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Introduction For feminist-researchers who engage in field research and conduct interviews to collect information on specific conditions that affect women’s lives, the question once asked by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her 1988 essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” is daunting but imperative. As a feminist-scholar who specializes in feminism and social movements, I do research that involves making contact with representatives of women’s groups, women’s rights advocates, and feminist-activists who engage in political and social transformation. The question of whose voices we hear always emerges, and it emerged with a particular resonance during two series of interviews that I conducted amid the 1997 introduction of workfare policy in Ontario.1 The first series of interviews was conducted with several women who lived on social assistance; many were single mothers with whom I used life narrative methodology to highlight the multifaceted itineraries of welfare recipients and the multiple ways they represent themselves. The second series of interviews was conducted with representatives of women’s groups and community organizations who advocated for welfare recipients but were not necessarily recipients themselves. The objective was to collect the experiences of these advocates who defend welfare recipients’ rights, but most importantly to
understand how feminist discourses and practices on poverty are produced, reproduced, and/or transformed. The members of these collectives were in contact almost daily with welfare recipients either as consumers of welfare services or as members and/or active participants within their organizations.

Both series of interviews relied on feminist qualitative methodology oriented towards unveiling the dramatic impact of policy changes on women's lives and on the collective action against poverty. I was not surprised to find significant differences between the two narratives. After all, the self-representation of a “single mother on welfare” is not the same as an exposé on discursive practices and modes of organizing put forth by a women's group. By contrasting these two series of narratives, however, it became clear to me that there was much more going on than just a difference of scale. The main and substantive difference lay instead between two competing representations of women needing welfare assistance. In the first series, women had no difficulty representing themselves as agents of their own lives with a possible future, even if they knew they were likely to receive public assistance in the long term. While they admit that they need help and that their choices with regards to coping strategies may appear contradictory, they present a level of consciousness that makes them clearly see the political context that they occupy. In the second series, by contrast, the notion of agency gives way to a representation of single mothers on welfare “as victims” of all kinds of situations, mainly of the welfare/workfare system and of personal and institutional violence. Here, women were represented as defenceless and confronted with impossible solutions, needing the guidance of an organized force to help them make the right choices and to defend their rights before the public institutions that controlled their lives. Although the discourses of feminist collectives and community groups differed, they shared a common view that assessing how they work as feminist collectives and defending the effectiveness of their analyses in regards to the political context were primary considerations, while viewing single mothers as agents with high levels of consciousness was a secondary consideration.

These two series of interviews highlight the difficulty of representing the “subaltern” within feminist research as well as community activism. The present article is not about social policy (even if the main question that emerged from the initial research was about how policy changes affect the
way people make choices about their lives), nor does it present a case study, even though I will reference the multifaceted character of a woman living on welfare/workfare throughout the text. Instead, this article proposes a feminist exploration of the relationship established between two terrains: the terrain of feminist academic research and the terrain of feminist activism. This intersection has been the theme of important theoretical and epistemological innovations in feminist theory, especially within feminist reflexivity theory as well as the politics of location. What remain relatively unexplored, however, are the interactions within another category of feminist-intellectuals, those who self-identify as political activists and those who work within feminist collectives. My focus, therefore, is on the relational dynamics established between these two categories of feminist-intellectuals, my purpose being to question who sits at the centre of the analysis when feminist-researchers in academia connect with representatives of feminist collectives and women's groups to conduct research on women's living conditions; on feminist discourses and practices evolving within women's groups; and on how policy changes affect different sets of power relations in women’s lives, including their relations with women’s groups and so forth.

Attributing the status of “intellectual” to feminist-activists should not come as a surprise. They are often approached by feminist-researchers who value their status held within the community as well as their expertise and knowledge. Feminist-activists, therefore, are not mere functionaries assigned to provide services and to perform basic administrative tasks. Feminist-activists take advantage of their position/location within the women’s movement—sometimes within multiple organizations—to develop theories, discourses, and practices that later can become part of, or be co-opted within, feminist teaching and feminist research in academia. Feminist-activists, whether or not they have a university education, contribute significantly to the production and reproduction of feminist knowledge, and their expertise is valued as a contribution to the representation of women in multiple contexts. Yet what do we know about the specific character of women’s groups’ representatives who occupy the position of the “native informant”? Spivak uses this concept and its multifaceted position when she writes “Certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best ‘native informants’ for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other. But one must
nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous.”

Two underlying and interrelated questions guide the following exploration: first, what happens to the voices and actions of the “subaltern woman” as a result of the interaction between the researcher and the activist/native informant? Second, is there a space for the subaltern woman — either as a user of services or as an active participant in the objectives of the group — from which she can contribute to the creation of feminist discourses, theories, and analyses that, in turn, are used for the representation of her needs within public/political spheres? The following sections of this article focus on this representation and its ambiguities, and outline the institutional limitations within which both categories of feminist-intellectuals are constrained. In the first section, I focus on the ways in which Spivak conceived the presence of the native informant, while keeping in mind that doing feminist research using the West as a terrain is not the same as providing information about the subaltern woman to the West. After introducing the figure of the native informant, I explore Spivak’s thoughts on the (im)possibilities of speech and autonomy of action of the subaltern woman. Spivak’s postcolonial critique of representation in her 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” highlights the ambiguities, misappropriations, and diversions operated by intellectuals who, in spite of their good intentions, pretend to give a voice to the oppressed. This issue is fundamental for the epistemology of feminist research, especially when feminist-researchers use intermediaries such as feminist collectives and women’s groups in order to collect information. This dilemma will be the focus of the second section, where I will suggest that Spivak’s question does not need a definitive answer because she herself refuses to fall into the trap of making a clear choice between a “yes” or a “no” to the subaltern voice. Instead, it is her question itself that needs to be asked repeatedly and to be placed constantly at the centre of feminist research. The third section focuses on the rearticulation of the terrains of feminist research in academia and feminist-activism while revisiting the heterogeneous character of Spivak’s native informant and the multiple positions/locations this character holds within different interacting worlds.
The Process of Representation and Its Ambiguities

The Heterogeneous Figure of the “Native Informant”

I would like to begin with a question: how is it possible to realize the political commitment of making subaltern women, especially those who are living on the margins of society, visible and central to feminist research? The question raises the issue of double loyalty: loyalty towards women at the centre of feminist research and loyalty towards the institutional structures within which the feminist research is taking place, which does not always favour the “subaltern woman.” Working towards a theory of representation would be easy if it was simple enough to achieve solidarity and gain a sense of belonging amongst feminists: researchers, activists, and subalterns. During the 1970s, several segments of the feminist movement created women-only spaces characterized by direct women-to-women relationships. Such a mechanism was at the heart of the movement’s capacity to theorize about women's oppression and liberation. The aim was to build a community in bodies and spirits: any feminist inquiry was possible if it happened within a women-only environment, which itself became part of the investigation. Doing feminist research today establishes similar forms of direct contact and still requires the establishment of close relationships between researchers and the researched within communities where the subaltern lives. This proximity between the researcher and the subaltern does not mean, however, that either party has to accept all discourses and practices uncritically. According to Ania Loomba, this possibility of critical distance is the reason why Spivak considers the origin of the academic feminist-researcher as coming from the same environment she wants to research: “The intellectual whom Spivak here calls to arms is almost by definition the Indian woman academic working in the metropolitan academy, a woman who must struggle against the neo-colonial impulses of that space without succumbing to the nostalgic gesture of her counterpart in the third world.”

The feminist-researcher is not the only one facing the dilemma of a double loyalty. Feminist-activists experience this dilemma as well, but that does not simplify relations between researchers and activists. In order to find out exactly who the informant is, one should take into account various positions/locations of her action. In many positions/locations, the native informant is the same feminist who has moved from one world to another:
from the community to academia where she pursues feminist research based on her experience as an activist. Such transposition is far from perfect and does justice only partially to the native informant who acts at the intersection of more than one world: between communities of women, she once was (and still is) part of the academic institution where she now operates. To name her “native” originates from the fact that she comes from the same milieu and/or is successful in forging organic links with communities of women. She disseminates information both directly and indirectly within feminist research networks in women’s studies courses, in public lectures, in scholarly publications, to feminist audiences within academic conferences, and so forth. Often portrayed as coming from women’s concrete experience and/or one who represents their unique perspective, the native informant can present the illusion that the subaltern woman speaks.

Still, does the native informant have only an intermediary role as transmitter of information between academia and the community sector? Wouldn’t she be inclined—while proclaiming the authenticity of women’s voices—to substitute her own voice, even if only unconsciously during the process of representation? In reality, all of her theorization/description of women’s oppression, all of her analysis of, and information about, women’s living conditions, all of her efforts to bring legitimate claims within public/political spaces are all activities that operate in front of feminist audiences eager to know more—not only about the subaltern woman, but also about what is happening today in the field of women’s organizing. The relationship between the native informant and feminist audiences—as well as other audiences—is built on the belief that “organic” links exist that allow the native informant to claim a real interpretation/representation of women’s lives. What is exchanged among feminist-intellectuals—the academic and the activist—is constantly transformed, reinterpreted, and presented discursively as “women’s speech.” All categories of feminist-intellectuals practise a type of representation that emphasizes, first and foremost, the legitimacy of their actions of theorizing, analyzing, interpreting, and advocating, and of feminist-intellectuals representing themselves.
(Im)possibility of Speech and Autonomy of Action of the “Subaltern Woman” In the world of traditional politics, representation refers to the space occupied by elected/nominated representatives within government, within public administration, and within other institutions of power. This article refers to an entirely different meaning of representation. Here, representation is seen as primarily discursive and qualitative, occurring when specific political and social forces are involved in defending the needs of social categories of people. During this process of representation, these social categories are constructed as prototypes to make them more visible and comprehensible within public/political spheres. Political and social actors involved in this process of representation do not often share the same vision of the world: certain of their discourses concerning images of those represented—single mothers living on welfare, for instance—clash with one another within public/political spheres while some others join forces in solidarity in order to transform current “meaning systems,” for instance, on welfare dependency. Within these spheres, political and social actors are searching for the legitimacy that will confer upon them the right to influence, directly or indirectly, the formation of discourses on social categories of people worthy of political and social recognition. For women’s groups and feminist-activists, the representation of women’s needs and women’s rights is often perceived as organic because of the close connection with the communities of women within which they act.

Spivak argues that “[two] senses of representation are being run together: representation as ‘speaking for,’ as in politics and representation as ‘representation’ as in art or philosophy.” One can look to a work of fiction or a work of art to find descriptions/qualifications that use the type of realism necessary for the recognition of experience. We can imagine a native informant, when speaking on behalf of women and/or their communities, being involved as faithfully as possible in the description of a living-reality onto which she superimposes a political meaning on their behalf. Spivak’s critique of representation sheds light on activities surrounding the construction of images on the subaltern woman. She requires us to go beyond this process and to capture the multifaceted social relations that exist among political actors (e.g., intellectuals, feminist collectives, political parties, unions, etc.), as well as the institutions these actors are involved with and
that give them the legitimacy to represent. Despite the fact that feminist-intellectuals seek to place the subaltern at the centre of their analysis and their representation, they actually receive their legitimacy and political visibility from somewhere other than the particular community whence the subaltern women emerged.

For Spivak, the feminist-intellectual who pretends to give a voice to the subaltern cannot be reduced to her single individual dimension. Beyond the interlocking set of relations that characterizes her life (e.g., class, gender, race, sexual practices, and so forth), the intellectual remains inserted within powerful associations and institutions located within specific geopolitical contexts. Within the terrain of the university for instance, feminist-intellectuals occupy a position of multiple ambiguities, as Mohanty underlines so acutely within her discussion of the domination of the first-world. She writes that “feminist scholarly practices (reading, writing, critiquing, etc.) are inscribed in relations of power—relations that they counter, resist, or perhaps implicitly support. There can of course be no apolitical scholarship.” However, the same ambiguity exists within the terrain of community activism, where feminist-intellectuals develop services, strategies of action, and sometimes coalesce within the field of political discourse to influence social policies for social transformation.

Therefore if one takes seriously Spivak’s question, one must try to articulate feminist research along a multiplicity of discursive terrains where individuals—the researcher, the activist/informant, and the subaltern—are constituted through active participation within institutional forces. Academic research and, more specifically, feminist research, even if performed locally—as in the case of welfare/workfare issues—has to relocate all actors, feminists and nonfeminists, within its geopolitical context. Moreover, even if rooted regionally and/or nationally, the legitimacy of universities depends on their capacity to inscribe their activities within a web of institutional relations determined by such a context. In return, this legitimacy is redistributed internally among groups of scholars and determines “what stories are told, how they are told and by whom.”

Indeed, one must also take into account that the subaltern woman is everywhere and so is the native informant: within and outside academia; within and outside the classroom as teachers, researchers, students, teaching
and research assistants, etc.; and within and outside feminist collectives as activists, practitioners, users of services, etc. Above all, being reminded of multiple positions/locations of the subaltern woman and of the native informant is a reminder of how class and the process of racialization determine diverse relations of power within institutions. Race and class inform how they study, research, inform, write, and respond to scholarly research about them, as well as how they contribute to the creation of transformative and competing narratives that they also help to produce.¹⁷

**The Problem of Multiple Loyalties and the Dynamics of Organic Solidarity** The relative proximities of all feminist actors still raises important distinctions that must be made concerning terrains of intervention (i.e., the terrain of research in relation to the native informant and the terrain of activism in relation to the subaltern), their articulation, as well as the institutional and political constraints within which this articulation takes place. On one hand, the academic terrain is mapped by a complex network of universities, conferences, educational programs, funding grants, scholarly publications, and other mechanisms for the dissemination of knowledge. This terrain is highly regulated by research councils and other state institutions that determine the rules for ethical research and involves the close participation of academic researchers directly.¹⁸ Furthermore, a multiplicity of regulations within universities establish and maintain standards that inform graduate student funding, hiring, tenure and promotion, the attribution of research grants, and the recognition of academic excellence; each process depends on an extensive bureaucratic network with implications inside and outside the university, and highlights the individual feminist-researcher’s position in both. Within the academic world, there are research centres, scholarly associations (that may or may not be determined by the usual boundaries of academic disciplines), documentation centres and scholarly publications, as well as state agencies and bureaucratic rules that govern university research, determine grant distribution (forcing universities to adopt strict and restrictive procedures and rules for research and ethics), and decide research priorities and directions for public funding throughout the country.¹⁹ That is to say, feminist researchers participate in designing these institutions and setting the rules. As universities have become
increasingly corporatized, however, they can no longer be mythologized as “sanctuaries” or “sites for free scholarly inquiry.” It is within these academic sites, and by taking advantage of the residual sense of academic freedom therein, that feminist scholarship has grown impressively over the years to a point of becoming part of “an academic industrial complex.”

On the other hand, there is the terrain where collective action unfolds through numerous feminist collectives, women’s groups, and community organizations. This terrain also contains public institutions and parapublic organizations working within various systems (e.g., hospitals, schools, and municipalities) and all kinds of organizations and categories of community workers whose thoughts and actions strongly impact on feminist practices in many different ways. Within the community sector, there are multiple locations where feminist activism evolves: networks of feminist-activists and communities of practitioners who, even if they are acting outside academia, are able to propose research projects questioning existing feminist theories and methods, and challenging research practices within their fields. It should be noted that these collective regroupings concern institutions and organizational structures that the women’s movement has been able to build over the years. Some of these structures were made in collaboration with feminist-researchers in academia with the objective of working with feminist collectives and women’s groups. Such networks and structures cannot be reduced to their basic characteristics. Women’s groups are political and are also social actors within public/political spheres, and, as such, they provide legitimacy to the feminist-researcher vis-à-vis research institutions. They bring the guarantee that the information collected comes from legitimate sources of knowledge and expertise.

During certain phases of their research, feminist-intellectuals from both terrains—university research and community activism—question and challenge each other. During this dialogic interaction, each category of feminist-intellectuals enters into a dynamic that sets aside, at least temporarily, its specific connections with the subaltern woman, even though it is precisely with her that both want to base their legitimacy. The collaboration between feminist-researchers and women’s groups becomes even more effective when protocols are negotiated with the goal of regulating feminist action-research between universities and the community sector.
In spite of the best collaborative efforts, both categories of feminist regroupings are not mere aggregations of individuals, and have much more than just a sense of belonging to their respective communities. While entering into relations with one another, they bring with them the influence of multiple institutional networks that interconnect and inform each other, generating a sense of solidarity, but also all of the tension generated by the contexts in which they are forced to operate.

Once the articulation between these two terrains is achieved, tensions emerge due to the fact that there is a defence of self-interests on both sides. The articulation of these interests does not happen in isolation, but rather is made through representations outside of and beyond scholarly research. The genealogy of this process of defending one's own interest is also traceable through history. Feminist-researchers may or may not necessarily be involved in the selection of which interests are in need of public/political representation. Such selection always happens through ongoing conflicts among political actors who hold worldviews that are more or less hegemonic or dominant, depending on the historical period. And of course, feminist-researchers are not responsible for the coming to power of neoliberal governments, nor are they responsible for the adoption of neoliberal economic policies that negatively affect universities, academic teaching, and scholarly research. The fact remains though that it is within these contexts that their interactions with feminist-activists take place today. They know—or at least they should know—that within their own universities, the defence of interests goes through a practice of representation and negotiation with powerful political and economic public/private forces that, more than any other influence, legitimizes the status they gain through the recognition of excellence in their research activities. This does not happen by virtue of their payment of fees to scholarly associations, but rather by virtue of a recognized status, legitimized by rules established historically and negotiated over time.

To think that the subaltern woman speaks freely through feminist research is not a simple task. In “Can the Subaltern speak?” Spivak puts forward the means to deconstruct the mechanism of representation of those who give themselves the mandate to enforce the subaltern’s voice within public/political spheres, and of those who pretend to integrate mediation practices.
performed at the crossroads between the subaltern woman and the feminist-intellectual. However, to believe that feminist-intellectuals—within academia and the community sector—can so easily yield their position to make the subaltern woman audible is to misunderstand the dynamics of mediation itself. Spivak forces us to reinsert the feminist-intellectual within the institutional networks described above, which privilege the creation of links either through affiliations with academic institutions, or through organic relations with community groups, in the name of solidarity. For Spivak, it is precisely these hidden links, affiliations, and relations that matter the most when she states: “[t]o the question of woman as subaltern, I will suggest that the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female agency.”

Indeed, Spivak’s way of demystifying the role of the intellectual has generated considerable controversy. Several of her critics conclude that the subaltern woman could never aspire to speak or to represent herself without the recourse of legitimate intermediary bodies. Some even conclude that her suggestion that “the subaltern cannot speak” signifies the impossibility of all forms of resistance. Spivak admits having been taken by surprise by the controversy surrounding the release of her text. In an interview with editors of the Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, she expresses regret that the verb “to speak” has been taken too literally and reaffirms that the word “subaltern” names a position and, as such, it cannot be romanticized. The controversy prompted her to reconsider the text, but even if the conclusion remains unchanged, it is clear that for her this is the mechanism used during the mediation process that is responsible for the diversion/occultation of the subaltern’s voice, but not of her autonomy or her ability to resist. For this reason, other scholars, such as Ania Loomba, have written about the possibility of recuperating this autonomy by considering the Gramscian dimension of political commitment through which Spivak restores the conditions of possibility for subaltern voices. As she writes:

Spivak thus signals the necessity of adapting the Gramscian Marxism—pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will—by combining a philosophical skepticism about recovering any subaltern agency with a political commitment to making visible the position of the marginalized. Thus, she makes her case...
for the validity of the representation of the subaltern by the post-colonial feminist-intellectual.\textsuperscript{31}

Here, Gramsci’s thought provides an important contribution to our understanding of what is involved within the act of doing feminist research in connection with feminist collectives, especially when the heterogeneous character of the native informant is at stake.\textsuperscript{32} Gramsci and Spivak both insist on the responsibility of the intellectual, not as a single individual, but as embedded in a collective order. They both recognize the subaltern’s ability to develop a political consciousness and highlight the danger of its erasure during the process of being represented by intellectuals whose privileged positions are rarely subjected to an historical and critical inquiry. It should not come as a surprise then that “Can the Subaltern Speak?” begins by stating that the voice of the oppressed cannot be heard simply by allowing it to speak; that by doing only this is to avoid a critical reflection on the position of intellectuals within history.\textsuperscript{33} She proposes a dual inquiry: one of ideological affiliations and one derived from Gramscian thought as found in the \textit{Prison Notebooks} (especially from his notes on the “The Study of Philosophy” wherein he approaches the responsibility of the intellectual through an identical mode of critical inquiry).\textsuperscript{34} Gramsci argues that it is necessary to take an historical perspective that accounts for the presence of ideologies and asks why some have become hegemonic or dominant and not others. How, during the process of diffusion within society, have some systems of thought fractured according to certain trends and taken some directions rather than others?\textsuperscript{35} Gramsci recognizes the intellectual as a product of history leaving no inventory of its multiple traces deposited in all of us, regardless of the level of our consciousness:

To criticize one’s own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and to raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world. It therefore also means criticism of all previous philosophy, in so far as this has left stratified deposits in popular philosophy. The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.\textsuperscript{36}
Spivak also recognizes the existence of a political awareness within the subaltern woman, but intellectuals’ efforts to represent her hide this awareness. Here again, her way of thinking is similar to that of Gramsci, who states that anyone is capable of engaging in philosophical activities. He made such a statement many times when discussing the specific training of intellectuals and during his reflection on the formation of philosophical thought. Gramsci circumscribes the role of the intellectual, arguing that his task is to never introduce, from scratch, a new philosophy; rather, the role of the intellectual is to “reactivate” and to “promote critical thinking” on systems of thought that already exist:

First of all, therefore, it must be a criticism of ‘common sense,’ basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity.

If, for Gramsci, the intellectual’s activities begin at an individual level, it is precisely because these activities are enshrined within a collective order. When he isolates this individual who is thinking and acting, it is only to reintroduce him/her immediately within one or several social forces and/or collectives: the village, the commune, the social class, the union, the political party. It is in relation to these collective entities that he urges each intellectual to know himself/herself as a product of history. For Gramsci, the development of political consciousness is much more complex than a simple dialectical relationship between two distinct entities, one acting over the other, for instance a group of intellectuals influencing social masses. The relationship between unequal entities would not exist without the action of a group of subalterns: for him the subaltern is a position held within a specific political formation and points to a certain level of political consciousness.

Our scenario positions all of our actors—the feminist-intellectual, the activist/informant, and the subaltern—in the West, and so we hear Spivak’s advice when she urges us to revisit Gramsci, who coined the concept of the subaltern within the context of the Italian South. Maintaining her consciousness, the subaltern substitutes for a specific social category of woman—for
instance, our single mother on welfare—during the very moment that she enters into contact with a women’s group whose action is to defend her rights before the powerful institutions that control her life. Neither for Gramsci nor for Spivak should the term subaltern—this individual linked with communities and/or political and social formations—be assimilated or substituted for the generic, undifferentiated, unorganized term “social masses.” However, there is always the possibility that a feminist-intellectual who does not develop a critical analysis of her position/location within institutions—the university or the community sector that provides her legitimacy and status as feminist-intellectual who “speaks for”—develops some doubt about the ability of the single mother to maintain an autonomy of speech and of action. But Gramsci’s conception of the subaltern—as far as Spivak’s conception—makes her (the single mother) much more than mere executor of slogans of the organization she is in. The subaltern carries a certain level of political awareness, and her efforts to preserve unity between her thought and her action suggest a consciousness constantly subjected to dialectical thinking. First, there is the consciousness to witness a world that is changing and to participate with others in its transformation. Such awareness, however, contradicts a second type of consciousness that is made of old ways of thinking and shaped by ideologies borrowed from the past, as seen in Gramsci here:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit and verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed.41

Thus within feminist collectives, the role of the intellectual vis-à-vis the subaltern woman—who enters into the groups from their margins42—is to unify this dual consciousness: the consciousness of being part of a new world and the consciousness of breaking with old ways of thinking. Needless to say, the dual/dialectical consciousness can impact on feminist-intellectuals.
in a way that can potentially make their voices and their actions contradictory: contradictions are not always on the side of the subaltern’s consciousness.

**Rearticulating the Terrain of Academia and the Terrain of Activism**

**Feminist Reflexivity Approach and Beyond** Through innovative feminist theories and qualitative methodologies, feminist-researchers have demonstrated how race, class, sexual practices, ability, and so forth affect their research, and have initiated the process of re-examining the dynamic of production and reproduction of knowledge. Research activities, constitutive of knowledge, are dependent on the political, economic, sociological, cultural, racial, and sexual contexts as well as the social relations within which the feminist-intellectual is located. As such, the feminist approach of reflexivity brought new epistemological dimensions while requesting accountability within feminist research. Nonetheless, when we reinsert feminist-intellectuals within their respective institutional web described earlier, there are at least three difficulties we encounter as feminists who are self-reflecting on our own location.

First, while the scrutiny of personal characteristics and subjectivity becomes more transparent in feminist research, the situation remains particularly opaque on the side of institutions on which the production of knowledge and recognition of scientific research depend. It is likely that personal and subjective questioning that addresses all kinds of power relations and hierarchies of positions—which otherwise remain deeply entrenched within traditional academic research characterized by whiteness—will remain a mystification as long as those who control the mechanism of academic research keep their controlling power over research out of view.

The second difficulty is that the reflexivity approach tends to keep the researcher at the centre of the study: rarely do we see a similar personal and subjective narrative emerge during the research interview or after it takes place. If the geopolitical context does not capture the entire process, a certain kind of individualism remains untouched despite the depth and the seriousness of the inquiry. The theoretical and methodological challenges raised by feminist reflexivity were not meant to identify who is in control of the representation. Rather, they underline the conflict between the action of
representing women's aspirations and the action of representing one's own interests. Within the struggle for representation—the expression of women's desires, their needs, their aspirations, their demands, and their strategies of resistance—one always runs the risk of separating women's desires from the vehicle used to express them.

The legitimacy of feminist narratives represents a third difficulty. Which narrative occupies the centre of academic institutions and which feminist-researchers do academic institutions support, promote, and reward? Are some narratives marginalized, silenced, even threatened if told or even researched? Malinda S. Smith in “Gender, Whiteness and ‘Other Others’ in the Academy,” demonstrates how the process of promoting gender equity never dismantles the hegemonic position of whiteness within universities. Rather, the notion of gender comes to be identified with white women while all of the others (the nonwhite, the aboriginal, the disabled, and so forth) became the “other others.” Furthermore, gender equity mechanisms and their enforcement through university regulations (un)veil the active presence of actors who can be native informants, and, in many instances, these actors are asked to apply the same university policies and regulations that marginalize them, while at the same time their goal and main objective is to propose different narratives. Perhaps Patricia Monture gives the best example of this problem when she writes:

A resentment I carry is the fact that I have developed an academic (and personal) expertise in the area of ‘equity.’ This was never one of my goals when I returned to university. My aims were singularly focused on the forced application of criminal law sanctions against Aboriginal people and the resulting consequences, such as our over-representation in the prison population. This realization causes recurring resentment for me, because it was never my ambition to be an equity object or expert (and one is related to the other). Dealing with the resentment can be an emotional and destabilizing experience. It means acknowledging the way in which racialized social arrangements (including educational spaces) can force us to perpetually react and resist.

The terrain of academic research is a web of competing discourses and of interests, of tensions and of conflicts, but also of possible ideological, political affinities and solidarities. We know now that feminist-researchers
cannot be approached as single individuals from whom it suffices simply to get the disclosure of their interests, origins, and political affinities. We are entangled within multiple mechanisms of institutional control—constructed through history—and sometimes we may contribute, even if unknowingly, to the reproduction of the same hegemony we fight against. If Mohanty rightly suggests that universities “remain sites of struggle and contestation, thus making the corporate academy a crucial locus of feminist engagement,” this engagement must take into account the outside world of community activism.

The situation is not so different for feminist-activists, who may or may not be practitioners within women’s groups. While describing themselves as advocates in the defence of women’s interests, they often present themselves as interpreters of women’s living realities, which they claim to know best. That is why many feminist-intellectuals in academia may see feminist-activists as useful and unavoidable for their research. Sometimes, the connections between academic researchers open space for manipulation, but feminist-activists—who are more or less aware of the frontiers between their worlds and the world where they practise representation—know well how to use the argument of being privileged witnesses of women’s living conditions and how to represent their needs within public/political spheres. This is a dynamic where feminist-activists themselves face the problem of a dual loyalty: the defence of women’s interests and/or the defence of their own legitimacy.

This issue brings us back to the two meanings of representation mentioned above: representation as “speaking for” and re-presentation in the sense of describing women’s conditions. In the present context of feminist activism, however, representation no longer occurs within a social democracy characterized by some sort of individualism, collective participation, and the type of universal public policies that aimed to distribute wealth for the purpose of equalizing the living conditions of several categories of people, including single mothers on welfare. On the contrary, it has become the well-established world of neoliberalism, which is characterized by downloaded personal responsibility and requires that both categories of feminist-intellectuals—those working within communities and those attached to academic institutions—enter into the process of marketing their knowledge as well as
their services. Thus, the politics of unveiling multiple power relations that place the researcher and the activist on one side and communities of women on the other side (even by simply revealing power relations between the researcher and the activist) has very little impact on the strength of institutional connections that each category of feminist intellectuals maintains, sometimes at the expense of their discourses of liberation. That being said, we should look again to the heterogeneous position of the native informant.

A Return to the Native Informant and the Interpenetration of Worlds

Because we are not, strictly speaking, talking about a postcolonial context in the sense meant by Spivak,52 and because our specific context is shaped by the interrelation of two separate terrains—the terrain of the academic research and the terrain of community activism—we consider here three possible positions/locations occupied by the native informant. The introduction establishes that this article is not about public policy nor based on a specific study. Nevertheless, for each of the three positions/locations, based upon my experiences with the research involving welfare mothers and their advocates in the late 1990s, I will try to identify some implications for women’s voices and women’s capacity to act autonomously within women’s collectives and community organizations. After all, those groups are spaces where the native informant and the subaltern woman often intersect and this is where the representation process began. Furthermore, the three positions/locations can neither be assimilated by one another nor put into competition, although they can evolve at the same time and within the same space.

An informant who provides information about women and their communities occupies the first position/location. It does not really matter whether or not she comes from an identical milieu as the community in which she is conducting her research. What matters is that her role as informant and her expertise are acknowledged; that her information transfers from the territory of the subaltern to the territory of academia in the attempt to translate a language and a culture. These activities of transference and of translation aimed to provide meanings about a territory that is unknown and is occupied by women to whom the characteristic of being victims—of someone or something—is attached. This does not mean that the infor-
mant is knowingly involved in the process of victimizing women, but it does mean that during the process of transfer/translation, some elements of “woman-victim-of” remain entrenched and impact on the meaning that is generated. The terrain of community practice does not predetermine the degree of the informant’s radicalization, politicization, or commitment to women. Indeed, her formation as a feminist-intellectual forces her to account for imbalanced power relations with women and she may acknowledge benefitting from this but not beyond. The informant remains at the centre of the analysis. Her inclination to believe that women are victims and therefore cannot represent themselves ensures that the subaltern does not speak.

The second position/location is occupied by an informant who is solidly located within the same community and social relationship as the subaltern woman. She plays the role of a spokesperson for the outside world and does not go beyond what she interprets as the life experiences of women on behalf of whom she does feminist activism. Even as a feminist-intellectual working within feminist collectives and even if she has devoted her time to feminist struggles against oppression, a significant distance persists between her—as representative of the collective—and users of women’s group services. Important discrepancies are maintained between feminist discourses and the way in which subaltern women talk about their lives. The difference can be barely noticeable due to a firm objective of women’s groups’ to struggle in solidarity with the subaltern. Nevertheless, it bears important implications during the process of representation when the informant represents women’s living conditions, contributing to feminist research and shaping feminist discourse(s) within public/political spaces, and sometimes shapes public policies such as workfare, for example. Our informant believes that she can establish a dialogical connection between feminist research within academia and her goal of giving a voice to the subaltern woman, but this only gives space to a refracted and mediated voice with the appearance of authenticity.

The third position/location of the informant is similar to a cultural translator’s activities. Let’s imagine, for instance, the work of an interpreter whose professional tasks consist of assisting seekers of refugee status to appear in front of immigration officials or face an agent of welfare and, in both cases, struggling for survival. Her task is not comparable to that of a professional
translator of literary works who can afford to take a few days or even a week to find the proper word and meaning so that the translation not only remains faithful to the author, but also becomes a work of its own. The cultural translator performs, on a daily basis and instantaneously, the transnationalization/interpenetration of opposite worlds that would otherwise ignore each other in spite of their intersecting boundaries. Consequently, and contrary to the two previous positions, knowing in which world our informant stands and whether she maintains an organic relationship with the community of the subaltern woman, or whether she is parachuted into it from a place that has very little knowledge of feminist activism within civil society, is irrelevant. Nevertheless, her action does not allow us to believe that the only thing necessary is to create a bridge so that women's voices—subalterns' voices—are recognized. Her position/location as informant/cultural translator may seem insignificant but still faces the dilemma of a dual loyalty. She resolves it by reducing her task to what needs to be translated, to what she is asked to represent. It is precisely within that impasse, Spivak suggests, that the importance of representation appears in full force: “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.”

The informant/cultural translator knows that the subaltern must use an intermediary force to gain access and visibility within public/political spaces, but in no way does she believe that the subaltern is unable to act or create intermediary structures for herself when existing ones are unable to assure adequate representation. The (im)possibility to free the subaltern voice, despite all obstacles, requires critical thinking on the different positions/locations occupied by intermediary informants and representatives of women's groups. It necessitates a special consciousness of the multiplicity of ramifications, which links informants to powerful institutions that legitimize discourses and practices. Only then can the informant/cultural translator place herself in a situation to understand and to acknowledge the subaltern, including when the subaltern's words and actions seem to be inconsistent or even contradictory.
Conclusion Feminist-researchers and feminist-activists are part of a double process that supplies research content, and both participate in their own ways in the interpretation of women’s needs. To the extent that feminist-activists remain the dominant figure within women’s groups, it is important to verify the ways in which their theoretical models of liberation and their political approaches to oppression are compatible with strategies of resistance adopted by figures of subalternity who never relinquish their will to act and to resist. Spivak has indicated that while using Western modes of representation, the subaltern woman of the South cannot speak, but she never said that any attempt on her part to resist and to assert her voice and action was futile. Perhaps one must start by keeping in mind that feminist research is not happening solely within the walls of universities; it does not always need the legitimacy of academia to enable powerful theorizations on subaltern lives, political protests, and social transformation. This reminder that there is potentially space outside academia echoes Cherrie L. Moraga’s thought when she wonders “if perhaps non-cooperation with the academy may proffer a more effective approach toward building a truly ‘decolonial’ educational system for people of color of all classes.”

What does it mean now to integrate the same critical consciousness within feminist collectives, which are engaged in the process of social transformation and which are witnessing daily the disintegration of women’s living conditions? Feminist-intellectuals within feminist collectives occupy a variety of positions at the crossroads of several areas of intervention where women are most often presented as victims of all violence: racism, exclusion, poverty, homophobia, as well as the constant judiciarization of their daily lives. Like teaching and researching in academia, feminist discourse and practice within the community sector follows an itinerary that is traceable through historical periods. That is why it is necessary to revisit the genealogy of feminism, not as a linear project, but with the objective of contextualizing discourses that have influenced the struggles and political orientations of the contemporary women’s movement(s). Retracing feminist theorizations in any given time and place must give a central and determinant place to feminist theories produced outside of academia within the terrains of activism(s). The present political context urges us to revisit the evolution of feminist theories and practices as well as the many cases of emerging or
disappearing themes, trends, struggles, and demands up to the present time. Some questions deserve a closer look. For instance, why are we more likely to retain—almost at the hegemonic level—the liberal theoretical framework when it comes time to assess public/political gains made by women? Why, after periods of daring feminist theories and richness in cultural and political initiatives, was what followed marked by disillusion over cautiousness, and most of all, the occultation of political moments like the importance of political art and culture within feminism? It is not the time to analyze conditions of the emergence of contemporary feminism, but rather to understand political orientations and directions taken by women's movement(s) in recent years. The challenge will be to succeed in retrieving those discourses and practices that are always evolving at the margins of mainstream feminism; the objective will be to have an understanding of a movement that is multifaceted, heterogeneous, and transdiscursive across all of its segments.

Notes

I wish to thank the three reviewers from Studies in Political Economy whose comments helped to improve and clarify arguments contained in this article.


3. A reflection in that direction began to emerge with the book of N. Guberman, J. Lamoureux, J. Beeman, D. Fournier, and L. Gervais, *Le défi des pratiques démocratiques dans les groupes de femmes* (Montréal, Éd: Saint-Martin, 2004). Furthermore, the protocol negotiated nearly 30 years ago between l’Institut de recherche en Études des femmes (IREF), Relais-Femmes (a network of women’s groups), and the Université du Québec à Montréal provided a good example of this type of interaction.

4. Similar interactions exist within many other contexts such as in education, the health care system, and the judicial system. See Michaud, *Conscience subalterne, conscience identitaire*.


7. By using the term “West,” I remain closer to the terminology that Spivak used in 1988. She also refers to the “first-world.”


23. I am referring here again to the protocol between l’IREF, Relais-Femmes, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. See note 3.


26. In the *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 23, Spivak writes “But if as teachers of literature we teach reading, literature can be our teacher as well as our object of investigation. And, since we are imprisoned in the vicious circle of our stakes in institutional power, the Magistrate’s researches in extremis can perhaps rearrange our desires.” Here again, Spivak suggests that there is no such thing as an individual intellectual but an intellectual embedded into a web of power relations.
33. Spivak challenges certain radical approaches that have the effect of recentring the analysis around the Western subject, even though the initial objective was to decentralize the West as a subject. The example she gives is the conversation between Foucault and Deleuze published in “Language, Counter-Hegemony, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,” D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon, (eds.), (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). The present article could have drawn more attention to the thought of Foucault and Deleuze in the particular context within which Spivak opens her text. However, I choose to focus attention on Gramsci, whose presence, even if discrete, holds an important place in Spivak’s critical approach of the intellectual embedded within a collective order.
34. The English translation of the Prison Notebooks, with an Introduction by J. A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) is in the process of being completed under the direction of J. A. Buttigieg, who followed very closely the critical Italian edition established by Valentino Garratana and the Instituto Gramsci, Quaderni del carcere, Edizione critica dell’Istituto Gramsci (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1975). However, as I write this article, only eight notebooks out of 29 have been translated. While some references may come from the Buttigieg edition, this article refers essentially to Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, Selection for the Prison Notebook (New York: International Publishers, 1971).
40. It is interesting to note that Gramsci potentially conceived both the intellectual and the subaltern as ranks within the army. Concerning the position of the intellectuals, he wrote in his first notebook that “they correspond to the non-commissioned and junior officers in the army (and also to some field officers excluding the general staff in the narrowest sense of the term).” See the edition directed by Buttigieg, vol. 1, p. 133.
41. Prison Notebooks, p. 333.
42. I conceive the margin as being dynamic and dialogical: when women decide to get involved in the activities of a women’s group, they begin to do so from their point of entry located at the periphery. The time women spend within the group and the degree of their insertion give them the space to participate in the formation of feminist discourses and practices as well as the ability to transform them. See Michaud, Conscience subalterne, conscience identitaire.
46. Monture, “Race, Gender, and the University: Strategies for Survival”; Smith, “Gender, Whiteness and ‘Others.’”
Canada is a place where colonialism is still entrenched in the daily lives of Indigenous peoples. As I write the final corrections of this article in January 2013, the movement “Idle No More,” influenced by Teresa Spence and her hunger strike, is mobilizing extensively across the country. It demands that colonialism be ended and Indigenous sovereignty be recognized.