

Cynthia Euloe .004

The Curious Feminist

Introduction

*Being Curious about Our Lack
of Feminist Curiosity*

Being curious takes energy. It may thus be a distorted form of “energy conservation” that makes certain ideas so alluring. Take, for instance, the loaded adjective “natural.” If one takes for granted that something is “natural” — generals being male, garment workers being female — it saves mental energy. After all, what is deemed natural hasn’t been self-consciously created. No decisions have to be made. The result: we can imagine that there is nothing we need to investigate. We can just feel sympathy with women working in sweatshops, for instance, without bothering to figure out how they got there or what they think about being women sewing there.

“Tradition” serves much the same misguided energy-saving purpose. If something is accepted as being “traditional” — inheritance passing through the male line, incoming officials swearing

on a Bible — then it too can be swathed in a protective blanket, making it almost immune to bothersome questioning.

A close cousin of “traditional” is “always.” Warning lights now start flashing in my head whenever I hear someone wielding “always.” Too often it is used to cut short an awkward discussion. “Americans have always loved guns.” “Women have always seen other women as rivals.” A variant on “always” is “oldest” — as in the glib declaration “Prostitution is the oldest profession.” As if prostitution were timeless, without a history. As if the organizing of certain women’s sexuality so that it can serve simultaneously commercial and masculinized functions had “always” existed, everywhere. Thank goodness, the fans of “always” imply, now we don’t have to invest our scarce energy in exploring that topic. Phew.

During the eight years that it has taken me to think through the essays included here — the last was written during the continuing U.S. occupation of Iraq — I have become more and more curious about curiosity and its absence. As an example, for so long I was satisfied to use (to think with) the phrase “cheap labor.” In fact, I even thought using the phrase made me sound (to myself and to others) as if I were a critically thinking person, someone equipped with intellectual energy. It was only when I began, thanks to the nudging of feminist colleagues, to turn the phrase around, to say instead “labor *made* cheap,” that I realized how *lazy* I actually had been. Now whenever I write “labor made cheap” on a blackboard, people in the room call out, “By whom?” “How?” They are expanding our investigatory agenda. They are calling on me, on all of us, to exert more intellectual energy.

The moment when one becomes newly curious about something is also a good time to think about what created one’s previ-

ous *lack* of curiosity. So many power structures — inside households, within institutions, in societies, in international affairs — are dependent on our continuing lack of curiosity. “Natural,” “tradition,” “always”: each has served as a cultural pillar to prop up familial, community, national, and international power structures, imbuing them with legitimacy, with timelessness, with inevitability. Any power arrangement that is imagined to be legitimate, timeless, and inevitable is pretty well fortified. Thus we need to stop and scrutinize our lack of curiosity. We also need to be genuinely curious about others’ lack of curiosity — not for the sake of feeling self-satisfied, but for the sake of meaningfully engaging with those who take any power structure as unproblematic.

Why is a state of uncuriosity about what it takes to produce a pair of fashionable sneakers so comfortable? What is there about being uncurious about how any military base affects the civilians living in base towns that seems so reasonable? I’ve come to think that making and keeping us uncurious must serve somebody’s political purpose. I also have become convinced that I am deeply complicit in my own lack of curiosity. *Uncuriosity* is dangerously comfortable if it can be dressed up in the sophisticated attire of reasonableness and intellectual efficiency: “We can’t be investigating everything!”

What is distinctive about developing a *feminist* curiosity? One of the starting points of feminism is taking women’s lives seriously. “Seriously” implies listening carefully, digging deep, developing a long attention span, being ready to be surprised. Taking women — all sorts of women, in disparate times and places — seriously is not the same thing as valorizing women. Many women, of course, deserve praise, even awe; but many

women we need to take seriously may appear too complicit in violence or in the oppression of others, or too cozily wrapped up in their relative privilege to inspire praise or compassion. Yet a feminist curiosity finds all women worth thinking about, paying close attention to, because in this way we will be able to throw into sharp relief the blatant and subtle political workings of both femininity and masculinity.

“Military spouses,” “child soldiers,” “factory managers,” “sweatshop workers,” “humanitarian aid workers,” “rape survivors,” “peace activists,” “warlords,” “occupation authorities.” Each of these conventional ungendered terms serves to hide the political workings of masculinity and femininity. Each dampens our curiosity about where women are and where men are, about who put women there and men here, about who benefits from women being there and not someplace else, about what women themselves think about being there and what they do with those thoughts when they try to relate to men and to other women. Any time we don’t pursue these questions, we are likely to miss patriarchy. It will glide right by us like an oil tanker on a foggy night. The fog is uncuriosity. Yet if we miss patriarchy when it is in fact operating as a major structure of power, then our explanations about how the world works will be unreliable.

Patriarchy — patriarchy is the structural and ideological system that perpetuates the privileging of masculinity. All kinds of social systems and institutions can become patriarchal. Whole cultures can become patriarchal. That is a reality that has inspired feminist movements to become national in scope, mobilizing energies on so many levels simultaneously. Families, town halls, militaries, banks, and police departments are among those sites of ordinary life perhaps especially notorious for their incli-

nations toward patriarchal values, structures, and practices. Scores of hospitals, schools, factories, legislatures, political parties, museums, newspapers, theater companies, television networks, religious organizations, corporations, and courts — no matter how modern their outward trappings — have developed ways of looking and acting toward their own members and clients and toward the world around them that derive from the presumption that what is masculine is most deserving of reward, promotion, admiration, emulation, agenda prioritization, and budgetary line. Patriarchal inclinations can also be found in peace and justice movements, as well as in the offices of progressive magazines, enlightened foundations, and globally sensitive nongovernmental organizations — each of them can be, and have become, patriarchal.

Patriarchal systems are notable for marginalizing the feminine. That is, insofar as any society or group is patriarchal, it is there that it is comfortable — unquestioned — to infantilize, ignore, trivialize, or even actively cast scorn upon what is thought to be feminized. That is why a feminist curiosity is always directed not only at the official or public discourses and behaviors of people in groups or institutions, but also at their informal, private, casual conversations, at the shared jokes, gestures, and rituals — all of which help to glue relationships together. The feminist investigator always arrives before the meeting begins to hear the before-the-meeting offhand banter and is still wide awake and curious when the meeting-after-the-meeting continues among a select few down the corridor and into the pub.

No patriarchy is made up just of men or just of the masculine. Far from it. Patriarchal systems have been so enduring, so adaptable, precisely because they make many women overlook their

own marginal positions and feel instead secure, protected, valued. Patriarchies — in militias, in labor unions, in nationalist movements, in political parties, in whole states and entire international institutions — may privilege masculinity, but they need the complex idea of femininity and enough women’s acceptance or complicity to operate. To sustain their gendered hierarchies, patriarchal law firms, for example, need not only feminized secretaries and feminized cleaners, but also feminized law associates and feminized paralegals. Patriarchal militaries need feminized military wives and feminized military prostitutes. Patriarchal corporations need feminized clerical workers and feminized assembly-line workers. Every person who is pressed or lured into playing a feminized role must do so in order to make the masculinized people seem to be (to themselves as well as everyone else) the most wise, the most intellectual, the most rational, the most tough-minded, the most hard-headed.

One of the reasons that feminists have been so astute in exposing patriarchy as a principal cause for so many of the world’s processes — empire-building, globalization, modernization — is that feminists have been curious about women. By taking women seriously in their myriad locations, feminists have been able to see patriarchy when everyone else has seen only capitalism or militarism or racism or imperialism. It will be clear in the chapters that follow, I think, that I have become more and more convinced — as I have been tutored by others — that patriarchy must always be on the analytical couch.

Patriarchy is not old hat. And it is not fixed. The structures and beliefs that combine to privilege masculinity are continuously being modernized. Nowadays there are so many feminists and other women’s advocates internationally sharing informa-

tion, insights, and strategies that the enterprise of updating patriarchy is perhaps less assured of success than it has ever been. Still, every new constitution drafting, every new economic planning, every new treaty negotiation provides at least the opportunity for those who benefit from the privileging of masculinity to equip patriarchy with a deceptive “new look.” Patriarchy, consequently, can be as fashionable as hiring Bechtel, Lockheed, and other private military contractors to carry on the tasks of foreign occupation. That is, as the U.S. government’s strategists seek to give their postwar reconstruction steps in Iraq and Afghanistan the look of something that is the opposite of old-fashioned dictatorships and imperialism, in practice they are paying some of the most profoundly masculinity-privileging organizations to carry out this imperial agenda. What is allegedly new thus may be reproducing something that is all too familiar. Patriarchy can be as ubiquitous as nationalism, patriotism, and postwar reconstruction.

So it is always risky to assume that the only power structures and related ideological justifications to be on the look out for are capitalism, militarism, racism, and imperialism. The question I have come to think we must always pose is: How much of what is going on here is caused by the workings of patriarchy? Sometimes patriarchy may be only a small part of the explanation. Other times patriarchy may hold the causal key. We will never know unless we ask, unless we seriously investigate how and why masculinity is privileged — and how much of that privileging depends on controlling women or drawing them into complicity.

The newest path down which my feminist curiosity has been taking me is marked “Girlhood.” My own girlhood, to be exact.

Part 4 in this book is a small sampling of what I'm discovering as I take a fresh look at my own girlhood in a wartime New York suburb. As I dig away, I am becoming curious about how a middle-class American girlhood, even that of a "tomboy," was subtly feminized. At the same time I am trying to see if I can figure out how my girlhood was militarized—in the games my friends and I played on Aldershot Lane, in the songs I diligently memorized off of vinyl records, in the ways I imagined the lives of my mother and my father during those wartime and postwar years. This exploration is a work-in-progress. At the moment, as you will see, I have more questions than answers. But I'm learning a lot about the feminization and militarization of a seemingly ordinary girlhood by just being curious. Even the format I've chosen is different, unlike any other I've ever tried. I think because my whole stance in this effort is not one of explaining, but one of quizzicalness, the lines come to me in abbreviated form. The usual lengthy expository prose just doesn't seem right for this newest "dig."

At the same time, as I have been seeking to look at one girlhood afresh, I have been asking new questions about what it takes—how much dismantling of patriarchal relations between women, men, and states it takes—to achieve genuine and lasting demilitarization. Some of the most exciting feminist questioning being done today is by feminists working to support women in what are often called now "postconflict zones." They have been generous in teaching me about the often surprising layers of masculinized public and private relationships that need to be exposed and unpacked in order to effect more than superficial demilitarization. I am fortunate to count among these feminist demilitarizing teachers/thinkers/activists Cynthia Cockburn, Dyan Mazurana, Carol

Cohn, Felicity Hill, Vanessa Farr, Angela Raven-Roberts, Sandra Whitworth, Wenona Giles, Nic Marsh, Suzanne Williams, Laura Hammond, and Vijaya Joshi.

Among those people who recently have done the most to make me more curious about the ways in which patriarchy and militarization work together in American women's and men's lives have been feminists in Japan, Korea, and Turkey. Japanese, Korean, and Turkish feminists are not just living with, and revealing, the gendered effects of U.S. patriarchal militarism. They also are energetically exploring precisely how the workings of their own homegrown varieties of patriarchy and militarization combine with those of the United States to create and sustain the sorts of international alliances that deepen the privileging of certain forms of masculinity. These Turkish, Korean, and Japanese feminists warn against imagining that any brand of nationalism uninformed by feminist understandings can, by itself, effectively dismantle the operations of militarization and masculinized privilege in women's lives. I am particularly grateful to Ruri Ito and her feminist colleagues in Tokyo at Ochanomizu University's Institute for Gender Studies, as well as Japanese feminists in Kyushu and Okinawa; to Eun Shil Kim, Insook Kwon, the editorial group of *If* magazine, and their feminist colleagues in Seoul; and to Ayşe Gul Altınay and the other brave feminist thinkers and activists throughout Turkey. They each have been stretching me to ask new questions; all have energized me so that I won't be comforted by too-easy answers.

For more than a decade now Naomi Schneider of the University of California Press has been my editor, sounding board, and friend. I am fortunate indeed. Sue Heinemann, Sierra Filucci, and all the wonderful people of the Press are real "pros."

Joni Seager is a leading feminist geographer and author of the astounding *Penguin Atlas of Women in the World*, whose new edition she has just published (2003). As a partner, Joni has been wonderfully generous, sharing with me with her Canadian consciousness, her worldly inquisitiveness, her genius for finding just the right turn of phrase, and her mischievous irreverence.

My ever-stretchy local reading and writing friends include Serena Hilsinger, Lois Brynes, Laura Zimmerman, Julie Abraham, Amy Lang, Wendy Luttrell, Robert Shreefter, Madeline Drexler, and E. J. Graff. This book is dedicated to Gilda Bruckman and Judy Wachs, my longest feminist best pals, so curious, generous, and witty. Friendship matters.

PART ONE

Sneakers, Silences, and Surprises

The Surprised Feminist

Predicting never has been my preferred vocation. Friends have to bribe me to go with them to sci-fi movies. Reading academic “ten-year plans” almost never puts me on the edge of my seat. So, I confess, I am quite daunted at the prospect of responding to an enticing invitation from the feminist journal *Signs* to spell out even tentative hunches about where feminist scholarship — especially activist-minded scholarship — will be heading in the twenty-first century.

Surprise. I have come to think that the capacity to be surprised — and to *admit* it — is an undervalued feminist attribute. To be surprised is to have one’s current explanatory notions, and thus one’s predictive assumptions, thrown into confusion. In both academic life and activist public life in most cultures, one is socialized to deny surprise. It is as if admitting surprise jeopardized one’s hard-earned credibility. And credibility, something necessarily bestowed by others, is the bedrock of status. To deny surprise, to sweep confusion under the rug, thus may be espe-

cially tempting for feminists, since in societies ranging from Serbia to the United States, from Vietnam to Italy, our purchase on status is insecure early in this new millennium. Better to assume the “Oh, well, of course it would turn out like that” pose.

This, however, seems to me to be an increasingly risky, if understandable, inclination. Being open to surprise, being ready to publicly acknowledge surprise, may be among the most useful attitudes to adopt to prepare one’s feminist self for what now lies ahead.

For all of my daily attempts to listen to and mull about the world, I did not predict, did not anticipate these late-twentieth-century occurrences:

- the NATO-ization of human rights
- the fall of Indonesia’s Suharto
- the collapse of the Brazilian economy
- the Canadian Inuits’ adoption of a gender-equality principle for their new territorial Nunavut parliament
- the recruitment of girl children into the Sierre Leone rebel army
- the rise of the Kosovo Liberation Army
- the British arrest of Chilean ex-dictator Augusto Pinochet
- Harvard’s decision to award male scholars scarce fellowships at Radcliffe’s Bunting Institute

All of these events and the dynamics that brought them about are deeply gendered. That is, women and men played different roles in them. Moreover, they have had quite different effects on ideas about femininity and masculinity. The ways particular women of distinct citizenship statuses, social classes, ethnic groups, and



In Liberia fifteen-year-old Rachel Wesech joined one of the country’s insurgent armies a year after her mother was raped. She told *Washington Post* reporter Emily Wax, “I was hurting so deeply. So I became a fighter. What was I doing with my life here, anyway?” The male officer watching her here called himself Rachel’s “boyfriend.” Other girls who have joined (or been abducted by) insurgent and government forces have reported sexual abuse by the men in those forces. (Photo by Michel Ducille, © 2003, *The Washington Post*, reprinted with permission)

racialized identities respond to each of these events is certain to determine the respective depth or shallowness of its long-term consequences in the twenty-first century. My surprise at Suharto’s 1998 fall suggests that I underestimated the breadth of Indonesians’ political disaffection, even though I was trying hard to chart the organizing efforts of Nike’s Indonesian women sneaker-factory workers. My surprise at Ottawa officials’ 1999 agreement to establish Nunavut and at local Inuits’ decision to institutionalize a fifty-fifty female/male legislative representation reveals the inadequacy of my long-standing curiosity about the politics of

Native Canadian women. Being caught off guard by the Kosovo Liberation Army's militarized emergence is a result of having paid insufficient attention to the impacts of the oppressive policies of Slobodan Milosevic, Yugoslavia's 1990s president, on Kosovo's young men's ethnicized sense of their own masculinity.

The list of embarrassments goes on. My feminist eyebrows went up at:

the success of the U.S. Women's National Basketball Association

the post-bubble economy corporate layoffs of Japanese clerical "office ladies"

the reemergence of butch/fem role-playing among many young American lesbians

the rising number of Mexican men working in border *maquiladoras* (assembly plants)

the appearance of Russian women in the brothels of Thailand and Israel

Admitting my surprise is the only way I am going to be able to take fresh stock of my feminist analyses of developments both far afield and close to home. If I worked hard enough, I probably could manage to fit the rising unemployment of Japanese clerical workers into my existing concepts of the sexual division of labor. I could explain Japanese corporate executives' decisions to lay off some of their most feminized labor not in terms of the classic workings of cheapening labor but in terms of those executives' acceptance of equally classic notions that privilege men's employment in times of economic depression. Likewise, I might be able to explain the success of the American women's professional bas-

kethball league in terms of patriarchy's famed adaptiveness. After all, at the same time gifted women athletes are gaining a thin slice of ESPN's prime-time television coverage, Reebok and Nike are commodifying those same women's bodies, and more and more men are vying to coach those women's (and their younger school-girl sisters') sports teams. That is, whenever one is surprised, one most likely can manage to squeeze the new development into a comfortable, worn conceptual shoe. And this effort is worth the try. Maybe an existing idea does satisfactorily explain the surprising phenomenon. Certainly, sexual divisions of labor and adaptive patriarchy are not concepts that any feminist should rush to dump. But one needs to make that explanatory effort in a spirit of willingness to let go, willingness to think afresh.

It is often in the classroom that a feminist academic is most routinely tested in her commitment to acknowledging surprise. Say I have just made a point—about Canadians' political culture or about the role of misogyny in fueling the Rwandan genocide—when a student raises her hand and describes something she has observed that doesn't jibe at all with my analytical argument. What do I do? I am tempted to commend the student for her interesting contribution but then to move right into reworking it so that it somehow confirms my point. What I need to do, though, is to pause and say, "Gee, that's surprising. Let's all think about what this new information does to my earlier analysis." It is amazing how much guts, or at least stamina, it takes to do this. It may take even a larger dose of these resources to do it on a prestigious conference panel or in an intense strategy session.

At the time when I was drafting this short essay in early 1999, I had to practice the art of admitting surprise at a number of developments:

the Columbine High School massacre in Colorado nightly televised images of Kosovo refugee “women and children”
 British prime minister Tony Blair’s outmilitarizing all of his NATO colleagues
 learning about a strand of Tibetan culture that celebrates male warriors
 the Pentagon’s decision to extend its Junior ROTC military training program into middle schools

When the latest news is so dismayingly patriarchal, it is natural for anyone with a hint of feminist consciousness to think, “Here we go again.” Yet there is a very fine line, sometimes, between a sharp vision that can see clearly the perpetuating dynamics of patriarchal structures and a cynicism that dulls curiosity — curiosity about exactly why two Colorado boys used guns and explosives to express their masculinized adolescent alienation or about precisely what gender rearrangements occurred in an Albanian tent city. Seeing patriarchy, even misogyny, is not enough. In each instance, we need to know exactly how it works and whether, even if continuing, it has been contested. At a gross level of analysis the patriarchal outcomes may seem to be more of the same, but discovering what is producing them may come as a surprise.

Thus, as we go forward in the twenty-first century, feminists inside and outside academia need to be on our guard against a cynical form of knowing. We need to send the roots of our curiosity down ever deeper. We need to stand ready to be surprised — to admit surprise and build on it. It is bound to enliven our teaching, broaden our conversations, and make our strategies more savvy.