

FEMINISMS: WHERE DO WE COME FROM? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Weaving the threads: a genealogy of feminisms in Catalonia

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Textile is an image closely linked to women in our country and thus an appropriate one to approach an explanation of the genealogy of feminisms, following the path of threads from that past to combine with those of the present, taking us from 19th-century bourgeois philanthropists to 21st-century transfeminism and decolonial feminisms, from the first anarcho-syndicalists to the young protagonists of the feminist strikes of 8 March, from the anticlerical spiritists to the modern-day devotees to the cause of Mother Earth (*Pacha Mama*).

The concept of genealogy is important because the history of women seeking to live and express their freedom over the centuries has time and again been buried in silence and invisibility. Whenever a strong and potent expression of women's struggle for their rights and decent living conditions blossoms, it is presented as having arisen out of nothing, as if there were no common history or shared present context to give meaning and continuity to the permanent, on-going tradition of women's struggles throughout history and all over the world.

The concept of genealogy implies recognising all the threads involved: stronger ones that have withstood the passage of time down to the present and more subtle ones rooted in the day-to-day lives and work of millions of women, preserving and maintaining non-normative knowledge and practices that have always been integrated into the fabric of feminisms. We defend all women's manifestations and expressions in helping weave the tapestry of current feminisms, thus avoiding the "phenomenon of interruption" as defined by Adrienne Rich,

based on Michelle Cliff's concept, whereby "women's work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own".

Pioneers

In the context of Catalonia, we would like to start with an early reference to Duoda, the 9th-century Countess of Barcelona and Septimania, mother and teacher, who wrote a manual on bringing up her children, estranged from her due to 'patriarchal' circumstances. Also worthy of our memory and recognition are the witches: wise women, medicinal healers, herbalists and midwives, who in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries were persecuted and executed under the repression and control of the Church, as their knowledge of life and healing were a competence that the established powers could not allow. And there is still much research to be done to recover the chronological thread running through figures such as Isabel de Villena, in the 15th century, and down through the silence imposed by the patriarchy.

When Maria Aurèlia Campany published *El feminisme a Catalunya* in 1973 with the publishing house Nova Terra, she was emerging from "a very sad and very long silence" and opened her work by stating that Catalan feminism dating back to the late 19th century was influenced by the Anglo-Saxon Suffrage Movement. This was undoubtedly the case and could not have been otherwise, given our history, her book being a critique of bourgeois, enlightened reformist feminism. Yet when one examines the women involved and their works, one realises we must also defend their legacy, because of the thought, energy and efforts they put into changing the role and situation of women. For instance, the journals *Ori grana* and *Feminal* and even *La dona catalana* bear witness to the work helping women in society undertaken by Dolors Monserdà, Francesca Bonnemaison, Carme Karr and others, as far as their 'circumstances' allowed. We cannot forget that Dolors Monserdà created the Patronat d'Obreres de l'Agulla (the Society of Women Needle Workers), run as a cooperative, to give work and support to seamstresses in adverse situations. Francesca Bonnemaison's greatest contribution was founding the Institució de Cultura i Biblioteca Popular per a la Dona (People's Cultural Institute and Library for Women) which provided education and training to women from the lower middle classes, thereby facilitating their access to non-domestic activities and integration into the productive process.

Visibility must also be given to another section of society, as all the activity headed by bourgeois women occurred alongside popular anarcho-syndicalist, socialist and communist movements, in which working class women mobilised in force in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Teresa Claramunt is the pioneer of Catalan working class feminism. She played a significant role during the formative years of the anarchist movement in Catalonia. Her activism and dedication established the foundations of left-wing feminism among women during the Second Republic, the Spanish Civil War and the resistance to Franco. In Sabadell, one of the centres for the textile industry in Catalonia, Teresa Claramunt, through a simple discourse based on her experiences, initiated the fierce defence and organisation of working women, who were often sidelined in industrial conflicts.

Her anti-clericalism and her interest in equal education and the suppression of double moral standards to achieve equality between men and women brought her into contact with Àngeles López de Ayala, republican, feminist and mason. Together, they founded in 1891 the *Sociedad Autónoma de Mujeres de Barcelona* (Women's Autonomous Society of Barcelona), working also with the spiritist Amalia Domingo Soler, a leading defender of the emancipation of women from the church and patriarchy and a prolific writer.

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These three women organised the women's march on 10 July 1910 in favour of female emancipation and secular education. Alongside mass demonstrations whose images chime with those of today, mentioned should also be made of other major strikes at the time, such as that of La Canadenca, in 1919, where women made up 80% of the workforce, and frequent women's strikes in companies staffed by women in the 1970s, during the last years of the Franco dictatorship and the Transition, most famously the women's lock-in at Motor Ibèrica and the Numax strike.

Cultural field

In the field of culture, the importance of *El Club Femení i d'Esports de Barcelona* (Women's Sports Club of Barcelona) should also be stressed. The club was founded in 1928 and, as its name indicates, it was a feminist sports organisation, linked to key progressive and Catalan nationalist proposals in Republican Barcelona. It was also more popular and affordable than the *Lyceum Club*, another important cultural space for women in the city during the 1930s, frequented by intellectuals. The names Aurora Bertrana, Anna Murià, Carme Montoriol and Teresa Vernet are associated with these institutions, along with other women, journalists and teachers, such as María Luz Morales, Llucieta Canyà, Ana Martínez Sagi, Irene Polo, Rosa Sensat and Leonor Serrano, all leading figures in the Republican period. Their disappearance through external and internal exile after the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War led to the barren period in feminism during Franco's dictatorship.

Also worthy of mention is Enriqueta Gallinat, a member of the political party *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (Republican Left of Catalonia) who, at a time when women still did not have the right to vote, organised the collection of over half a million signatures from women in favour of the autonomy of Catalonia in support for President Macià and the 1932 Statute of Núria. After returning from exile and time in prison, she became one of the founders of the *Associació Dones del 36* (Association of Women of '36) in 1997, where for many years she and her colleagues worked to recover the historical memory of women in the war, giving talks in primary and secondary schools. We should also remember the

anonymous women, militia women and women who held positions of political and social responsibility during the Civil War period. And this year, 100 years after her birth, mention should be made of Teresa Pàmies, a founder member of the Aliança Nacional de la Dona Jove (Young Women's National Alliance), a Catalan anti-fascist youth organisation founded in April 1937 and open to women of different political tendencies whose aim was to unite antifascist women.

The strength of the anarchists during the Republic and Spanish Civil War became clear when Federica Montseny was appointed the first female minister at the Ministry of Health, but above all, in collective terms, her great contribution was to found Mujeres Libres (Free Women) under the leadership of Lucía Sánchez Saornil and Mercedes Comaposada. Another member of the organisation, the physician Amparo Poch, carried out important work in the field of health, sex education and conscious parenthood, topics which fall within what we now call sexual and reproductive rights.

The silence under the dictatorship

The phenomenon of interruption mentioned above is most clearly shown in Catalonia in the silence imposed for over 30 years by the Franco dictatorship in relation to the progressive achievements of the Republic. When weaving the more recent feminist genealogy, there are women who are still with us today who were involved in the clandestine network of resistance to the Franco dictatorship, and then initiated a new period of feminisms from the 1970s onwards. Certain international circumstances had opened up what Maria Mercè Marçal termed 'a window onto this closed sky': we refer here to the Second Vatican Council in 1962 (a year which significantly gave its name to the publishing house founded at the time, Edicions 62) and the events of May 1968 in Paris. A fertile substrate of resistance and demands was being woven thanks to the publication of translations of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Kate Millet, the news and experiences of women who had lived through the events in Paris, the need and desire for general social and political change and the drive provided by women from clandestine unions and political parties, groups of housewives, female representatives of neighbourhood movements, university women and the prolific self-awareness groups. When the UN declared 1975 International Women's Year, this substrate ensured the related events were also organised in Catalonia and after the death of the dictator, the Jornades Catalanes de la Dona (Catalan Women's Conference) was held in the University of Barcelona Paraninf building in the last week of May 1976, attended by a large, enthusiastic number of women from different fields of the feminist struggle.

The conclusions from the '76 Conference were drawn up as a list of all the urgent changes required in our society to overcome the discriminations and injustices experienced by women, and marked the work of feminists during the years of the so-called political Transition, to the extent that the change to democracy, although today considered limited, owes a great deal to feminisms.

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After an initial period where unity was required to ensure feminism appeared as a major force in society, feminists became aware of the growing plurality and diversity that now began to emerge and express itself, after being silenced throughout the period of Franco's repression. We experienced and shared struggles and differences, feminists who were dual activists (in left-wing parties and in feminism) and autonomous feminists, independent from political parties and trade unions. Equality feminism, with a clear goal of achieving social justice, equal opportunities and the necessary legal changes, had its own dynamics and, together with progressive political parties, promoted the legislation leading to the creation of 'women's institutes' in Spain and the *Institut Català de la Dona* (Catalan Women's Institute, now called *Institut Català de les Dones*) in Catalonia. Difference feminism, in seeking recognition of the contributions of women throughout history in all fields of the sustainability of life, knowledge and actions outside of hegemonic androcentrism, offered a profound critique of the patriarchal system and sought a comprehensive alternative.

At the same time, in this plural, diverse and sometimes conflictive context in the late 1970s and 1980s, the need for the cultural recovery of a non-androcentric feminine genealogy led to initiatives with highly significant repercussions, such as the bar La Sal, the women's bookshop in the street Carrer Lladó and the LaSal Edicions women's publishing house, which released numerous interesting works in diverse collections. All sectors of feminism converged at one time or another in these spaces.

Feminist organisation

The prevailing form of feminist organisation at the time was the Coordinadora Feminista (Feminist Coordinating Committee), with broad representation of women from local organisations, trade unions, ecologist groups, pacifists and anti-militarism movements, such as Dona, Anticoncepció i Avortament (Woman, Contraception and Abortion, DAIA), Donas Antimilitaristas (Anti-militarist Women, DOAN), Lesbianas Feministes (Lesbian Feminists), Assemblea de Donas d'Ensenyament (Assembly of Women in Education), Dona i presó (Women and Prison) and many more. Dating from this initial period are the journals *Vindicación feminista* and *Dones en lluita*. Major protests were organised, such as the anti-militarist train to Tortosa and participation in the Greenham Common anti-nuclear camp. At the same time, special mention should be made of the Centre d'Estudis de la Dona/El Centre (Centre for Women's Studies) created in 1984 by Gretel Ammann, the Assemblea de Feministes Independents de Barcelona (Barcelona Assembly of Independent Feminists), the Associació Cultural de Dones La Nostra Illa (Women's Cultural Association), the women's theatre group Gram Teatre and other initiatives such as the organisation of the Primera Setmana de Lesbianes de Barcelona (First Barcelona Lesbian's Week) and international meetings together with the group Lesbianes Feministes, all of

which contributed to conserving documentation on the feminist movement and, more specifically, the contribution of lesbians.

An on-going demand from this period was for a meeting place for the feminist movement. This was finally resolved after a municipal building was occupied as a squat, leading to negotiations with the City Council and the founding of the *Ca la dona* project in 1988.

The feminist movement in Catalonia has always been characterised by its efforts to seek joint action, through an awareness of the diversity within the movement accompanied by the knowledge that, despite our differences, we are united by our struggle against the patriarchy. As we approach the present, while recognising our inevitable bias, we will attempt to provide an objective description of the continuity in the feminist genealogy through the threads of thought and action we consider most significant.

The *Jornades dels 20 anys de Feminisme* (20 Years of Feminism Conference), held at the National Institute of Physical Education building on Montjuïc in 1996, showed how women from the feminist movement were reuniting after the encouraging yet difficult years of attempting to establish an 'acceptable' democracy. The need to occupy a specific political space forced political parties to formulate positions in relation to the demands of the feminist movement, leading to numerous arguments and divisions within it. The importance of this conference lay in the fact that when it was announced, several months beforehand, and during its preparation, it was already conceived as a turning point in re-establishing joint work among all sectors of the feminist movement. It set out a number of common points and, in particular, stressed the value of unity in action and recognising the importance of building relations as a necessary policy. From that moment, in order to ensure continuity, the *Xarxa Feminista* (Feminist Network) was born, a new concept at that time, reflecting the desire to work through a horizontal, non-hierarchical organisation, where all women's groups, whatever their field or form, would feel recognised and connected to the wave of the feminist movement. All this arose in the context of the emerging anti-globalisation movements in Barcelona and other European cities, connecting protests and resistance to new manifestations of the neoliberal system.

In 2006, when the feminist movement put together the conference called *Les Dones Sabem Fer i Fem Saber* (Women's Know-How and Awareness) held at *Llars Mundet* in Barcelona, gender studies was spreading in universities and new generations were educated knowing that women knew what they knew. Empowerment was the buzzword; we did not want to be the object of study and demanded to be seen as political subjects. We reformulated the concept of domestic labour to place care work at the centre of society, in that it enabled the growth, development and maintenance of human life and had almost always been carried out by women in most of the world's cultures. We questioned the sexual binarisms that the patriarchal system has imposed as pillars of its symbolic order. We realised the need to protect nature from the consequences of global warming. We defended the search for peace in all conflicts that globalisation only helped escalate. Transfeminisms highlighted the emergence of a series of discourses, political practices and cultural productions linked to the struggle for sexual and gender freedom, after which concepts such as 'queer', 'heteropatriarchy', 'cis-male' and 'dyke' became common in the feminist narrative.

Shared struggles

In the context of shared struggles with social movements, these were years in which different waves of resistance took shape. Opposition to cuts in education, health and the social services in general grew in strength. There was increasing mobilisation for the right to housing in the face of the property boom, which burst as an ‘economic crisis’ when in fact it was an expression of the uncontrolled, predatory nature of banking-led speculation. To combat it, the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages, PAH) was established in 2009 and buildings were frequently occupied as squats, thereby consolidating a major alternative movement. In 2011, the 15 May (15M) protests broke out, as a convergence of all the demands for change towards a more supportive, participative and democratic society. The camp occupying Barcelona’s Plaça Catalunya brought together the *indignados*, which included younger feminist sectors, and, in particular, fostered debate on the crisis of revolutionary and personal horizons through labour precarity and the relationship between political life and care. Out of this came the ‘iaiaflautes’ (protesting grandmothers) and ‘las marees’ (tides) of different colours that weaved sector-based struggles together. These years also saw demonstrations in favour of Catalan independence, culminating in the referendum on 1 October 2017, mobilising millions of people, gaining unanticipated importance and leading to the founding of the group *Feministes per la Independència* (Feminists for Independence).

This was the panorama in 2016 when we organised another conference, titled *Radical-ment feministes* (Radically Feminist), a name which aimed to reflect our political position and our long and deeply rooted tradition. In these recent years, the political subject of feminism has switched to ‘women, lesbians and trans women’ and feminist agency has become mainstream, with previously unheard-of presence in the media, on the streets and around the world. The social media acts to broadcast and disseminate feminist seeds that penetrate all areas and levels of society. Waves of young feminists have focussed all their energies on talking about and explaining how they suffer violence and how they experience their sexuality, with the phrase “our body, our rights” more relevant than ever. Decolonial feminisms have erupted in force, highlighting the importance of anti-racism and a critique of the eurocentric viewpoint, placing the intersection of sex/gender, class and race conflicts in the feminist agenda.

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Lacking a degree of distance in terms of subject and time, it is impossible to outline the depth and complexity of current feminisms in our country, but we hope we have at least managed to convey a sense of the air we breathe: intersectionality, unity, diversity, wealth, strength, mutual recognition and sisterhood, values we must all try to maintain and preserve. This is how, over the years, more alternative feminisms have been complemented by more institutional feminisms, all working in their own areas and mutually helping to progress as

far as possible: some out in the streets, demanding resources and services, others in public institutions, managing to obtain budgets for as many areas as possible, others strengthening alliances with social movements, others promoting policies for building relations between different feminisms, yet others reflecting on and providing thought for feminist activism; and all of us interacting and strengthening our feminist corpus. It must be stressed that these are not closed compartments in which we all do different things. Intersectionality and the mainstreaming of feminist struggles and reflection based on political practice have always been among the most important contributions of our activism. And this is reflected in the inseparable link between body and life, in the experience of care, creative and civilising work, in the recognition of sexual options and identities, and in the constant practice-based reformulation to advance our thinking and analysis of reality.

When we see the return of reactionary forces, we realise the fragility of the milestones we have achieved and how we need to protect and defend them. Historical experience here and around the world shows us that nothing is won forever, that laws are welcomed but, as we are constantly saying, they are glass ceilings if unaccompanied by a change in mentality and the personal and material resources to implement them successfully. Laws such as women's right for the eradication of gender-based violence, the law of effective equality between men and women and the law of sexual and reproductive rights are paradigmatic examples of the deficiencies, limitations and difficulties we still face in achieving our goals.

Today, the challenges of feminisms and society in general mean we must all, through solidarity and empathy, seek the means to build that which is still achievable: an anti-patriarchal world and society that is free, anti-racist, without violence, respectful of the natural environment and working actively to combat the effects of the climate crisis, showing responsibility in managing natural resources, which causes so much tragic displacement of people, and welcoming people fleeing from armed conflict, as we know full well that it is women, children and the weak who suffer most in all situations of violence and injustice. The threads in feminist genealogy continue to be woven day by day, making it difficult to draw this narrative to a definitive close. Only poetry can help do so, hence we end with a fragment by Maria Mercè Marçal, who wrote in *Bruixa de dol* in 1977:

The smoke will draw
the start of history
like jewelled ivy
around our body
and it will rain and the sun will shine
and we will dance in the air
the new songs
that the earth will receive.
We will claim the night
and the word Woman.
Then will the tree
of freedom grow.

**Mercè Otero Vidal**

Mercè Otero Vidal is Graduated in Philosophy and Literature from Universitat de Barcelona. Chair Professor of Latin, she taught classical languages and literary critics. She is currently retired and involved in the feminist movement as an activist of Xarxa Feminista and Ca la Dona. She focuses on coeducation, LGBTI+, gynecocritics and memory. She has written several works about the role of women throughout history and translated Latin texts into Catalan.

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Montserrat Otero Vidal is Graduated in Philosophy from Universitat de Barcelona and worked as a social researcher. Currently retired, she is dedicated to feminist activism. She is involved in the Xarxa Feminista and the Documentation Center Ca la Dona. She also contributes to the organization of the Feminist School. She authored and co-authored several articles published at critical opinion publications or feminist meetings, such as *Desafíos y oportunidades en los feminismos*, *Temps de mudances i desplaçaments*, *Autoritat femenina i participació política* and *Los feminismos como espacios de relacion y libertad*