern socialist movement through the early decades of the twentieth century. Women were not absent from the Finnish socialist discourse of Bay St. in the heyday of Port Arthur radicalism.⁵² Indeed, by 1921, Ontario had become the focal point for all Finnish immigration and the numbers of women in Port Arthur were beginning to equal those of men. Finnish domestic workers,⁵³ in particular, had been politicized during the socialist fervour that swept Finland in the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ Thus, young women immigrating to Canada brought a socialist world view to their work as domestics in Canada.⁵⁵ Further, class-consciousness among Finnish women in Port Arthur was not restricted to the maid's organizations. Women in Port Arthur were actively encouraged to attend, participate and engage in debate at all socialist meetings in the Labour Temple.⁵⁶

⁵² As early as 1903, thirty women had joined Imatra 9, a socialist worker's organization founded in Port Arthur.

⁵³ For a detailed account of the work of Finnish domestic women see Varpu Lindstrom-Best, *Defiant Sisters*, chapter 5.

⁵⁴ Many Finnish immigrants arrived in Canada shortly after the Finnish Civil War of 1918 which saw the defeat of the left by the "white army." Many had been persecuted and imprisoned, or had seen family and loved ones shot. The ardour with which Finnish immigrants took up the socialist cause in Canada was deeply rooted in these scars but largely misunderstood by the mainstream population. Indeed, Nellie McClung referred to the reputation of immigrant Finnish domestic workers as "socialists and trouble-makers" (*Defiant Sisters*, p. 118).

⁵⁵ During the 1920s, Finnish domestic servants made up 7 to 8 per cent of all immigrant women classified as "female domestics." In 1929, 79.6% of Finnish women immigrating to Canada were domestic workers (statistics from *Defiant Sisters*).

⁵⁶ A progressive Finnish socialist man was expected to publicly promote women's right to equality. However, Tyne Latva recalls the paradox: "'Go to the meetings, go to the meetings,' my husband used to say as he was going out the door leaving me at home with a young baby. How do I go when

Financial independence was highly valued and Finnish women in the north were noted for choosing money over marriage. Some women who did not want to work as domestics found fast and lucrative business opportunities running bootlegging operations called *Koriorpparit* (the "doghouse keepers" or keepers of blind pigs). *Koriorpparit* thrived in the resource towns where men were longing for diversion, and in Port Arthur where the strict liquor laws and dress codes of the "official" taverns alienated immigrants. Operating "dog-houses" gave many women an alternative, independent way of living and gave women status as matrons, bankers and bouncers.⁵⁷ According to Varpu Lindström-Best, these female bootleggers were women of power, property and control over men, at once the most respected and despised women in the community,⁵⁸ not afraid to break the law when it did not seem to meet the worker's needs.

Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, the organized social, cultural and political activity in Northern Ontario's Finnish communities was dominated by the radical left, in which women played a significant part. Sanna Kannasto, in particular, was a vibrant socialist orator and organizer: "a small bit of a woman . . . with piercing eyes . . . and a fiery orator's tongue." Kannasto's militant style, a mixture of socialism and feminism, has been held in contrast to anglophone women of the time and the "cool, undemonstrative nature" of Finns themselves. Kannasto, like other Finnish socialist women, was noted

he is attending meetings every night?" (*Defiant Sisters*, p. 102).

⁵⁷ However, as noted above, *koriorpparit* which doubled as "cat-houses" were shunned in socialist circles. Marxist feminist and radical feminist analyses of prostitution, while fascinating, are not discussed in the present study.

⁵⁸ An autobiography of a Timmins woman describes one bootlegger, who was putting her two sons through university in Helsinki, as follows:

The Queen of Hearts, it was said, kept a spotless house, and no fault could be found with her morals. She was a business woman -- for drinks only and no funny business -- but she did not have any friends among the Finnish housewives, nor did she take part in any of the various social activities.

for her independence and political assertiveness and often took in promising young women for intensive study with her inside the Bay St. milieu - a *locale* which would, despite the silencing of Finnish-socialist traditions by the universalism of radical feminist discourse, become extremely significant as the second-wave feminist movement came north in the early 1970s.

C. Essentialism: True, Strong and Free

Whether we are discussing women's oppression or the alienation of Northern Ontario, one theme which emerges is that people can and do find strength in the "confirming consolations"⁵⁹ of their relative powerlessness - and many of these consolations find their expression in myth.

Among modern forest industry workers in the north, myths of the earlier timber trade allow for a celebration of the physical strength, courage and perseverance of their predecessors. Thomas Dunk points out that although this may be an invented tradition, the values inherent in the myth are still present in the male working-class culture of the region.⁶⁰ For women, compensatory myths have included continued assertions about the *specialness* of women and their values. Lynn Segal calls this the politics of despair and retreat - a means of softening a pervasive pessimism about one's ability to change one's position in life.

⁵⁹ Lynn Segal, *Is the Future Female?*, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Dunk, *It's a Working Man's Town*, p. 56. Physical strength and the ability to "drink like a man" continue to be important signifiers of regional identity and distinctiveness.

i) Woman

In the late 1960s, feminism took a radical departure from previous liberal and socialist feminist assertions that freedom for women was to be found in political and economic "liberation." Radical feminism argued that women's liberation was not to be found in pushing liberalism to its logical conclusion by demanding "equal rights" for women in political and economic life. It was contended that by remaining inside a liberal discourse, women were engaging with *male* constructs of equality and liberty, which were merely symbols of male *power*. The explanation for women's oppression, then, could not be found in a discussion of the 'rational' human agent. It was, in fact, a thing of the body.⁶¹

The private sphere of the family came under intense scrutiny, identified as the chief institution of patriarchal authority, "a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole." Patriarchal force was re-conceptualized as the domain of the individual male, "who alone is psychologically and technically equipped to perpetrate physical violence."⁶² The strength of a radical feminist analysis lay in its ability to logically connect the social, psychological, economic and political manifestations of women's oppression. In problematizing the family and applying an analysis of power relationships in the private sphere, early radical feminism was indeed unique and important as it emerged.

However, in its focus on the politics surrounding women's bodies, radical feminism has often

⁶¹ More than liberal or Marxist feminists, radical feminist theory has attempted to explicitly articulate how women's bodies (reproduction and sexuality) are controlled in order to serve male needs. Such control is conceptualized as being manifest in restrictive contraception or abortion laws and violence against women (rape, wife battering, pornography, etc.).

⁶² See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*. New York: Doubleday, 1970.

suggested that men and women are biologically and psychologically different - with men usually portrayed as corrupt and women as innocent. Radical feminism, like liberal feminism, has often assumed an innate or essential self. It differs from liberalism, however, in distinguishing between the so-called "essential" characteristics of each sex. Radical feminism increasingly conceptualized women, in relation to Marxism and socialist feminism, as an oppressed "class" unto themselves. The notion that women, as a "sex class," have more in common than do members of the same economic class, began to supercede the idea of class-based struggle in discourse about women and work.⁶³ Insofar as women's oppression was conceptualized as the individual manifestation of a universal problem, the individual experience became inconsequential once it had been incorporated into a collective narrative. Once the theoretical assumption that individual lives were public, and collective, events, the cause of women's oppression as *women* was, increasingly, to be found, not in society, but in psychology.⁶⁴

It was therefore contended by leading radical feminist theorists that the motive force in history has been a dialectic of sex, the striving of men for power over women. As Kate Millet wrote:

Our society . . . is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political offices, finances -- in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police -- is entirely in male hands.⁶⁵

Socialist feminists have criticized this approach, warning that essentialist claims are more often than

⁶³ Theorists such as Shulamith Firestone and Catherine MacKinnon have used traditional Marxist concepts to analogize between class oppression and sex oppression, identifying sex and sexuality as *the* locus of male power.

⁶⁴ See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*. New York: Bantam Books, 1970. Firestone looked to Freud to understand gender development in terms of power. She characterizes the male as seeking power and domination while the female is nurturant, artistic and philosophical. Such a characterization is typical of radical feminist theories about human nature, but radical feminists have disagreed over whether these differences are due to biology or culture.

⁶⁵ Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p. 25.

not politically and philosophically conservative. For example, it has been pointed out that by agreeing that women are *a priori* nurturing, and that men are conversely obsessed with death, many radical feminists have been in danger of supporting the very dichotomies they seek to avoid. Joan Cocks has stated that a standard radical feminist strategy has been to retain historically defined gender-categories and attributed characteristics, but to revalue them so that the female ones can be used to empower women vis a vis their own bodies and innate femaleness.⁶⁶ Also at issue for socialist feminists, is the radical feminist belief in the universality and inevitability of patriarchy as a governing social institution. Indeed, the concept of the "pure voice" of women has become increasingly problematic in theoretical discourse as radical feminism has departed from its early analysis of sexual politics toward a celebration of "woman-only" space and culture.

ii) North

Given what has already been discussed above about the Finnish community of Northern Ontario, it is interesting to note that the region was settled within the ideological frame of the Canada First Movement, a nationalist agenda which coupled the idea of a strong "Northern race" with a popularized social darwinism. Following an implicitly racist ideology, based largely on ethnic stereotypes, its proponents called upon immigrants from suitably 'northern' climes to open the north of Ontario. Feeling that Confederation had been created without flourish, Haliburton, Dennison and

⁶⁶ See Joan Cocks, "Wordless Emotions: Some Critical Reflections on Radical Feminism," *Politics and Society* 13(1), 1984, pp. 27-58; Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaphysics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Publishing, 1978). Daly, in particular, insists upon the elemental purity of women and promotes an individual and psychic voyage to an ideal of 'women's space.' Reclaiming both language and nature from male "phallocracy," Daly asserts, is the only solution to women's oppression. Women engaged in reform, or working as professionals, are considered "parasites" who are "lobotomized . . . victimized into a state of living death." *The Race of Women*, therefore, is reserved for none but the pure of heart.

others agitated for the northwesterly expansion of the country, not only for the economic advantage of the new Dominion, but also as an opportunity to create the spirit of a nation.

Carl Berger, in "The True North Strong and Free," argues that it was no accident that an intellectual elite would appeal to "the unconquered North" as a foundation myth for its nationalist agenda.⁶⁷ By the early nineteenth century, the political and industrial revolutions in Europe, liberalism and the aesthetic perception of the sublime were accompanied by an increasing fascination with the relationship of human beings to the natural environment. In Victorian England, magazines began to offer excerpts from the published journals of fur traders as tales of excitement and adventure for British youth.⁶⁸ Particularly after the acquisition of the northwest territory in 1896, imaginative writers were provided with an unexperienced area, full of indigenous incidents and themes.

Late nineteenth-century popular rhetoric also connected geographic location or climatic condition with the moulding of racial character. The logical extension of life in northern climates was considered to be resilience and strength, both of political culture and the character of individuals, in contrast to what was characterized as an "effeminate" south. Robert Grant Haliburton, said to be the first proponent of the 'northern race' theory in Canada, contended that Canada's future as a dominant world power was secure precisely because of its northern character, rooted as that character was thought to be in notions of liberty and self-reliance. These were considered to be the elemental institutions of the northmen.

⁶⁷ Carl Berger, "The True North, Strong and Free . . ." *Nationalism in Canada*. Ed. Peter Russell (Toronto: McGraw Hill Ryerson, 1966) p. 5.

⁶⁸ See S. D. Grant, "Myths of the North in the Canadian Ethos," *The Northern Review* 3/4 (1989) for a detailed discussion of historical influences upon the popular Canadian mythology of north.

Therefore, exponents of the "northern destiny" of Canada politically agitated for the population of the New North by "descendants of the Northern races" -- Celtic, Teutonic, Scandinavian, Norman French, Saxon, and Swede -- who were purported to share appealing geographically determined attributes necessary for the purpose at hand. In 1871, William Foster said that "The old Norse mythology, with its Thor hammers and Thor hammerings, appeals to us, -- for we are a Northern people, -- as the true out-crop of human nature, more manly, than the weak marrow bones superstition of an effeminate South."⁶⁹

Immigration officials, as mediators of a peculiar Darwinian nationalism, encouraged the influx of an eclectic immigrant population into Northern Ontario. By 1921 Northern Ontario held 1/2 of the Scandinavians, Austrians and Ukrainians, and almost the entire Finnish population of Ontario. The majority were unskilled, manual labourers who were offered the possibility of hard cash and freedom, available through the building of railways, opening of mines and the advancing of the lumber industry into a dense wilderness.

Climate was seen as both a sort of agency, able to mould desirable characteristics irrespective of race, and as a determining feature in the fixity of racial capacities. Haliburton insisted that all future immigration would consist of races already adapted to the northern environment. On the other hand, the complete malleability of human character through climate was also assigned to the immigrant who, upon arriving in Canada from the monarchical countries of Europe, would come to exhibit a "manly" independence. This transformation would come to the individual through the influence of British institutions and the "broad rivers, boundless prairies, high mountains, and pathless woods."

⁶⁹ *Canada First: A Memorial of the late William A. Foster* (Toronto, 1890), p. 25 as quoted in Berger.

On both counts, the north was theoretically guaranteed to breed a population of rugged, individualistic, hardy men who would open the northern forests and mines with commitment and speed. In Canada, it was claimed that "the cold north wind that rocked the cradle of our race, still blows through our forests, and breathes the spirit of liberty into our hearts."⁷⁰

Interestingly, socialism found its strongest support in the most "northerly" of the immigrant population - the Bay St. Finns of the 1930s. Far from tapping, or creating, an essential northern character, I would argue that, contrary to the myth, the demands of daily existence -- an existence mediated by social institutions firmly rooted in liberalism and racist stereotyping -- offers more interesting food for thought. Reflecting on the character of the Finns in her childhood, Alice Boyer in "Cold," states that "it's hard to be a carefree wood nymph in buckled Arctics and iron overcoats. It's difficult to be a dancing satyr in rubber boots and quilted parkas."⁷¹ It is also difficult to become the "True North, Strong and Free" in an economy which offered seasonal work in lumber camps, low wages and an existence bordering between subsistence and destitution.

D. Postmodernism:

All humanist discourse assumes an essence (rational / emotional; female / male). But postmodernism proposes that an individual is always in a state of flux - the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity and the variety of positions we may occupy.⁷² Linda Alcoff points out that in post-modernist

⁷⁰ R. G. Haliburton, *The Men of the North and their place in history. A lecture delivered before the Montreal Literary Club, March 31st, 1869* (Montreal, 1869) p. 2, 8, 16, as quoted in Berger.

⁷¹ Alice Boyer, "Cold" *Northward Journal* 37, p. 31.

⁷² See Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13:3 (1988); Susan Bordo,

discourse, it is language (and silence) which interprets the individual as a subject -- constituting her subjectivity for her. Subjectivity, according to this view, is an effect of ideology and it is assumed that ideology is always the precondition for social existence. Ideology is considered to be the mediator between individuals and the conditions of their lives - an imaginary relationship. Further, Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests that to think one is an author of one's own identity necessitates a belief in control of the meaning, that one imagines he or she to be the type of subject proposed in the theory -- rational and unified -- rather than the effect of language. Such imagining gives psychological and emotional force to the process of identification.⁷³

i) Woman

In the postmodernist view, to identify oneself as a woman is to engage in a discursive exercise with theory. There are many competing ways of giving meaning and organizing social institutions, as my exploration of the philosophies above has shown. The meaning attached to the existing structure of social institutions is a site of political struggle waged mainly through language. At the level of the individual woman, theory and language are able to offer an explanation of where experiences come from and why. Postmodernism offers an explanation for why those experiences of "woman" may be often contradictory and incoherent.

"Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender Scepticism" *Feminism : Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990). As Alcoff points out, Lacan, Derrida and Foucault are the front-runners of post-structuralist theory. Though they differ in their approach, all three explore the common theme that the discoverable humanist subject (self-contained and unified) is in fact a construct of that very discourse. Lacan uses psychoanalysis; Derrida uses grammar; and Foucault uses the history of discourses to attack essentialism.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

The postmodernist argument against other feminist theories is that all are trying to attain something that is quite impossible -- an encompassing meaning for the word and the position of "woman." Different feminisms have competed for the meaning of a plural signifier, yet none of the theories we have discussed have engaged with the relationship between subjectivity and meaning and the range of possible subject positions a single woman may occupy. Derrida has called for a deconstruction of binary oppositions in language.⁷⁴ This is appealing to many feminist theorists because of the problems that radical feminism has encountered by maintaining a male / female discursive framework in attempting to discuss "woman." From a deconstructionist perspective, analyses which use subjectivity as the basis are complicit with the failings of humanism. This is a struggle which feminism has always had, with strategies sometimes devolving into a blunt and rhetorical essentialism. In commenting on "woman," Derrida has said that woman is historically and discursively constructed -- a volatile collectivity that cannot be relied on. Deconstruction, then, can expose the artifice inherent in nature, gender and the unified self - the cornerstone of western liberal thought.⁷⁵ It also offers a means of dividing the unitary "woman," towards which the experience of radical feminism vis a vis suppressing *difference* among women has pushed us.

Alcoff's difficulty with an outright dismantling of existing categories like "woman" is that a feminist practice can then be only be negative, rejecting "everything finite, definite, structure, loaded with

⁷⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Spurs*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978). I am indebted to Linda Alcoff for her treatment of Derrida in the context of feminist poststructuralism. She points out that Derrida's discussion of binary oppositions challenges feminist theory to see the very category of "woman" as a fiction and a source of women's oppression.

⁷⁵ See Michel Foucault, "Why Study Power: The Question of the Subject" *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics: Michel Foucault*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2d ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983).

meaning, in the existing state of society."⁷⁶ She fears that battling a tendency toward essentialism in some feminist theory with the nominalism of poststructuralist thought creates a paradox for concrete feminist action. Nonetheless, the attraction of post-structuralism for the purposes of this discussion is that it provides a tool for moving beyond liberalism, socialism and essentialism to explore and theorize in areas that they have overlooked.

ii) North

The concept of region as a "frozen scene for human activity"⁷⁷ has come under attack with the influence of modern social theory on the discipline of human geography. The discipline is now less concerned with collecting technical information on the facts of an objective world to be exploited as a technical apparatus, and increasingly is interested in exploring the psychological and social constructions of place.⁷⁸ Nigel Thrift sees the region as an interactive structure, "the 'actively passive' meeting place of social structure and human agency."⁷⁹ Landscape is no longer thought of as an inert, physical realm, but a symbolic one as well.

Anssi Paasi; in his thorough discussion of the re-conceptualization of the region argues that "the division of labour and its spatial consequences, manifest themselves in economic and power relations,

⁷⁶ Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation between Power and Denial" *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), p. 166. See also Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism."

⁷⁷ Allan Pred, "Place as a Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and Time-Geography of Becoming Places." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74 (1984), p. 282.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ See Nigel Thrift, "On the Determination of Social Action in Space and Time," *Society and Space* 1 (1983), pp. 23-57.

define the role of single individuals in creating, maintaining and reproducing the structures of society and hence also the symbolic dimensions of space."⁸⁰ Politicians, bureaucrats, journalists and others similarly placed, have a significant role in the production and reproduction of spatial consciousness among individuals through the institutionalization of symbolic myths and economic practices of particular places.

Further, Paasi makes an important distinction between "region" and "place," in the context of concrete societies, as one possibility for understanding the development and role of individual and collective spatial consciousness in societies. His point of departure is that the region is a concrete manifestation of social (natural, cultural, economic, political, etc.) processes that affect and are affected by changes in spatial structures over time. Whereas the concept of place is rooted in the everyday life of individuals, one's "lifeworld" or "path," the region is an abstraction to be realized in relationship between individual action and social structure through the structuration process of the society.

The concept of the region is interpreted as a category with an explicit collective dimension which represents the level of institutional practice and regional history. Regions are essentially symbolic structures which transcend local social interactions and are mediated in everyday life through symbols. Hence, Paasi argues that although personal meanings associated with the region are contained in the practice of individuals, "these meanings cannot be totally reduced to experiences that constitute everyday life, since a region bears with it institutionally mediated practices and relations, the most significant being the history of the region as a part of the spatial structure of the society in question."⁸¹

⁸⁰ Paasi, 109.

⁸¹ Paasi, 114.

Conclusion:

I began this chapter with a discussion of the rational, liberal subject -- unified, autonomous, un-gendered and un-placed. In Northern Ontario, this subject is a colonial inspiration, sent to the wilderness to organize material reality, and explore and harness the contents of a cohesive region -- the boreal forest of the Canadian Shield. In this world of single-industry resource towns, women have little place.

I followed with a discussion of the Marxist subject, defined by his / her capacity for productive and reproductive labour. In Northern Ontario, this subject is a worker, a key location of class conflict and resistance, as evidenced by the experience of the Finnish radical left of Port Arthur in the 1930s. In this world of socialist organizing, the position of women is not necessarily fixed, but neither is she the author of her own life. For the Finnish immigrant woman of the 1930s, her choices are largely limited to domestic work, bootlegging, or prostitution.

In contrast, the essential subject, whether the "Northmen of the New World" or Mary Daly's "Race of Women," finds strength in the "confirming consolations" of myth. In Northern Ontario the early timber trade allows for a regional celebration of strength, courage and perseverance in a harsh wilderness. For women, a belief in an innate and innocent nurturing spirit - the antithesis of the rugged north - makes life in small towns with small gardens, through long winters and long marriages, slightly more bearable.

Finally, I concluded this chapter with a discussion of the post-modern subject as a site of conflicting forms of identification. Whether "northern," "woman," or both, this subject is in a constant state of

flux and contradiction -- vested with both power and powerlessness. It is from this position -- the disunity of the "northern woman" -- that I begin to discuss the text of the *Northern Woman Journal*.

CHAPTER TWO

WOMANSPACE: BRINGING FEMINISM TO NORTHERN ONTARIO

A. Political Context - Second-Wave Feminism

There is little doubt that since the time of Mary Wollstonecraft there have been various "feminist movements" at work to better the position of women in society. In Canada, some nineteenth-century feminists embraced a progressive-reform impulse toward the development of a moral, civilized and virtuous society in the rapidly industrializing new world. At local, provincial and national levels, Canadian women joined to campaign for temperance, religious instruction, improvements in the workplace, better housing, facilities for single women and state-run public and child welfare programs.⁸² Many groups were associated with churches but were soon joined by a number of secular organizations which increasingly advocated direct involvement for women in political life.

The call for female suffrage throughout the late nineteenth century became an increasingly national project which, in Canada, culminated in the *Women's Franchise Act* in 1918 and the *Dominion Elections Act* in 1920. After this and other legislative victories, feminist activity continued, but not nearly at the same level or with the same urgency. Many working-class women found more direct and immediately effective means of gaining equality through union socialism throughout the 1920s and 1930s.⁸³ As discussed in the previous chapter, Finnish women in Port Arthur were at the forefront of

⁸² Jane Errington, "Pioneers and Suffragists," in *Changing Patterns: Women in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), p. 65.

⁸³ For a detailed discussion of this period, see Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left 1920-1950* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989). Many socialist women rejected the term "feminism" because they associated it with middle-class bourgeois reform. However, they did incorporate some gender analysis into their socialism and were, in fact, early practitioners of a Marxist / socialist feminism.

this movement; most notable is the work of Sanna Kannasto who championed for Finnish women and was known for her eloquence, confidence and knowledge of socialist doctrine.

Though Kannasto's Bay St. *locale* was itself central to the northern feminist movement, a portrait of her has not been written into the history of the early Canadian feminist movement, nor that of the north. Although many immigrant women were actively engaged in women's issues within their own communities, their insights and experience existed outside the mainstream. The suffragists of the late nineteenth century belonged to organizations like the Toronto Women's Literary Club, founded in 1876. It was a small group of middle class, educated and professional women who not only sought the vote but the opening of universities to women.⁸⁴ This political platform obviously had little to do with the lives of Finnish domestic workers, Franco-Ontarian "housewives," or displaced Native women in the north.

The movement continued to be primarily white and middle class. Clearly in the aftermath of World War II this group of women, particularly in Southern Ontario, seemed to be advancing both economically and politically and were increasingly better-educated and moving into higher-paying work. The unity which characterized the earlier days of suffrage was thought to be past.⁸⁵ The 1950s were characterized as an era of prosperity and, as Naomi Black has stated, no one expected the women's movement to re-emerge.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Sandra Burt et al. *Changing Patterns*, pp. 70-71.

⁸⁵ The vote had a unifying appeal as a feminist symbol. After its achievement, there was a sense that unity in the movement was lacking and the urgency of early days had disappeared.

⁸⁶ Naomi Black, "The Canadian Women's Movement: The Second Wave" in *Changing Patterns*, p. 81. This assumption is the subject of much debate, with current literature showing that there may have been more feminist organizing throughout the early decades of this century than scholars like Naomi Black had previously thought.

However, as the political and economic position of women was increasing, their domestic obligations remained virtually unchanged. In the late 1960s, Black points to two sorts of grievances which pushed feminist activity once again to the fore of national political life, fuelling a growing "second-wave" women's movement in the urban centres. Reformists, much like their earlier predecessors, were calling for an end to continued discrimination against women in the public sphere, seeking to raise the so-called "glass ceiling" which kept women from attaining positions of public power in society. Furthermore, Canadian businesswomen at the time were complaining of multiple and conflicting expectations, having to be "twice as good as a man" and still be primarily responsible for the family.⁸⁷

In 1966, Laura Sabia brought together 32 women to establish the Committee for Equality for Women, organized primarily to lobby for a government inquiry into the status of women in Canada. It was clear to Sabia and others that women did not represent a constituency in the political agenda of the state, which ignored their initially quiet requests. Only after Sabia threatened potential violence and a march of two million women on Parliament Hill did the government respond in establishing the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.⁸⁸

The government's purpose was a dual one: to gather the information necessary to integrate women fully into the workforce and to defuse the growing feminist activism. However, the work of the Commission itself proved to be a transformative process. As women came together to prepare and present briefs to the Commission, they were politicized in the process. Many were transformed into

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-5.

⁸⁸ Black, "The Second Wave," p. 87-88. For further discussion of this history, see also Marjorie Griffin Cohen, "The Canadian Women's Movement" in Pierson et al. eds., *Canadian Women's Issues, Volume 1: Strong Voices*; Nancy Adamson et al., *Feminist Organizing for Change*, chap. 2.

active radical feminists through the unprecedented and extensive public hearings which occurred.⁸⁹

Although the resulting analysis of the causes of women's oppression was largely reformist and its scope somewhat limited (it remained silent on issues of violence against women, lesbian rights, race and ethnicity), the Royal Commission was crucial to second-wave feminism in the period 1967-1970, a time when public awareness of women's issues and women's participation in the movement was growing at a rapid rate. It ultimately led to the establishment of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women in 1972, a continuing umbrella organization which, unlike the experience in the United States, was able to at least accommodate, if not always nourish, diverse women's groups from across the political spectrum.⁹⁰

At the same time as the Royal Commission was hearing briefs and recommending reforms, younger women were drawing on their experience in the student movements of the 1960s, and importing elements of the radical political culture of the New Left to women's issues and concerns. These women's groups were characterized by a distrust of government and a belief in revolutionary change through "consciousness raising" in non-hierarchical organizations. By the early 1970s, "grassroots" feminism was articulating a sense of itself as different from both institutionalized feminism and the socialist left.⁹¹

In addition, the second wave saw local groups emerging to address the interests of specific groups of

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁹⁰ For a thorough discussion of NAC, see Jill Vickers, *Politics as if Women Mattered: A Political Analysis of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women* (Toronto: U of Toronto P. 1993).

⁹¹ Nancy Adamson et al., *Feminist Organizing for Change*, chap. 2 is extremely helpful in outlining the history of the two distinct approaches to feminist organizing which emerged in the late 1960s at the time of the Royal Commission

women. For example, groups of Native women began to focus on the right of Native women to legal "status" as Indians regardless of inter-racial marriage;⁹² black women formed a national congress; farm women became involved in local farm issues, and so on.⁹³ For the most part, however, these groups were very small and had short life-spans, and remained on the margins of the wider liberation movement throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Therefore, with socialist discourse largely relegated to the margins, the central debate during this time between liberal and radical feminism occurred largely within a white, educated woman's milieu.⁹⁴ The centrality of, and the tension between, these two strains of thought is evident in the limited number of feminist texts considered to be influential at the time of the Royal Commission: Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*.⁹⁵

Millet's *Sexual Politics* responded to the liberal feminism promoted by Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* by asking the question: "Has women's freedom been 'accidentally' and 'irrationally' curtailed as liberal feminism assumes?" Millet's answer set out to broaden contemporary theorizing about

⁹² Native women were among the first to campaign on their own behalf. Although the Royal Commission had identified clause 12(1)(b) of the *Indian Act* as a "special kind of discrimination," native women felt that "nothing would get done" until they organized themselves. The Ontario Native Women's Association was formed, with its headquarters in Thunder Bay in 1972. Its goal was to achieve status for native wives of non-status husbands, as well as to provide leadership in their communities faced with problems of alcoholism and abuse.

⁹³ Pierson et al., p. 15. See also "The Personal is Political" in Alison Prentice et al., eds. *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), pp. 391-405.

⁹⁴ The issue of racism in the women's movement has been widely discussed in recent years. See, for example, Audrey Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984); Lee Maracle, "Racism, Sexism and Patriarchy" in Himani Bannerji, ed. *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993); bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness" in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Between the Lines, 1990).

⁹⁵ There were many more feminist works available, existing in the shadow of those texts which have come to be considered "classics" in the present day.

women's oppression, examining hitherto private sexual relations between men and women. She asserted that "coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum."⁹⁶ In seeing the family as a political realm, early radical feminism problematized the private sphere as a mediating structure of women's oppression, and challenged biological rationalizations for traditional gender roles.

These ideas, emerging largely from the frustration of U.S. women with their experience in leftist movements, were new to Canadian feminism, pushing reformers to engage with the politics of the private sphere -- the enactment of male power in the home. This debate was central to the emergence of Canadian radical feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Standing increasingly apart from existing philosophical traditions, radical feminism was labelled as a movement of women, by women, and for women, pushing theories of women's oppression beyond conventional understandings of power.⁹⁷ Its fundamental challenge to liberal philosophy was that the personal was political, and that power operations must be defined on grounds of personal contact and experience.⁹⁸

Because individual issues were defined as being ultimately social and political, practical solutions were seen to be collective as well. In her study on the structure and organizing principles of feminist collectives, Janice L. Ristock asserts that the emergence of alternative services for women drew heavily on the experience of early consciousness-raising groups. The ideal of "women helping women

⁹⁶ Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p. 23.

⁹⁷ For a reflection on the important contribution that a radical feminist critique of liberal assumptions has made to post-structuralism and deconstruction, see Sneja Gunew, *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* (London: Routledge, 1990); and Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

⁹⁸ Millet asserts: "Indeed, it may be imperative that we give some attention to defining a theory of politics which treats power relationships on grounds less conventional than those to which we are accustomed. I have therefore found it pertinent to define them on grounds of personal contact and interaction between members of well-defined and coherent groups: races, castes, classes, and sexes" (*Sexual Politics*, p. 24).

help one another" became contrasted to the world of male power where women were identified as "other."⁹⁹

The organizational structure of "consciousness-raising" emerged with the politicization of individual women's lives in the theoretical arena in order to allow women to "speak their bitterness" and discuss the implications of their individual experiences in their relationships with men and society as a whole. What previously had been seen as personal problems or "neuroses" were, in groups, re-conceptualized as political problems originating not with the individual, but with society. The commonalities experienced in this initial sharing of stories in small groups across geographic and class borders, coupled with an emerging theoretical tradition which asserted the universality of its gender analysis, led those in the movement to proclaim that "sisterhood is global."

In the context of consciousness-raising efforts, violence against women by men was a central organizing principle with its analysis of power relationships on the personal level. Having identified rape as the practice of patriarchal theory by individual men, it then became the paradigm for understanding all other ways in which women were oppressed. Radical feminist theorists were attempting to reconceptualize human relationships to eliminate oppression, and the early women's movement began to incorporate the ideal of empowerment into their organizational structures. Much work then went into developing a "uniquely feminist structure" based on consensus and collectivity to mediate the spread of "consciousness" to other "sisters." Such a structure was eventually discussed as a "space" where women could feel "safe" in their work as feminists.

⁹⁹ See Janice L. Ristock, "Feminist Collectives: The Struggles and Contradictions in our Quest for a 'Uniquely Feminist Structure'" *Women and Social Change*, eds. Jeri Wine and Janice Ristock (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1991), pp. 41-55.

The strength that came with challenging the conventional liberal model with a radical analysis, was the development of theoretical tools for logically connecting antecedent social, psychological, economic and political manifestations of women's oppression in *both* the public and private sphere. As an organizing theory, it was able to provide a clear and compelling argument for women to begin to enter the realm of sexual politics in their personal lives and, as individuals, use their experience to challenge an historical and mythological tradition dominated by men. As such, it too was crucial to the mobilization of women throughout the time of the Bird Commission, in late 1960s and early 1970s.

B. The Northern Woman

The almost total absence of women both from the mythic constructions and the institutionalized structures of Northern Ontario combined with radical feminism's attack on the identity of the rational human agent created a vibrant period of questioning and recasting the meaning of "northern woman" throughout the 1970s.

At the Northern Women's Conference in 1973, women from the region heard from keynote speakers about how they might become "sisters" with them and were called upon to work for a public and political response to their private frustrations, having now been given the tools to recognize what they shared in common as women. On the last day of the Conference, 50 women in Thunder Bay took their cue and formed the Northern Women's Centre, an institution which would come to mediate the "arrival" of radical feminist politics in the north

The Women's Centre, and its appearance through the gestetnered publication which preceded the

Northern Woman Journal in 1973, mirrored the activities of women across the country at the time. In Thunder Bay, as elsewhere, women began to form consciousness-raising groups. There started to be talk of creating a "woman-only space" on Bay Street. A transition house for battered women was proposed. As a result, the newsletter grew and by 1974, it had become the *Northern Woman Journal* in tabloid form.

This marks the beginning of the collection I am working from. The earlier gestetnered publications are now unavailable and consequently there are at least seven issues that I am missing. My copy of the first tabloid is now yellowed and torn - handwritten across the top is a note to me which says: "No more copies." On the cover, below a rough drawing of two women embracing is the sale price, marked at 50 cents. The contents are obviously cut and paste. Letters and original articles are typewritten; pieces borrowed from other publications have been pasted in with titles and acknowledgements handwritten in black ink. Over the years, the overall appearance of the *Journal* has improved, though not by much. It remains roughly-hewn, its appearance charmingly humble in spite of the bold declarations it contains.

In "Working with Words: Feminist Publishing in Canada," Margie Wolfe explains that the [radical] feminist movement naturally grew into a feminist press because mainstream periodical, newspaper and book publishers were seen as having entrenched "patriarchal" ideals of profit and product, as opposed to the "feminist" goal of radical social change. Feminist publishers in the 1970s were almost exclusively non-profit, volunteer-driven organizations. They consciously chose to remain outside the forces of the mass market, relying strongly on the belief that writing *by* women was *for* women. In the words of the founders of the *Northern Woman Journal* in an early editorial:

We talk of freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, the freedom to belong to any political party, the freedom of choice. But when we look at our freedoms, we find they are

often illusions of freedom. It is the people with the money who get the press and the talk time. Why else must we form an alternative press?¹⁰⁰

The organizational structure adopted by the *Northern Woman Journal* rested on the radical feminist assumption that all hierarchical structures are man-made, and therefore oppressive to women. Its founders believed that a strong collective process, based on a sharing of power and feminist ideals, was crucial to the production of the *Journal*. The centrality of a radical feminist analysis of power led to a theoretical reconceptualization of human relationships and organizational structure. In this, the larger movement assumed an organizational strategy based on the assumption that in a sphere set apart from men, feminist collectives would be able to make the idea of non-hierarchical, egalitarian relationships among women an operable reality. For the *Journal*, this meant the creation of a project that drew heavily on the socialist critiques of the radical left, but was wedded to the "ideal of empowerment"¹⁰¹ for women.

A significant starting point for both the Northern Women's Conference and the *Northern Woman Journal* was the absence of women's experience from notions of "development" in small resource towns. At the time of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, unemployment rates for women in the north were significantly higher than for their southern counterparts. The imbalance between the incomes of men and women in the North continue to surpass national and provincial averages. Female median income in the Thunder Bay District in 1988 was 38 per cent of male median income, as compared to 48 per cent for the country as a whole. Two-thirds of all female workers in the North are employed only part of the year, or part-time in clerical, sales and service occupations.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ *Northern Woman Journal* collective, "Editorial" *Northern Woman Journal* 2: 4 (1975), p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Ristock, "Feminist Collectives," pp. 41-55.

¹⁰² Dunk, *It's a Working Man's Town*, pp. 60-61.

Employing a Marxist critique, Grace Hartmann argued in 1976 to a group of trade unionists in Sudbury that women's lives, therefore, were less rewarding because of the high cost of maintaining the material life of the family in the north with few productive resources. Corporations in Northern Ontario paid substantially lower taxes than in any other region of the country, and the consequent shortage in tax revenues has historically resulted in substandard sanitation, education, health and social services.¹⁰³ Hartmann asserted that:

. . . such communities eventually face serious problems; their community facilities and services fall short of expectations of the increasing number of residents, yet there are no local funds available to remedy the situation. This process is actually aided by the Province, as there is no legislation or program available whereby these separate unorganized communities could begin to carry out self-help measures. They have no mechanism for self-expression; no financial base to carry out community improvements; and they have no powers to control development."¹⁰⁴

Self-expression, improvement, and power, as concepts within a Marxist discourse, are linked to the material basis of an individual's life, and thus reconceptualizations of the same are to be found only as a result of concrete, material change -- ultimately through social and economic revolution.

An early letter to the editor applauded the marriage of this socialist conception of 'north' to an otherwise generic women's movement in the *Northern Woman Journal*, identifying the "inappropriateness of strategies developed by southern women to suit southern problems." Writing from Red Lake, the woman wrote of the limited range of options for women in a primary resource industry town. "Consequently," she says, "it is harder to overcome the feeling of powerlessness many women experience."¹⁰⁵ Another woman, writing from Pickle Lake, stated that her own life in the north could be summed up in one paragraph:

¹⁰³ Grace Hartmann, "The Social Impact of Economic Development of Northern Communities" *Boreal* 5 (1977), p. 82.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Audrey Anderson, "Letter to the Editor" *Northern Woman Journal* 5:2 (1979), p. 3.

My children are grown-up and at university. I cannot retrain here in Pickle Lake as there are no facilities, therefore I cannot get a job and there are very few jobs available anyway. I am secretary of the Recreation Committee of Pickle Lake and keep myself busy with my own interests, but get very fed up at times with the lack of facilities and the restrictions of such a small population. I occasionally think of leaving Pickle Lake and establishing myself elsewhere, but am very happily married and attached to my husband.¹⁰⁶

Moving to Northern Ontario when she married, this particular woman says that her dream was of entering a strange world of high mountains and deep bush, the home she would make in the wilderness, and of children she would raise to be strong and wild and free.¹⁰⁷ The reality, she says, is that she had since come to hate the isolation, feeling that she had no part in a world created by men and was dying a slow death spurred on by silence. Living in small towns through long winters and long marriages is a sentiment echoed over and over again:

More than half my life
in that stony ground . . .
Crop in, crop off
counting pregnancies
War brides, war brides
nailed into the land, scratching
Praying for the hens to lay.
Logger's wives marooned in
smouldering muskeg . . .¹⁰⁸

Indeed, the *Northern Woman Journal*, from its inception, problematized the *place* of women in Northwestern Ontario in relation to the northern myth. Who were they? What did they do? How did this fit with what feminist theory was saying about the oppression of women in general? The regionalism of the northern women's movement pointed to the importance of addressing the needs of women in their own, specific, and place-based context – one which was identified as economically and culturally unsuited to southern feminist models. The role of the *Journal* in this process was expressed, somewhat romantically, as in a 1990 retrospective:

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Robertson Borland, "North Songs" *Northern Woman Journal* 5:4 (1979), p. 12.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ Gert Beadle, "Time in the Life" *Crone's Musings*. Vol. 1-3 (self-published).

The journal seems to have a life of her own. Her evolution has ebbed and flowed, her collective ever-changing, her contributors come and go, her home shifts (always coming back to Bay St.) but the Northern Woman just keeps on being, always trying to fulfil her purpose.¹⁰⁹

The two most interesting elements in what is otherwise a nostalgic, rhetorical confection, are the notions of *return* to Bay St. and the qualified assertion, in the personification of the *Northern Woman Journal*, that "Northern Woman" is a state of being, or becoming. What did the anonymous authors have in mind when they alluded to the constancy of Bay St.? And what purpose is this state of being, "the northern woman," designed to fulfil?

The region *is* different. Far from being frozen and inert, as in classical geographic definitions, the formation of individual biographies in relation to larger, and often externally-mediated, social structures in Northern Ontario has led to a vibrant regionalism primarily constructed in opposition to liberal capitalism and its myths.

For someone from Thunder Bay, "Bay St." has the same sort of cultural currency as "Queen St." in Toronto or "St. Laurent" in Montreal. It signifies a particular historic *locale*, echoing the struggle of the Finnish socialists of the 1920s and 1930s. If, as Allan Pred asserts in his discussion of geographic paradigms for understanding *place*, time-space specific activities and power relationships are interrelated in the formation, and transformation, of nature and social structure, then the emergence of "Bay St." as both a physical and symbolic milieu for the practice of radical political ideals is an interesting phenomenon. Bay St. may be conceptualized as the symbolic region -- The True North Strong and Free -- or it may also point to something smaller, an experience more rooted to the daily life of individuals and the ways in which they organize space within particular discursive formations --

¹⁰⁹ Northern Woman Journal collective, "Our Herstory" *Northern Woman Journal* 13: 1&2 (1990), p. 2.

the Finnish Labour Temple, WomanSpace, Bay St:

Social activity . . . takes place as a continuous *discourse*, rooted in a staggered series of shared material-situations that constantly arise out of one another in a dialectically linked distribution of opportunity and constraint, presence and absence.¹¹⁰

Indeed, the specialized "discourse" of Bay St., as a political and historical *meeting-place* of social institutions and human agency in Northwestern Ontario, has been one in which individuals have attempted to construct radical alternatives to dominant structures and cultural imaginaries, most visible in the economic relationships which have characterized the region since the late nineteenth century.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in having access to the Finnish myth of Bay St., and with a similar program of radical social change (this time for *women* in the north), the northern women's movement of the early 1970s aligned itself physically, and symbolically, to the idea of re-membering Bay St. as a site of struggle over the construction of meaning in the social order. The allusion to Bay St. by the collective of the *Northern Woman Journal*, thus signifies among other things a particular localized radical chic. It is an allusion to a socialist politic which has essentially passed from practice into myth.

As discussed above, by the early 1970s women inside the radical Left began to ask where women's experience of patriarchy, as conceptualized in the new sexual politic, fit with Marxist ideology. Social revolution for whom? Although Marxism has remained the dominant discourse in the socialist tradition, many socialist feminists had moved beyond a traditional Marxist framework to theorize a more complex understanding of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. On Bay St., it was increasingly asserted that the inclusion of northern women into the history of the region's radical

¹¹⁰ Giddens, as quoted in Paasi, p. 32.

politics was long overdue and that this inclusion was to be found inside WomanSpace.

The radical feminist milieu through which women workers in Port Arthur came to ask their "sisters" for solidarity, argued that women's discontent was a personal and political response to the systematic domination, exploitation and oppression of their *sex* in every sphere of private and public life -- in the labour market, in the male-centred emotional structure of marriage, and in the understanding of women's psyche as "neurotic."

Therefore, in 1975, when the *Journal* collective was approached, "because of their interest in women's issues," by women support staff on strike at the Port Arthur Clinic in Thunder Bay, the strike was offered to *Journal* readers as an example of the struggles of women workers against low pay, unsatisfactory working conditions, and the minimal support women received from both the public and male-occupied trade unions in strike situations. "They feel men's picket lines are treated with much greater respect. The strikers have been harassed and ignored . . . and have felt it is a sign of their sex." It was signed, "in sisterhood and struggle," without a name.¹¹¹

The dominant feminist discourse then, including that of the *Northern Woman Journal*, had become one in which *all* women belonged to an inferior caste in relation to men, regardless of their individual position in society. Insofar as women's oppression was conceptualized as the individual manifestation of a universal problem, the individual experience became inconsequential once it had been incorporated into a collective narrative. The theoretical assumption of radical feminism was that

¹¹¹ "Port Arthur Clinic Unfair to Women: Doctors Cause Scabs!" *Northern Woman Journal* 2:3 (1975), p. 3. In light of a recent request by the Ontario Medical Association for a 40% wage increase for doctors (\$17,000), the non-unionized strikers were demanding a 15% increase (\$800) for themselves, as well as benefits and union security.

individual lives were more or less undifferentiable as public and collective events.

To this, the *Journal* had added a further dimension to the ideal of women's empowerment -- the region. Not only did their newly identified universal oppression as women demand group allegiance, but their *place* as women in the north brought a further dimension to the assumed commonality that they shared. As well, the regional consciousness of the founding collective was a feature used, both internally and externally, as a distinguishing factor in describing their relationship to the larger feminist movement. Politically, there was much to be gained from adopting the notion of universal women's oppression given the vast distances that separate a small population of women in the north. But Northern Ontario, from its beginnings, was created as a separate economic and cultural sphere in relation to the south, and northern women, practically speaking, had historically shared different material concerns.

It may be argued that a gendered existence in the north was wedded to the ideal of sisterhood, at the same time that a northern experience of gender posed a significant and immediate challenge to this ideal. It further may be argued that the project of dialogue with a "northern" sisterhood, set apart from the "south", at the outset, was equally volatile, and perhaps a more contested category at the time, precisely because of the place-based context of the *Northern Woman Journal*.

Having settled in the historically socialist Bay St. milieu, engaging with feminist theory from inside an established north/south dialectic, there was a somewhat hesitant acknowledgement among the early members of WomanSpace that painful differences among women existed. "Sisterhood" with southern feminists had already been identified as problematic. The name *Northern Woman*, from the outset, had been offered as a "tantalizing invitation to imbue ourselves with all kinds of virtues not

commonly found in our sisters to the south, or east, or west."¹¹² Believing that northern women shared the "iron overcoats" said to be characteristic of Finns, the *Journal* proclaimed that "the cold has made us bolder, stronger, more susceptible to a largeness of spirit, less driven to pettiness, more able to face realities."¹¹³

The collective's expressed political commitment to a regionally contextualized feminism meant that assumptions about the universality of woman, in theory, were challenged directly and thoroughly by women, in practice. The *Northern Woman Journal* engaged in lively debate, challenging the social construction of "woman" on all fronts, but implicitly did not embrace the basic tenets of radical feminism wholeheartedly. Indeed, the early *Journals* of this period read with an electricity, a tension, that came from the conflation of theory and practice -- the trying on and casting off of various meanings attached to the newly destabilized social category of woman.

The *Journal* operated primarily under the assumption that the *realities* faced by women in the North were different, and required an immediate and practical response -- equality, rural daycare, jobs, access to abortion, and dialogue with native women living in close proximity to white women in isolated resource communities.¹¹⁴ If radical feminism served to destabilize conventional representations of the female subject in popular and theoretical discourse by questioning the authority of contemporary definitions of "woman," what then was the meaning of *sisterhood*? How could northern feminists reconcile the significance of the Bay St. milieu, the *difference* implicit in a regional discourse of north/south, with ideal of *sisterhood*?

¹¹² *Northern Woman Journal* collective, "Northern Woman," *Northern Woman Journal* 2:3 (1975), p. 10.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Anonymous, "I'm not a women's libber but . . ." *Northern Woman Journal* 2:3 (1975), p. 4.

The tension between this attention to sameness and difference is also evident in the choice of name for the *Journal* itself. At that same time as the early collective was attempting to address the diversity of women in the region, they drew heavily on radical feminist notions of sameness in choosing the singular "woman" as the subject of their work. I would therefore argue that the naming of north as a location for the *practice* of feminist theory in the northern women's movement, could only be reconciled with radical feminism through the use of the singular subject and a full-scale adoption of the ideal of empowerment for a *northern* sisterhood. The basic theoretical assumptions of radical feminism remained intact, imported into the north and practised within an identifiable specificity, namely the creation of WomanSpace within the Bay St. milieu. The normative discourse of sisterhood caused women in the north to be theorized, from *inside* WomanSpace, as being in close proximity despite vast distances and cultural divides, approximations of one another, by virtue of the dominant regional discourse.

Further, in adopting the inherited myth of climatic determinism as the basis of its north/south dialogue with the feminist movement, while at the same time attempting to proselytize the ideal of sisterhood to women *inside* the region, the *Journal* began a process of identification with a singular and capitalized "Northern Woman." Idealized as a state of being, this singularity of focus ultimately undermined its ability to understand and make any politically useful generalizations about the social construction and material existence of northern women themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

COMMUNITY AND PROXIMITY: LOCATING THE NORTHERN WOMAN

By 1977, after three years of publication, optimism reigned in *Journal* editorials. The establishment of WomanSpace, a rented building in the heart of Bay St. which housed numerous radical feminist organizations,¹¹⁵ was said to have united women working for change in the north, and existed as a testimony to the success of northern sisterhood. The *Journal* collective,¹¹⁶ the disseminating arm of WomanSpace, proclaimed that their work was an "oasis" for the woman in Northern Ontario.

Of course, the first step in the development of this northern sisterhood had been to create the institutional structures required to mediate the spread of feminist "consciousness-raising" throughout the region. Thus, for women in need of women who "genuinely cared," an 11-step Consciousness-Raising program appeared in an early issue of the *Journal* which encouraged northern women to form groups of eight to ten in their own communities and address the following:

Week 1: Were you treated differently from your brother . . . ?

Week 2: Discuss your relationship with women in your family?

Week 3: Discuss the problems of growing up as a girl. How did you feel about your body?

Week 4: Have you noticed any recurring patterns in your relationships with men? (It's the recurring patterns you want to look for).

Week 5: What have been the pressures, family or social, on you? How do you feel being married, single, divorced?

Week 6: Was having children a matter of choice? What are the social pressures on you?

Week 7: Have you ever felt that men have pressured you into sex? Have you ever lied about

¹¹⁵ WomanSpace housed the Northern Women's Centre, the Northern Women's Credit Union, Crisis Homes Inc. and the *Northern Woman Journal*.

¹¹⁶ It is difficult to determine the make-up of "the collective" from the *Journal* itself. Most articles were reprinted from other feminist publications and those written about local issues rarely identified the writer. In interviews with Gert Beadle and Noreen Lavoie, it became clear that these two women were doing most of the productive work of the *Journal*. The "editorial committee" appears to have been a mostly informal and fluid group of women involved in the various organizations renting rooms at WomanSpace.

orgasm?

Week 8: When [do] you feel like a sex object? Why do you want to be beautiful?

Week 9: Have you ever felt competitive with other women? Have you ever been attracted to other women?

Week 10: What is a "nice girl?" When have you been called selfish?

Week 11: How do you feel about getting old?¹¹⁷

An accompanying article outlined the *Journal's* editorial position. Consciousness-raising meant that one must first recognize oneself as an "object" and begin the process, through measuring one's female experience against a radical feminist discourse of emancipation, of becoming a "subject." Further, upon entering into the process, northern women were told to say "good-bye to the myth that women don't like each other and expect friendship" from other women. Readers were warned that they would sound silly in the group if they said such things as "I'm a man's woman." The feminist project of developing women's consciousness was likened to the rungs of a ladder: "We all began on the bottom rung. Consciousness-raising is the first step up from the bottom . . ." ¹¹⁸

Because women had been conditioned to view each other as rivals, it was suggested to women living in Northern Ontario that their newly formed consciousness-raising groups meet in a "neutral" place rather than in each other's homes. This was to ensure that there was no competition about housekeeping or entertaining abilities. Women following this program were discouraged from engaging in "theory." They were told to speak directly from experience, and *never* to challenge another's experience.

I would argue that far from disengaging from theory in consciousness-raising groups as encouraged by the *Northern Woman Journal*, women were, in fact, in close relationship to it. It had often been said that theory is a luxury that women on the ground cannot afford. But this assertion does not

¹¹⁷ "14 week Outline for Consciousness Raising" *Northern Woman Journal* 2:3 (1975), p. 5.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

recognize that practices are based on theoretical assumptions, and that theory and practice are always in co-relationship in the forming of individual consciousness. Theory is a means of explaining practice and is, in turn, challenged by practice. Theory requires human beings, human "subjects" -- it does not exist in abstraction from individual experience. The question is whether one is conscious of the theories that one's practice relies on.

In terms of the feminist movement, "grassroots" political activism is the pragmatic domain where concrete struggles for power, or "empowerment" in the language of the feminist movement, are enacted. But the political is also an imagined world because it rests on theories and values about what matters. Adams' states that in order to understand practice, we must also understand the meaning structures behind them. Political practices themselves, he argues, are naive, lived in the realm of common sense assumptions. Thus, to articulate meaning is to translate it, construe it, force it from the 'unproblematically truistic' status of lived meaning to the explicit level of self-conscious meaning. Beyond showing us what we think, imagine, or value in the course of doing X, the interpretation of practices often goes further, showing how certain practical understandings are partial, contradictory or otherwise inadequate.

All political theory, whether liberalism, socialism or feminism, has a vision of changing the world. The assertion by radical feminist theorists that women's oppression is the most universal and omnipresent form of oppression has indeed succeeded in throwing the conventional meanings of "woman" into disarray. By challenging the patriarchal constructions of "woman" in theory and by showing the ways in which contemporary social institutions and institutional practices are theoretically charged, new opportunities of identification have been offered to women through the naming of their own experience, making their personal political.

According to Ruth Roach Pierson, the lived experience of women is inextricably entwined with questions of difference, domination and voice. The non-recognition of self in the grand narratives of western history has provoked the reclaiming of a feminist women's history that has sought not only to recover but to validate women's experience. Feminist scholarship has successfully carved out new research methodologies based on oral history, diaries, and letters -- lesser known literary forms rooted in daily life:

... our experience of the ongoing struggle to legitimate and create a space for women's history is the lived experience of power in the sense of domination, that is the experience of subjugation, the experience of oppression . . . In a hierarchy of knowledges, we women's historians, particularly we feminist women's historians, have assigned a privileged place to knowledge claims based on lived experience.¹¹⁹

In this vein, publishing the stories collected by the Northwestern Ontario Herstory Project, allowed the *Journal* to engage with a forgotten history:

Knowledge in the academic sense is as cold as statistics, but the heart, dear friends calls for more. All across this great northwest, in public or in isolation, history is being written simply by our being here.¹²⁰

The voice posited as authentic and assigned to women in this model is closely tied to the consciousness-raising process of hearing and telling of experience in a confessional mode. It constituted a practice which extended the theory of radical feminism, the place of the "I" in relation to literary universals. Thus, the questions in the 11-step program ask a woman directly about her *experience* as a woman in relation to dominant societal definitions. Women once considered rivals in popular discourse were instead offered a new female subjectivity which promised them sisterhood, and provided a new set of theoretical understandings with which to achieve this goal.

¹¹⁹ Ruth Roach Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," *Writing Women's History*, eds. Karen Offen et al. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), p. 83.

¹²⁰ *Northern Woman Journal* collective, "Editorial" *Northern Woman Journal* 2:6 (1976), p. 2.

The rationale for the emergence of what literary theorist Sneja Gunew has called "the glittering I" is that personal testimony should pierce theories of representation. Indeed it should. Voices, Gunew says, "from the other side of the barbed wire,"¹²¹ challenge the grand narratives of human history, and dominant representations for modes of being gendered and en-placed. However it may also be argued that the "I" or the individual, is produced "not only by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world."

[Language] is also the place where our sense of selves, our subjectivity, is constructed. The assumption that subjectivity is constructed implies that it is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced. Subjectivity is produced in a whole range of discursive practices -- economic, social, political -- the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power. Language is not the expression of unique individuality, it constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific.¹²²

If human beings are en-gendered and placed as a result of a semiotic interaction, through language, between the outer and inner world, the 'northern woman,' as a contextualized and mythologized female subject, may be seen as both "excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it."¹²³ Thus, if northern women, via the *Northern Woman Journal*, were to consider themselves "sisters," differentiation for the individual only occurred with the level of consciousness one was believed to have reached in relation to the increasingly normative discourse of the collective:

Unfortunately some people, because of fear or ignorance, will never acknowledge or recognize that women are oppressed. However, for those of us concerned with personal growth, development and independence, for all women, we'll continue our climb, confident

¹²¹ See Sneja Gunew, "Feminism / Theory / Post Colonialism: Agency Without Identity" unpublished paper (Australia: Deaken University, 1992).

¹²² Chris Weedon, "Principles of Post Structuralism," p. 21.

¹²³ Foucault has been credited with shifting the focus of inquiry from "knowing" to an understanding of knowledge as not only produced, but *productive*. Knowledge produces changes not only in the exercise of power but in the actions of those subjected to the exercise of power. See Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982), p. 789.

that growing numbers of women are joining us.¹²⁴

Success or failure was dependent on one's commitment to women, as a category, and thus one's ability to act out a theoretical *sisterhood* with women. This became the mediating function of WomanSpace, the "house of women" in the heart of Bay St., which acted as a testing ground for theoretical imports from radical feminism into the North. Through the *Northern Woman Journal*, the women of WomanSpace relayed the experience of bringing feminism to *their* experience of the northern context, inviting readers to share in their struggles with feminist theory, collective practice, and each other.

The normative discourse of sisterhood as a *community* of women, as with the contemporary discourse of community in general, aspires to its own goodness and makes many arresting claims regarding its value. Although, as stated earlier, the radical feminist ideal of sisterhood created an important space for critical commentary about modern society, the discourse constructed about the causes of women's oppression made it increasingly difficult to challenge the ideal of sisterhood itself.

Similarly, the "ritual open house" at the Northern Women's Centre, where "all tensions disappear,"¹²⁵ provided a symbol for chosen affiliation with a "women's" community. It claimed to be open, to welcome "new faces,"¹²⁶ but community in this sense does not allow for the individual apart from the ideological subject. This is not to say that human agency does not exist. Indeed, it may act to effect change within the group, but only at the risk of condemnation and expulsion:

... some of the young women, seventeen or eighteen years old, that would come in -- the most wonderful young people to work with -- if they had a boyfriend, they were so shy about even telling it to anyone . . . to come in with lipstick on was due for a lecture . . . Even our nice feminist movement sort of got into a lot of dogma. My frustration was -- do you have to be

¹²⁴ *Northern Woman Journal* 2:3 (1975), p. 2.

¹²⁵ *Northern Woman Journal* collective, "Editorial" *Northern Woman Journal* 3:3 (1977), p. 2.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

raped to find your words?¹²⁷

The feminist discourse of WomanSpace, therefore, gave hearing to individuality only in so far as it could be subsumed into a group event. Donna Jowett has characterized this process as an alteration of consciousness which is sought by the individual, constituted as community, and designed to achieve certain political ends.¹²⁸ The subjugation of individual experience, individual "pain," into the ideal of ahistorical, decontextualized empowerment by women, for women, was in fact the only way for the collective of WomanSpace to live out their sisterhood as "northern" women. *Sisterhood* increasingly came to imply a women's *community*,¹²⁹ housed and contained inside WomanSpace.

Donna Jowett, in "Origins, Occupation, and the Proximity of the Neighbour," states that within the contemporary discourse of community, progressive social activists claim that what is important is not where you come from, not your individuality or your sense of attachment to a place, but what you *believe*. She claims that the discourse of community, in the sense of communion, "hungers for what it has in fact given up on. Its devouring appetite requires the construction and consumption of pre-fabricated group experience, easily named, not too difficult to join . . ."¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Gert Beadle, telephone interview (August 5, 1992).

¹²⁸ See Donna Jowett, "Origins, Occupation and the Proximity of the Neighbour" in *Who is this "We"?* Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1994), pp. 11-30 on the concept of "ecstatic communion."

¹²⁹ Raymond Williams, in *Keywords*, states that community is one of the most vague and malleable words in current usage:

Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.

¹³⁰ Jowett, p. 17.

In this context, Jowett also discusses the idea of proximity -- the unchosen and random interactions of everyday life, among those with whom one perhaps does not *identify* with. Proximity is absent from the "openness" of the political community because it has already been mediated prior to contact through the normative discourse of the group. Proximity, Jowett says, contains the risk of conflict, challenge, and harm -- the "I" in relation to an emancipatory discourse of "we." She asserts that the "we" of community tries to manage the risk by displacing it into an "outside." and forgetting that its "we" is not universal:

communities of the Same . . . exist only by displacing the difference within it to "others" marked as inferior through the burden of difference they are forced to carry so that the Same can continue to hallucinate its sameness, purity and privilege to itself.¹³¹

Proximity, then, when it does not *fit*, when it is random and arbitrary and difficult, is a risk to community. Thus, if there is to be any meaning or goodness in "community," Jowett argues, it is tested first and always in proximity.

The question of proximity in the northern feminist movement meant that when told by a native woman from Geraldton that they, the "*Northern Woman*" had nothing to offer her, members of the women's "community" who had gone to speak with "sisters" in small towns about what feminism could do for them came face to face with the tension between colonized and colonizer.¹³² This relationship is hidden in the Bay St. milieu, and mostly absent in the pages of the *Journal*.

Brief mention was made in the *Journal* of the finding of the Royal Commission on the Northern Environment in 1976 which stated that the division between native and white women in the region had always been very marked. However, there was no discussion of the reasons why this was so. Little

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² "Heartbreak in Geraldton," *Northern Woman Journal* 3:2 (1977), p. 13.

discussion of racism entered the pages of the *Northern Woman* which continued to reflect the intellectual interests of white, urban north, and politicized women.

Reflecting on the encounter with the native woman mentioned above, in "Heartbreak in Geraldton" the white author (once again anonymous) retreated into the normative discourse of sisterhood and *claimed* the native woman by giving her name and telling her story:

Who will change it [the *ignorance* of racism, not the structure] if not women, for she is ours, beyond the Indian, beyond the White, is woman blood and bone . . . She was wrong when she said she wanted nothing from us, for at the first sign that she was in the presence of women who truly cared and suffered with her, she broke and we wept together. Perhaps we wept for the things that divide us, for the love we deny each other and perhaps we wept because there's a revolution going on and we know love is not enough . . . No woman truly tuned in to her own female core could make as loose a statement as "we support the Native women's cause" without realizing it is their own cause. She cannot be wounded unless the pain is general . . .¹³³

It is interesting that the native woman's name was given, but the author of the piece remained safely inside the umbrella of the "collective." What had been told to the group by the woman in question was recounted in detail, a mediated confession of her experience as *other* and her struggle to become part of the "we, who had come to welcome her."¹³⁴

Although it remained situated in the radical socialist landscape of Bay St., and committed to challenging the economic position of women in the region, the quest for sisterhood at WomanSpace quickly superseded all other social relationships in discussions of the meanings attached to the characterizations of the northern woman. The question then becomes *who* is inscribing the "northern woman" and to what effect?

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

The first editorial policy of the *Northern Woman Journal*, which remained in place for several years, pointed to the unity, creativity and commitment of the group. An addendum to the policy within the first year signalled a conscious choice not to publish "material that is offensive and opposed to the basic premises of the Women's Movement: 'As workers on this paper, we assume the responsibility to edit on behalf of the ideals of feminism'"¹³⁵

This was a response to a lengthy letter disputing a woman's right to an abortion. The editorial decision not to publish it was hotly contested in the next issue by a former "Northern woman" living in Brandon, Manitoba, who said that she felt she had a right to read what the woman who wrote the letter had to say, and did not appreciate such decisions being made for her. She accused the collective of lacking "not only respect for life, but also the opinions of other women, your sisters. I find your present policy of condemnation . . . repulsive and do not wish to see another issue."¹³⁶

The collective answered with a partial retraction, which withdrew into the protective discourse of sisterhood by saying: "Our commitment to the concept of sisterhood demands this journal to bleed with and for all women regardless of their point of view." A call was made for mutual understanding and healthy exchange, asking that the writer of the letter be patient: "Hang in there, Mary Kay, we progress."¹³⁷

Less than a year later, however, an editorial reflecting on the outcome of the Port Arthur Clinic strike, spoke of a "nitwit in the guise of a female employee," who called for the decertification of the union.

¹³⁵ "Editorial Policy Addition," *Northern Woman Journal* 2:3 (1975), p. 2.

¹³⁶ "Dear Sisters?" *Northern Woman Journal* 2:4 (1975), p. 2.

¹³⁷ "Dear Readers," *Northern Woman Journal* 2:4 (1975), p. 2.

It was asked whether she had heard of the struggle by women for women, whether she read the local paper, whether she had ever bothered to look up the words 'unity' or 'solidarity' in the dictionary. She was called a "ding-a-ling" and worthy of nothing but "pity and contempt."¹³⁸

Over time, as the ideal of northern *sisterhood* for these women came into proximity with actual women in the north, it could only be sustained through a full-scale retreat into a universal theory of emancipation offered from the outside, and the increasingly insular safety of a very narrow woman-identified space.

Throughout the third volume of the *Journal* in 1975-76, the content offered to northern women about their place in society came steadily in line with the political platform of Redstockings, a radical women's group in New York City which published a Manifesto outlining a program to end women's oppression. An excerpt from the Manifesto, published in the *Journal* in 1976, explicitly identified women as an "oppressed class" unto themselves:

Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labour. We are considered inferior beings, whose only purpose is to enhance men's lives. Our humanity is denied. Our prescribed behaviour is enforced by the threat of physical violence.¹³⁹

If all women composed a class, then it followed that all men belonged to a counterclass. Women's oppression, it said, was total and the agents of oppression were the men with whom women lived. All other forms of exploitation (racism, capitalism, imperialism) were extensions of male supremacy. It was said that far from "women helping women help themselves," the goal of the feminist movement was now to *change men*. The Redstockings Manifesto identified personal experience as the *only* basis

¹³⁸ "Editorial" *Northern Woman Journal* 3:1 (1976), p. 2.

¹³⁹ "Redstockings Manifesto," *Northern Woman Journal* 3:1 (1976), p. 9.

for analysis, given that all existing ideologies were products of male culture and therefore suspect. The top of the consciousness-raising ladder, then, was female *class* consciousness, which would come only through an identification with *all* women. A commitment was made to achieving "internal democracy," allowing every woman an equal chance to develop her "political potential." The manifesto ended with the promise: "This time we are going all the way."

In the same issue of the *Journal*, other articles attacked the liberal assumption that rapists are "sick" and asked readers allow for the conclusion that violence is a "typical and frequent response of men to women," a practice condoned by all races and classes of men. The rapist was thus identified as "your boyfriend's brother," and rape was a practice "fatted on the fantasies of the normal male."¹⁴⁰ In this article, psychiatrists were said to be complicit in the system of rape, engaged in "masked coercion" by fostering of self-hatred and divisiveness in women. These were identified as institutional tactics practised by *every* member of the psychiatric profession.

Questions about the specificity and *location* of women's experience in the north, the mainstay of the early *Journal*, were now virtually absent. Above the "Redstockings Manifesto," however, was a note explaining the position of the collective: "we (the Northern Woman) are not in *complete* agreement with either the article or the campaign . . . however we offer them both to our readers hoping you will respond with your opinions..."¹⁴¹ The publishing of the Manifesto in the *Northern Woman Journal* provoked no response from readers, many of whom simply wanted to know *who* the collective was. Whether the addition of a disclaimer betrayed dissent among members of the *Journal* collective, or was an attempt to open up a space for debate, it appears to be the first identifiable sign of separation

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴¹ "Editor's Note," *Northern Woman Journal* 3:1 (1976), p. 9.

among women who had previously identified themselves only through an anonymous "we."

Collective struggle is often cast as a *we/they* binary, the "I" having already been subsumed into the group. Indeed the *Northern Woman Journal*, in adopting radical feminist principles, and maintaining the north/south (or worker/capitalist) binary of the dominant regional discourse, claimed oppositional politics as its core. Alternative visions held by groups working for societal transformation easily foster polarization, assuming hegemony within two or more distinct camps. Real differences in skill, ability, and ideology within the group in question then may remain unacknowledged, because the difference has been displaced alongside the risk of proximity. Diversity is seen as a threat to collective identity, placing the *we* on shaky ground when working against the specified *they*. The result is often the exclusion or ostracization of non-conforming members, placing dissenters in the category of *other*.

In emancipatory strategies, this means offering people an opportunity to emerge from their personal silences and conform to a group ideology, to come to a sense of belonging through the sharing of experience that serves the collective narrative. Donna Jowett asks what happens within a discourse which assigns goodness to a community:

Clearly, speakers of community think it's good for the people in it, but what then of the people excluded? Perhaps, they do not care, having communities of their own with different values, practices and idioms which are good for them. Or perhaps those not in a particular community are harmed by their exclusion and have no ready made communities waiting in the wings to be chosen by them. Or perhaps they are systematically excluded from all communities available for consumption.¹⁴²

In the early 1970s, Jo Freeman began strongly to advise feminist collectives to acknowledge the existence of difference and domination beneath their own struggles against patriarchy. She did not believe that issues of leadership, authority, and power could be ignored by the feminist movement.

¹⁴² Jowett, p. 19.

If they were, she predicted that an ideally egalitarian structure would become manipulative and undemocratic. She asserted that there was no such thing as a *structureless* group:

If the movement continues to deliberately not select who shall exercise power, it does not thereby abolish power. All it does is to abdicate the right to demand that those who do exercise power and influence be responsible for it . . . when informal elites are combined with a myth of structurelessness, there can be no attempt to put limits on the use of power.¹⁴³

Highly cohesive groups, particularly those with a political voice, exert power and control over their members' behaviour and demand conformity to a unified vision. Under these conditions, differences remain, but sisterhood is held as Truth. At the same time, an ideological commitment to "internal democracy," assumes a universal equality of the skill and personal power required to be an effective part of the collective process. In reality, there are hidden webs of power with prescriptive rhetoric, which absolutely exclude some women from the process and create false distinctions between empowerment and power for others.

If, as part of a collective, women are expected to become subjects of the ideal of sisterhood, then the *collective* is given false power as the mediator of a theoretical construction of "woman." To put it in geographic terms, *woman* or *sisterhood*, as the symbolic landscape of WomanSpace, became a *project*, the institutionalized "northern woman" in constant interaction with the human paths which moved through it.

Ironically, the weakest spot in the subscription list of the *Northern Woman Journal* was the region itself, a fact which was lamented as a sign to the collective that 'a prophet is without honour is his

¹⁴³ Jo Freeman, as quoted in Ristock, p. 42.

[her] own country."¹⁴⁴ It may be that since getting the *Journal* produced and paid for was a constant struggle, the choice to rely solely on subscriptions set up immediate limitations. Like many other alternative presses, all the energy had gone into editorial considerations, with little attention paid to conventional market research or feasibility studies. As well, in terms of a feminist press, readers must share a certain level of political affinity and therefore the market is further circumscribed. A letter from Red Lake offered the explanation that for women in smaller communities, "Thunder Bay seems like a booming metropolis . . . I would welcome articles whose focus moved to the smaller communities so that more women could feel truly involved."¹⁴⁵ Charles Landry identifies this as a recurring theme in the boom and bust cycle of alternative media:

In rejecting the forms of understanding of audiences and markets which the commercial media work with, these projects have often ended up by completely neglecting the problem of their market. This has meant that they often sustain illusions about the nature of their readership, imagining, for instance, that they communicate with the 'people' or the 'working class' or 'women' in some undifferentiated sense, while remaining wilfully ignorant of the fact that their actual readership is a particular, highly educated, subsection of any one of these categories.¹⁴⁶

Landry sees this as the fundamental weakness in the political culture of the seventies, which drew heavily from feminism's arrival on the agenda and the new criteria development for decision-making based on the principles of participation, inclusion and voice:

¹⁴⁴ "Editorial" *Northern Woman Journal* 3:2 (1977), p. 2. "The readership of the journal now ranges far afield from Newfoundland to the Northwest Territories, from libraries and universities in every province, to American university archives requesting the *Journal* as a historical contribution in the ongoing record of the women's movement. Our exchange list grows as dozens of newsletters and Status of Women publications request that we share. The weakest spot in our subscription list is at the local level, reminding us again of the old adage 'a prophet is without honour in his own country.'" Even here we are encouraged as the faithful stand fast and a new name appears from time to time . . . as we move with the times and sense the changes in our own perception of ourselves, we are overwhelmed again at the responsibility of a feminist press . . . "

¹⁴⁵ Audrey Anderson, "Letter to the Editor," *Northern Woman Journal* 5:2 (1979), p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Charles Landry et al. *What a Way to Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Future* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1985), p. 17.

What was important was the way the agenda of issues was set, and that agenda set definite limits to the range of politically acceptable activities / questions / lifestyles.¹⁴⁷

Janice Ristock's research into feminist collective process in the 1980s found that many women noted factions between lesbian and heterosexual women, the politically correct and the politically incorrect. She found that some identities and differences were perceived as having more value, thereby fostering a hidden hierarchy of feminism:

Thus, feminist ideology which is inextricably linked to the collective structure is transformed into oppressive rule setting, a prescriber of acceptable attitudes and behaviours.¹⁴⁸

Illustrative of this point is a 1983 letter, "Female Frogs and Crumbs," which appeared in the *Journal* and indicated that there had been trouble brewing at WomanSpace for quite some time:

I see these frogs getting real possessive about their particular lily pad. I see them real scared about new frogs in town. Once in a while a younger frog gets ousted by the old gang and decides to build her own new lily pad; a new little empire in the frog pond.¹⁴⁹

WomanSpace was accused of being little more than a "frog-eat-frog" pond, littered with "bickering, backstabbing and biting" in a competition over who were the best and worst feminists in town:

So I walked into this community straight out of the bush, with my skis on my feet and my belongings on my back. I sure didn't see then what I see now. What idealistically I hoped would be an equal situation is in reality a hierarchy of some big female frogs in a little pond trying to outcroak each other. It's called empire building.¹⁵⁰

How had northern *sisterhood* come to this against the backdrop of the Women's Centre's ongoing proclamations that they were no longer "beset by divisional factions"? Indeed, the very notion that the inhabitants of WomanSpace were *no longer* beset by divisional factions raises the question of whether these divisive forces were resolved or whether dissenters were merely expelled from the ranks. The accusations contained in "Female Frogs and Crumbs" further demand that one ask why,

¹⁴⁷ Landry, p. 8.

¹⁴⁸ Ristock, pp. 48-9.

¹⁴⁹ "Female Frogs and Crumbs," *Northern Woman Journal* 8:3 (1980), p. 11.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

if WomanSpace was theoretically open to *all* women, were there only a few who felt at home there, and many who came and left?

Penelope Eckert's fascinating sociological study of "girl talk" offers some interesting food for thought in her assertion that consensus among girls and women is actually masked competition over the creation of "symbolic capital." She begins by claiming that "girl talk" is a peculiarly female speech event, involving long and detailed personal discussion about people, norms and beliefs deriving from women's limited access to direct power in society. As a consequence of the domestication of female labour, Eckert claims that women are socially situated in ways which demand the development of *personal* influence, defined in terms of overall moral character in relation to societal norms, and thus the need to explore and negotiate norms with each other.¹⁵¹

Her methodology entailed analyzing a precise transcription of conversation among a group of adolescent girls and charting the details of the means by which they achieve consensus. In such a conversation, she finds that one cannot appear to be competitive in an attempt to gain symbolic capital, or moral authority. Such things should not appear to have been consciously sought and accumulated because explicit competition contradicts underlying cultural definitions of personal worth for women. Regarding gossip, Eckert states that "the establishment and maintenance of norms requires regular monitoring and, because it is women who must compete in relation to these norms, it is they who have the greatest interest in monitoring..." Girl talk is the main activity through which they do this. "By engaging in the negotiation of norms, women can increase their stake in the norms, simultaneously tying together the community and tying themselves to it."

¹⁵¹ Penelope Eckert, "Cooperative Competition in Adolescent 'Girl Talk'" *Discourse Processes* 13 (1990), pp. 91-122.

The building of consensus is therefore, at its root, the building of community through a shared account of themselves as a group. Eckert illustrates, in her study, how consensus may be built not only through the accumulation of items of consensus throughout the conversation, but also through hierarchical development, with relatively trivial agreements coming to yield a broader consensus. Progression through subtopics leads to the development of agreement on a much higher level by the time the conversation is through:

. . . it is clear at times that one or more of the participants finds herself stuck in a consensus that she probably does not really share, by virtue of having agreed to the earlier items of consensus and not being able to argue against the other participant's logic in building the higher level item.¹⁵²

The notion that social conditioning is involved in the way in which women choose to speak to each other, raises interesting questions for the consensual structure of consciousness-raising groups and the broader radical feminist movement. Eckert's study shows that the illustration of behaviour in relation to norms is a crucial means of emphasizing community membership. The group tends to align in relation to the people discussed, thereby setting themselves off as a temporary community. This allows displays of compassion for transgressions and maturity in analyzing the causes for such.

Can WomanSpace, then, be seen as an institutionalization of "girl talk"? The implication of this would be that feminist consciousness raising wasn't, in fact, very "radical" at all. Indeed, the image of *smallness* revealed in "Female Frogs and Crumbs" stands in stark contrast to the ideal of the northern women's community presented consistently in the *Journal*. Reading about WomanSpace, one is offered a portrait of a vibrant collective identity made workable by its regionalism, its professed commitment to women where they are.¹⁵³ This is an appealing image, but in fact, the *Journal* had

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁵³ "Editorial" *Northern Woman Journal* 3:3, p. 2, on WomanSpace: "This is no day for poor-mouthing, the year shows promise of progress; we are not beset by divisional factors. The journal will

been glossing over some painful differences and difficulties that existed in naming the location of the northern woman. A northern sisterhood was presupposed, and women were demanded to engage in "ecstatic communion" with the hub of northern feminism - located on Bay St., playing inside the northern myth.

The trap of WomanSpace was that the 'personal as political' came to glamourize the particular as universal, applying the "narcissistic self-centring" of a small group of women passionate for change to an imagined collectivity outside of themselves -- the northern woman. In the search for the thing itself, the north/woman (not defined by men), many members of the *Journal* collective embarked on a process of myth-making, the making of a female myth and a related normative discourse, which swallowed the very thing they hoped was being born. Indeed, there is an argument to be made that competition over "symbolic capital" was one of the key points of dissent among the collective, particularly in later years as the diversity of female subjects theorized in feminist discourse increased and became available to individual women working for change.

The collective, though it idealized its own sisterhood and offered only the resolved items of consensus to readers of the *Journal*, in fact did not exist apart from human agency with all that this entails. In 1978, following the issue which contained the Redstockings Manifesto, the *Journal* stopped publishing for six months, a further sign that competition and dissent was becoming an entrenched feature of collective process:

We decided to take six months off and process and just get to know one another. For a fair

play a major role with a paid staff of two and a committed back up crew. The office will be open five days a week from nine to five and will hopefully become an information centre as well . . ." And in the same issue, a letter from Anis Bose of Thorold, Ontario (p. 3) stated: "Seeing all of you, such divergent personalities working together for a common cause has sustained my drooping spirits. Perhaps Sisterhood still lives in the outlying areas. It certainly doesn't in our urban centres . . ."

period of time we weren't as concerned about group and process as we were about tasks. We spent an enormous amount of time nurturing the collective and so it became a larger group again...¹⁵⁴

In the first issue following this reprieve a new disclaimer appeared stating that the opinions of the author were not necessarily those of each collective member. This was followed by a long apology and explanation for the lateness of the issue.¹⁵⁵ The collective said that in the transition back from paid staff to volunteer workers, those involved in production had been feeling that they were being taken advantage of, and those who were not, like Noreen Lavoie, felt they were not needed:

I was feeling very oppressed along with these women, but not feeling that I had anything to contribute . . . I was a volunteer to do things that I thought I was capable of, which wasn't very much. It certainly wasn't writing. I've never written. I'm not a writer at all . . . It's really what burned me out though. I realized that I just needed to escape from it. It took me too long to get out. It was the physical part of it too. We didn't have proper equipment to do things so our skills were limited. My part of it was always the typing, the physical part . . . putting it out, getting it to the post office. I'm tired just thinking about it.¹⁵⁶

For most of its history, the *Northern Woman Journal* had relied on a small, highly committed group of women to see it to press. Though it remained affiliated with the Northern Women's Centre and was produced, physically and theoretically, from WomanSpace, it set itself apart early on as a separate, and smaller group. Still, a tension remained between those who knew they would be doing the practical work and those who were involved only for general discussions of process and policy. The break-down of the founding collective, then, seems to have occurred at the level of organization and goal-setting. "Unstructured groups, although ideal for getting people to talk about their lives, are not the most effective form for getting things done."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Marg Phillips, telephone interview, June 7, 1992.

¹⁵⁵ "Editorial," *Northern Woman Journal* 4:1 (1978), p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ Noreen Lavoie, telephone interview (August 5, 1992).

¹⁵⁷ Landry, p. 8.

Noreen Lavoie has been reflexively identified in anniversary issues of the *Journal* as one of only two active members¹⁵⁸ of the collective keeping the *Journal* going in the mid 1970s. A collective of two, down from twelve, down from fifty. In 1979, a call was made for new collective members and the decision to stop publishing was made in order to allow time to "cement a foundation" of *collective* solidarity:

After long discussions, and many disagreements, we have established a working volunteer collective. Some of the members of the new collective participated in the evaluation and goal-setting meetings. Some new members did not. Some of the participants in the organizational meetings chose to withdraw as "collective" members, but will still offer their services.¹⁵⁹

The key points of disagreement remain undocumented, but the sudden appearance in 1979 of a signed column called "Gert's Gospel," placed beside the apology discussed above, offers some interesting clues. It is this single voice, standing apart from the collective, which begins to illuminate the covert story of the *Northern Woman Journal*.

¹⁵⁸ The other active member was Gert Beadle who will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁵⁹ "Editorial," *Northern Woman Journal* 4:1 (1978), p. 2.

CHAPTER FOUR

BEING AND BECOMING. THE PATH OF ONE NORTHERN WOMAN: GERT BEADLE

In her "Gospel," following the breakdown of the original *Journal* collective in 1979, Gert Beadle asserted that Truth was the total of women's experience:

Imagine foisting as tenuous a thing as what is ours alone on our human family.... Splits and factions and divisions. levels and strata and classes, high style, no style and life style, progressives, regressives and passives -- a million truths and all with something to teach us... Would we see each other differently if we had nothing to sell?"¹⁶⁰

She made an impassioned plea for emotional maturity and integrity within the women's movement, worried that "weary foot-soliders" were operating at cross-purposes in a "divided army."

Gert had come to the Northern Women's Conference in 1973, embracing the ideal of sisterhood wholeheartedly and without reservation, "becoming" a feminist at sixty. Born in Burriss, Ontario, twenty miles outside of Fort Frances, Gert seems to have been the only member of WomanSpace who had lived in small, northern communities for much of her life. Her father's family had come to the region early, as homesteaders, and had stayed for generations. Her mother, an American, left to go back when the children were very small. Gert was left to raise her brother and sister, helping her father whom she described as "an exceptional man, full of good humour and Blarney." Gert married at eighteen, at the height of the Depression. She raised two sons and ran a General Store in the Rainy River District with her husband until the family moved to Thunder Bay in 1951.

At that time it was really strange. I was coming on to forty years old and had no notion that I had anything to say about it - about the move, or selling our place. We women didn't do much about knowing our rights in those days.¹⁶¹

Through the early days of consciousness-raising, she said: "The women of Thunder Bay unfolded me

¹⁶⁰ Gert Beadle, "Gert's Gospel" *Northern Woman Journal* 5:1 (1979), p. 2.

¹⁶¹ Gert Beadle, telephone interview, May 31, 1992.

and educated me and politicized me and changed my life." Over the years, Gert had written poetry, "sort of off in the closet, taking out my frustrations." With the marriage between feminism and regionalism in the milieu of WomanSpace, a wonderful scope of meaning was provided for a woman "coming from pioneer stock who survived by hard work and determination . . . a very ordinary person who simply got fed up with the ridiculous position that we women allowed ourselves to get in . . ." ¹⁶² For Gert, finding and claiming her own voice was a personal revolt against words written by "incestuous old poets . . . foul corks, stopping up a better wine, impeding flight to inner spaces by more worthy voyageurs." ¹⁶³

The optimist of the early collective, she was daring and passionate, convincing the others to sign a three-year-lease for WomanSpace with no money. It was her agitation that led the collective to sign the papers which made it exist, not in theory, but in fact:

One time I got them to sign a three-year lease on a building without any money. For some reason the decisions that I seem to make so easily -- I just seem to instinctively know this is the right way to go and that it will turn out all right. I never lost heart because to me it was an idea whose time had come. ¹⁶⁴

At the same time Gert was credited with keeping the founding collective of the *Northern Woman Journal* together; initially she was doing 75% of the menial work and much of the writing in the *Northern Woman Journal*, continuing her mission to "let everyone out of the trap." But to some of the younger, more 'politicized' women, Gert seemed naive. Noreen Lavoie remembers that Gert always felt intimidated in the company of the collective, they being "better educated" than she.

And even writing from the west coast for the seventeenth anniversary issue of the *Journal*, after

¹⁶² Gert Beadle, "On Becoming a Celebrity," unpublished.

¹⁶³ Gert Beadle, *Rising* (Thunder Bay: Northern Woman Journal).

¹⁶⁴ Gert Beadle, Telephone Interview, May 31, 1992.

having won the Person's Award in 1984 and the Order of Canada in 1986,¹⁶⁵ Gert still apologizes for the fact that "someone who couldn't spell worth a shit, had no feeling for punctuation and was not thoroughly politicized . . . [took] up all that printed space."¹⁶⁶

I wasn't into the theory as much as the collective was . . . I'm much more feminist today than I was then because I've read and I've thought.¹⁶⁷ But in those days I just wanted to let everyone out of the trap, you know? So the fact that I seemed to have a little talent with words sort of made me a frustration with some of the collective. Mind you, I loved them dearly, and they loved me back because they had to!¹⁶⁸

Gert's struggles with ageism and classism were often hidden in measures of adequate (or inadequate) politicization. Her voice in the *Journal* is particularly interesting because her age and her life-long history in the north, her "glittering I," so to speak, posed a continuous challenge to the women's community of Bay St. In 1976, in anticipation of the establishment of WomanSpace as announced in a particularly optimistic *Journal* editorial, she published "Snob Story." She warned against the "superior intellect of a first class snob," and the "Messianic fever [sic] that send minorities [in the women's movement] flailing about to establish their personal and collective wisdom of eternal truth."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Being the recipient of these awards continues to be a source of amusement for Gert: "Isn't it a kick . . . that I should be the recipient of national recognition for telling us what we already know?" ("On Becoming A Celebrity," unpublished).

¹⁶⁶ Gert Beadle, "Our Thoughts on Feminist Publishing Today," *Northern Woman Journal* 13: 1 & 2 (1990), p. 14.

¹⁶⁷ This apologetic tone is present in much of Gert's early writing in the *Journal*: "I have chosen to make my spiritual life work for me in ways that even my grassroots thinking can understand (*NWJ* 4:3 (1978), p. 2). Similarly, in *NWJ* 4:4 (1978): "Creativity is not something that I have recognized in myself for any great length of time . . . creativity has nothing to do with age, nor has it much to do with study. What it has to do with is the ability to watch your own balloons collapse and being absolutely sure you have enough wind left to do it again, different, but better." Her words are often very wise, yet the hesitation present may be seen to be a function of "girl talk" and Gert's sometimes tenuous relationship with other collective members.

¹⁶⁸ Gert Beadle, telephone interview, May 31, 1992.

¹⁶⁹ Gert Beadle, "Snob Story," *Northern Woman Journal* 3:1 (1977), p. 2.

Similarly, in a whimsical tale of multiple personalities, she used the disunity of her own self as a metaphor pointing to the need for a similar acknowledgement of difference in the women's movement. "The single personality has no balance . . . Some of the most interesting people in me are socially unacceptable which has increased my affection for them and made it practically impossible to be either surprised or disappointed in the human equation."¹⁷⁰

Reflecting on her experiences in the radical feminist movement of the 1970s, Gert acknowledges that she disagreed with many of the decisions made by the group ("my role in the collective was not always positive"¹⁷¹), but her passion for *sisterhood* led her to use the *Journal* as a place to plead for integrity and respect among women. She kept writing, sometimes under the anonymous umbrella of "the collective," but increasingly forging out on her own. The process was obviously painful, as one increasingly witnesses, through Gert's Gospel, her intense frustration with the women's movement:

The commonality of women is such a gut thing. The amount of time we spend proving our differences, hanging our guilt trips on somebody else is such a waste of precious time and energy that it is sure to do us all in. I may be accused of not facing reality, but my response is that I have faced it, stepped over it, and dismissed it¹⁷². . . Sometimes the feminist press itself is oppressive. It reeks of bleeding egos, and weary footsoldiers slogging through the mud, laying their tattered bodies on some man-made cross. No sense of humour, no light at the end of the tunnel, no upward movement of the spirit, just fuel for a fire that they haven't yet decided what to do with.¹⁷³

Gert's discontent with non-recognition of herself in the feminist movement -- her age, her search for spirituality, or her sense of humour -- illustrates the potentially totalizing imprint of both theory and practice upon individual interpretations of one's relationship with one's place in the social order. Gert was first drawn to the feminist movement because of the absence of women's stories in the northern

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Gert Beadle, telephone interview, May 31, 1992.

¹⁷² Implicit in these words is a critique of the ageism which Gert experienced in the movement.

¹⁷³ Gert Beadle, "Gert's Gospel," *Northern Woman Journal* 5:1 (1979), p. 2.

myth. She was searching for community, *communion*, and yet within the very space that wished to agitate for inclusion of women into contemporary discourse, and the space which borrowed from the Bay St. myth to address the north/south binary still in effect, she witnessed a shattered community unable to practice what its theory wished it to do.

A postmodernist critique suggests that this process is inevitable and necessary, because contemporary theories of emancipation have continued to operate within a humanist discourse that presupposes a unified self and maintained binary oppositions. This means that "woman" cannot exist without the very thing it struggles against under feminism -- man. By supposing that gender relies on an innate essence to one's gender and the "opposite" gender, as radical feminist theory increasingly did, its unified ideal of 'woman' and 'sisterhood' masked operations of power that divided women's interests as much as united them.

Concrete historical women, like Gert or the native woman in "Heartbreak in Geraldton," reveal the inadequacy of the unified category 'woman' and thus struggle in *proximity* to, not in *communion* with the politics of "woman." Indeed, in a poem published years later, Gert reflects that she feels she had more in common with the woman in Geraldton, than she did with her *community* of women in

Thunder Bay:

I knew an Indian woman once
 with one hand.
 Her man, she said
 chopped the other one
 off with an axe
 when he went drinking.
 We wept for her
 and folded her in the family
 like a sacred trust
 till she couldn't
 take the pressure
 of having to be

perpetually grateful.
 She broke a plate
 glass window with
 her good hand.
 I hadn't realized till then
 she was my sister.
 I couldn't stand having to be grateful either.¹⁷⁴

Gert, the woman who had lived in the north her whole life, as had the native woman, did not want to be grateful that feminism had been offered for her consumption. Even if she was grateful, nevertheless her experience did not reflect the Redstockings Manifesto. Rooted in place, her experience demanded that she struggle with the risk of responding to *northern* women, a risk that had indeed come to exist through the mediation of WomanSpace, a "community of Same."

As I have discussed in Chapter One, the ways in which an individual is en-gendered and located are determined by the engagement of the self in social reality. Identity is thus a process of consciousness in which one's history is interpreted and reconstructed within a range of available meanings. The agency of the subject is made possible through this process of political interpretation of one's place and choice of identification, the meanings of which are themselves historically contingent and changeable.

Thus I would argue that Gert's increasing dissatisfaction with the subjectivity she had absorbed through WomanSpace led her to identify not with the northern *woman*, but with the *northern* woman, a subject position legitimized through the nature/woman conflation of cultural feminism, and one of which she could imagine herself an author. She increasingly came to embrace the politics of being aged, female, and northern, ever still remaining inside the ideal of *sisterhood*, to justify her humour

¹⁷⁴ Gert Beadle, *Crone's Musings*.

in what was becoming largely a "sullen march." I would argue that this self-characterization, the assertion by Gert of her self, her authentic 'northern' voice in relation to the collective, was one of the things that made possible the shift for the *Northern Woman Journal* from a radical feminist press governed by the activities of the Northern Women's Centre, to a completely separate group, guided by the warm principles and comforting words of cultural feminism.

From the beginning, Gert spoke of the forgiving and strong 'nature' of the northern woman who, she claimed, was stronger and more resilient than her southern sisters.¹⁷⁵ Increasingly this came to mean that northern women, from small towns in the region were stronger, and less petty, than the women's community of Thunder Bay. In an open letter to the women of Rainy River in 1979 Gert said that being in their presence for International Women's Day affirmed for her "that I am part and parcel of that valley where women are somehow bigger, deeper and less given to paranoid fears in their relationships with other women." There, in Fort Frances, she says, "it is normal and no great surprise to find one hundred and fifty women of all ages, from every church and service club, feasting together..." Gert's "northern" exuberance seems a far cry from her thoughts on Thunder Bay. She attributes this to a "cultural uniqueness" written into the history of "Women in the Valley":

... [it] has shown us (you will notice I say us) to be resilient [sic] and resourceful. It is the northern air, I say, perhaps the water (ugh), certainly the mineral in the soil. There is a tension in the valley and though it is not of your making . . . it is you, the women, who will heal the wounds¹⁷⁶ and restore the Valley to sanity."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ In these characterizations, one is able to see Gert creating her own female identity from inside the northern myth.

¹⁷⁶ This closely parallels the imagery of much of the ecofeminist writing which grew with the emergence of cultural feminism. See Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Caroline Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Karen Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making the Connections" in *Environmental Ethics* 9(1), pp. 3-20; Judith Plant, ed. *Healing the Wounds* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1990).

Indeed, it was Gert who embraced fully the assumption that women in the north were different from women in the South, and she who came to offer the most seductive mythology of the 'northern woman' in a doomed but moving attempt to unify an increasingly divided northern women's movement.

As Gert began to sign her name, it became evident which of the voices appearing under the anonymous authorship of the collective were, in fact, hers. Emerging as early as 1977 as a central voice of the *Journal*, Gert increasingly lost her hesitant stance in relation to feminist theory and to strongly advocate her own position. She recounted standing in front of the mirror and asking plaintively, "Who am I?" She continued: "When I first realized I was a crowd . . . we just decided that when I knocked on the door of myself, whoever had the energy would answer and surprise the rest of us." In one of the only bursts of humour in the *Journal* thus far, Gert speaks of Carlotta, a gift from her Spanish grandmother, racing in to sink long nails into the "quivering and flabby flanks" of her aging spouse. Then there is Nanna, the professional relative, let out only long enough to pack cookies in the cookie jar and shake the dirt out. Or there is Libby the Libber, a late bloomer racing off to "the house of women where she feels not indispensable but reasonably intelligent..." Just in time, Gert says, Libby experienced a "born-again conversion which straightened her spine, removed the film from her eyes and sent her out to preach the gospel of the total female..."¹⁷⁸

This last personality, the aging crone preaching the gospel of the total female, was a significant departure from all other female "subjects" explored throughout the *Journal* and indeed paralleled a

¹⁷⁷ Gert Beadle, "Open Letter to the Women: Rainy River District," *Northern Woman Journal* 5:2 (1979), p. 3.

¹⁷⁸ Gert Beadle, *Northern Woman Journal* 3:1 (1977), p. 2.

shift in the meanings assigned to "woman" by many radical feminist theorists. Given the tendency of radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin to offer biological and psychological rationales for the perceived universality of women's oppression, it is not surprising that by the mid-1970s, "weary foot-soldiers" in the women's movement, failing to see any reward for their efforts, were beginning to call for a cultural separation rooted in the moral superiority of women's "aesthetic mode."¹⁷⁹

Under the new "cultural feminism," selected principles of what had been a radical women's movement for social change became entrenched in a highly conservative and reactionary belief in male vice and female virtue. Alice Echols compares this shift to feminists' involvement in the social purity movement of the late nineteenth-century, in which the issues of agency, victimization and morality contained in a feminist discourse about sexuality became "the charged locus for [a] politics of female outrage."¹⁸⁰

Early radical feminism stressed the material basis of patriarchy. At the same time, the oppression of women by individual men was widely viewed as a psycho-social relationship which became manifest in material existence. With cultural feminism, however, the material reality became subsumed in favour of an exaggerated understanding of male and female psychology. Although they would identify themselves as "radical" feminists, theorists such as Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly began to speak of the reclaiming of the "female principle."¹⁸¹ The goal of feminism, the true test of

¹⁷⁹ See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970). Here, Firestone makes a distinction between the male "technical" mode which centres on control and destruction and the female "aesthetic" mode which focused on nurturing and beauty.

¹⁸⁰ Alice Echols, "The New Feminism of Yin and Yang" in Ann Snitow et al., eds. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (Monthly Review Press, 1983), p. 439.

¹⁸¹ See Mary Daly, *Gyn Ecology*; Andrea Dworkin "Terror, Torture and Resistance" in *Canadian Woman Studies* 12:1 (1991) pp. 37-42.

sisterhood, was no longer one's commitment to women as a social category, but to *woman* as a female body with an essential core. A vilification of the left ensued, with cultural feminism pointing to dissent within the women's movement, not as a sign of diversity among women, but as proof of the extent to which patriarchy had defiled the mother-daughter bond, and thus all relationships among women.¹⁸² Feminism became synonymous with female-bonding; the women-identified woman became an elevated ideal.

Indeed, through Gert's writing, one begins to see the collective splitting along exactly these lines. In 1979, Gert asked readers which part of her "nature" had she not yet fully shared with them. "I am as transparent as water in my total dedication to a future generation..." She vented her frustration with a movement "struggling on all fronts," having studied and researched everything but the soul:

If I had one last secret of my life to share with all my human family, especially my sisters, I would speak of the mystery of the soul and the part it could play in our certain destiny.¹⁸³

She spoke of "true life," the positive energy that created the world, the rejection of sin and guilt as male constructs of faith, and the need to accept the wisdom of the life force as the centre of the women's movement.

In the same issue, prostitution was abhorred, and the suggestion that women can be salvaged from the "abuse and degradation implicit in prostituting one's self"¹⁸⁴ through the collective control of brothels was ridiculed. Above this article appeared an excerpt from Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* which exalted the glory of motherhood, and claimed that women have been robbed of their biological power

¹⁸² For discussions on motherhood, see particularly Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976).

¹⁸³ Gert Beadle, "Gert's Gospel," *Northern Woman Journal* 5:6 (1979), p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

by male experts who fear it. A few pages later, a "Christian Feminism" Conference was reported on by Gert, who attended along with several other women involved with WomanSpace. Gert, then, was not alone in moving the *Journal* further toward the development of a different rationale for maintaining the ideal of *sisterhood*. Indeed, letters from readers were also beginning to call for change, asking for a shift away from the "rape theme" to happier subjects that portray women in a "positive" light.

By the next issue of the *Journal* in early 1980, a women's spirituality group had been established at WomanSpace. Gert insisted that readers of most feminist journals recognized the absence of a spiritual dimension, "both from the pages and from the movement itself." She cited "pure bravery" as the catalyst which brought eight women together at WomanSpace to discuss what was going wrong with the movement. The conclusion they reached was that the hope for feminism lay in the realization of spirit in women as universal, and that this was the unifying force for women who were continuing to let individual and material concerns divide them in their political life. "What is a cause without spirit?" Gert asks. "When shall we rise about the oppression of the collective, that stifling dishonest pretence that no one can lead or be responsible for a decision until the bias of every individual has had its chance to cut it down to size?"¹⁸⁵

Indeed, by 1979, Gert was discouraged. In what she said may be her last "Gospel," she challenged the collective to ask themselves where the *Journal* stood in relation to other projects at WomanSpace, where energies were increasingly being spread too thin. Her vision for the *Journal* was a "balanced, informative, and creative feminist paper that appealed to women's *strengths*. "There is a question in my mind as to the desirability of women emotionally involved in the heavy subjects of rape and

¹⁸⁵ Gert Beadle, "Seeds of Liberation" *Northern Woman Journal* 6:1 (1980), p. 3.

battering attempting to produce [the *Journal*]." The Northern Women's Centre, she argued, was holding the reins too tightly and not allowing for creativity. If the situation continued, the *Journal* would fold. Or, she offered, the *Journal* could be turned over completely to women not affiliated with the centre, "women who are perhaps plugged into creativity rather than the heavy message, but nevertheless would find room for some of our input."¹⁸⁶

Cultural feminism then, was meant to offer an alternative to the "tyranny of the collective" by women who, because of the virtues inherent in their shared biology, were increasingly presumed also to share a common soul. In 1978, Mary Daly published *Gyn Ecology* which called for the creation of a "Race of Women" and insisted upon the elemental purity of women. Far removed from the grass-roots anti-elitist activism of the 1970s which had so taken hold and incorporated itself into the Bay St. myth in Northwestern Ontario, Daly's prescription for the "pure of heart" was a complete retreat from political life into utopian constructions of female sexuality and spirituality. Sisterhood was renamed "Be-Friending" in Daly's analysis. You would know those involved in the process, she says, through "gestures, witty comments, facial expressions, glances, a certain light in the eye, caresses, style of clothing, ways of walking, choices of occupation, of environment..."¹⁸⁷ This is an extremely opaque frame of reference but Daly is absolute in her assertion that they are *not* "Painted Birds" (feminine), "token feminists" (liberals), or "fembots" (professional women).

Lynn Segal, in a chapter entitled "Compensations of the Powerless,"¹⁸⁸ notes that many feminists since the late 1970s have delighted in Daly's powerful images of female salvation and passionate promises

¹⁸⁶ Gert Beadle, "Gert's Gospel" *Northern Woman Journal* 6:2 (1980), p. 3.

¹⁸⁷ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* as quoted in Lynn Segal, *Is the Future Female: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 18.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

of fulfilment through language. Indeed, ancient triple goddess imagery became central to her evolution as a poet and feminist through this time. She came to identify with all three, charting her progress from maiden to mother to hag as part of a magical journey to freedom:

Giving birth to yourself after long gestation
 in the belly of your old woman
 is hard labour . . .
 There is nothing sacred about this birth
 if you want to live.
 you must be prepared to kill
 years of betrayal and denial will set
 her bones against you, close her womb
 like the tight lips of a Methodist ministers.
 She is a bonded servant, sold and sold again
 your own mother whom you despise
 for a lifetime of apology and humility.
 This Biblical good woman would deny
 your conception as an aberration, an evil
 spell that took her while asleep.
 But you are beyond term, raging for the light
 and you render her into mythology.
 You will forgive her finally for her
 dependence on the old laws of survival
 and begin to mother this new life.
 This healthy child,
 worth dying for.¹⁸⁹

Segal calls this a conservative retreat to a belief in the unchanging nature of woman -- a politics of despair which reflects the pessimism that had been growing in the radical feminist movement since the mid-seventies.¹⁹⁰

This may be true, yet for Gert as Crone, with cultural feminism the hesitancy of her voice indeed

¹⁸⁹ Gert Beadle, "Born Again" *Crone's Musings* (self published).

¹⁹⁰ Radical feminism, at least in theory, had demanded power in all spheres. But the difficulty of living the ideal of *sisterhood*, indeed the risk inherent in the question of proximity, led many feminists to search for "specialness" and solace by 1980. There is little room in this framework for *any* discussion of class, region or ethnicity. Instead, it offers a softer and less challenging understanding of the 'northern woman.'

disappeared. She became a spinner of possibilities, a teller of 'truths,' a feminist icon transformed into a witch by patriarchy. The feminist movement had failed to address the role and needs of elder women, except in the context of menopause, depression and imminent death. Yet, as part of a grassroots movement of elder women and women's spirituality, Gert embraced the power of myth and archetype. Looking through a family album watching her shape evolve into a grandmother figure "made of cookie dough and doomed to be nibbled to death by well-meaning carnivores,"¹⁹¹ Gert then decided that she would no longer participate in the politics of reform.

At its most *northern*, the *Journal* under Gert's tutelage was also at its most theoretically charged by the distancing of cultural feminist theory from the radical women's movement. A basic premise of cultural feminism is that women can only describe what is woman. In dominant discourse, woman has always been construed as something, explained through a biological rationale as being alternately immoral / irrational or kind / nurturing. Cultural feminism proposed that the meanings attached to woman had been misunderstood and misconstrued by men. The goal then was to reclaim the glory of essential feminine characteristics of peacefulness, self-awareness and a deep connection to the reproductive and regenerative capacities of nature, for themselves. Rather than a feminist consciousness then, the ladder to climb becomes one leading to the essential *female* nature. To achieve this, one need not venture further than one's own body -- even the personal as political becomes irrelevant.

I will offer that for Gert, cultural feminism represented an opportunity to align with a female subject that afforded her some power within the northern women's movement. In adopting the position of crone, and critiquing the practice of northern feminism from a cultural spiritualist perspective which

¹⁹¹ Gert Beadle, "Family Album" *Rising*.

was rapidly becoming part of the contemporary feminist discourse, she was able to theoretically argue against her own exclusions for the first time. As eco-feminism came to over-lap with cultural feminism, projecting the idealized female onto nature which had been previously conceptualized as male and bloody, further legitimation was offered for the assertion that an essential 'northernness' meant strength for its true inhabitants.

The excitement of the early *Journal* differed from this because it looked to the possibility for women to *break out* of contemporary societal ideas of 'woman.' But the rise of sisterhood as a normative discourse, one may say even as a program, for women's relationship to each other, led to a theoretical denial of human agency and difference. Human agency, in practice, was always at work in the trying on and casting off of modes of female subjectivity with the group at WomanSpace, but it increasingly became a programmatic communion with the dominant discourse of the collective.

In response to this, Gert sought out an identification with the crone, and though she is credited with keeping the founding collective together, it may be argued that she ultimately abandoned it in her push for practical and theoretical change in the way the *Journal* was conceptualized. Her call for a new collective drew members from the spirituality group which she had helped form at WomanSpace, and ultimately led to a softening of the *Journal's* radical history, legitimized by the cultural feminist revolt against all things not of the spirit.

Indeed, the radical Bay St. *locale*, with its unresolved north / south; colonizer / colonized / immigrant; and male / female dialectics, coupled with the difficult proximity of the native woman in Geraldton, became completely entrenched in myth with the equation of woman and nature in Gert's poetry:

She was Northern
deep in her secret marrow

the depth of rock
 and forest claimed her,
 in its swollen rivers
 she heard the whisper of
 the dipping paddles
 when the loon was hiding

More than the North
 she was the quiet pool
 unpolluted . . .
 The free north
 virgin . . .
 Yet in the wilderness
 she played as fawn to doe
 a target for the hunter
 a raw resource . . . Ripe
 for the picking.
 The lust of progress
 felled her like a pine
 stripped her . . .
 Stole the treasure she was hiding . . .
 Left her like an easy lay
 discarded . . .
 She was Northern
 her braids as sleek
 as feathers on a crow
 and yet . . .
 Her destiny is wed to sorrow

She was the time it is
 and our tomorrow.¹⁹²

Gert, herself, claimed to be continuing her "upward movement of the spirit," refusing to be "led by the defeated, tutored by the frustrated." Finally, she voiced her driving principle relation to the *Northern Woman Journal* collective and the theoretical milieu of WomanSpace -- that she was a *Northern Woman* and this, for her, meant something quite different, something she had been saying all along:

My perspective is a working-class one. We're too well put together up here to lend ourselves to the role of the victim... The *Journal* began with a socialist message in the day when the

¹⁹² Gert Beadle, "The Free North," *Northern Woman Journal* 2:6 (1975), p. 3.

message was not popular. It evolved into a women's struggle quite naturally. It is my contention that it is time to evolve again, this time to true diversity...¹⁹³

A call was put out for a new collective to take the reins, and it succeeded. In early 1980, the new collective, claimed to be recently recovered from "the 1975 feminist burn-out" and busy studying feminist issues. The editorial policy stated that women would now be portrayed in a *positive* light, covering events from a woman's experience. Though articles about events in the region continued to appear, the analysis of the reincarnated *Journal* represented a full-scale retreat from radical feminist theory and practice in its search for the *essence* of the 'northern woman.' For an increasing number of women, the "academic" exercise underlying northern feminism was becoming uncomfortable and intimidating. Sisterhood was no longer possible. Proximity with the Northern Women's Centre was now far too dangerous to the "positive energy" required to provide a feminist press alternative. Soon the new *Journal* collective divorced itself completely from the Centre, moving its offices to the other side of the downtown core, away from Bay St. in a quest for an exclusively "positive female energy needed to provide a feminist press alternative for women."¹⁹⁴

Interestingly, it was made clear that the current collective would *not* publish bias which worked against the principles of feminism, a statement which, this time, provoked no response from northern women, many of whom it seems had chosen to identify themselves as something other than the "Northern Woman" offered to them by the *Journal*.

It is unknown whether Gert, who retired to British Columbia shortly after she founded the new collective, desired or anticipated such a withdrawal from the early movement which she credited with

¹⁹³ Gert Beadle, "Gert's Gospel" *Northern Woman Journal* 7:1 (1981), p. 11.

¹⁹⁴ *Northern Woman Journal* collective, "Editorial," *Northern Woman Journal* 10:2 (1984), p. 2.

unfolding her, educating her, politicizing her, and changing her life. But through her agency, her vision of the strong, northern woman, 'The True North Strong and Free,' the *Northern Woman* had become uniformly singular and indivisible. To simply *be*, without reflex, is the luxury that the *Northern Woman Journal* assumed by its increasing withdrawal into the safety of its own mythologized name:

Now that we have been persuaded that we can have it all, we know we don't want any of it, it's a crock, a total waste of energy. The patriarchal structures, be they public or personal, have an underlying politic that is damaging to the soul and lethal to the planet. We have finally brought the politic home to the personal, the movement has gone inside.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Gert Beadle, "From the Pen of . . . Gert Beadle," unpublished.

CONCLUSION:

This is the place where we bury the myth and write our names in its dust.

Gert Beadle, "Woman's Place"

The myth of the north is a powerful cultural imaginary. Stories about the great actors of the north: the Canada First Movement, the voyageurs, the "Bay St. Boys," and modern-day lumberjacks offer a particular cultural context and regional milieu through which northern regionalism has emerged in Northwestern Ontario. For the purposes of this discussion, Northern Ontario has been conceptualized as primarily a social construction, emerging from within a liberal philosophical framework and becoming manifest in colonial economic expansion and resource extraction in an "untouched" landscape.

The myth of the north is also a gendered story. The human landscape of the north has traditionally not reflected the experience, knowledge and concerns of women. The term "single-industry town" refers to both specific places and a mythical context, does not capture the industry of women in northern homes. Similarly, discussions of the negative effects of a boom and bust resource economy have not adequately dealt with the intense isolation many women experience in their communities. Thus, Gert Beadle's articulation of her attempt to "write [the] names" of northern women into the liberal / masculine myth through the Northern Woman Journal is an allusion to the way in which feminism has made new narrative and dramatic resources available to women in the north.

I have attempted to show how the primary landscape of Northern Ontario has been shaped by liberal ideology with pockets or particular locales attesting to the existence and the desire for radical change. Through a discussion of the historically radical socialist milieu of Bay St. in Thunder Bay,

I have scratched the surface of a powerfully evocative fiction and situated the Northern Woman Journal both physically, symbolically and, in part, theoretically within it.

The stories of Bay St. are part of an enduring myth, located primarily within the consequences of settlement and economic development shaped by nineteenth-century liberal discourse. Colonial subjects engaged with a racist notion of "Canada First" and opened a nation. They were complicit in the displacement of a people from their land. An immigrant population came to a "new life," which meant toil and struggle in the boreal forest. It is the latter, finding a voice in the radical labour movement of the 1930s, that is enshrined in the Bay St. myth.

Decades later, in the same location, women engaged with the ideal of sisterhood and developed WomanSpace as a celebration of a new radical project and a new mythology -- the goodness of community and the solidarity of sisters. However, with the explosion of feminist awareness among urban women at WomanSpace, young wives in single-industry towns, franco-Ontarian women, native women, and elderly Finnish matrons were pushed to the edges of "consciousness" -- relegated to the bottom rung of the "consciousness-raising ladder" from the beginning, almost as a reflex. The concept of the "pure voice" of women and the celebration of "women-only" space is thus shown to be extremely problematic and contradictory for northern "sisters" who, though part of the community of WomanSpace, have lived their lives in proximity to northern women who do not fit.

Carl Berger has argued that an intellectual elite appealed to the "unconquered North" as the foundation myth for a nationalist agenda; WomanSpace similarly appealed to the "unconquered Woman" as a foundation myth for women's freedom. When the two were brought together, as they sometimes were in the poetry of Gert Beadle, the collision of theory and practice created a tension that often splintered

fragile alliances based on shared biology and / or a shared sense of place.

I have explored these themes in discussing why a unified movement, feminist or regionalist, is impossible when there is a multiplicity of subjects within the single self. "Woman" is a singular discursive construct. Political splits in feminism are fed by different sets of theory offering different forms of subjectivity, or identification with the concept "woman." The same is true for "north." It is not surprising then, that the "northern woman" is a volatile collectivity, with both sets of meanings offering a fertile site for contestation.

The *Northern Woman Journal* is, therefore, an interesting example of the difficulties faced by political groups who, essentially, are fighting for the power to control discourse and meaning, and thus identity and identification. Where there are multiple discourses and many possible positions, the fact that an individual is not fixed, nor coherent, is made clear. It is left to the individual subjects, like Gert, to coordinate the discourses - not burying the myth, but choosing among many different stories (whether consciously or unconsciously), in order to write one's name in the dust.

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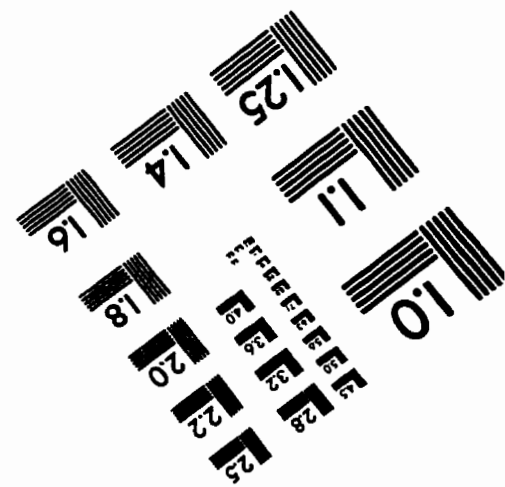
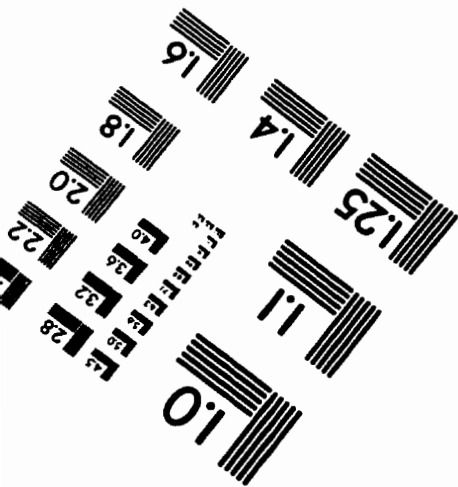
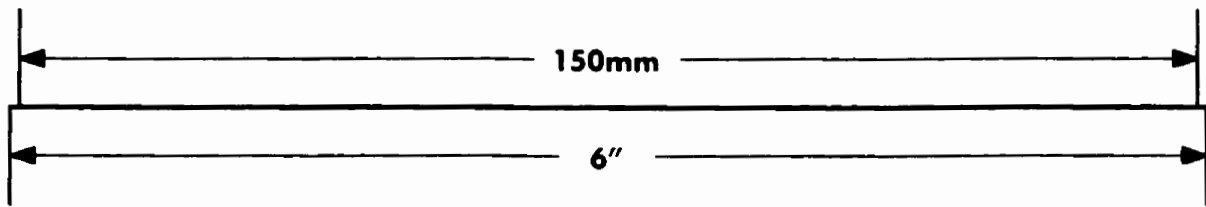
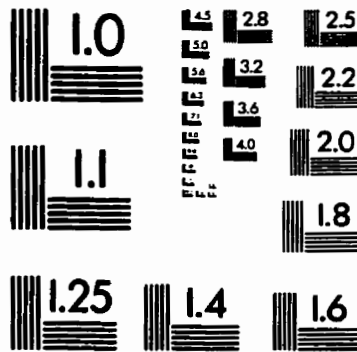
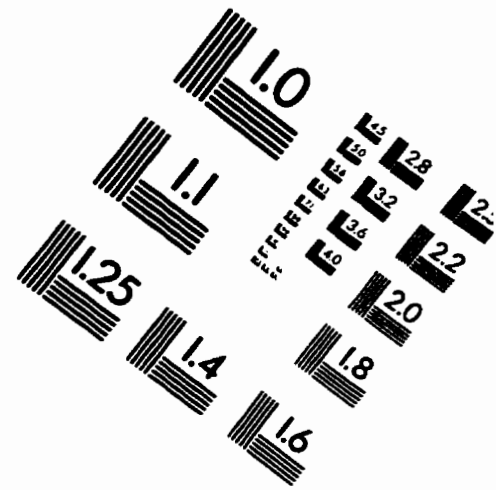
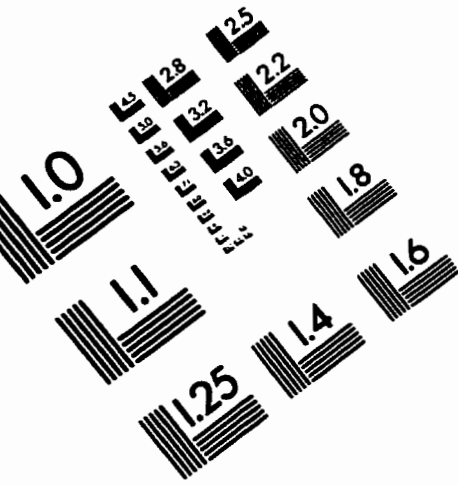
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