

Case Study: Community Activists and Portuguese Immigrant Cleaners in 1970s and 1980s Toronto

Objectives

1. To learn about the history of activism in the 1970s and 1980s, an era of pronounced political, social justice, and feminist activism and significant social change. The focus is on Canada, specifically Toronto. The case study highlights the female activists who worked with Portuguese immigrant female office cleaners to address their workplace needs and demands.
2. To learn about oral history as a research method for uncovering the lives of historically marginalized groups. Relatedly, to gain experience at interpreting present-day interviews with oral informants (or narrators) who are remembering and reflecting on the past.
3. To learn how to read and interpret primary documents, such as written texts, that were created in the historical period being studied.
4. To convey one's understanding of the subject matter in up to three ways:
 - a. writing an essay or a number of short papers
 - b. preparing questions for a real or imagined interview
 - c. mounting dramatizations to be performed before the class.

Learners

The assignment has been designed with both secondary and post-secondary students in mind. There are three main components. Instructors of college and university courses on women/gender, im/migration, labour, or social movements might assign all of them. High-school instructors (such as those teaching the Ontario-based curriculum requirements for grade ten Canadian

history) might reduce the number of components to be completed.

Depending on the course or grade level, instructors may wish to modify the amount of reading required.

Themes

Immigrant women in the post-1960 workforce; Portuguese immigrant women's labour activism; Community activists; Social movements; Paolo Freire-inspired literacy work to empower the poor and exploited; Portuguese immigrant children and families in 1970s and 1980s Toronto.

Format

This three-part assignment could be used as a one-off assignment or as a thematically linked set of assignments in a course. Courses dealing with the history of women, workers, im/migrants, and/or social movements in Canada could make effective use of the assignment. So, too, could courses in Women & Gender Studies, Labour Studies, and/or Social Justice Studies.

Components

The assignment has three main components. Instructors may adopt one, two, or all three of them.

1. Students will answer questions based on the assigned materials in order to write one essay (2,500 words) or two or three shorter papers. The answers may also be used to create a website for a cross-curricular connection to Media Studies.
2. Students will actually conduct or imagine conducting an interview with a working immigrant woman or a community activist working with

immigrant women. The student will prepare ten informed questions for the real or imagined interview.

- a. If a student plans to conduct an actual interview, they will conduct the interview and report on how the interviewee answered the questions. Up to five of the ten interview questions may concern biographical details. The rest should address activist themes, such as organizing union drives and going out on strike.
 - b. A student may opt instead to create a profile of a community activist or a Portuguese immigrant cleaner who became a labour activist. In this case, they will report on the imagined but informed answers to their prepared questions.
3. In small groups, students will develop dramatizations on themes informed by real events. Students will develop scripts based on what they have learned and perform the dramatizations.

Background Information

Thousands of Portuguese women who immigrated to Toronto after 1960 supported their struggling families by working night shifts cleaning the offices of government buildings at the Ontario Legislature or privately-owned buildings located in the city's financial district.

In the 1970s, the Portuguese women began to organize to demand better pay and working conditions. To assist the women, the staff at St. Christopher House, a social agency located in a heavily Portuguese neighbourhood in west-end Toronto, founded a program called Cleaners' Action. The staff were community activists inspired by notions of social justice for the oppressed

and empowering the poor with the tools to improve their lives. The staff of Cleaners' Action helped the Portuguese women to learn English, join unions, demand higher wages, and to strike for better pay and workplace conditions. A mural to Cleaners' Action, which has also been called a social movement and a women's labour movement, was unveiled in Toronto in 2021. The mural was commissioned in a joint effort by the Embassy of Portugal in Canada, the Little Portugal BIA, and Deputy Mayor of Toronto, Ana Bailão and featured the work of artist Vhils, also known as Alexandre Farto¹.



Figure 1. Photo of Mural to Cleaners' Action by Lusa/Sérgio Mourato

Required Materials

1. Miranda, Susan. "[An Unlikely Collection of Union Militants': Portuguese Cleaning Women Become Political Subjects in Postwar Toronto](#)".

Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal 32, 1 (2007): 111-21

¹ Collaboration with Vhils in mural honoring Cleaners' Action.
<https://gilbertofernandes.ca/2021/10/26/collaboration-with-vhils-in-mural-honoring-cleaner-s-action/> Accessed Nov. 21, 2022.

2. Two Interviews from Rise Up! Feminist Digital Archive. In each case, there is a recorded interview, including a version with closed captioning, and a transcript of the interview.
 - a. [Portuguese Workers/Birth of Cleaners' Action 1975](#). Interview with Sidney Pratt and Marcie Ponte by Franca Iacovetta
 - b. [Immigrant Women Create the Working Women Community Centre, 1975](#). Interview with Marcie Ponte by Sue Colley
3. Watch the first 20 minutes of [Starting from Nina: The Politics of Learning](#). Development Education Centre, Toronto, & Icarus Films, New York, 1978. Co-produced by Rosemary Donegan, Anita Shilton Martin, D'Arcy Martin, and Paulo Freire. Total 32 minutes. The 1978 documentary shows educators applying the Freire method in the west-end of Toronto.
4. [Literacy: Charitable Enterprise or Political Right?](#) *Literacy Working Group*, St. Christopher House, Toronto, 1977. Read pp 1-3 of the 11-page pamphlet.

People and Concepts in the Required Materials

Sidney Pratt

- Sidney Pratt was a community organizer and literacy activist with St. Christopher House who became centrally involved in immigrant cleaners' labour activism.

Marcie Ponte

- Marcie Ponte was a Portuguese immigrant who became a community worker and activist. She joined the Cleaners' Action staff at St. Christopher House as a student placement. She became involved in working with Portuguese cleaners to address their workplace needs,

and with the Working Women Community Centre, which provided services to immigrant women.

Paulo Freire

- Paulo Freire was a teacher in Brazil who went from simply teaching people how to read and write to linking literacy education to justice and equality. In the 1960s, Freire began to develop literacy programs for the poor. He also embraced liberation theology, a doctrine that called on Christians to bring justice to poor and oppressed people, particularly through political activism. In his influential 1968 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire laid out the principles that inspired community activists in Toronto.

Vatican II (1962-65)

- The era's social movements led to reforms of the Roman Catholic Church under Vatican II. Out of a belief in a more progressive and practical Christianity, clergy and lay people took up social justice causes. These included organizing boycotts against gouging landlords and discriminatory employers, promoting local community improvement schemes, and denouncing segregated housing and factory closures.

Saul Alinsky

- Saul Alinsky was a Chicago-born activist. He organized workers, immigrants, and the poor, particularly African-Americans, in major U.S. cities into "people's organizations" that drew attention to neighbourhood grievances and protested inequality through confrontational tactics.

LIP Grant

- The Local Initiatives Program was a federal program established by the Liberal government in 1971 to provide grants to community and cultural projects. Billed as part of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's effort to create "a just society," Conservatives criticized it as a program that funded radical causes.

Component One

The student will write one essay (2,500 words), or a number of shorter papers, on the basis of their answers to one of the sets of questions below. The questions relate to the major theme of why and how the activists and immigrant female cleaners joined forces in support of the cleaners' efforts to improve their wages and workplaces.

The questions are grouped around three interrelated themes: the activists' goals and actions; the literacy campaigns; and the cleaners' strike in 1984.

Questions about Activist Sidney Pratt

1. What was Sidney Pratt's background?
2. What were the principles and the social movements that informed her activism?
3. Before she came to Toronto, where was she and what was she doing?
4. How did Pratt put her principles into practice in her work as a staff member of St. Christopher House, a social agency based in the heavily immigrant west-end of Toronto? Consider the different programs that she founded or was involved in.
5. How did Pratt try to apply her principles in supporting the Portuguese female cleaners?

6. How did Pratt work with the Portuguese immigrant cleaners?

Questions about Activist Marcie Ponte

1. What was Marcie Ponte's background?
2. What principles influenced Ponte's work as a community worker (first at St. Stephen's Community Centre, then St. Christopher's Cleaners' Action, and later Working Women for Immigrant Women Centre)?
3. Who and what programs was Marcie Ponte involved with at the Working Women Community Centre?
4. In both Rise Up! interviews, Marcie Ponte describes herself as the "daughter" of activists like Sidney Pratt (as well as Brenda Duncombe and Mary Ellen Nettle). What does she mean by that?

Questions about Literacy Campaigns for Immigrants

1. When describing the type of literacy or ESL (English as a Second Language) classes Cleaners' Action taught, Ponte says "it wasn't teaching the ABCs?" What were they doing?
2. Through Cleaners' Action, Marcie Ponte and Sidney Pratt were involved in a number of workplace strategies? What were they? What happened?
3. Why did Ponte pose as a cleaner's daughter during a union meeting at the Toronto- Dominion Centre?

Questions about Literacy Activism

1. How are Freire's views reflected in *Literacy: Charitable Enterprise or Political Right?*
2. Who wrote this pamphlet and what are their goals?

3. The pamphlet includes the phrase: "Literacy work, like education in general, is a political act. It is not neutral, for the act of revealing social reality in order to transform it, or of concealing it in order to preserve it, is political." What does it mean?

Questions about Teachers and Community Educators

1. Paulo Freire appears at the start of the documentary called *Starting from Nina: The Politics of Learning*, and returns at the twenty-minute mark. According to Freire, what role should literacy and education play in the lives of working-class and poor people? Where should an educator begin with a learner?
2. How do the Toronto-based teachers and community educators teaching immigrant children and adults explain their goals?
3. How do they try to apply the Freire method in their work?
4. How do the teachers in what is described as an "inner-city" school lead the class with young students? How do the students respond? What stories do they tell?
5. What do you make of the scene involving the teacher and women reading about "Mrs. Baker's week"?
6. What do you think about the teacher's strategy of having a class of Portuguese adult students write a story of a Portuguese couple?
7. Consider the scene of the male teacher and the adult students in a bilingual English class. What do you make of the teacher's questions and the students' answers?

Questions about Susan Miranda's Article

1. What does the phrase "An Unlikely Collection of Union Militants" mean?
Who was surprised by the women's actions?
2. How did the women explain why they were on strike?
3. Why did the picket-line attract media attention?
4. How did the strike end? Were there long-term consequences?

Component Two

Students will conduct or imagine conducting an interview with a working immigrant woman or a community activist working with immigrant women. Each student will prepare ten informed questions for the real or imagined interview.

- a. If a student plans to conduct an actual interview, they will conduct the interview and report on how the interviewee answered the questions. Up to five of the ten interview questions may concern biographical details. The rest should address activist themes, such as organizing union drives and going out on strike.
- b. A student may opt instead to create a fictional community activist or Portuguese immigrant cleaner who became a labour activist. In this case, they will report on the imagined but informed answers to their prepared questions.

Component Three

In small groups, students will create one or two dramatizations based on what they have learned about the subject. To come up with a script, the students will draw on what they have learned from completing the exercises

for Components One (one essay or a few shorter papers) and Two (an actual or imagined interview).

Below are four possible scenarios for a dramatization. The group will select a scenario (either one from the list below or an original idea). The groups will write a short script (approximately 1,500 words) and perform it for the class.

1. Script a scene with Pratt and/or Ponte in a meeting with the cleaners.
2. Script a scene involving a Cleaners' Action workshop.
3. Script a scene involving the strikers on the picket-line at First Canadian Place in 1984.
4. Script a scene with the children on the picket line and at the victory party in 1984.

Notes to Teachers

Consider the option of having your students visit the mural.

Explore the possibility of having the students perform their dramatizations in front of the mural.

The two assigned interviews are part of an oral history project completed by Rise Up! Feminist Digital Archive. The project is called [*Women Unite: Feminist Activists in Toronto, 1970s-1990s*](#). In each case, there is a recorded interview, including a version with closed captioning, and a transcript.

View additional content from the documentary, *Starting from Nina: The Politics of Learning*. The last five minutes of the documentary show a union meeting with Portuguese workers. An immigrant union steward is using her

recently acquired English to address the group. It then features Freire explaining the use of the name “Nina” in the title of the documentary.

Additional material on this subject can be found in the book by Susana Miranda with Franca Iacovetta, *Cleaning Up: Portuguese Women's Fight for Labour Rights in Toronto* (Between the Lines, 2023). It is due out in April 2023.

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