

In Memoriam

**ROXANA NG:
THINKING AND ACTING 'AGAINST THE GRAIN'**

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Roxana Ng, advisory board member and an important supporter of the Society for Socialist Studies and the journal, died on January 12, 2013. What follows is an inadequate reminder of her life and especially her work but I hope even this short remembrance will encourage scholars to return to her writing or discover it anew.

Roxana's academic and activist work informed each other. In her research, she was engaged in unmasking how class, gender and race inequalities are reproduced through mundane institutional relations. She emphasized that intentions are less important than the ways we all work within contexts of unequal social relations, so that reflexive awareness of the 'how' of these social relations is an essential and necessary first step to challenging intertwined racism, sexism and class exploitation. Her activism and in another way her research supported efforts, particularly by and for immigrant women workers, to create solidarity as part of the process of building new kinds of social relations, both for here and now and to prefigure a radically transformed world of social(ist) justice.

In her classroom, Roxana practiced innovative embodied pedagogies that practically deconstructed taken-for-granted mind/body dichotomies through the practice of Qi Gong, whilst also laying bare the ways that racism, sexism and class inequalities played themselves out in the classroom and outside of it. As she recounted and analysed in her article 'A Woman Out of Control' (1993), this often came at the cost of marginalization by the administration and frank hostility from (some white male) students made uncomfortable by her relentless tracking of the expressions of power relations in everyday interactions. Many others, especially but not only minoritized women, gained strength and insight from her deconstructions of the often-invisible

relations of power and exploitation that shape everyday life, including in the classroom.

Among her many activities, academic and activist, Roxana was a firm and enthusiastic supporter of *Socialist Studies/Etudes Socialistes*. In response to the journal's efforts to engage more consistently with feminist, anti-racist, Indigenous and other counterhegemonic approaches, as they inform socialism, she wrote to me in September 2012, "I am VERY pleased that Socialist Studies found a way of moving forward.... I have always supported the group and the publication. We NEED a forum in Canada to put forward issues from a socialist perspective. So I am totally supportive." And she was supportive, practically, in lending her expertise and scholarly reputation to the scientific board and in helping me identify other scholars whose involvement I should seek out for the journal. This support will be missed. Most of all, it is difficult to think of the engaged conversation that has been interrupted, from a woman whose every day life was an example –in the classroom, in her writing, in her activism – of energy and commitment to social(ist) justice.

We will honour Roxana next year, with a special issue around her work, coordinated by Sedef Arat-Koç, a member of editorial board. Here, appropriately for an issue on transgressive pedagogies and research, are some of Roxana's own words. In them, she advises us to think and act "against the grain" of hegemonic practices and discourses, in and outside of the university, even when this comes at a cost to ourselves. Indeed, she knew herself, too well, the costs of thinking and acting against the grain (Ng 1993) without letting this ever defeat her commitment to transformative social change. Moreover, she sought practically to make these costs more bearable, by working for and in solidarity with marginalized, exploited and dominated classes and groups. Here she is, in her own words (Ng 1993):

I recommend that we try to think and act "against the grain".... To act against the grain requires one first to recognize that routinized courses of action and interactions within the university are imbued with unequal power distributions which produce and reinforce various forms of marginalization and exclusion. Thus, a commitment to redress these power relations involves interventions and actions that may appear "counter- intuitive. We need to rupture ways university business and interactions are "normally" conducted...

We must develop a critical awareness of the power dynamics operating in institutional relations, and of the fact that people participate in institutions as unequal subjects. We must take an antisexist/antiracist approach to understanding and acting upon institutional relations, rather than

overlooking the embeddedness of gender, race, class, and other forms of inequality that shape our interactions...

We must speak out against normalized courses of action that maintain existing inequality, although this may alienate us from those in power as well as those close to us. We must actively support our minority colleagues in their teaching, administrative, and other responsibilities, and consciously open up spaces for previously silenced or marginalized voices to be heard. We must create spaces for students to interrogate existing paradigms and to explore alternative ones, and support them in other endeavours. We must also constantly interrogate our own taken-for-granted ways of acting, thinking, and being in the world...

Finally, I want briefly to take up the issue of safety and comfort, because these words have become currency in debates around discourses and practices that challenge existing modes of thinking and working. Understanding oppression and doing antiracist work is by definition unsafe and uncomfortable, because both involve a serious (and frequently threatening) effort to interrogate our privilege as well as our powerlessness. To speak of safety and comfort is to speak from a position of privilege, relative though it may be. For those who have existed too long on the margins, life has never been safe or comfortable. Understanding and eliminating oppression and inequality oblige us to examine our relative privilege, to move out of our internalized positions as victims, to take control over our lives, and to take responsibility for change. Such an undertaking is by definition risky, and therefore requires commitment to a different vision of society than that which we now take for granted.

Teaching and learning against the grain is not easy, comfortable, or safe. It is protracted, difficult, uncomfortable, painful, and risky. It involves struggles with our colleagues and our students, as well as within ourselves. It is, in short, a challenge.

Roxana fearlessly took up that challenge herself and now we are left to assume this challenge ourselves, but without her. She will be missed.

Reference

Ng, Roxana. 1993. "A Woman Out of Control'. Deconstructing Racism and Sexism in the University." *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation*. 18 (3): 189-205.