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Remembering Muriel

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ABSTRACT

Muriel Dimen was singular—but also multiple. A brave risk taker, wearing her vulnerability. A mentor showing her uncertainty. She created a hybrid form of written address in which the formal and the colloquial, the public and the intimate, the erotic and the traumatic, the put-together and the broken-up shared the stage, speaking not as one but as multiples. The world without her feels like an endless absence.

Muriel Dimen and I met in 1979, when we were well into our 30s. A lot had happened already—the 1960s with its delirious craziness, the 1970s and its wounded retrenchment. We were part of an organization of newly minted psychoanalytically minded therapists, trying to keep the faith while building careers—a contradiction that was ultimately unsustainable. But although the group imploded, the dense web of relationships made under its sign survived and thrived to this day—many of us still friends, colleagues, and fellow travelers.

The 1980s was a febrile decade for work in gender and sexuality, and Muriel and I, along with our comrades, theorized and strategized, fought and supported each other, and continued to make things over the next many years both realistic and visionary.

Realistic and visionary. That was my dear Muriel. She was a Radical, pure and simple. Long after the term had lost its currency, it remained her idiom, an experience both past and present that came back to me each time I made my way through her beat-up marble lobby and into her tenderly curated apartment.

She lived her idiom with a purity that was distinctive—and that is what she wrote about. “The personal is political is theoretical” says the old feminist adage, a recursivity Muriel went on to queer and multiply by creating a hybrid form of written address in which the formal and the colloquial, the public and the intimate, the erotic and the traumatic, the put-together and the broken-up shared the stage, speaking not as one but as multiples.

The effect was intellectual prose that *felt* like the spoken word even when it was not written in the first person. Indeed, Muriel refused the narcissistic anonymity of the Ur writer and theorist even though it was hers for the taking. Instead, as she never tired of reminding us, a thinker is always also gendered, sexed, embodied, and fighting shame. (“A body that thinks is a body that stinks,” was how she liked to put it).

And she liked to break the literary frame—to talk directly to *you* about the most intimate things—sexuality, bodies, suffering, shame. She wanted you to feel that she’d been there, where *you* were. Even in her most theoretically ambitious works, you could sense that she was not looking to preen but rather to share the fruits of her hard work—“to help,” as she put it simply in an interview.

Her strategy was not to pile it on but to break it up. “Don’t worry,” she seemed to be saying. “I’ll walk you through this. I’m not going to get too fancy, making you feel small by comparison. Here—lemme try to explain.”

And intermittently she did just that: “I’ve chosen to take a risk here, to let you in,” she tells us in the middle of a tough passage. And just as you begin to realize that you will never be able to predict the moment when she speaks directly to you again, we read, “I mean to *get* to you; my use of the vernacular is meant to

spark in you an idea or experience either forgotten, or perhaps not known before. I would like that” (Dimen, 2014, p. 293).

“*I would like that*”? Who writes academic prose like this?

But Muriel was like no one else. She was always testing—pushing some boundary, trying to think her way to something very new, hard, often disturbing, and to speak it in a fresh, new form of address. She forced herself back on the ice when there was no need. She could have repeated herself; there are always new generations of readers—but that was never her desire.

Instead, she asked her mind to do the hardest things—to set up camp at the social margins and the disciplinary boundaries, inventing a new intellectual approach for her layered vision: “heteroglossia”—a hybridity she constructed by crisscrossing and crosscutting among intellectual disciplines. Her habits, as she explained, were those of “splicing,” of teasing out interimplications between ideas and traditions where they were not always obvious, an approach that anticipated what is now termed “intersectionality.”

In her lust for making things intellectually—and literarily—Muriel wrote every single day, as she once told me, year in and year out—except for Thanksgiving, a detail that somehow always moved me. In this aspect, my writing life has been inextricably bound up with hers. We were bonded in this daily practice, our particular form of identificatory love. Being recognized by Muriel as a “like subject,” being as compelled as she was by the practice of wordcraft, equally willing to set everything aside to do it—this filled me with happiness.

She called it “our life,” and over years of weekends, she in Sag, me in the Berks—we shared our circuit from desk to couch to bed to view, and back around, as the day grew into itself and then wound down. “Can you listen to something?” I would ask, hitting speed dial. How intimate—revealing my childish excitement but also my grown-up fear of it falling flat—or of the whole thing turning out to be kind of ridiculous.

There was no one else with whom I would take such a risk, revealing in real time my absolutely current, absolutely best effort. But then Muriel was absolutely trustworthy. She herself took giant risks. Living in a state of almost total transparency, her relationships were citadels of rigorous authenticity. There was no such thing as a generic visit with Muriel, for instance—no cheat sheets of easy topics to drift through, no version of “phoning it in” that would fly. If you didn’t have the wherewithal for that kind of an evening, you’d probably do better to stay home and order in.

Muriel didn’t love everyone, but if she loved *you*? Well, you gave yourself over. Feeling her sinking into *you*, sensing what it was in *you* that so endeared *you* to her—one’s ordinary shyness would fall away, and someone less guarded, more queer and idiomatic—a truer self used to staying under wraps—would accept her invitation and click “connect.”

But there was also no telling who would reply. Muriel lived her multiplicity. Fierce, stoic, steely. Leaky, transparent, emotionalized. Unpredictable bouts of intensity. Reliable capacity for deep, relational silence. A brave risk taker wearing her vulnerability. A mentor showing her uncertainty.

Surrendering to her subjectivity, often by choice, sometimes by default, Muriel expected no less from those she loved. Her truth, often assembled and delivered in the right now of the moment, was her signature. In this, she was the most “in-the-now” person I’ve ever known. Long before she was gravely ill, she had no time or patience, indeed little aptitude, for falseness. Time with Muriel meant time in the raw.

How lonesome and thin, this life without her. How many of us—around the world—feel the endless absence that I do, every day, as I settle in, expectantly, waiting for words to arrive.

Notes on contributor

Virginia Goldner, *Ph.D.*, is the founding editor of *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* and is on the faculty of the New York University Post-doctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and the City University of New York doctoral programs.

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