Nicole E Pietsch - “Did you think I’d crumble? Did you think I'd lay down and die? Oh no not I”: From Survivors’ Stories to Feminist Organizing ? The Continuum of Psychiatric Resistance in the Anti-Rape Movement

Statistics reveal that two of three Canadian women have experienced sexual violence[1]. Yet despite the social context operant in sexual violence, medically labelled “psychiatric problems” – for example, substance use, self-harm and anger – are regularly defined as pathological in women survivors of sexual violence[2]. This essay identified how contemporary psychiatric conceptualizations of female survivors of sexual violence reproduce historic constructs of the hysterical female body: a biomedical phenomenon, emblematic of “the traditionally negative characteristics considered to be feminine” – for example, “duplicity, theatricality, suggestibility, instability, weakness, passivity, excessive emotionality”[3]. This work used an anti-racist, anti-oppression framework to identify feminist conceptualizations of sexual violence as strategic resistance to psychiatry – itself a sexist institution.

Acts of feminist and survivor-based resistance to psychiatry include:

- Maintaining an understanding of sexual violence that does “not locate the determinants of violence against women [with]in women’s lives or in the ways [that] they [choose to] cope”[4]
- Maintaining a focus on “the socio-political underpinnings of violence vis-à-vis service delivery” for survivors[5]
- Maintaining spaces for survivors’ voices and expertise
- Anti-rape workers’ capacity to “assert and reinforce boundaries in ways that do not exploit power differences between clients and staff”[6]
- Holding society accountable for the problem of sexual violence, as opposed to locating this problem in individual sexual offenders, survivors, and medicalized “symptomology”

[5] Ibid, 33
[6] Ibid, 40