

## Finding Space in the Student Movement for Both/And Identities

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One of the exciting things about the 2012 student strike was how many people understood themselves as activists for the first time and became more radical in their thinking, tactics, or both, building a stronger base for future activism. With this future in mind, the three of us have been engaged in an ongoing conversation about how and why our experiences of the 2012 student movement differed from anything with which we had been involved before. We share some of what has emerged through these conversations below, highlighting what we have learned in dialogue and action together about our identities, communities of solidarity, the importance of intersectional analysis, and the transformative potential of direct action.

Our conversation started on a cold afternoon in February 2012, as we sat together wrapped in sleeping bags and blankets in the #6party solidarity camp outside of McGill University's James Administration building (6partylive.tumblr.com). #6party was a five-day surprise resignation party for—and occupation in the sixth floor office of—the Deputy Provost Student Life and Learning. The *occuparty*<sup>1</sup> was in protest of the unilateral decision

<sup>1</sup>The idea of a festive action was important to the students involved as a way of dispelling myths about activists as violent and angry. Nonetheless, #6party was an effective, and intentionally political, disruption of the university's status quo. We use the term '*occuparty*' here, as it was used by participants, to highlight that

by the university's senior administration to invalidate the results of democratic referenda that had confirmed the continued existence of two important campus-community services funded by student fee levies: QPIRG-McGill and radio station CKUT. Additional motivations behind the actions of the student *occupartiers* included ongoing administrative attacks on student autonomy and input in decision-making, the university's ties to extractive and exploitative industries, and the senior administration's avid public support for the proposed provincial tuition increases.

On the morning of February 7th, once the group of student activists established their presence on the sixth floor, dozens of students and professors entered and claimed the first floor of the administration building. This secondary, 24 hour *occuparty* involved teach-ins, food service from the Midnight Kitchen (another campus-community service), a performance by a local trans activist and spoken word artist, meetings, and various groupings for study and conversation. On day two of the #6party, a support camp was set up outside of the administration building below the windows to which the sixth floor *occupartiers* had gained access. In the camp's impromptu shelters, students braved brutally cold temperatures to bear witness to events as they unfolded, providing around-the-clock moral and material support to the party upstairs and informing passers-by about the *occuparty* and its demands. Over the next five days, bonds were formed between students and

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tactic of claiming space while maintaining some of the intended levity. It's worth noting, as well, that discussions about the colonial connotations of the «occupy» movement were in the air at the time and affected the choice of language to discuss #6party.

## This is Fucking Class War

faculty across various areas and levels of study, political backgrounds and a range of experience in organizing. We shared our stories and perspectives, as well as all manner of resources: from those meeting basic needs to those exploring intellectual ideas and scholarship.

In the context of the inspiring exchanges that were happening, the three of us shared realizations about how the structures of the university reduce “diversity” to compartmentalized academic disciplines that fail to reflect our complex lived experiences of multiple, intersecting subjectivities. Despite institutional policies supposedly aspiring to “equity and diversity,” there was nowhere at the university but in activist spaces where women of colour, queer and other usually marginalized people were respected and in roles of leadership. We were struck by how, within the group of activists in and around #6party, we saw many male, heterosexual, and white students stepping back, intentionally muting their privilege, and supporting and following Others. There was a commitment to addressing oppression that ran deeper than lip service, and a sense of responsibility and reflexivity.

In some of our conversations since then, we’ve reflected on what it was about the #6party moment and setting that facilitated comradeship among people with such varied experiences of oppression. It seems clear that in addition to a stated anti-oppressive perspective from many or all those involved, it was the intensity of the experience, as well as our forced dependency on each other, that catalyzed and intensified relationships and dynamics that might have taken longer to emerge, or not have emerged at all, under other circumstances. The decentralized nature of that

organizing—exacerbated by limited communication to the sixth floor and the ad hoc way in which support came together—led to an environment in which people had an opportunity to prove themselves and be respected on the basis of their contributions, rather than being prejudged and pigeonholed. Equally important, the critical nature of support work, typically scripted as feminine and racialized, was also brought to the fore when the largely (though by no means entirely) white, cis, male sixth-floor party had its access to food, internet, and electricity cut off by the senior administration and had to trust in the solidarity organizing outside.

As a Métis woman and a Black woman, Molly and Rosalind were conscious of drawing on the historical importance of direct action for our communities. It wasn't just that we ourselves were radical people; when institutions have historically been designed to exclude you, radical action becomes the only way to effect real change! At the same time, while reading Marx and Bakunin might get you into an occupation, the skills and mentality of getting things done, getting people fed, and building networks and a supportive community are not only useful personality traits, they are part of a powerful tradition of Black and Indigenous women's organizing. It is no surprise that given the opportunity, women of colour organizers took on central roles in the #6party support camp.

### **Claiming and queering marginal space**

[Marginality] is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse

## This is Fucking Class War

that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.

— bell hooks (1990). *Marginality as a site of resistance*.

In late 2011, the Queer McGill Political Action Working Group published a short article discussing queer and trans folks in relation to the upcoming strike. The conclusion of that piece, which Mona was a part of drafting, read:

Let us create a movement that fosters a respect for, and a proliferation of, diverse tactics. Straight, white, cisgender<sup>2</sup>, abled men are taught to speak loudly and take up space. In meetings where their voices are the only ones heard, queer people become disenfranchized and excluded. You cannot count on our participation simply because our end goals are the same. To be strong, our movement must be united. As we work to build a powerful and lasting student movement, we call on our allies to actively seek out and include queer perspectives in every step of planning, action and, ultimately, building a better educational system.

This statement reflected conversations and thinking about what it meant to 'queer' something: how dismantling the structures that maintain straight and cisgender privilege is different from just creating a space specifically for queer

<sup>2</sup>Cisgender, *n.* Not transgender (from *cis-*, and *trans-*, Latin.)

people, and entails, in fact, de-centring and skewing the experiences of cis and straight people in that space as well as creating possibilities that have nothing to do with sexual orientation or gender specifically.

The #6party solidarity camp, however temporarily, created a new kind of marginal space that was diverse and empowering; we claimed and queered, Blackened, and worked to decolonize that strip of space alongside the Administration Building for all marginalized people in an action in defense of CKUT and QPIRG, whose social justice mandate benefits all of us. The *occuparty* and support camp opened up both geographic and conceptual space of radical possibility not only for our physical presence at the university but also for a broader discussion about marginalization.

These events have to be understood in the context of an intense response from the university security force, especially for those of us who were doing a lot of organizing on the ground and who were out there at the camp. The visible security presence on campus increased significantly, and students involved with #6party support were filmed, followed, harassed (sometimes by name), and constantly under threat of physical harm or legal/disciplinary retribution. This was some people's first experience with that kind of intense, ongoing surveillance, and it contributed significantly to building the deep empathy that emerged—not only between people who were constantly at the support camp or up on the sixth floor, but also for people who participated in activism on campus afterwards.

## This is Fucking Class War

The surveillance of individual students (as confirmed in security reports later obtained through ATI requests) produced an inflated sense of visibility. For many of us this entailed an uncomfortable shift from feeling erased and invisible to feeling hypervisible as ‘threatening others’ on campus. For some being surveilled had the likely intended consequences of intimidation, shifting one’s attention from the collective action to the potential individual consequences. But for many of us our hypervisibility and alienation from the campus mainstream increased our reliance on fellow “known student radicals” for camaraderie and collective care.

Through our participation in this action, we insisted on our self-determined collectivity, on the basis of political affinity, not race, gender, class, or position within the university. By stepping outside of our prescribed roles and assigned locations (e.g. within our separate disciplines and levels of study), we troubled the university’s veneer of liberalism and revealed the extent of the institution’s investment in constructing and controlling narratives and physical spaces in ways that uphold social hierarchies.

An outcome of this experience, and of the personal relationships that were built among the *occupartiers* and support organizers, was a broader disruption of normalized social hierarchies regarding whose input is valued and whose knowledge counts in our social circles and activist communities. Those of us who were touched by the events around #6party supported one another to the extent that we could expect to be heard and have our ideas and concerns valued—our solidarity was about us caring about each other, and realizing that our avowed politics don’t

mean anything if we don't act on our love for each other when friends and comrades are being hurt. White activists listened when their comrades of colour called out racism; cis, heterosexual folks committed to understanding the issues of gender and queerness important to their friends.

For the three of us, this kind of bond is a prerequisite to lasting solidarity and allyship; you can talk about oppression for as long as you like, but unless people who are socialized to being centred come to recognize—and commit to actively negating—their dominance, that talk is not going to matter. Through the intense friendships formed in direct action—so intense that we felt unable to be very far away from each other for a while afterwards—we developed a lasting empathy for one another and by extension for the various communities we identify with, along with an understanding that we're in this together.

### **From occupartiers to student activists**

The three of us found that the space created in and around #6party, and the strike organizing that followed within the community we had formed, was intersectional in a way unlike coalition organizing we'd each been involved in before. Rather than trying to bring people together across identities but ultimately tokenizing all of us as spokespeople for our groups, in the context of direct action we created a space that allowed for complexity and challenged us to listen to each other and learn from each others' lived experiences.

## This is Fucking Class War

As people with fluid, both/and identities—“biracial,” Métis and genderqueer—we found our corner of student movement activism to be a space within which we were not forced into the either/or positions we often experience as we move between mainstream and marginalized communities.

What was it that made that possible? Did the inclusion of so many diverse folks automatically shift power relations? How do we make it happen again, and again? We’ve come to suspect the answers to these questions are tied up with affinity and decentralization on the one hand (letting people do what they feel comfortable doing), and respect and trust on the other (letting people prove themselves but not making them prove themselves). And love, which seems so important but can be difficult to talk about without sounding like we’re quoting platitudes. Nevertheless, the love is important and undeniable!

The urgency of the organizing during #6party—as well as the spatial disconnect between the initiators, on the sixth floor, and the more fluid membership of the support camp—compelled a process in which important decisions were not decreed by leaders and then delegated. Indeed decisions were at times realized conceptually and performatively at the same time, with our collective strategy and direction formed out of the accumulated actions of all of us who acted out our responses to the situation. In this decentralized and ad hoc collectivity, we acted individually or in varying small affinity clusters, at times our bodies moving before or as ideas occurred to us. Though many of us were in near-constant contact, the nature of our trust in each other allowed us, when necessary, to simply call on

each other for support and then confirm our consent in action, through verbal and nonverbal communication.

The community that was forged out of these five days lasted as student strikes were launched across Québec, and turned its energy largely toward mobilizing McGill students to join in those strikes. As that struggle spread the former *occupartiers* back across the compartmentalized and contested spaces of student association general assemblies, our trust in each other and interdependence continued to be tested and reinforced through direct action. The experience of having each others' backs in physical struggles in the streets directly translated to being prepared to support each other in challenging the ideological opponents we'd find both outside and even within the student movement.

### **On solidarity and being more than students**

The potential for broader cross-sector solidarity emerged quite early in the mobilizations for the 2012 student strike, with a blockade of the stock exchange in February attracting students, long-time activists, and a variety of community based organizers and people who care about and are most affected by cuts to social spending. Different people took on different roles in this action, with mostly young, White, able-bodied students and activists securing the most vulnerable point of entry to the building, linking arms and standing off against the police who were attempting to undermine the action. When the police became violent, several older, racialized and disabled protesters moved into the area of conflict and disrupted the escalating confrontation with their presence,

## This is Fucking Class War

providing a way for students and activists to integrate back into the larger demonstration. rosalind recalls being really conscious of her identification with members of both groups in this action; being with fellow student-activists with whom she had been organizing and encountering some Black elders who she knew from community work. The blockade demonstrated the potential of direct action involving a diverse range of students, many from affluent backgrounds, working in solidarity with Indigenous, racialized, and poor and working class communities.

At a campus demonstration around that same time Molly described solidarity as follows.

What is Solidarity? We have been hearing a lot of talk about the “university community”—but what is community? Is it a group of individuals who inhabit the same general area? People who are thrown together without choice and are forced to coexist? I think this is the definition of community the university’s senior administration uses: “you’re here temporarily, so just shut up, keep your head down, and try to tolerate one another using the rules we have provided for you.”

Community for me is empathy. It’s sharing a deep, encompassing empathy and love with people around us. It’s rejecting the isolationist structure of this university and society in order to connect and really relate to one another. This idea of community is more than superficial jargon: it is about genuine inclusion and inclusion is about realizing solidarity. In a society that is so isolating and selfish, how do we build relationships? First, we have to open ourselves to radical amazement and radical embarrassment. Radical amazement allows us to believe change is possible & desirable. Radical embarrassment makes it personal, and forces us to reflect on our own privilege.

## Both/And Identities

Second, we must struggle together. Struggle is not just direct action, it's spending time together, eating together, taking care of one another, helping one another, creating together, fighting and forgiving, being stressed out, etc. Ultimately, struggle involves giving of yourself and accepting from others. Solidarity, trust, empathy—these things connect us not only to one another, but to the injustices that exist around us. Solidarity means wanting to engage with one another and create change, because if any members of our community suffer, then we suffer as well. Solidarity is also an amazing gift. Knowing without hesitation that you have a network of love and support that will be there beyond convenience and beyond popularity is unbelievably strengthening. Being able to provide for others—even when you're almost beyond the limits of your own endurance—is satisfying and fulfilling in a profound and indescribable way.

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In contextualizing the spring 2012 movement we often talk about the history of Québec student strikes, but in fact people who became involved in the student strike had been involved in community activism, in Occupy Montreal or Occupy movements elsewhere, or had watched what was going on in Greece and Spain, Chile and Egypt and felt implicated in that work. More closely connected to our context—what did it mean for people's politics, street tactics, and strategies, that the Toronto G20 counter-summit protests happened between the last student strike and this one? In our experience, activists brought to the 2012 Québec movement both new experiences and a historical sense of global social movement.

Relatedly, we found it misleading to think about student activists as students and nothing else: one of the

## This is Fucking Class War

things that made the student movement really powerful for many of us was precisely the sense that we weren't fighting only as students, but as whole, complicated people from various communities and social locations. Many of us coming from that perspective cared much less, if at all, about what the hike meant for most current university students; rather, we were struggling about the way universities, society, or the economy are thought about and structured. It was very obvious that this hike would set a precedent for other austerity measures if it wasn't stopped, and things like hikes in healthcare costs, daycare prices, and electricity rates were already in the pipeline. For many activists, first-hand experiences of surveillance, profiling, media misrepresentation, and police brutality opened their eyes to some of the realities faced daily by Indigenous, racialized and poor communities and contributed to building solidarity with broader anticolonial and antiracist struggles.

For those of us with a more intersectional analysis, the failure of the strike's most visible spokespeople to meaningfully engage with these issues felt like a missed opportunity, especially as calls for a social strike grew more strident. In a way, #6party had been a unique and important early rallying point for our participation in the movement, because it framed the strike for us as being about a broader range of issues and identities from the start. Having that foundation undoubtedly gave us a different view and experience of the broader student movement than a lot of other people had, especially similarly marginalized folks. Where many of our friends felt the movement "wasn't for them," our experiences gave us a glimpse of something the

## Both/And Identities

whole movement could aspire to, and occasionally lent us the strength to hold it accountable to that vision.

Our activism was and is about our whole selves, which in the context of the student movement often meant acting on two fronts: defending our position as students while simultaneously challenging the movement's assumptions about race, class, colonialism, and gender. Though our involvement in strike organizing took many forms, we found fruitful, challenging opportunities in the increasingly disparate, affinity-based organizing that began to characterize the strike after the initial movement timeline—which posited the CLASSE/FECQ/FEUQ demo in late March as a culmination point—broke down. To bring it back to the notion of both/and identities, we feel that we get to be whole people in the context of decentralized direct action. We're not just students, and we are not just our gender, or race or class identifications... we're all of these things. We're bringing this wholeness to it.

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Back on campus, following #6party we were able to navigate the space of the university with a much stronger sense of our presence there: building solidarity in action and across differences really helped us to practice fearlessness in challenging oppression, and in just being who we are in the face of broader Québec society. Mona, for example, probably wouldn't have had the confidence to begin writing a column in the McGill Daily and signing off publicly with gender-neutral pronouns if it hadn't been for the experience of being validated in eir gender identity

## This is Fucking Class War

by people who weren't themselves immersed in the queer/trans community. Knowing what that could feel like led em to the realization that that level of self-determination and respect is something e both wants and deserves all the time.

Unlike a “community” defined by sameness and envisioned in terms of its parameters and the containment of people and ideas, the community that can be built in social action is necessarily diverse, porous and fluid. It can be a community that actively resists containment while engaging in critical and challenging acts of solidarity based on the belief that another university, and another society, is possible. It operates from a basis of embodied relationships, not only abstract principles, and in doing so recognizes the material effects of political principles. Although student unionism played an undeniable role in the strike, in our experience it was direct action and the formation of affinity-based organizing groups that lent the movement its transformative potential.