

# The Lessons of the Hall

By Cason Sharpe

Tanya lost her glasses. She's blind as a bat without them. She texts me to come find her in the lobby of the Hall. I'm on the seventh floor, where I usually sit between classes, or maybe I'm in an empty seminar room, studying. I go to the lobby and see her standing perfectly still amidst hoards of students running late to class or rushing for tables at the campus bar. She doesn't see me until I'm a few inches from her face, at which point she breathes a sigh of relief as I take her by the arm. As we make our way to the metro, someone hands us two red felt squares to pin to our jackets. I don't think anything of it. People are always handing out crap outside of the Hall.

The Hall is a large, modernist structure downtown that runs along de Maisonneuve Ouest from Bishop to Mackay. Its twelve stories feature identical rows of long, thin windows framed in grey cement, giving the building an appearance similar to the surface of a cheese grater. The building opened its doors in 1966, on the same day as the grand unveiling of the Montreal metro. At the time, it was the only structure to house all the activities of Sir George Williams University, an institution that would soon be expanded and renamed Concordia. The idea was to create a central hub, a singular entity that could contain the university's nebulous functions in accordance with its purported values of diverse and democratic exchange. Employing a utilitarian design intended to address a multiplicity of student and faculty needs, the Hall boasts over 40 classrooms, nearly 100 research labs, and an auditorium that can seat 700. (It's also worth noting that several classrooms have no windows; that the walls are off-white and so are the floors; and that the fluorescent overheads make early-morning hangovers especially severe). Spiralling down the centre of the building are a series of escalators that almost never work, causing the stairwells to clog with students shuffling like cattle from class to class. More than any physical feature, what I associate with the Hall are the ideas it contains. In the Hall, I'm introduced to Judith Butler, bell hooks, and "The Allegory of the Cave." In the Hall, I hear the word *colonial* for the first time, and I throw up in its second-floor washroom after a particularly graphic John Waters double-bill. In this unsuspecting structure, thousands of young minds open up like flowers. Mine will be no exception.

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When Tanya and I arrive home, Fraser is sitting at the desk in his room, drawing, and Drew is in the kitchen braising lamb, or pork cheek, or maybe he's entertaining a few of his classmates from Film Studies, a boisterous crowd whose presence I tolerate on the suspicion that they'll leave a few stray beers in our fridge at the end of the night. Tanya, Fraser, and Drew have proven easy to live with, although I have no experience living with people other than my family. The dynamic feels more balanced than that of a duo or trio. One girl, three boys; one white, three black. Drew points at the red felt square on my left lapel.

"You striking?" he asks.

"What strike?" The government has recently threatened to put an end to the province-wide tuition freeze, Drew tells us. A group of students barricaded the entrance to the Champlain Bridge with concrete blocks. The police disbanded them with pepper spray.

I'm not sure what to think. On one hand, striking seems pointless and inconvenient. The semester has already been paid for, so what good would it do to skip classes now? On the other hand, rising tuition means bigger loans, higher interest rates, and more minimum – wage shifts at my gruelling part-time job. The university is a goliath that only cares about money, and to impact its operation in any way seems unfathomable. I feel jaded, angry, and powerless.

"So," asks Drew, "you striking?"

"Yeah," I say. "I guess so."

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Tanya, Fraser, Drew, and I go to the big protest downtown, which departs from outside the Hall. Thousands of students gather with signs in their hands and red felt squares pinned to their chests. I've never been part of a crowd this big before, a united mass bigger than the sum of its parts. Through word of mouth I pick up the basics: use more experienced protesters as shields against the police; stick with a buddy and follow the chants as best you can; maintain pace; drink water. Hypnotized, I let the crowd take me under its tow like a lazy river. Where did all these people learn how to move like this?

At the time, I'm unaware of what some refer to as the "Computer Lab Incident," otherwise known as the Sir George Williams Protest of 1969. The incident grew from a complaint lodged in April 1968 by a group of black students against Perry Anderson, a biology instructor accused of assigning grades according to race. "A man is entitled to his prejudices," the dean of the university reportedly said after Anderson's hearing, the ineffectiveness of which seemed clear from the start. Not only did Anderson evade punishment, he also landed a promotion. Where was the diverse and democratic exchange? Where were the values upon which the Hall had been built?

On January 29th, 1969, 200 students occupied the computer lab on the ninth floor of the Hall to protest the university's decision to dismiss charges against Anderson. The occupation remained peaceful until negotiations between students and administration broke down on February 11th, at which point the university sent riot cops into the Hall. Windows were smashed, and through them students began to throw computer punch cards, which fluttered like snowflakes down to the wintry curb. A fire broke out, and a forming crowd on the street cheered for the students to burn. Public opinion was against them, making it easy to forget how young they were. Characterized across the country as aggressive troublemakers, these students were barely old enough to vote or rent a car. Several came from across the Caribbean, eager for the educational opportunities promised by the Hall. For weeks they had slept away from their beds, in an off-white room with flickering fluorescents, only to be demonized in the news and then nearly burned alive for daring to ask for the grades they deserved.

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I won't learn about the Computer Lab Incident until after I graduate. For the next four years, the escalators will remain broken, and I'll wander the Hall totally unaware that it's the site of the largest student uprising in Canadian history. I'll attend class on the ninth floor without considering the 87 arrests and two millions dollars of damages that occurred there four decades prior. For the next four years, I'll keep my head down and study hard, and when a white classmate gets a better grade than me, I'll wonder if it has to do with race.

Over the next four years, my mind will open up like a flower. It starts with a protest outside of the Hall, where I march with my roommates, one white and two black. I know what Judith Butler said about gender and I can explain "The Allegory of the Cave," but what I'm really learning is that while there's not necessarily a right or a wrong way to do things, there are ways that will get you more, even if that more is barely half of what somebody else gets for doing less. Most importantly, I'm learning about groups, their power, their danger, and their purpose. These are the lessons of the Hall.