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Doctoral Thesis Review

“Agents of Change: Feminist literary magazines,  
editors, and the politics of cultural production in Canada (1970-2000)”  
by Mr. Marcin Markowicz

Submitted by Dr. Smaro Kamboureli

I read Mr. Marcin Markowicz’s dissertation, “Agents of Change: Feminist literary magazines, editors, and the politics of cultural production in Canada (1970-2000),” with great interest and pleasure. At 202 pages (not including the bibliography and the appendixes), it is not a very long dissertation, but the literary archive and the findings it brings to light are of immense and lasting value.

As its title suggests, Mr. Markowicz’s dissertation traces thirty years of feminist literary production in Canada, focusing specifically on the history and impact of five important Canadian feminist magazines. The period it covers, 1970 to 2000, overlaps with a number of crucial turning points in Canadian culture, especially with regard to women’s history and literature, in particular the struggle for women’s rights and for greater visibility of women’s writing, as well as the backlash these have elicited.

Many critics have engaged with that period from the perspective of Canadian women’s voices, and there is a considerable body of work that addresses the rise of magazines and small presses in Canada, but nobody has so far undertaken the kind of systematic approach to women’s literary journals that Mr. Markowicz pursues in this project. “Agents of Change” is the result of meticulous archival research, research that has no doubt involved a huge amount of time pouring over a vast array of documents. Mr. Markowicz has done an excellent job organizing and contextualizing this material in ways that offer a unique and, what is equally important, first collective and sustained look at this material. He is to be congratulated for taking on such a monumental task. Nevertheless, what is admirable about this study—its sheer ambitiousness and attempt toward thoroughness—also points to its Achilles’ heel.

Mr. Markowicz focuses on five magazines, each calling attention to its particularities and complex history; these magazines’ role in the development of Canadian women’s writing; the material, economic, and cultural exigencies of these magazines’ production; the affective labour of women editors; collaboration and its challenges that those magazines relied on; the editors’ interaction with contributors; the overall history of Canadian feminist publications; editorial theory; and gender, race, and class matters in relation to cultural capital. This array of topics speaks of the scrupulousness of his approach but also points to the fact that it is very difficult, if not downright unfeasible, to engage with such a range of issues adequately, let alone do so in ways that are consistently discriminating and analytical. This is of no fault of his own, for no single study can accomplish this, let alone do so in 200 pages. Each of the themes that he takes on has a long and complex genealogy, and Mr. Markowicz makes a valiant effort to address their specifics; each demands its own analysis, and here, too, he sets out to display his knowledge and the force of his analytic mind. Still, while Mr. Markowicz demonstrates admirable skills

in addressing these matters and synthesizing the archival material, the dissertation would have been far more effective had he limited its scope or expanded its length to make room for more in-depth and extended analysis.

Let me try to unpack my comments above.

Mr. Markowicz identifies his approach as a “literary/historical analysis” (3) that “merg[es] periodical studies with literary history” (5), one that, as he argues, offers a “holistic look at the histories of five publications” (190). There is no doubt that his overall methodology in the dissertation is historical, specifically archival, for he delves into the archives of *Fireweed*, *(f.)lip*, *Tessera*, and *Contemporary Verse 2* (he was not able to access the fonds of *Room of One’s Own* but perused the magazine’s entire run in that period). What gives shape and direction to his archival research is his desire to reveal the understories that mobilized these magazines’ editorial vision and labour as well as the circumstances and conditions that allowed them to flourish but also to curtail their goals and, in some cases, to stop publication. In his own words, he is interested in “the untold stories of women as editors, women as makers of culture, producers of meaning, and facilitators of change” (5). This is a perfectly sound scholarly concern, but one that exponentially shifts his critical lens away from these periodicals’ history and toward other methodological approaches and thematic concerns, notably those of “cultural studies” (37) and cultural materialism, among other strands that are relevant to the specifics of this study, such as editorial theory and archival research.

That Mr. Markowicz’s dissertation ventures into all these areas provides ample evidence not only of his sharp intellect but also of his solid theoretical background. He is definitely familiar with these critical terrains and, what is most important, persuasive when, for example, he discusses the “affective labour” (34) and the “affective economies” (29) of these women editors, but the reader (at least this reader) is left wanting more. While there is no doubt that, when it comes to women scholars’ editorial work, affective labour takes its toll, and that the affective economies of that work result in productive “social networks,” to characterize this editorial work virtually exclusively via a gendered aspect of affect runs the risk of reproducing some of the stereotypical assumptions about women. (In that thirty-year period that he focuses on, there were other magazines which, though not specifically feminist or run by women editors, also relied on a similar kind of affective labour.) Needless to say, given the mandate of his project, Mr. Markowicz cannot afford to, and in fact he doesn’t, lose sight of gender. Still, the analysis he provides of these matters remains too circumscribed by the critics he briefly engages with (i.e., Hardt and Negri, Ahmed, and Eichhorn and Milne). When he mentions, albeit in passing, that the editorial labour and economies that sustained these magazines also “relied on various processes of gift economy,” he limits this very valuable insight to the “exchange of ads and subscriptions” (101). How would an analysis of gift economy, one usually associated with the barter economy of Indigenous cultures, help expand our understanding of female editorial work? We never find out. Nor do we get what Mr. Markowicz promises to present, for example, in Chapter 3, namely, “a holistic overview of the aesthetics and politics of feminist literary magazines” (81). His analysis of the archival material does touch on aesthetics and politics, but we definitely don’t get a “holistic overview” as such. We don’t precisely because it is not possible to represent, in the kind of detail that he usually provides, the archival material he has unearthed while at the same time offering an in-depth analysis of these magazines’ editorial practices, aesthetics, and politics, let alone do so in the various cultural and historical contexts that are relevant to them.

The same applies to Mr. Markowicz's attempt to problematize archival research. He makes some extremely valuable comments about "the selective and inconclusive nature of histories told in the archives" (36), but there is no attempt to engage with archival theory or push his own insights any further. In sum, Mr. Markowicz deploys an interdisciplinary methodology that is highly appropriate to his project, but his critical impulse to address virtually every single important aspect of his literary archive works at cross-purposes with the analysis he offers.

One of the ways in which Mr. Markowicz's historical approach is abundantly evident is in his practice to quote extensively. Citationality is a foundational aspect of all scholarship, but its function becomes even more important in the context of an archival study like this one. Given that his primary archival material is not readily or easily accessible to the reader, citation becomes the only way in which we can become familiar with Mr. Markowicz's research corpus. I must say that I am grateful to have access to so much useful history. And I'm certain that many scholars will find this dissertation to be a most helpful guide to the history of Canadian women's magazines. However, at the same time this now shared archival corpus will, most likely, inspire further research on Canadian feminist periodicals, the amount of information presented via quotations, paraphrase, and other references is dizzying. It is very hard to keep track of all this "raw" research material. Mr. Markowicz would have fulfilled his goal more effectively than he has already done had he exercised greater judiciousness in his selection of the material cited. Thus, at the same time that he deserves to be praised for his conscientiousness as a researcher who doesn't leave a stone unturned, he should have tried to focus on fewer, more strategically chosen, examples in order to have more space for further analysis.

Archival research is not only a labour-intensive and costly activity; it also requires dealing with sensitive material and making difficult ethical decisions. Mr. Markowicz displays great sensitivity and discrimination in how he approaches these aspects of his archival research. Not only does he do an excellent job explaining how he went about "framing . . . the material [he] found," but he also accounts for his "decision to anonymize" certain voices while remaining attentive to matters of "scholarly credibility" (35-36). He comes across, then, as a highly responsible scholar, one who is mindful of the difficult ethical concerns archival research entails.

The scope, methodology, historical contours, thematic concerns, and related contexts are clearly and compellingly articulated in the dissertation's first two chapters. Mr. Markowicz presents an accurate overview of the social, cultural, as well as policy changes that the period he focuses on went through. "Survey," as the subtitle "Surveying the field" suggests, is the operative method of delivery here, and in this case an appropriate one, for a more extensive analysis of that history would have taken him too far afield. The subsequent chapters present a closer, more intimate, view of the internal workings of the magazines in question, and this is where the significant contribution this dissertation makes to the critical landscape of Canadian literature becomes more apparent.

In what follows, I would like to draw attention to some of the instances in this study that demand clarification or more rigorous analysis.

Early in the opening chapter, Mr. Markowicz states that, "while conceptually relevant," "Bourdieu's theories . . . are not part of the methodological apparatus discussed" because of his (Mr. Markowicz's) emphasis on "concerns related to gender" (20). This is at once a strange and missed opportunity: strange

because no critical discourse is immune to or irrelevant to gender analysis; missed opportunity because not only would Bourdieu's theory have helped Mr. Markowicz apply further pressure on his findings about women's editorial labour and policies, but it would have also given him the opportunity to test the limits of some of Bourdieu's own assumptions.

Many aspects of these five magazines' production revolve around collaboration and collectives. Although Mr. Markowicz documents, amply so, these aspects via archival references—for example, he argues for “the interrelatedness of collaboration and cultural production” (134), and closer to the conclusion of the dissertation he states that “the processes of editing and producing feminist literary magazines also revealed a strong correlation between collaboration and feminist cultural production” (193)—it would have been useful to engage in some detail with these concepts as practices of women's editorial labour but also as means of creating community. Neither collaboration nor collectives as such are exclusively gender-specific, and there is a lot of scholarship about creative or literary collectives that could have shed further light on these matters.

Mr. Markowicz states that “The reliance on institutional funding in the context of feminist publishing of the late twentieth century seems to be a uniquely Canadian phenomenon” (56), but no evidence is furnished to support this statement. While it is true that, given Canadian demographics, the country's geographical expanse, and its colonial / national politics, not to mention the relentless encroachment of American culture, Canadian cultural production is not viable without federal or provincial funding, state funding of literary endeavours is not a phenomenon unique to Canada. Some explanation, even if it were in a note, is necessary here.

In relation to *Contemporary Verse 2*, Mr. Markowicz argues that its editorial collective, although it “explicitly voiced [its] aim to promote women's writing,” did not position “itself as explicitly ‘feminist’ from the start, but instead focused on the fostering of the dialogue between men and women” (76). This is the kind of statement that can be both accurate and misleading. For one thing, it seems to convey the notion that separatist feminism, the kind that assumes that women's feminist goals can be achieved only through separation from men, is a more authentic or legitimate feminist approach than other feminisms. There were plenty of arguments in the 1980s about the pros and cons of various, often strategic, approaches to feminism. Mr. Markowicz seems to be aware of them—for example, he mentions the shift that occurred away from the essentialisms of second-wave feminism—yet he dismisses the feminism of *CV 2*'s editorial policy too summarily. In other words, how can he reconcile these editors' goal to promote women's writing with his statement that they were not explicitly feminist? And why is “feminist” in scare quotes here? He reiterates the same point later on when he states that “*CV 2* visibly distanced itself from feminism—apart from the fact that the very notion of it being taken over by a collective of women was a clear example of a feminist intervention” (108). If having a women's editorial collective is a feminist act, then claiming that they “distanced” themselves from feminism doesn't make sense; what's more, the word “distanced” suggests a deliberate gesture, which further obfuscates the matter as to whether or not these women were feminists. Acknowledging that there are different kinds of feminism, as he does when he discusses, for example, “the absence of non-white [women] writers” in the early issues of *Fireweed* (111), is extremely important in the context of this dissertation, as is the need to qualify, more clearly than is already done, the kinds of feminism embodied by particular editorial collectives and their practices. If I'm allowed a bit of personal history here, Pamela Banding, Di Brandt, Jan Horner, and Jane Casey, *CV*

2's editors, happened to be not only my graduate student peers but also close friends at that time, and I witnessed the process through which they took over the editorship of the magazine. They were definitely feminists, in fact well versed in continental theory. And we all proudly saw ourselves as the forerunners of feminist theory at the University of Manitoba's Department of English against the conservatism of our, mostly, male professors. This may be evidence that is extraneous to Mr. Markowicz's archive, but I think it helps reinforce these editors' own commitment to women's voices as well as their pledge to continue and further advance Dorothy Livesay's own feminist legacy. Rather than raising doubts, unfairly so I believe, about the feminist signature of this editorial collective's policy, it would be more productive to address how the dialogue between women and men that they sought to foster contributed to their magazine's mandate, and/or how it advanced a differently nuanced sense of feminism than, say, that of *Room of One's Own*.

Along these lines, describing *FUSE* as a “non-feminist publication” (100) is a rather gratuitous, if not misleading, statement. *FUSE* may not have had a specifically feminist agenda—it was primarily known as a magazine exposing and addressing racial and racist issues—but it was definitely open to feminist voices.

Mr. Markowicz draws attention to the “regional appeal [that] can be noticed with regard to all studied magazines” (72). This is a very interesting and important observation indeed, but he doesn't attempt to explain or contextualize it with regard to regionalism in Canada, in relation to the ideas of localism and community, or in terms of how a broader audience was hard to reach because of fiscal limitations. Addressing the challenges a local magazine faced in gaining a national reputation and circulation is an issue that warrants further critical attention. While he does take note of the funding provided (or not) by the Canada Council, he doesn't consider that guaranteeing funding from provincial arts councils often depended, in fact still does in some cases, on a magazine proving its commitment to publishing local authors. In some cases, too, because of the politics of regional divides, focusing exclusively on local authors was a political gesture in its own right. This applied as much to women's magazines as to other, not gender-specific, periodicals. In this context, a comment like that by Eleanor Wachtel that she wanted to produce a special issue on Carol Shields because, beyond her admiration for this author, “living in Winnipeg has left Shields somehow invisible under a snowbank” (106) smacks of cultural snobbery and anti-prairie sentiment; the authors, be they men or women, that mattered culturally in that period were those with presence and visibility in central Canada, specifically Toronto, a sensibility prevalent at that time.

In his discussion of the groundbreaking conference Women and Words, Mr. Markowicz writes that “The conference had representatives across Canada—including Yukon” (64). This is a minor point, but it shows surprise at Yukon's inclusion. Why so? Yukon, specifically Whitehorse, has long had a vibrant local culture. I recommend deleting this parenthetical comment. Another minor point that conveys inaccurate information concerns a reference to me in relation to (*f.*)*lip*. Mr. Markowicz writes that “Leila Sujir worked in Alberta, Smaro Kamboureli in Saskatchewan (later replaced by Di Brandt, who covered both Manitoba and Saskatchewan) ...” (96). The verb “worked in” suggests that I lived in Saskatchewan, where I never did; like Di Brandt after me, I was responsible for soliciting material from Saskatchewan as well as from Manitoba, where I lived.

One final point I would like to raise concerns Mr. Markowicz's statement that he is “in no position to call [him]self a feminist scholar” (33). In light of the questions I raise above as to what constitutes

feminism, specifically the need to spell out what is already implied in the dissertation, that there are different kinds of feminism, I must say I'm truly puzzled by this self-declaration. This dissertation is definitely the work of a feminist scholar, at least in my view, a scholar whose research demonstrates a deep commitment to Canadian women's writing and feminist concerns. Gone are the days—at least I hope so—when feminism was thought to be exclusively a woman's concern. I don't wish to speculate as to Mr. Markowicz's reasons for "distancing" himself from the very topic that he has so arduously pursued. Whatever these reasons might be, I find his statement to be troubling. I would strongly recommend that he either delete this statement or explain what he means by it.

In conclusion, I hope it has become apparent by now that the questions I raise derive from the richness and complexity of this dissertation rather than from any fundamental problems in it. These are concerns that Mr. Markowicz can take into account if or when he decides to revise the dissertation for publication.

I am then happy to state, unequivocally so, that I find "Agents of Change" to be a most worthy project, one satisfactorily executed, and thus ready to be accepted in fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree.

I appreciate the opportunity I have been given to read Mr. Markowicz's dissertation. I have learned a lot from what certainly comes across as a labour of love for archival scholarship and Canadian women's writing. And as a Canadian scholar and a Canadianist, I feel compelled to express my gratitude that such an archival and original project has been undertaken at a Polish university.

I wish Mr. Markowicz my very best for a productive and fulfilling academic career.

Sincerely,



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