The work that historians do in order to find texts, which they make into evidence, inclines some to a sense that the sources speak to us. I have experienced research as requiring me to be very quiet when reading documents so that I can “hear” them speak to me.¹

Historians may experience some texts as more revealing or moving than others, but their predilections are often quite different from those who originally created and classified these documents. When the Liberal government set up the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) in 1967 to investigate women’s status and make recommendations to enhance female equality, women’s organizations and trade unions welcomed the opportunity to contribute written briefs, many of which were presented in public.² Indeed, the commission had been established after vigorous lobbying by the Committee for Women’s Equality, a coalition of women’s organizations, led by white, professional, educated women, as well as at least one prominent trade unionist. While scholars have somewhat different views of the RCSW’s politics and impact — some stressing its liberal feminist orientation and others seeing it as a moment of possibility for women’s public, ‘civic resistance’³ — most would concede that this royal commission, more than others, encouraged input from ‘ordinary’ women, solicited through newspaper ads, surveys, TV and radio coverage, and letters to community and women’s organizations.⁴

The seven appointed commissioners,⁵ and especially their staff, had clear ideas about which briefs were most useful, and should be published for posterity, favouring ones that provided ‘hard’ evidence, social-science style, that had statistics (presumed not to lie), and concrete, pragmatic,
realistic policy suggestions. They did not like submissions that were “bellicerently” feminist or appeared to describe individual “grievances”; nor, of course, did they have any use for ‘wild’ socialists trying to criticize the capitalist system. Given the RCSW’s preconceived notion of usefulness, it is not hard to see why the roughly one thousand private letters submitted often assumed a lower priority: they were perceived to be more subjective, particularistic, and opinionated. The analysts, in fact, sometimes scribbled “no value” or “little value” at the top of these letters. Historians might disagree.

One could argue that both sources offered insights into women’s experience, one through empirical, social-scientific ways of knowing, and the other through a more flexible, variable, and personal means of communication. While the trade union briefs were characterized by a fixed style of presentation, and were formal, distanced in tone, and, despite some differences between unions, structured around similar categories, the letters were more personal, emotive, and passionate, even if they appeared contradictory, disorganized, or hurriedly written. Since this ‘private’ mode of communication gave women more leeway to say the unspoken, the letters offer a unique standpoint from which to view women’s interpretations of the changing economic and social landscape of the postwar period, including the way in which women invoked their own personal experiences as meaningful and authoritative evidence for the commission to consider. To read the letters through this particular lens, however, necessitates critical engagement with the very concept of experience, which has been the lightning rod for intense debates within Marxist, feminist, and poststructuralist writing since the 1970s. Using the letters as evidence, I want to revisit these debates, reaffirming the value of a feminist historical materialist analytic in women’s history, as well as the importance of a political sensibility that, as Catherine Hall so presciently put it, conveys a sense of “feeling” for the past.

**Debating Experience**

Our preconceived notion of personal correspondence as a privileged source of information, my own feminist perspective, and perhaps a lingering impulse (in the vein of the new social history) to ‘rescue women’s voices’ and
to see the subject as wilful and intentional, undoubtedly shaped my assessment of the letters, though I also recognized that the letters represented only a “trace” of the larger story of women’s work. Some poststructuralist critics would go further, arguing, as Joan Scott has, that experience is better seen as a “linguistic event” that “doesn’t happen outside established meanings.” Scott’s contention that experience is an epistemologically flawed foundational concept, too often used to privilege certain historical sources as “unassailable” and ‘authentic’ has undoubtedly altered the way we think about our subjects. If feminist historians once gave epistemic “privilege to experience,” we later came to express far more epistemic doubt about experience. Following Scott’s lead, other social theorists also contend that experience is not merely a “problematic building block” for social history, but also a dangerously ‘essentializing’ and universalizing concept that potentially leads to “tribalized” identities.

Poststructuralist reappraisals of the concept of experience have undeniably had an influence on historical writing and feminist theory. In the Canadian context, a much-praised historiographical article penned by Joy Parr in 1995 also argued that “experiences were claims, not irrefutable foundations,” for “meaning precedes experience,” while two European social historians have argued recently that Joan Scott’s critique effectively “disposed” of E.P. Thompson’s use of the concept. Debates about experience, however, will likely continue: after all, they have been dogging historians over the entire twentieth century, and in one sense, most historians have long recognized that without mediation of some kind there is no experience. Early twentieth-century historians like Oakeshott “challenged the authority of experience, doubted all attempts to re-experience history,” and emphasized instead the active role of historians in constructing the past.

Experience later became the focus of vigorous debate within social history and British Marxism, stimulated by Raymond Williams’ and especially Edward Thompson’s efforts to move away from sterile structuralism and reductive economism by stressing the lived experience of working-class people as a means of “re-insert[ing] the subject” into history. Thompson was taken to task by structuralist Marxists for his neglect of objective conditions, as well as the way in which he endowed experience with far too much “authenticity” and “epistemological privilege” — the latter
criticism ironically similar to that of later postmodernists. Experience, he maintained in response, was a humanist concept worth defending, rather than a thoroughly ideological construct needing “scientific discovery by intellectuals.” He defined experience as both “lived events” and humans’ processing and consciousness of them, but the relationship between the two was not automatic and predictable, and they also informed each other: experience was implied in consciousness and realms of the cultural were also part of experience. Experience thus operated as a mediating or “junction concept,” creating a dialectical “dialogue between social being and social consciousness that goes in both directions.”

Thompsonian notions of experience left an imprint on an earlier generation of socialist-feminist labour historians who expanded on New Left efforts to reconceptualize labour history beyond the limited category of “the economic,” while also altering its masculinist orientation by integrating women and gender into the narrative. While socialist-feminist historians wrote in a materialist mindset, it was hardly an economistic one: the pressures of material conditions shaping daily life, the consideration of culture and ideology as part of class formation, and an emphasis on the reflective human subject making history all shaped their writing, along with questions concerning male domination and patriarchal cultures. Certain Thompsonian sensibilities about experience, humanism, and politics, in other words, were germane to their thinking: they were interested in creating a narrative through the eyes of historical actresses; they questioned the existence of a politically neutral objectivity; and they were unafraid to employ a language of moral approbation about oppression and exploitation. As Linda Gordon put it, socialist-feminist historians saw the importance of “listening to” and understanding their historical subjects, creating a “subjective, imaginative and emulative communication” with the past.

Even historians sympathetic to Thompson point to inconsistencies in his definitions of experience, but the most thoroughgoing feminist critiques came from postmodernists like Scott, who faulted Thompson for his ‘foundational’ investment in experience and in “class as an identity rooted in structural relations that pre-exist politics” — though this latter position is hardly surprising given Thompson’s debt to historical materialism. Scott’s characterization of experience broke not only with
Thompson’s writing, but also with earlier, ‘modernist’ feminist scholarship that assumed recuperating women’s words, even reading men’s words about women against the grain, offered us realistic glimpses of lives lived. These scholars were not trying to prove an “empirical” point, as much as a feminist point about the need to counter male-defined history with women’s stories. There was undoubtedly an initial tendency, especially for those using oral history and personal narratives, to assume women’s words were a taken-for-granted point of origin for consciousness, including feminist ‘oppositional consciousness,’ though feminist historians soon began to interrogate the construction of memory, and ask how personal narratives were shaped by cultural norms and conventions.

Although poststructuralist writing has productively unsettled an inclination to read experience as a direct ‘point of origin’ for consciousness, and sharpened our scrutiny of narrative conventions, texts, and historical contingency, earlier ‘modernist’ or humanist notions of experience have never been totally abandoned, and indeed they have been defended by many feminist writers. Some feminist standpoint theorists, who originally borrowed from historical materialism, have registered their objection to poststructuralist writing on experience, sensing that it severs social consciousness from the social location and daily activities — productive and reproductive — of the oppressed, and fails to address how an alternative perspective about the world might be achieved through human agency and political reflection. Nancy Hartsock implicitly assumes, as did Thompson, the existence of different levels of experience, and the potential for disjunctures between material being-in-the-world and our consciousness of it. “What sort of oppositional subjectivities,” she asks, “grow out of the experience of being native, women, poor?” One’s “location in the social order” and the “liminality” of the oppressed matter, she adds, but there is no direct, determinate line from experience to political consciousness, for the views ‘from below’ are multiple and contradictory, sometimes critical of, but also “vulnerable to the dominant culture.”

Dorothy Smith’s explication of the ‘relations of ruling’ also assumes that an alternative standpoint located in women’s “every day, every night” experience can emerge as a political possibility, not the least because a feminist analysis must start with a ‘knowable’ world “brought into being by human activity.”
Marxist-feminists who have not completely abandoned the concept of social determination, or who remain committed to Marx’s methodology of exploring the ‘conditions of possibility’ that underlie class conflict, also invoke women’s experience in their writing, not as an unproblematic, transparent, and readily readable reality, but as a reality embedded in social relations, and encompassing language, ideology, and culture. A materialist-feminist like Rosemary Hennessy, while directly engaged in debates with queer and ‘post’ writing, nonetheless positions her analysis of sexuality within the material conjuncture of late capitalism, and she refers to Thompson’s writing in her discussion of the “dis-identification” that can transpire between feelings considered legitimate under capitalism and those ‘outlawed,’ between the “identities promoted by the dominant culture and the lived experience of social relations not summoned up by these terms.”

In a somewhat different vein, Sonia Kruks’s critique of poststructuralist writing on experience starts by challenging the false ‘transition narrative’ that has emerged about the rupture between outdated modernism and superior postmodernism. This manufactured narrative, she suggests, has blinded feminists to the insights of Simon de Beauvoir’s existential writings, particularly her emphasis on lived experience and the “sentient, emotional subject.” In de Beauvoir’s view, she argues, gender was socially produced, but women were not without agency: they experienced a “constrained, situated freedom.” Moreover, by denying experience, and reducing human subjects to a set of “discursive effects,” postmodern feminists preclude an understanding of both interiority, and the domain of “affectivity”—the latter crucial to feminist projects of understanding and solidarity.

Scholars outside of Marxist traditions, who are nonetheless concerned about the textual erasure of social relations in some poststructuralist writing, are also “reclaiming” experience as a viable historical, and necessary, political concept. The notion that experience is still “epistemologically indispensable” to the recovery of history is forwarded by a group of postpositivist realist scholars who challenge postmodern attempts to “de-legitimize a theoretical project that explores linkages between social location and identity.” While granting that experience is mediated through culture and ideology, postpositivists assert that it is still shaped
by “cognitive processes,” making humans capable of rendering relatively ‘true’ and objective knowledge about the world — recognizing that objectivity does not mean neutrality.\textsuperscript{38} In the postmodernist critique of experience, these scholars warn, the salience of political-ethical judgements is negated, an epistemological relativism prevails, questions about how historical transformations in consciousness occur are left unanswered, and “ideology becomes total and inescapable,” with humans “confined to a fixed order of meanings.”\textsuperscript{39}

Postpositivist writing has been justifiably criticized as liberal pluralist in tone, lacking an anticapitalist critique or discussion of class as a category of exploitation.\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, these defences of experience are not theoretically homogeneous, or cut from the same ideological cloth. For cultural studies scholar Michael Pickering, Thompson’s notion of experience needs to be defended less because of its absolute theoretical soundness and more because of its theoretical sensibility. Reflecting the theoretical shift from materialism to intersectional feminist analyses, Pickering’s emphasis is primarily on the “mutually constituting”\textsuperscript{41} intersections of social structure, representation, and subjectivities that create lived experience; productive relations do not take centre stage in his definition. Yet, dismayed by the portrayal of historical subjects as no more than “vectors” for ideology/discourse,\textsuperscript{42} he is sympathetic to earlier Marxist efforts of historical retrieval that rejected mechanical and elitist theories (including Marxist ones) delineating society from above, in favour of efforts to listen to the collective voices of historical actors, attempting to get “inside their minds and hearts”\textsuperscript{43}— while recognizing full well that their words are not simply transparent reflections of reality.

These somewhat disparate defences suggest that experience, as both socialist humanists and feminists have conceived it, has not been entirely ‘disposed of.’ Apprehensions about the slighting of attention to human agency and social causality\textsuperscript{44} in recent historical writing have encouraged a group of “middle grounders” to seek a compromise “between discourse and experience.”\textsuperscript{45} Jay Smith, to note only one example, urges historians to resist the “lure of experience” if that concept still means exploring the social, political, and cultural contexts shaping how individuals ‘read’ their worlds. His alternative is to explore the “interpretive dispositions that determine how people engage, process, and learn from all that occurs,” with

Words of Experience/Experiencing Words
these dispositions defined as “ever changing beliefs, ideas and values that are fragmented, disconnected, composite and contradictory.” While the phrasing is different, this definition does not really break entirely from idealist and postmodern assumptions. Other efforts at theoretical rapprochement have been criticized as new forms of liberal pluralism; moreover, rather than sitting on the political fence, middle grounders often ultimately come down on one side or the other, most often the discursive, criticizing, for example, the “myopia of materialism.” Few scholars are brave enough to declare that “accommodation is an illusion” and that this “middle ground” still slights “human agency and causal explanations.”

Our reassessment of experience may have to heed this warning, rather than following the more heavily trod path of desperately seeking a liberal compromise that is anything but a Marxist or materialist solution. This, at least, was my conclusion after reading hundreds of letters from working women who were determined to claim their own experience as the solid evidence that the Royal Commission was looking for.

Letters to Florence Bird

Read as a whole, women’s letters to Florence Bird, the Head of the RCSW, suggested to me that working women’s consciousness had undergone important shifts the postwar period. If the letters had only been personal laments for unhappy lives, they might have resembled women’s devotional letters to St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes; however, these women did not seek aid in becoming ‘better’ individuals in order to cope with their problems. On the contrary, many women identified ideological barriers and structural inequalities in Canadian society, and they articulated a sense of collective grievance and desire for change. Certainly, these women spoke from a limited constituency. The letters were predominantly from literate (and semi-literate) English and French-speaking women who had the confidence and skills to put their ideas to paper. In terms of race, they may have reflected the predominantly white population of the time, but racial minorities, the very poor, as well as recent European immigrants, were still underrepresented. There were many white-collar working women writing, Bird suggested, because they wanted to avoid the public exposure of commission hearings,
fearing reprisals on the job. One sixteen-year veteran clerical worker at Bell Telephone, who laid out multiple examples of rampant discrimination in the company, insisted that her name be “kept under cover” as she feared losing her “only means of support.” It was precisely this group of white-collar women, along with those in service work and the feminized professions, whose commitment to wage labour was rapidly increasing.

The letters were just one of a number of examples of the commission’s information-filtering practices; many had “private” written on them, but in some cases the commission staff categorized them as private letters based solely on their method of presentation and content. Since the very satisfied would have been less likely to write, the letters were generally letters of complaint or calls for change. The anonymity of private submissions also meant that, statistically, they were skewed in political outlook: women and men who celebrated homemaking and opposed married women’s work were more likely to write privately than appear in public, fearing that the “tide of [public] opinion is in favour of married women working.” Like the official briefs, women’s letters were strategic attempts to persuade the RCSW that their concerns were important, but they did address issues other submissions did not: there are more references in these letters to sexual harassment and violence, issues the commission was later criticized for completely ignoring. “My husband beat me and tried to kill me several times,” wrote one woman, “family welfare [just] told me to go home and not antagonize him.” The term ‘sexual harassment’ had yet to be coined, but women’s allusions to it are quite clear. “I did not come to this country to be the boss’s girlfriend” said an immigrant about her decision to leave a workplace, while another noted she had to quit a job because of the “pressure” caused when she “refused to have anything to do with a married man.” Although Bird claimed the commission did not address violence, as it was perceived to be a social, not a women’s issue, these letters clearly said otherwise.

If we are to understand how women explained their labour in these letters, we have to consider the social relations in which they were embedded. Changes in material life shape the formation of social groups “as well as how they describe themselves.” This is not to say the relations of production and reproduction of the period were a bare economic imperative determining women’s lives, but rather that the organization, thought,
and practice of women’s labour were imbricated in these changing economic relations. The Royal Commission itself was in part a response to the increased numbers of women working for pay. In pushing for such a commission, feminists drew not only on the political climate of the time—debates about civil rights, poverty, and equality—but pointed to women’s increased role in the labour force. The postwar transformation in the labour force may have been interpreted differently, but it was not simply discursively constructed. More and more women were working for pay, and returning to wage work after childbearing. The extent and nature of these shifts was differentiated by class, immigration status, and ethnicity; indeed, one could argue that poor and racialized women had a long-standing involvement in paid labour, but that far more working- and middle-class women were now joining the workforce. Still, for all groups of women, wage-earning motherhood was becoming more and more the norm.

Women’s changing productive and reproductive work roles meant they had different timetables, hours of work, job definitions, relationships with other women, and schedules with their children; in other words, the physical and mental mapping of their daily lives was altering. This is made clear in women’s descriptions of their rushed double days and fast-paced multi-tasking. One woman who had previously combined wage and mother work, then dropped paid work, described her typical day with a physical analogy: “I found myself saying, ‘Run, run, run as fast as you can, you can’t catch me.’ . . . What makes [us] run? Stop the world I want to get off!” As Kathleen Canning argues, women’s embodied experiences of significant physical alterations in daily life sometimes “opened the way for the transformation of consciousness.” Similarly, Regina Gagnier’s study of British working-class women’s letters about motherhood indicates how their experience of pain, uncertainty, and anxiety generated new ways of describing themselves, which in turn were utilized politically as justifications for better conditions of life for themselves and their children.

Even some of the apparent tensions in women’s letters to the RCSW can be interpreted in light of their struggles to come to terms with a new economic and social landscape. One repeated theme was what one writer called the “civil war” between married working women and homemakers. Homemakers often claimed their work was not “esteemed or
rewarded” and that they were chastised for not using their brains and talent by going out to work, while working women with families believed they were stigmatized for ‘abandoning’ their children at home. “Married women with children,” wrote one homemaker, are in the unenviable position of “being ‘damned if they, and damned if they don’t.’ On the one hand, we hear about the damaging effects on the family unit if the mother goes out to work, and on the other hand, we are being constantly urged to make more use of our potential.” Her claim that women were at a difficult “historical crossroads” was apt, but not all writers were as even-handed. Women in the home who felt their work was “downgraded” might concede that mothers had a right to work, but there was no mistaking the judgmental tone of one such correspondent who intoned that working mothers should make “proper arrangements” for their children, who often “run wild and are a terror to the neighbourhood.”

The idealization of a male breadwinner and home-centred motherhood, especially for white, middle-class women, was still quite powerful, but these ideals were increasingly challenged by the needs of working families, and the growing number of married women in the labour force. This ‘civil war,’ then, was a reflection of women’s uncertain attempts to process where they fit in the changing world around them, how to interpret and legitimate the work they performed every day. In a similar vein, single self-supporting women, single working mothers, and divorced women often made references to their ‘outsider’ status as workers, although they had differing explanations for this marginalization. Analyzing their different rationales is important, but so too is seeing the common denominator in their discomfort: they were responding, both consciously and unconsciously, to their exclusion from the dominant, idealized heteronormative familial ideal.

Letters that bridled with resentment or anger about this outsider status might simultaneously be articulations of entitlement. Single women and self-supporting mothers especially suggested that every citizen had a right to be independent economically, not forced into dependence on others. Some of the most painful letters to read are those from single working mothers, often deserted, who knew first-hand the injustice of divorce laws, the uselessness of trying to secure spousal support, and the daily worry of supporting their children on a woman’s salary. Their
budgets were so tight that a few bus tickets or an extra lunch could make the difference between ending the month in the red or the black. 67 To add insult to injury, they felt looked down upon, their children treated as “third class oddities.” “Each day I go to work wondering why I’m doing it and each day I hurry home to cook or snack quickly to appease my ulcer I’ve been starving all day . . . you see, I can’t afford lunches for the children and me as well,” wrote one single mother who also knew that she would be “called down for even having a man in the house.” 68 Although a few women asked why they became mothers at all, most directed their palpable anger towards laws and salaries that did not allow them the dignity they believed they and their children deserved.

Not all women articulated a clear-cut sense of collective injustice. Some women’s presentations of themselves were individualist in tone, reflecting also the prevailing ideology about the deserving and undeserving poor. A single working mother, supporting three children, one an “invalid,” with scarcely a penny to spare every week, insisted she still had her “dignity” and was better than others she saw lingering at the welfare office, alcohol bottle in hand. 69 Women decried the fact that women were their own worst enemies (because they denied the need for equality, were nasty to other women, or were hoodwinked into subservient femininity), or sometimes advocated their own prescription for individual ‘bootstrapping.’ An older woman insisted that younger women just had to assume some “backbone” in order to secure their economic independence and a share of any property in the marriage: “Girls must see from the start that they must stand up for themselves . . . . Get all the knowledge you can and use it to be a full person and not lean on men as dependents. . . . Of course no husband is going to say you are worth your salt. I’d say find out what salt you are worth, and see you are worth it.” This self-help advocate, however, also incorporated a more subversive critique of the patriarchal attitudes that accounted for women’s oppression. Men would “never do anything to help women as long as they can exploit them,” she concluded, ending with the essentialist, but nonetheless amusing quip: “Men are a race of cads.” 70

One can often read between the lines of these letters to guess at the particular personal situation shaping women’s views, but their life histories reflect more than particularistic stories, as the commission staff
assumed. Many self-supporting white-collar women workers, for example, wrote to the RCSW expressing their unhappiness, resentments, and desire for something better: it was not only wages, but their sense of respectability that was on the line. The self-supporting single woman had long had some social purchase as a deserving, if pitied, wage earner, but many women writing to Florence Bird took a more assertive stance, equating their needs and rights with those of self-supporting men. White-collar women bemoaned the fine line they faced between poverty and respectability, and with good reason. Women’s clerical salaries were, on average, two-thirds of men’s, not even enough for an apartment, leaving them in rented rooms, or dependent on family. “I want to speak for the unmarried female workers,” wrote one correspondent, “how about some tax concessions so we can rent something better than housekeeping rooms, euphemistically called bachelor suites. After all, we are past the stage when dorm living is fun.” Complainants about working women’s lack of access to the private ‘home space’ they deserved came from many letter writers, though a few used this complaint to relay resentments against married working women, since the pooling of more than one salary appeared to offer couples more housing options.

The issue of housing touched a nerve because it symbolized economic independence and dignity. One immigrant woman working as a waitress protested that she could not secure a mortgage because she was single, though her anger was simultaneously fuelled by the way in which her service labour was denigrated: there is “no respect for waitresses, even less than waiters . . . [we are] too lowly to merit status” yet we are providing an “essential service.” She went on to condemn the more affluent customers — including women — whom she thought looked down on her, indicating the class tensions between women also relayed in a few letters to the RCSW. Single women who had looked after aged parents also found themselves, later in life, without a house or pension, uncompensated for their years of caring work, and few assets other than their high-school typing skills. “Why should a woman who has spent half of her life looking after her aged parents . . . be doomed to a life of poverty after they have died?” In an inchoate way, these women understood that their unpaid contributions to social reproduction had left them vulnerable to poverty and marginalization.
Women’s sense of unfairness or dissatisfaction often emerged from the fissures, contradictions, and stress points they sensed between constructions of women’s economic needs and their actual material predicament, between idealized domesticity and the reality that more women were going out to work, between the expectations placed on ‘good’ mothers and the constraints of the double day. Women’s personal narratives, suggest Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, are always positioned within a social context, and thus bear the marks of existing ideologies and unequal power relations. Yet these may be unsettled by countervailing ‘subversive stories’ that emerge in the disjunction between the recounting of subjective experience and dominant discourses, between “biography and history.”

Metaphors of friction have often been used to suggest how hegemonic ideologies can be unsettled by the pressures of material relations, cultural traditions, political beliefs, and human feeling. Our social consciousness of lived traditions, institutions, and formations, Raymond Williams suggested, is never fixed or complete; we may have experiences that do not seem attuned to, or recognizable within, this consciousness, though we may feel only an “unease, displacement or reservation” about this dissonance, and any new forms of thought and feeling may remain “embryonic,” tentative, before — and if — they are fully articulated. Analyzing these fissures is politically crucial if we are to understand how resistance might emerge to taken-for-granted understandings of class and gender relations. This emphasis on tension and contradiction has been intrinsic to much writing on feminism since the 1970s, but similar notions of “double consciousness” have been at the heart of many discussions of other oppressed groups. Our reflections on the “distorted” ideological constructions of our own daily experiences, gay historian William Wilson suggests in a critique of Joan Scott, may well lead to “transformations in [our] collective and political consciousness.”

Both the male breadwinner ideal and a sexual division of labour increasingly rubbed up against women’s day-to-day needs and aspirations, sparking their questions, resentments, and protests. Women could see how unfair, if not irrational, the male breadwinner ideal was when a young single man in their office was paid more than a single mother supporting children, and they were not afraid to point out the contradiction. “Women office workers in this small town,” wrote one woman, “are so
badly paid they cannot support their families, and their qualifications are not recognized. Take the young men out of university who are installed in higher positions and imperiously tell us where to put a comma when they can’t write a sentence and are paid twice as much. . . . So yes, women are discriminated against.”78 Women are “treated as if it is not quite ladylike or nice to be the sole support of the family,” one woman advised, “this fallacy needs uprooting if we are to have a just society.”79

These women understood that discrimination was systemic rather than haphazard and individual; even if they made their point using personal anecdotes, they simultaneously conveyed a sense of collective displeasure about shared social conditions. Both public submissions and private letters complained that older women were shut out of the job market, either because employers cavalierly replaced them with younger women, or because employment agencies like Drake Personnel discriminated against them. “Sorry, we have had no requests for women over 50,”80 they told one woman, who then wrote to Florence asking that something be done about this discrimination. Since it’s a well-known fact that we are “governed by older men,” asked one woman pointedly, why is that older women are not allowed to work?81

A sense of collective injustice was also registered through women’s criticisms of practices that were more often accepted as unchangeable in the interwar period: the lack of advancement for women in the professions like teaching, pregnancy bars for women workers, and the prevailing sexual division of labour. Women offered different interpretations of the sexual division of labour, but there was nonetheless unhappiness expressed with the limitations it placed on their earning and sense of fulfilment. Some protested that employment agencies streamed women only into clerical jobs, while one bank clerk pointed out that banks slyly put a different title on a woman’s job, then paid a man more to do it, while “expecting us to live on a salary no single man would.”82 The “general male attitude,” explained one woman looking for work, was that “anything in a skirt should be able to type.”83 A European immigrant who was an experienced photographer protested her relegation to a photofinishing factory, after being denied jobs because of her sex: when I go to work, “I have to shut off my brain, [if not] I would go out of my mind,” she lamented.84

Women writers were not convinced the prevailing division of labour
was based on inherent sex differences, though some still clung to male breadwinner images. A single office worker with thwarted technical ambitions told the RCSW she had been confined to female-typed jobs, barred from more technical, highly skilled, or highly paid ones in her company. Even though she was “fascinated with motor mechanics” and had asked to work in the warehouse doing machinery orders, she was denied this job. She believed that married women’s place was primarily “in the home” but that, as a single woman, she was in a different category: “There are women like me who must make a living, not an existence, but a living, because we chose not to marry right out of high school.” She abandoned the company that prevented her from “moving up” or making equal pay, and was still searching for a job where she felt she could secure the “same benefits” as men, without “sacrificing [her] femininity.”

Other women had a more politicized sense of ‘who benefits’ from women’s work in female job ghettos. “Employers take advantage of working mothers,” wrote one correspondent. “They know [we have to work and] . . . they discount our wages and job opportunities,” using the excuse that women are “short term” workers, even though this was not the reality. “Why are [our] girls only trained for nursing and teaching” she asked; after all, “women have brains too, yet they must outwork and outperform males.” As if to apologize for her radical views, she concluded more lightheartedly: “I guess I was born thirty years too early.”

While poststructuralist writing has been concerned with the emergence of counter-discourses, explications of the origins of such resistance are less clearly enunciated. In contrast, feminist historical materialist writing has situated the possibilities of resistance within the interconnected dynamic of changing social relations, concrete human activities, and the reflective human process of meaning making. If these letters to the RCSW had been shaped only within a ‘closed circuit’ of discursive possibilities that constituted women’s reality, it would have been difficult for women to imagine and demand something different — yet clearly many did. Women did not begin to interpret their world with new eyes simply as a result of ambiguities within discourses, but rather because their experience of capitalist and gendered work relations, along with an emerging vocabulary of equality, stimulated their questions. Women writers seldom employed words like ‘liberation,’ or cited Betty Freidan,
and some even shied away from feminism, noting fearfully they did not want to “discard their femininity in the rush for equal rights.” Yet they were clearly articulating a changing consciousness of the centrality of paid labour in their lives, as well as a sense of grievance about workplace inequality. Their opposition was voiced by appropriating some of the very ideals sacred to the dominant social order — entitlement, rights, human dignity — not unlike generations of workers before them. “We have to make things better for our daughters,” concluded one mother, while another writer put it more forcefully: “We need profound changes . . . this is a generation of angry females who will be satisfied with nothing less.”

Women’s articulations of unfairness were not necessarily expressed in a clear and uncompromising manner. Working mothers, for instance, recognized that a male-breadwinner family was a persisting ideal, and their letters were couched in a defensive tone. They felt they were the most stigmatized, misunderstood workers, and they wanted the RCSW to hear their side of the story. They responded, defensively, to the prevailing myths about working moms. One mother countered the idea that women worked for unnecessary ‘extras’ by reminding the RCSW that part-time workers like her had “few benefits and lower pay,” and that her money was not “spent on luxuries and riotous living . . . it goes to the dentist bill, buys shoes to replace a pair outgrown, new curtains, paint for the kitchen ceiling . . . and countless other items that deteriorate or disappear to the embarrassment of an already strained budget.” The charge that working mothers neglected their children and created juvenile delinquents was the cruellest myth of all; a bookkeeper wrote to Bird denouncing a radio show caller who had referred to working mothers as mere nighttime babysitters, insinuating that they barely knew their children. Many working mothers invoked the notion of their own experience to counter these myths, and some suggested that they were especially misunderstood by men who had never been in their shoes: “Our legislators, predominantly male, fail to realize how hard the majority of women work to raise children, educate them, provide extras that are in no way luxuries, and ease the burden on the husband. Working mothers are helping to provide the citizens of the future.”

While the letters reveal perceived differences between women workers based on age or marital status, they are less revealing about the very
significant divisions of class, ethnicity, and race, while sexual orientation was simply ignored. A few letters do indict the commission’s “professional” bias, claiming it was paying too little attention to the “working conditions of [blue-collar] hourly wage” jobs.92 Few of the white- and blue-collar working mothers who wrote adopted the line of some service clubs, with solidly middle-class leadership, that suggested working moms were forced to work largely due to poverty, but might prefer to be homemakers. Understandably, the letter writers wanted to legitimize their labour, not suggest that bringing home a pay check was a second-best option. The regional and racial complexion of Canadian poverty also revealed itself in submissions that simply asked for paid work of any kind for women. “There is little opportunity for women’s labour in Newfoundland because of high unemployment,” lamented one brief.93 Another woman from Nova Scotia pointed out that many women workers in her town feared even raising the issue of equal pay, since decent jobs were “scarce,” and their husband’s seasonal work in the fisheries meant wives had little choice but to work.94 Lacking letters from Aboriginal women, we must look to public presentations that discussed the lack of work available in their communities. An Alberta Métis woman who testified before the RCSW lamented the fate of the next generation on her reserve should they not secure work: “we need training and work . . . men could work in sawmills, girls train as supervisors in local mission schools, or as waitresses, cooks, and in beauty culture. It is sad to see so many young people walking around when so much could be done.”95 The fairly narrow work options she cited for women suggest that critiques of the sexual division of labour were less salient for those who had long been denied any paid work. The notion that Aboriginal women especially should be trained for domestic work, articulated in a long brief submitted by a white woman in the NWT, was, however, quite different, reflecting a racist understanding of character and ability.

While I have quoted predominantly from letters defending women’s waged work, there was certainly a minority group of men and women who expressed hostility to married women in the workforce, and unqualified support for a naturally ordained sexual division of labour. The few responses that were steeped in misogyny, however, came predominantly from men. Feminists, wrote one man, are publicity-seeking, “mentally
sick, unfeminine, frustrated, unhappy, dictatorial, overbearing and emotionally disturbed” people who need “a good psychiatrist and tranquillizers.”96 Another man offered a long diatribe on the uselessness of women over forty, bragging about the enjoyment of playing “slap and tickle” with his “cute typist.”97 These letters suggest how accepted the sexualization and ridicule of women was, though many of their authors appeared to be on the defensive, fearful that the established familial order they idealized was disintegrating. Where will all this talk of working women end, fretted another antifeminist: with “thousands of unemployed men” and “demands for golf courses for women not caring for their children.”98 The most adamant opponents of women’s equality were not taken seriously by the RCSW staff, though polite thank-you letters were required. Occasionally the staff had a little fun. When a rambling letter blamed cartoon characters Dagwood and Jiggs for patriarchy in crisis, the RCSW reply read: “Thank you for your letter explaining how Dagwood and Jiggs have demoted the father as the head of the household. Yours sincerely. . .”99

Nor were men the only antifeminists. Some women’s determination to cling to certain aspects of the existing gender order, perhaps those they found most ideologically reassuring, makes clear the fractured and contradictory nature of ideology. These letter writers might call for a better deal for women workers, but then caricature their fellow female workers, pointing to their emotive nature, their interest only in husband hunting, and their unsuitability for skilled jobs. Others opposed rights such as maternity leave, insisting that this ‘special status’ contradicted notions of equality: “Pregnancy is not an accident,” noted one writer acerbically, “if women want children, they can’t have their cake and eat it too.”100

Although they did not represent the majority, some writers laid out a hierarchy of who the most virtuous and deserving female workers were, assuming their right to work should be equated with need. Their views suggest that the Depression-era equation of job rights with providing roles, highlighted by Alice Kessler-Harris, had some residual appeal.101 By and large, however, all men were assumed to need a job, while some women were more entitled than others: those who were single, in poor families, or supporting children stood at the top of the list, though some correspondents also conceded this right to women with special professional skills. A letter writer who deplored the bad working conditions
in department stores, noting in particular Simpson’s refusal to pay one woman’s sick day, then added, “this woman depends on her wages. . . . there are other women who have husbands and what they earn is extra money, but when a woman depends on her salary to live, it is not right” she should lose her sick pay.102 Still, descriptions of the un/deserving worker were not always predictable. One woman in the Northwest Territories criticized well-off, white married women workers because so many Native youth were underemployed; do these women not know, she asked that “this still is a Depression for the native peoples?”103

As some of these examples illustrate, the letters are sometimes difficult to categorize, since they contained multiple themes, points of view, even seemingly contradictory ideas: a homemaker who soundly denounced working mothers might then call for day nurseries for them. This undoubtedly frustrated the commission, probably making it even less inclined to see the letters as solid evidence. Yet the topics women covered, the perspectives offered, and particularly the feeling they conveyed, did reveal something lost in the formal trade union briefs that divided women’s lives up into charts and statistics, and separate boxes of work and family. Some women protested a whole series of problems, undoubtedly seeing these as connected, not confined to separate spheres. A sixty-eight-year-old widow with two sons wrote about tax relief, abortion, violence, job benefits, and equal pay. Her views, presented with both humour and indignation, are worth quoting at length. Calling, first, for “no laws at all” concerning abortion and birth control, she asked:

Why should some 80 yr old cardinals decide [about abortion] for women. It’s ridiculous . . . might as well ask a eunuch to give his personal experience on sex. . . . women have to work harder, usually have longer hours and perform monotonous jobs for less than their male counterparts in most industry and particularly in offices. . . . they are subject to dismissal after years of hard work by arbitrary bosses who would rather have a younger if less efficient worker, and [the one fired] has no protection. I hope you have many responses and something will be done for women who are pushed around, worked to death, beaten up (and too scared to say anything about it) and work at two jobs a day.”104
The last example opens up the question of how contemporary readers experience these letters, perhaps endorsing or enjoying sentiments like hers that the RCSW was more prone to see as outspoken and subjective. Because letter writing in our culture permits us to be introspective, to express views or emotion inappropriate in the public sphere, women articulated a sense of injustice, rage, unhappiness, and hope that might have been consciously or unconsciously suppressed in public. Indeed, one could argue that the interface between the expression of emotion and changing social relations was precisely the opportunity opened up for “oppositional meaning making.” In Raymond Williams’s terms, the letters convey a “provisional, elusive, embryonic structure of feeling . . . a social experience which is still in process.”

Feelings are, admittedly, not to be naturalized. There is a social and historical dimension to emotion and affect; they are not innate, universal, or unchanging phenomena. Nor are readers’ responses entirely predictable. My feminist point of view, to be sure, plays a role in how I experience and interpret the letters — and convey them to you. Feminist and Marxist writing, however, has not been unreflective about the political expenditure we invest in our efforts to retrieve women’s and workers’ experience and consciousness, or the way in which the past only answers the questions we pose to it. The distance of objectivity, as both postmodernists and materialists might agree, is neither possible, nor necessarily a laudable goal. Subjecting our own interests to critical scrutiny, making our “partisanship” clear and “striving for dispassionate judgement,” suggests Terry Eagleton, speaking for the materialist side, are preferable to the “liberal myth” of “even handed” neutrality.

One could argue that these letters were strategically emotional or confessional in mode, and on one level that is absolutely true. But to see them only as rhetorical devices or discursive constructs misses the fact that women had something very real to complain about: if we assign no ‘truth claims’ to their words, concepts of exploitation, injustice, and oppression will have little meaning. Moreover, if we accede to “the [postmodern] death of the subject,” as Catherine Hall wrote perceptively in 1990, “it can lead to a . . . loss of feeling in [our] historical writing”: that sense of affect or ‘feeling’ has been, and should continue to be, an integral part of feminist history.

Words of Experience/Experiencing Words
Conclusion

Women’s private letters to this Royal Commission offered an array of observations, opinions, and life histories that often invoked women’s own experiences as evidence, which they contrasted in turn with the experience and views of male employers and lawmakers, and, occasionally, with those of more privileged women. While class tensions between women were evident in a few of the letters, they were likely flattened out in this particular source because so many of the letters came from literate English- and French-speaking white women, in professional, white-collar, and service work. Similarly, differences of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are less evident, save in the overwhelming assumption by writers and the commission alike that women workers were predominantly heterosexual, white Canadians.

The commission staff tended to see women’s personal evidence as more subjective, and of less value than the hard empirical data of social science research, yet these letters can tell us much about how women managed, negotiated, and interpreted the changing patterns and practices of paid labour during the twenty-five years following World War II, and why these women believed their experiences counted as solid evidence that would enlighten the commissioners. They were clearly articulating a changing consciousness of the centrality of paid labour in their lives, as well as an embryonic sense of grievance about workplace inequality. Their ‘subversive stories’ represented a challenge to the dominant norms, a sense of collective grievance, and a plea for better lives for themselves and their daughters. How and why women came to object to the status quo had much to do with frictions, fissures, and seeming incongruencies that were part and parcel of women’s daily experiences of both paid and unpaid work, and their reflections on them. This is not to suggest a one-way determinate line between work and consciousness. Women’s lives were bounded and pressured by the material, to be sure, but their understanding of social change was not then automatically ‘translated’ directly into political consciousness; rather, their experiences gave way to a range of possibilities that shaped how they handled those events — hence, the contradictory and partial character of their responses and observations. As in Gramscian writing, there existed the...
possibility, not inevitability, of a disjuncture between dominant and alternative ideologies.

Poststructuralist critiques of the concept of experience have sharpened our understanding of the way in which women’s words are mediated through culture, made us wary of drawing a direct line between being and consciousness, and warned us of the dangers of essentialism. However useful these cautions are, the theoretical assumptions separating poststructuralist critics and ‘modernist’ defenders of experience are not easily resolvable in a middle-ground compromise. It is not only that class is often slighted in the postmodern academic gaze, but that key epistemological differences cannot be wished away in a liberal search for compromise. Rather than seeking an elusive ‘third way,’ there is value in developing a reinvigorated feminist historical materialism as a method of unravelling the intertwined making of class and gender relations. On-the-ground, empirical “excavations” of women’s lives are crucial to this project, offering insight into a history created by women, but not within conditions of their own choosing. Our explorations of women’s experience need not entail a naive reification of experience, a denial of differences between women, or the assumption that it is unmediated by culture. Rather, our analyses can take into account the power of structuring relations, the two-way dialectic between being and consciousness, and the importance of human agency in meaning making. Although not all materialist feminists concur on how to define and use the concept of experience, a recurring metaphor of interconnected layers, encompassing contradiction and tension, is often invoked in their work. Experience is thus both lived and construed, a “point of origin for an explanation,” yet also as the “object of explanation”; it is dialectic between “first and third person” perspectives, the former foregrounding lived experience and the latter scrutinizing our processing of that experience.

These definitions, however, cannot suffice as timeless or lifeless abstract frameworks; they require the ongoing excavations of women’s lives, and the challenge of intellectual critique, if we are to comprehend how gender and race are embedded in the process of class formation, how oppression and exploitation are sustained, remade, and sometimes challenged over time. Both feminist and Marxist historians have been faulted for failing to interrogate our own subjective, political ends in
claiming to ‘know’ women’s authentic experience and interiority. It is true that explicating our own investment in this history is not only essential, but will produce more honest, critical, and animated history. However, “committed history” is not an unreflective history. The gap between women’s experience in the past and our attempts to reconstruct it cannot be denied, but this is not a convincing reason to abandon attempts to understand the minds and feelings of historical actors. Listening to our sources, as Linda Gordon suggests, and contemplating affective links with women in the past has many dangers for historians: we may romanticize past actors, think in presentist terms, assume a false sisterhood between women, skirt over differences based on class or race, or misinterpret their interpretation of their experience. Yet, however fraught or utopian this form of time travelling is, the effort may be both politically and historically worthwhile.

Notes


3 Timpson, “Royal Commissions as Sites of Resistance,” 124.

4 See Arscott, “Twenty-Five Years and Sixty-Five Minutes.”

5 The appointed commissioners, two men and five women, were white, educated volunteer or professional leaders in their fields, selected with an eye to regional and linguistic diversity. They were Florence Bird, journalist and head of the commission; Miss Elsie Gregory MacGill, aeronautical engineer; Mrs. Lola Lange, volunteer for women’s farming organizations; Miss Jeannine Lapointe; Doris Ogilvie, judge; Jacques Henripin, sociologist; and John Humphrey, law professor.

6 Analyst assessment from vol. 15, brief 295 and vol. 12, brief 115, Royal Commission on the Status of Women Papers, RG 33-89 (hereafter RCSW), Library and Archives Canada (LAC).


12 Craig Ireland, “The Appeal to Experience and Its Constituencies: Variations on a Persistent Thompsonian Theme,” Cultural Critique 52 (Autumn 2002): 95. It is important to note, however, that the postmodern critiques of identity politics differ from materialist-feminists critiques that stress the ‘fit’ between neoliberalism and identity politics and the politicization of identity “at the expense of the politicization of capitalism.” See Rosemary Hennessy, Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism (New York: Routledge, 2000), 229.

is Parr’s most recent book, in which experience is described differently. Commenting positively on another author, she notes: “This is a stark departure from the conceptual frame of recent studies of the social construction studies of gender, sex, and race. Rather than postulating, as social constructionists have done, that meaning precedes experience and that humans know the world through the meanings they share symbolically in language...” Parr attributes the expression “meaning precedes experience” to Joan Scott in her endnotes: Joy Parr, Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953–2000 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 12.


17 Jay, Songs of Experience, 202, 209.

18 E.P. Thompson, quoted in ibid., 206.


20 Thompson, The Poverty of Theory, 9.


24 Sewell, “How Classes Are Made.”


30 Ibid., 90.

31 Joanna Brenner, *Women and the Politics of Class* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 86, describes experience as inextricable from women’s “survival projects within capitalism.” It is difficult to categorize Marxist and materialist-feminist writers precisely. I use a very broad term, ‘materialist feminism,’ to describe those who fuse feminist and historical materialist or Marxist traditions in their writing, although when I describe historians of the 1970s and early 1980s who fit this category, I also use ‘socialist feminist,’ as this was how they often described themselves. There are some distinctions between (a) those locating themselves firmly in a Marxist tradition, for example, Martha Giminez, “Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited,” *Science and Society* 69 (January 2005): 11–32, and Teresa Ebert, “Rematerializing Feminism,” *Science and Society* 69 (January 2005): 33–55; (b) those who, very similarly, refer to themselves as Marxist-feminists (Lise Vogel, *Woman Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism* [New York: Routledge, 1995]), though drawing more concertedly on some

32 Hennessy, Profit and Pleasure, 230.


34 Ibid., 19.

35 Ibid., 140.


37 Ibid., 69.


40 Barbara Foley, review of Reclaiming Experience, in Cultural Logic: An Electronic Journal of Marxist Theory and Practice 4, no. 2 (Spring 2001), http://clogic.eserver.org/. Other critics suggest that realist writing skirts close to ‘relativism’ in that all invocations of experience are potentially valid in its schema: see Robert Young, review in Cultural Logic, http://clogic.eserver.org/.

42 Ibid., 224.

43 Ibid., 16.

44 On the sense of crisis relating to notions of human agency, see the special issue of *History and Theory* 40 (December 2001). For example, David Gary Shaw’s introduction, “Happy in Our Chains? Agency and Language in the Post-structuralist Age,” notes: “It is time for historians to show how these attempts to understand the self as constituted in social history were not misguided but were essential to historical work,” 3. For a discussion of whether social structure has been slighted, see Eley and Nield’s *The Future of Class*, or their “Farewell to the Working Class?” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 57 (2000): 1–30, as well as the critical responses.


46 Ibid.


49 They are the only authors in this special issue on agency with a forthright call to “reject the linguistic turn”: Michael L. Fitzhugh and William H. Leckie, Jr., “Agency, Postmodernism, and the Causes of Change,” *History and Theory* 40, no. 4 (Dec. 2001): 60. While I agree with some of their critique, I have doubts about their solution: cognitive science.


51 A note on how I selected the letters is important. I went through all the files of letters, then concentrated note taking on about two hundred. I included letters from women in all occupations (professional, blue-, and white-collar). Overall, factory workers and unorganized service workers (e.g., waitresses) were the smaller group. Women in professional jobs were a minority and those who did write were generally teachers or nurses. The largest group of writers appears to be women in various pink- and white-collar jobs or who had been in those jobs. I read letters of part- and full-time workers, and also of women who had quit work but commented on it. I also looked at some letters from men and homemakers who commented on working women. Regionally, the number of letters reflected the population: the files from Quebec and Ontario were far larger, and because more Alberta and Saskatchewan letters talked about farm women, I do not quote as often from them. I have listed the volume and file the letters are in, but not women’s names, to protect their anonymity.
In 1967, when the commission began its demographic work, women of colour were still a small minority of the overall Canadian population, although the RCSW also tended to overlook their stories. The RCSW did not even differentiate by race and ethnicity in some of their studies of immigrant women. See RCSW, vol. 28, immigration studies: Marica Rioux, “Female Immigrants in the Labour Force”; Freda Hawkins, “Women Immigrants in Canada”; Edith Ferguson, “Immigrant Women in Canada.” For a discussion of the issue of race and the RCSW, see Jane Arscott, “ Twenty-Five Years and Sixty-Five Minutes,” and for a differing view from a First Nations woman, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, “Patriarchy and Paternalism: The Legacy of the Canadian State for First Nations Women,” in Women and the Canadian State, ed. Andrew and Rodgers.

Vol. 9, Ontario file, RCSW, LAC (hereafter volume and province given).

Vol. 8, Northwest Territories.

Vol. 9, Ontario.

Vol. 8, Ontario, and vol. 9, Quebec.


Vol. 8, Manitoba.

Kathleen Canning, Gender History in Historical Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class and Citizenship (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 97. Of course, the physical changes she is referring to were far more drastic.


Vol. 9, Ontario.

Vol. 9, Quebec. Some homemakers stressed the importance of their work in comparison to wage work, but others lamented being an “unpaid servant,” feeling dependent on their husbands for every purchase, and their isolation in the home. Some testimonies echoed the sentiments of The Feminine Mystique: “I’m in a rut . . . feeling wasted, watching soap operas and gaining weight. Also drawing into a shell” (vol. 8, Quebec).

Valerie Korinek identifies this theme in letters to Chatelaine in Roughing It in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 100.

Vol. 8, Ontario.

Vol. 8, Ontario.

Ibid.
67 Vol. 9, Ontario.
68 Ibid.
69 Vol. 9, Ontario.
70 Vol. 8, Ontario.
71 Vol. 8, Ontario.
72 Vol. 11, brief 14, RCsw.
73 Vol. 9, Ontario.
78 Vol. 9, Ontario.
79 Ibid.
80 Vol. 8, Ontario.
81 Ibid.
82 Vol. 8, Nova Scotia.
83 Vol. 8, Manitoba.
84 Vol. 9, Ontario.
85 Vol. 8, Alberta.
86 Vol. 8, Ontario.
87 There is a wide range of writing influenced by postmodernism, including works in which discourse is not totalizing, but many feminist critiques do focus on problems within Foucauldian writing concerning resistance. See Linda Alcoff, “Feminist Politics and Foucault: The Limits to Collaboration,” in Crises in Continental Philosophy, ed. Arleen Dallery and Charles Scott, with P. Holley Roberts (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 69–86; Kate Soper, “Productive Contradictions,” in Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (New York: Routledge, 1993), 21–50.
88 Vol. 9, Ontario.
89 Vol. 8, Ontario, and vol. 8, Saskatchewan.
90 Vol. 8, New Brunswick.
91 Vol. 9, Nova Scotia.
92 Vol. 9, Ontario.
93 Vol. 11, brief 77, and vol. 18, brief 424.
94 Vol. 9, Nova Scotia.
95 Vol. 14, brief 252.
96 Vol. 8, Saskatchewan.
97 Vol. 9, Quebec.
98 Vol. 8, Saskatchewan.
99 Vol. 8, Ontario.
100 Vol. 8, Ontario.
101 Alice Kessler-Harris, “Gender Ideology in Historical Reconstruction: A Case Study from the 1930s,” *Gender and History* 1 (Spring 1989): 31–49.
102 Vol. 8, Ontario.
103 Vol. 9, Northwest Territories.
104 Vol. 8, Ontario.
106 Those in the past can only “speak” when “asked” questions by historians: Thomp-son, *The Poverty of Theory*, 222.
111 Ibid., 141.