CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Feminist Od[d]yssey

I am a feminist. Feminism is the heart of who I am, not only as an academic, but as a citizen and an individual.

As I understand it, feminism is comprised of the well-founded belief that girls and women are legally, politically, and socially disadvantaged on the grounds of their sex; the ethical stance that this oppression is morally wrong; and the pragmatic commitment to ending injustice to all female human beings.

For me, feminism is also a scholarly and creative project, and a role whose epistemic contours and moral challenges I continue to explore. As a feminist academic I have many stories to tell about those explorations. This book is, in part, a work of feminist "theoretical autobiography" (Middleton 1993, 179). It starts from a collection of experiential stories—which is, of course, where, classically, feminist thinking begins—and chronicles some stages of my feminist od[d]yssey in the university.

I call it an od[d]yssey because I am conscious of the eccentricity of my journey through academia. On the one hand, my academic path has been entirely ordinary and unexceptional: BA, MA, and PhD degrees, followed (after a nine-year stint at a Quebec CÉGEP) by a university appointment in which I moved up through the ranks

from assistant to associate and then to full professor. But on the other hand, my identities, both ascribed and chosen, as a woman and as a feminist, have made my academic situation anomalous by the standards set by and for the average white male faculty member.

"In telling their stories," write Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "narrators take up models of identity that are culturally available" (Smith and Watson 1996, 9, emphasis in original removed). But that cannot be the whole account, for women of my generation in academia have had to make up our professional and personal identities as we go along, dealing with the challenges and contradictions that ineluctably arise. The models were not already existing, waiting for women to try on, but had to be created, tentatively, maybe fearfully, with little or no prior observation of women in comparable situations. My academic generation was educated by men and, indeed, in my entire undergraduate education I was not taught by a single woman. Hence, our condition has been what Carolyn Heilbrun calls "liminality" (Heilbrun 1998), living on or beyond the threshold of old concepts of what women can and should do. In this necessarily ambiguous state we slip through the existing classifications of women's roles, rejecting traditional precepts about what women can and cannot, should and should not do.

There is little wonder we are sometimes disoriented. "Only certain kinds of stories become intelligible as they fit the managed framework, the imposed system" (Smith and Watson 1996, 11, emphasis in original removed). Our stories—the stories of women and also the stories of people of colour; of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals; of disabled persons; and of individuals from working class back-

grounds—do not always fit an environment generated both by and for traditional academics. And when we find that our stories are unintelligible within the "imposed system," we are obliged to try to change the system, to expand the "managed framework" so that it can accommodate us. Our liminal situation provides us with both the means and the motivation to revision the conventional terms set by the university.

Like Marianna De Marco Torgovnick's *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, this series of reflections from my academic life is animated by repeated "crossing[s] between personal history and intellectual life" (Torgovnick 1994, x-xi). *A Feminist I* is intended both to exemplify and to explore the justification of the use of "confessions" and autobiography in scholarly research and teaching, particularly within the context of feminist philosophy. While this book is not primarily a memoir, it draws upon what Annette Kuhn (1995) calls "memory work." I attempt to use my own experiences, both recent and remote, to gain insights into feminism and academia. From a first-person perspective, I reflect upon the significance of socio-economic class, gender and sex, disability, feminist research and teaching, and the politics of and demands made by the modern university. Throughout the book I am interested in exploring ethical, social, and epistemological issues generated through the intersection of identities—feminist and academic—in the context of debates about political correctness and other paradoxes of emancipatory politics within the university.

Some authors have suggested that the use of confessions in academic writing has virtually attained the status of a fad, or at least a "trend" (Miller 1997, 981, 999-1000). "Th[e] public support for confession has affected all the

academic disciplines in which self-expression is given value, from sociology to literature to the visual arts" (Perillo 1997, A56). Indeed, there are many recent examples of autobiographical and confessional feminist academic writing (see Miller 1991, Kaplan 1993,[1] Greene and Kahn 1993, Torgovnick 1994,[2] Ellis 1995,[3] and Kuhn 1995[4]). One difference between their work and mine is that while theirs is located within such disciplines as literary studies, French studies, English literature, sociology, and cultural studies, mine is specifically and intentionally philosophical in nature.[5] I engage in philosophy that arises out of my situation as a woman, as a feminist, and as an academic.

In writing this book, my reflections are sustained by the conviction that, if "writing is a significant exercise of selfhood" (Quinby 1992, 306), in philosophical writing it makes a difference who you are and what your experiences are. In my scholarly work this conviction is hard-won. The kind of background and training I had as an

1 But see also the doubts Kaplan later expresses about the effects on her personal and professional life of writing a memoir (Kaplan 1997).

2 In light of my own concern for the significance of class differences, I find it significant that Torgovnick describes her book as, in part, a "class narrative" (1994, 10).

3 Ellis describes her book as "experimental ethnography," which she defines as "a multilayered, intertextual case study that integrates private and social experience and ties autobiographical to sociological writing" (Ellis 1995, 3).

4 See Kuhn's discussion of the significance of her working-class background to her education and her choices as an academic sociologist (pp. 84-103).

5 One recent example of the use of personal experience, the author's own and that of others, within philosophical inquiry is Brison (1997).

academic philosopher required ignoring one's own specific experiences and personal history, ignoring one's social identities, ignoring one's changing needs and desires and motivations. Torgovnick describes the usual process of academic writing as "like building an armadillo: an armored shell designed to repel criticisms that one sets gingerly before colleagues to run for its life" (Torgovnick 1994, 70). When I was a student there was a taboo—a taboo that is still inculcated, I find, in many of the students who come to my classes fresh from training in humanities subjects such as English and history—against writing in the first person. This taboo is highlighted in Alice Kaplan's comments on her training as a theorist of French literature:

> Personal motivation. We didn't think about personal motivation. We thought of ourselves in the service of difficulty, absence, impossibility.... Curiosity about too many things was discouraged; author's lives, for example, were beneath us. (Kaplan 1993, 173)

In this book I break the taboo of my philosophical training by deliberately and explicitly using my own academic life experience as the primary resource for my philosophizing.

My earliest inclination to use my own life as a resource for philosophy arose out of my experiences as a mother, which inspired an early paper in which I appealed to my lived relationship to my children as the basis for critiquing the notorious philosophical "problem of other minds" (Overall 1988). Then, after years of writing impersonal philosophy, including a great deal of impersonal feminist philosophy (e.g., Overall 1987a,

1993), I began to experience an impulse to give the subtitle "confessions" to virtually every "scholarly" work I wrote. This feeling was fostered, in part, by my work as the writer of a weekly feminist column for my city's local paper.[6] While my background and training in analytic philosophy had always required that I write clearly and directly, the need and desire to reach through my column a diverse, non-academic, public audience, to be accessible, to be lively and interesting, and to move people, transformed my goals as a writer.

Yet the necessity of communicating with different audiences is not a new feature of my life. For a girl from a working class background, the first of her family ever to attend university, finding the right words to reach particular audiences very early became an urgent necessity. I had to find a way to be understood by, if not acceptable to, people from very different class origins than mine, and I had to do so in a way that would not compromise the values in terms of which I define my feminism.

Some feminists describe this relationship to the audience as a result of the "drive to connect" (Frey 1993, 44). But, as a feminist philosopher, my motivation has been not so much to connect with my audience as simply to get its attention. In writing and speaking about philosophy I am acting upon my urge to interpret human culture and to figure out difficult issues *in public*, that is, with the reading or listening audience's acknowledgement. As a feminist, I have often faced sceptical audiences, whose initial response to my presentations placed the onus on me to show why they should find my views worth noticing, let alone plausible. In making myself heard by these

6 The column is entitled "In Other Words" and appears on Mondays in the Kingston *Whig-Standard*.

various audiences, my aim has always been to initiate reception without expecting agreement. One way to encourage the audience to listen to me is to appeal to stories from my own experiences. So, finding methods of speaking to different groups required discovering ways to be public about what is personal. I had to become approachable. In employing the genre of theoretical autobiography, I am motivated both by the fearful desire to reveal who I am, and by the conviction that appealing to personal experience will disarm audiences and provide an opening for my political values.

> For the marginalized woman, autobiographical language may serve as a coinage that purchases entry into the social and discursive economy.... Deploying autobiographical practices that go against the grain, she may constitute an 'I' that becomes a place of creative and, by implication, political intervention. (Watson and Smith 1992, xix)

Early versions of several of the chapters in this book were originally presented to a variety of different audiences, ranging from a large group of primary and secondary school teachers and teachers in training (Chapter 3) and audiences comprised of women's studies scholars and graduate students (Chapters 2 and 5), to an audience of administrators and academics interested in pedagogy (Chapter 4) and an audience of mostly mainstream, analytically-trained philosophers (Chapter 8).

I'm inclined to say that its original audience helped to influence the character of each of the chapters. Yet to state that relationship in such a way implies a writer and speaker who is too passive. Rather, it is always *my view*

of the audience—my understanding of its collective personality; its hidden needs, wants, and agenda; and its political presuppositions—that shapes the issues as I advance them and the arguments that I use. By choosing how to present my experiences and by making aspects of myself available to my audiences, I also become an active participant in the development of the feminist I that the audience hears. As a writer and speaker I try to influence and persuade my audience and my readers, even as I am remaking myself. To "exercise selfhood" through writing is also to recreate the self. As Crispin Sartwell puts it,

> All my writing, and I think this is true of a lot of people, has been aimed primarily at treating myself; I am always telling myself what I think I need to hear, am always writing the books I think I need to read. My books are attempts to reconfigure my self or to manufacture a new self. (Sartwell 1998, 13)[7]

While I do not assume that others necessarily have the same experiences as mine, I hope that listeners and readers, both inside and outside the academy—and especially those who are feminists, regardless of whether they share my history and my version of feminism—will experience a resonance with my stories.

> Although we tend to have an acute sense of our specificity, as if our experience, like a thumbprint, were

7 Jane Gallop suggests, "we have to think constructed somehow other than in opposition to authentic" (Gallop 1995, 15). The constructed self (the only kind there is) can also be an authentic self, that is, a persona whom I have consciously chosen, and who espouses the ideals I value.

> unique (which, of course, in a bodily sense it is), autobiography theory has usefully shown that this uniqueness is what, paradoxically, is at one and the same time shareable and shared—and alternately refused: not like me at all. (Miller 1997, 999)

These reflections will therefore make no great claims to generalizability, although I have endeavoured to identify and clarify what I believe are epistemological and moral issues common to many feminists in academia. I share with Carolyn Ellis the hope that "What I ha[ve] learned from my own struggles for meaning [is] unique enough to be interesting, yet typical enough to help others understand important aspects of their lives" (Ellis 1995, 308).

Exploring the strengths and liabilities of our conflicting roles as feminist and academic has potential epistemic value, offering insights into such matters as how the university works, how oppression operates, and what paths we might take toward liberation. Though by no means a handbook or a practical guide, *A Feminist I* is, nonetheless, a pragmatic record of my struggles as a feminist and what I have learned from them.

Slowly and with difficulty over the last decade and a half, I have come to understand something about the political and moral meanings of being a feminist, about men and masculinism in the university, about the demands of teaching and the needs of different groups of students, about the effects of socio-economic class background, and about the cultural interpretation of disability. My understanding of these matters has come about partly because the academic environment has forced me to rethink my preconceptions and my behaviour.

Much of what I now believe about teaching and learning, as well as my views about feminist politics, masculinist power, and the hierarchical operations of institutions of higher learning, originated in my immersion in the realities of university life.

My understanding has also come about partly through my direct encounters with others' sometimes-unthinking reactions to my identities, both ascribed and chosen. Although these reactions were often painful to experience, I am no mere victim and do not perceive myself as one. I recognize and acknowledge the extraordinary rights and privileges I enjoy as a middle-class professional: freedom to say and write what I believe, exposure to new ideas and discoveries, professional autonomy, a good income. But inevitably, my personal confrontations with stereotypes, limitations, and injustices have had an especially powerful effect on my world view. As a person from a working-class background I needed years of bumping up against the university's covert classism before I finally learned that class background matters. And through my experience of temporary disablement, I journeyed from a place of ignorance about disability to a world in which social attitudes toward disabled persons were only too evident. In recounting what I learned through these experiences, my aim is not to claim the status of the oppressed, but rather to contribute to a growing feminist understanding of oppression.

My analysis of how to respond to disagreement and conflict is greatly influenced by my experiences in Re-evaluation Counseling ("RC") (Jackins 1973, 1978a, 1978b, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1992). RC is a form of peer counselling, which emphasizes mutual help and the exchange of listening time to enable participants to

emerge from past distresses and free themselves from oppressive social patterns. From RC I have learned to respect though not always believe people's expressions of emotion, to emphasize shared opportunities for listening and speaking, and to go beyond hopelessness to a vision of social change that permits all human beings to flourish.

In reaching out to various audiences, therefore, I tend to interpret my function as being that of a feminist intellectual "Ms Fix-It," who tries to move past the litanizing of feminist complaints to providing proposals for change. As a result, several chapters close with my suggestions for liberating ourselves and the academic world from some of the practices and ideologies that hold sexism and other oppressive ideologies in place. Like Naomi Scheman, I believe that

> it's just not true that the real world starts where the campus ends; ... I think that [students'] lives are real lives, and making a difference to them is making a difference in the real world; ... what we do together can be radically transformative, not only of [students] but of the other lives [they] touch. (Scheman 1995, 109)

In each of the chapters that follow I explore a different story, an aspect of my experience as a feminist academic and the conclusions that I draw from it. While some chapters are more theoretical than others, all are intended to exemplify my practice of reflecting on the meaning of my situation in academia. In Chapter 2, I begin by describing some examples of feminist political and moral "role muddles," generated by the conflicting expectations that arise from roles that are socially

dissonant. I am interested in how feminists are policed, both by those who fear or despise feminism and by those who expect feminism to be a panacea. Sometimes feminists also police each other, and the result is not solidarity but rather ethical confusion about what feminism is and what feminists should do. Situating feminist role muddles within the context of the media focus on "political correctness" and its effects on feminism, I connect them with ongoing debates about academic freedom and free speech, especially within teaching. Feminist role muddles have something important to tell us about what feminism is.

This exploration is followed, in Chapter 3, by reflections on feminists' often-ambiguous relationship with men in academia. "Women and Men in Education" discusses general political features of the situation of women and men, whether as students, staff, or faculty; the culture of sexism within the universities; and possible methods by which gender oppression and internalized oppression might be diminished. I try to show how feminist insights about oppression and internalized oppression, forms of communication, and the unrecognized values of emotion, can be given direct application within university committees and classrooms.

Role muddles may also originate from the varied and even conflicting demands made by different academic classes. The experience of teaching each year a new but forever-young student cohort gives the illusion that teaching itself is always the same. Yet the attempt to prepare and educate students must necessarily be flexible, to adjust to the varying needs, backgrounds, and goals of the always-unique individuals whom we instruct. In Chapter 4, "A Tale of Two Classes," I describe two

different groups of students who took my favourite course, "Philosophy and Feminism," and the ways in which their various motives, assumptions, and beliefs forced me to reshape my pedagogical assumptions and my approaches to teaching. The disorientation that I experienced when I realized that the second class could not be treated in the way I treated the first posed a profound challenge to my moral and political commitments as a feminist.

There is, of course, another meaning of "class" that should be just as immediate and important for classroom instructors. Starting from recollections of my working-class background, Chapter 5, "Nowhere At Home," develops what I call the phenomenology of a working-class academic's consciousness. As a tenured academic I now belong to the middle class, but I grew up in a working-class household and neighbourhood. To have a working-class background is to possess a feature that simultaneously makes it more difficult to acclimatize to the academic environment and also offers potential insights into the class-based operations of the university. In Chapter 5 I focus upon the discontinuities—in culture, expectations, values, priorities, and background knowledge—generated by the class mobility that higher education produces, and what I have learned from them.

The experience of being transposed from working-class family to middle-class academic engenders, for me, the feeling of being an imposter. Chapter 6, "Feeling Fraudulent," examines the feeling of academic fraudulence, and the connection of this feeling to moral quandaries in the situation of university instructors, especially those who are feminists. The feeling of being a fraud who has, through accident or deception, infiltrated the

ivory tower, is, I suggest, a not-surprising manifestation of the feminist academic identity. If I believe that I have not mastered the conflicting demands of my roles, then I am likely to feel like an imposter. When, in addition, I am at a life stage when my students are likely to regard me as a mother rather than as a generational peer, the combination of ageism with sexism exacerbates feelings of insecurity and role anomie. Rather than viewing it only negatively, I try to discern the implicit resources that feeling fraudulent may offer and use it to attempt a resolution or at least a revisioning of some ethical problems in university teaching.

In Chapter 7, "Passing for Normal," I draw upon my experiences of temporary disablement and my encounters with ableism, a phenomenon exacerbated by its connections with ageism. In their response to persons with disability many university faculty reveal a deep discontinuity between their moral ideals and gritty academic reality. My experience of being profoundly disabled while being pressured to pass as non-disabled, of being a medical patient while being expected to continue to be an "able-bodied" academic, generated role muddles that threatened my loyalty to the university. The requirement to deny, downplay, or protect others from one's identities (whether of class, sexual orientation, or ability) encourages persons who do not fit the "managed framework" of academia to attempt to adapt and assimilate or to disappear altogether.

All of these chapters are deliberately personal and experiential in method and tone. Yet the personal is never straightforwardly self-evident and unadorned or unrehearsed. As Gallop wryly remarks, "when the personal appears [in educational contexts] it is always as the

result of a process of im-personation [*sic*], a process of performing the personal for a public" (Gallop 1995, 9). Despite my appeals to personal experiences and social identities throughout these chapters, I am aware of the potential drawbacks of using personal experience within philosophical inquiry (Perillo 1997, A56).

> It's important to remember and record. To set the record straight, to get the story out. But we cannot afford to make memorializing a fetish: the sign of desire once wounded and forever enshrined. (Miller 1997, 1013)

However, as I assume throughout this book, the dangers of an uncritical, too-respectful appeal to experience do not mean that experience should not be used at all, only that it must be used critically and with care: "For it is through manipulation that one gains power over an experience in which one originally was powerless—that, at least, is the therapeutic lesson" (Perillo 1997, A56). Thus, this book is intended both as a demonstration and as an evaluation of the use of experience in academic writing.

> [E]xperience is not infrequently played as the trump card of authenticity, the last word of personal truth, forestalling all further discussion, let alone analysis. Nevertheless, experience is undeniably a key category of everyday knowledge, structuring people's lives in important ways. So, just as I know perfectly well that the whole idea is a fiction and a lure, part of me also 'knows' that my experience—my memories, my feelings —are important because these things make me what I

> am, make me different from everyone else. Must they be consigned to a compartment separate from the part of me that thinks and analyses? Can the idea of experience not be taken on board—if with a degree of caution—by cultural theory, rather than being simply evaded or, worse, consigned to the domain of sentimentality and nostalgia? (Kuhn 1995, 28)

I place the most theoretical component of this book—Chapter 8, "Personal Histories, Social Identities, and Feminist Philosophical Inquiry"—at the end because it evaluates the general justification of the methods used throughout the earlier chapters. After exploring the arguments for and against the use of and appeal to individual histories and social identities within feminist education and research, this chapter concludes by presenting my rationale for relying in so much of my work upon appeals to experience.

As I finish this book I have recently assumed a new academic identity. In my new capacity as a university administrator, I am immersed in handling the role muddles generated through the assumption of formidable amounts of responsibility together with the deployment of limited forms of academic power—while also trying to maintain my political commitments and moral integrity. As an academic feminist who is at once engaged with political struggles in the university and committed to scholarly reflection about the meanings of those struggles and their ethical ambiguities, I know that my feminist od[d]yssey is not finished.

CHAPTER 2

Role Muddles

> As feminist writers we know we cannot speak for anyone else: vain, unethical venture. Nor can we ignore or disregard the consequences of our writing. (Livia 1989, 33)

Several years ago I wrote a fairly conventional feminist theoretical paper on the dangers and liabilities of setting up isolated individual women as role models in institutions where they almost inevitably experience serious role conflicts and constraints (Overall 1987b). This chapter, however, is not about role models but rather role *muddles*, and, unlike my earlier effort, it must and will be written primarily in the first person, rather than in the apparently neutral and theoretical third person.

My identities, combined, create what I call role muddles—a set of discontinuities, contradictions, and ambiguities generated by conflicting expectations arising from socially incompatible roles. In the role muddle experience there is simultaneously both confusion about what I should be or do, as a feminist, and resistance to the individual and social voices that seem only too willing and eager to tell me what I should be and do, as a feminist. While I experience role muddles as a feminist mother, friend, and partner, I shall primarily focus here on my role muddles as a feminist academic: that is, as a teacher in the classroom, as a scholar of feminist philosophy, and as a privileged feminist among women more disadvantaged than I.