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POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES**

**Janna Rinaldi**

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AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

**M.A. (Peace and Conflict Studies)**

-----  
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-----  
FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT / FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

**Intimacy and Violence: Explaining Domestic Abuse in Lesbian Intimate Partnerships**

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TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS

**Hélène Tessier**

-----  
DIRECTEUR (DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS SUPERVISOR

-----  
CO-DIRECTEUR (CO-DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

**EXAMINATEURS (EXAMINATRICES) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS EXAMINERS**

**Stephen Brown**

**Carolyn Sharp**

**Gary W. Slater**

-----  
Le Doyen de la Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales / Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

# **INTIMACY AND VIOLENCE: EXPLAINING DOMESTIC ABUSE IN LESBIAN INTIMATE PARTNERSHIPS**

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Janna Rinaldi

**Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the MA degree in Peace and Conflict Studies**

PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES  
FACULTY OF HUMAN SCIENCES  
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## Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
PURPOSE STATEMENT .....	2
THESIS STATEMENT AND OUTLINE .....	4
GENESIS OF RESEARCH .....	5
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	7
LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH.....	9
CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD.....	10
AN IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT MY THEORETICAL STRATEGY .....	12
SEXUAL DIFFERENCE or SEXUATE DIFFERENCE.....	17
EXPLAINING MY USE OF IRIGARAY AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE .....	18
SECTION I – LITERATURE REVIEW .....	22
AREAS OF CONTROVERSY IN THE LITERATURE.....	26
GAPS IN THE RESEARCH.....	29
CONCLUSION OF LITERATURE REVIEW.....	31
SECTION II – EXPLAINING SOME KEY DEFINITIONS AND PSYCHONALYTIC CONCEPTS.....	32
THE (RE)DEFINITION OF ABUSE .....	32
INTERPRETATION AND USE OF KEY PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPTS .....	34
THE OEDIPAL COMPLEX AS THE PERSISTANT UNDERPINNING OF MODERN WESTERN SOCIETY.....	34
THE RELATION TO THE MOTHER AS TABOO.....	38
OUR DISCOMFORT WITH DEPENDENCY .....	40
THE MATERNAL AS A SOURCE OF CONFLICT .....	42
THE ROLE OF ABJECTION IN IDENTITY FORMATION.....	44
THE FEMALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIP AS DEFINED BY DYADIC ATTACHMENT.....	45
CHALLENGES TO DIFFERENTIATION FOR WOMEN .....	47
THEORY OF RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR AUTONOMY.....	48
SECTION III – THEORY .....	50
MOVING TOWARD A THEORY OF SEXUALITY: DEFINING THE NEW PSYCHOANALYSIS.....	50
IRIGARAY ON INTIMACY.....	53
THEORY OF WOMEN AND CONFLICT – IRIGARAY RETHINKS OEDIPUS .....	54
KRISTEVA AND THEORY ON LESBIAN LOVE AND ABJECTION.....	55
PSYCHOANALYSIS AND VIOLENCE: HOW IRIGARAY DIFFERS FROM KRISTEVA .....	58

SECTION IV – PRIORITIZING SEXUATE DIFFERENCE OVER THE EQUALITY APPROACH TO ACHIEVE RIGHTS .....	63
THE LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP AS A SPACE TO DEVELOP SEXUATE DIFFERENCE .....	66
SECTION V – CONCLUSION.....	69
Annex – Review of Outreach Materials and Services for Women in violent female-female intimate partnerships.....	75
SELECTION METHOD OF OUTREACH MATERIALS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS .....	76
INFO FROM OUTREACH MATERIALS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS.....	78
1. THE DELAWARE COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (DCADV) .....	78
2. VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULTS IN LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS (SEXUAL ASSAULT SARNIA, ONTARIO).....	80
3. CARING FOR LESBIAN HEALTH: A RESOURCE FOR CANADIAN HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS, POLICY MAKERS, PLANNERS .....	81
4. ASSISTING ABUSED LESBIANS: A GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS.....	82
References .....	1

“Words provoke affects and are in general the means of mutual influence among men. Thus we shall not depreciate the use of words in psychotherapy and we shall be pleased if we can listen to the words that pass between the analyst and his patient.

*But we cannot do that either. The talk of which psychoanalytic treatment consists brooks no listener; it cannot be demonstrated. A neurasthenic or hysterical patient can of course, like any other, be introduced to students in a psychiatric lecture. He will give an account of his complaints and symptoms, but of nothing else. The information required by analysis will be given by him only on condition of his having a special emotional attachment to the doctor; he would become silent as soon as he observed a single witness to whom he felt indifferent. For this information concerns what is most intimate in his mental life, everything that, as a socially independent person, he must conceal from other people, and beyond that, everything that, as a homogeneous personality, he will not admit to himself.”<sup>1</sup>*

Sigmund Freud (1962b, p. 41-42)

We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a “dark continent” for psychology.

Sigmund Freud (1926, p. 212)

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there seems to be an enhanced focus on domestic abuse. Yet, violence in lesbian relationships remains concertedly understudied, and even within the lesbian community there is a nearly universal silence and opacity on the topic. Moreover, the persistence of heteronormative gender stereotypes and the prominence of the feminist reliance on patriarchy (male entitlement and the power-differential) in this field may serve to deny violence among lesbians or cloud the ways in which a lesbian relationship has the potential to be more violent (abusive). In fact, many researchers have expressed surprise at uncovering rates of abuse in female same-sex relationships that are comparable and even significantly surpass those in gay male and heterosexual relationships (Elliot, 1996; Lie et al, 1991; Vickers, 1996).

Many important research questions around this phenomenon remain unasked. These include inquiries into the nature of abuse (or violence) between lesbians in an intimate relationship. It is important to know how lesbians experience violence in their intimate relationships, and whether lesbian domestic violence is different from domestic violence between gay male and heterosexual couples. Finally, it is necessary to understand the

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<sup>1</sup> This passage which I read years before becoming aware of the much denied problem of violence between women as lovers has been my guiding principle during the course of this research. This project is close to my person, and I use this passage to remind myself of the importance of listening from beyond the traditional lens (without automatically framing what I hear and learn about female-female intimate partner violence in the language of the dominant discourse).

characteristics of victims; of abusers. This type of information is critical to the domestic violence movement responding to abuse in lesbian couples (via outreach, support services).

It is often assumed that intimate partner violence between women (lesbians) is not very prevalent (due to the stereotyping of women as nurturing and passive), and that if it does occur then the abuse must be based on the same model as traditional heterosexual domestic violence. Yet, the statistics on prevalence rates of violence in lesbian partnerships suggest that the experience is different. A new lens is required to view this issue. In this paper, I argue that there is a connection between female intimacy and violence, and I use a specific psychoanalytic approach to explore this linkage.

### **PURPOSE STATEMENT**

Throughout the research and analysis for this project, my primary effort was to follow Janice Ristock's imperative to eschew the "heteronormative discourses and feminist categories and constructs to think about violence" that so critically impair our ability to understand and theorize about partner abuse in the confines of an intimate lesbian relationship (2001, p. 60). Often, this lens is used to strategically signal the similarities between lesbian and heterosexual partner abuse in order to ensure that it is not trivialized and to support equality (Ristock, 2002, p. 151).<sup>2</sup>

To better understand the phenomenon of domestic violence in lesbian intimate partnerships, avoiding the heteronormative feminist lens for a more gender-specific and in fact *sexuality*-specific approach may allow this research to break the silence on lesbian partner abuse; it may be useful in providing a language through which lesbians can "name the violence". The research also seeks to explain why rates of abuse in lesbian couples, although abuse is barely reported, are nonetheless significantly higher than rates for heterosexual and gay male partnerships. A new theoretical framework that moves away from the typical feminist lens to incorporate a psychoanalytic understanding of both intimacy and violence between women is required.

The current study and research of domestic violence, whether for the heterosexual or homosexual (gay male or lesbian) couple, falls under the general umbrella of the domestic violence movement. This was historically and continues to be a feminist undertaking—

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<sup>2</sup> It is also important to note that much of the language of the civil rights movement is strongly focused on equality. The path toward greater social acceptance and the ending of discrimination has historically taken the trajectory of the call for equal rights/equal treatment and status under the law.

largely a second wave, and now a third wave feminist movement<sup>3</sup> which aims to promote and foster equality for women under the law, equal rights and equal opportunities, as well as equal (access to) services. Where domestic violence is concerned, the push for equality includes access to support service centres, access to legal help, shelters, and counseling. For the most part, these services are “available” to women that are both heterosexual and homosexual (available to women irrespective of their sexuality), yet are tailored toward heterosexual women. For instance, some of the challenges of catering to the lesbian population (or to women in intimate relations with other women) affect shelters. A shelter may admit a lesbian abuser as a client or may experience difficulty in screening visitors that are female and may in fact be abusers visiting their partners. It is not enough anymore for a shelter to just screen out all males that may visit as a default security measure.

The feminist-led domestic violence movement contends that patriarchy is a root cause of violence against women. Yet, for the lesbian couple, it does not seem altogether plausible that patriarchy is to blame. Aside from being inappropriate or even irrelevant to a lesbian in an abusive relationship, the domestic violence movement, the related services,<sup>4</sup> and the policies behind it address some of the symptoms of lesbian abuse/domestic violence but avoid an inquiry into the cause.

Taken as a whole, feminism has quite successfully led to the development of theory and writings on gendered oppression, but it has yet to contribute to a theory of feminine sexuality, and as Irigaray explains, it is in theorizing sexuality and sexual difference (or as Irigaray would argue, ‘sexual indifference’) that we will be able to explain the roots of female subjugation (1993a). A psychoanalytic approach is useful because it can help us understand the way in which oppression can operate at subconscious levels. Uncovering these and bringing them to the level of consciousness is the first step toward negotiating a release from them.

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<sup>3</sup> The third wave of the feminist movement differs from the second wave in that it tries to incorporate interlocking oppression analysis and intersectionality.

<sup>4</sup> These services would include, for example, shelters, sexual assault crisis centers, services by counselors and therapists, police partner assault units, community center outreach efforts, outreach materials and literature, among others.

This research examines theory around the possible causes of a noticeably higher rate of abuse in female intimate partnerships by focusing solely on the ‘lesbian’ relationship<sup>5</sup>. It takes a targeted approach to the analysis of domestic violence between lesbians by utilizing psychoanalysis as the primary lens of analysis. A psychoanalytic approach is favored because psychoanalytic practice returns to the moment of birth, to the womb and mother, as the place where human subjectivity is formed. The relationship with the mother while the child is in the mother’s body (which psychoanalysis focuses heavily on) is also our primary and most intimate relationship. Accordingly it seems evident that to comprehend violence between women as lovers, a study of the nature of intimacy between child and the mother (the mother’s body) will point us to an understanding of the conflict.

Traditional psychoanalysis remains heavily patriarchal, but for this research, a post-Lacanian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis is employed, namely drawing from the work of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Nancy Chodorow. These three theorists depart from traditional psychoanalysis by eschewing certain fundamental assumptions about gender, the nature of human sexuality, and the formation of human subjectivity. It is through revisiting our assumptions and cultural postulates of the two sexes<sup>6</sup> that we may create the possibility for developing a new theoretical framework, a new feminist lens that would allow us to see and understand more fully lesbian intimacy and violence.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, this process of reframing, unpacking and understanding violence between women, at whatever stage or level (i.e. philosophical definitions of female relations, or analysis of assaulted lesbian victim intake practice, for instance) is part of a concrete and practical strategy toward forging a new path for women to have a social and cultural identity.

#### THESIS STATEMENT AND OUTLINE

While this paper is concerned with the occurrence of domestic battering/partner assault in the lesbian intimate relationship, the paper will begin from the premise that domestic violence in the lesbian partnership is not entirely or even primarily a gender issue (in the

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<sup>5</sup> The lesbian relationship will be referred to throughout this paper as the ‘female-female intimate partnership’, or the ‘female-female intimate relationship’ in order to be exclusive of women-who-love-women but do not identify openly as lesbians.

<sup>6</sup> There may be more than two sexes, but because this research has narrowed its focus to the abuse between lesbians it will address the issue of abuse primarily through the re-introduction of the binary of two sexes.

<sup>7</sup> And, as this paper will argue, the inverse is also important. In a way, the existence and high incidence rate of lesbian violence proves that the lack of sexual difference is real and is supported by culture even in spite of (and regardless of) social, cultural and political changes that the women’s movement has effected.

feminist sense). Rather, it is an intimacy issue. Gendered oppression and patriarchy are factors which critically enhance the incidence of abuse, contribute to its causes, and alter the ways in which the effects and symptoms of abuse are experienced. Specifically, this paper will argue that the ultimate cause of lesbian abuse is not that of the typical male entitlement/patriarchal entitlement, nor is it about power and control. **While the dominant culture of patriarchy and misogyny does contribute to violence, and while control is an important factor, rather, for women-who-love-women (and/or lesbians), partner violence is the actualization of the identity conflict between a woman and her relation to the maternal body (her mother), indicative of her troubled relation to the Feminine in general.**

First, I will provide a literature review and a brief survey of the most cited statistics on lesbian partner abuse, applying special focus to the Canadian context. Second, I will define intimate partner abuse, and then re-define the phenomenon in a way that moves away from the feminist domestic violence paradigm. Third, I will include a section of key theoretical terms and concepts, highlighting their relationship to violence between women-who-love-women. Fourth, I will address the role that intimacy plays in contributing to the violence and its effect on responses to the violence, applying a psychoanalytic lens and drawing primarily from the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray in order to explain why and how violence occurs in the intimate female relationship. In the final sections, I will explore some problems with the women's movement for addressing violence between women and I will conclude with an analysis of outreach materials which target lesbian violence.

## **GENESIS OF RESEARCH**

This research project quietly and organically evolved from several coffee table conversations with close friends in my community. As a woman in an intimate relationship with another woman, I became very much concerned and distressed to discover that domestic violence was not uncommon among other lesbian couples that I knew. As I began to ask more questions, first of my friends, and then of women that worked in the domestic violence field, as well as community police officers from the partner assault unit, I learnt that although violence among lesbians is not uncommon, there is no real course of action or support resources available to women in this situation. In the course of this discovery, I also began to feel that there was a very uncomfortable tension around this problem; people were very

unwilling to talk about it and would downplay the violence or exceptionalize it. In discussing this within my social circles, the tendencies to deny and minimize its occurrence were very prevalent among my lesbian friends and community, while the tendency to express incredulity and then categorize the occurrences as “it must just be screaming matches or name-calling between girls” was the norm among my straight friends.

What was most difficult for me to come to terms with was the way I would try to personally discount what I was learning about this issue. I was initially unable (or unwilling) to understand and make sense of the violence from within my lesbian, feminist framework. This phenomenon seemed to me to be a tremendous assault to an identity that I have worked hard to legitimate to myself and to others (when I began my coming out process), and I still find myself needing to routinely reinforce my sexuality to myself (which I sometimes take as a choice, other times as an innate disposition). Part of my own identity was based on an idealization of woman-to-woman relationships as nurturing and safe. Knowing that lesbian relationships are not entirely socially acceptable influenced me to not want to accept or acknowledge that violence was possible between women. I was afraid that what would come from exploring this issue would negate inroads that the rights and equality movement had made and, on a more personal level, would diminish my own confidence in my identification as a lesbian. From my background in Political Science and social movement theory, I was already aware of the complexities and power relations of oppression. However, it was only as I slowly started to understand and accept that lesbian violence was a very real phenomenon, that it affected several of my own friends, and that I could see elements of it in my own relationships, that my eyes were opened to how oppression really operates. Now I see violence in lesbian relationships all around me.

The problem of lesbian violence is a private matter and a public matter. From my work in a play and art therapy program for children that witness domestic abuse in their homes, I have an all too acute understanding of how domestic violence (especially when it remains unaddressed and hidden) permeates a family structure and is internalized by children with very sad and often devastating consequences. Lesbian domestic violence becomes a public concern when a significant portion of the population lives in violence and fear of disclosing their realities (by seeking help) because of the stigma and marginalization it might breed. It is even more reprehensible when there is nowhere (and virtually no effective resources) for

affected women to go even when they do have the courage to ask for help. It is now the lack of services and support programs that are so critical for women to overcome violence that concerns me most. These programs and services cannot be developed genuinely however, until a fuller understanding of what violence between women is, and how it operates. I am hopeful that what I may present through this research project will help develop a new framework for conceptualizing, understanding, and ultimately working through the violence that a marginalized population is experiencing.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In the development of this research project, it became important to me that I consider the ethical implications of research on a group that is heavily stigmatized and marginalized. In all societal contexts, lesbians are a minority and a socially and institutionally oppressed group within a patriarchal, heteronormative, and significantly homophobic social setting.

As a result, this research project is permeated by power relationships, from the tangible logistical issues of conducting the research, to the theory underpinning the issue. These power relationships must be taken into account throughout the design, planning, and the course of any research into the dynamics of the lesbian social group as they will shape how any research is conducted, received, and how it has the potential to be used to further oppress.

From the outset, as women, lesbians in abusive relationships are already marginalized and oppressed. Under patriarchy, and in a heteronormative context, it is automatically assumed that women are not violent and are certainly not the aggressors in relationships. For lesbians in abusive relationships, the overlapping layers of power translate into a denial of abuse by police, the justice system, support service providers (within the domestic violence movement), and even by the lesbian community.

In a homophobic setting, lesbians in violent circumstances are pushed by their own community to remain silent on the issue of relationship violence for fear that it might attract more negative attention to a community that is already stigmatized. Internalized homophobia operates as a powerful force within the community, silencing it and conditioning it to promote itself as entirely healthy and consistently without conflict in the eyes of society in general. Lesbians that are abusers or victims will be reluctant to speak on the issue for fear of being “outed” and for breaking the utopic image of the lesbian partnership as non-violent and

nurturing. This also has the added effect of serving as a type of protection for abusers who may threaten their partner with “outing” and benefit from the stereotypical image as non-violent.

The domestic violence movement also figures under the umbrella of the feminist movement. It follows that many feminist service providers, and outreach workers concerted ignore the phenomenon as acknowledging violence between women is counter to the feminist paradigm of men as oppressors (and therefore may jeopardize the fight against patriarchy). Even theory and literature that includes the issue of lesbian domestic violence minimizes it or explains it as rare. There is a strong reluctance and a valid fear on the part of feminist service providers to engage in any discussion on this issue.<sup>8</sup>

Lesbians, as a group, can (for some) be seen as tremendous social capital. They are included in another political approach for the advancement of same-sex rights and liberties—the civil rights movement. Here, since the civil rights movement is framed in the language of equality, there is an unwillingness to address lesbian domestic abuse as a different phenomenon than heterosexual domestic abuse, as this focus on particularity is not aligned with the push for equality. Accordingly, there is pressure from other branches of the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender/Transsexual and Two-Spirited Queer (GLBTTQ) population to remain silent on an issue that will detract from a push for equal rights.

The civil rights movement has also appropriated the privacy argument. This further inhibits the study of same-sex and particularly lesbian relationships as it is viewed as a potentially “too intimate” context of which this type of research is far too invasive. As Lee Vickers (1996) states, privacy in even the heterosexual couple is held in extremely high esteem. She describes the domestic sphere as largely the “Private Realm of Intimate Relationships Into Which No One or Thing Should Intrude.” For lesbian and gay partnerships, the privacy clause may prove to be an even greater barrier to disclosure or informational probing, especially since privacy has been appropriated by the civil rights

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<sup>8</sup> The reluctance of feminists and lesbian feminists to attract greater stigma to the lesbian community, and to detract from the importance of the domestic violence movement should not be underestimated. Identity politics and the homogenizing tendency of solidarity movements take on varying degrees of importance depending on the political climate. In the Canadian context, there were significant cuts to the Department of Status of Women Canada’s budget in 2006. Here we must note that most domestic violence services providers are feminist organizations and their funding of programs and initiatives are defined by their ideological stance. (Even if I had been able to incorporate interviews with service providers in this project, they would have been extremely difficult to obtain and would have been off-the-record in all likelihood).

movement as a defensive tool to self-preserve in the face of external and internal homophobia. Vickers (1996) notes,

Interestingly, 'privacy' arguments have frequently been relied on in efforts seeking to advance the rights of lesbians and gay men, by claiming that sexuality is a personal, private issue which the state has no business regulating. Arguably, such an approach leaves untouched institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism and may serve to inhibit open discussion of same sex abuse. There is a very real danger that adherence to the 'privacy' principle might insulate same sex abuse from community scrutiny. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear the view expressed from within the lesbian and gay community that domestic violence between lesbian and gay couples is a 'private' matter. Reliance on 'privacy' arguments can therefore be seen to have an unintended negative outcome in terms of reinforcing the silence surrounding same sex domestic violence.

The impact of the civil rights movement and the language and discourse of privacy and equality that dominates GBLTTQ issues and debates has not yet been examined for its effects on the responses to domestic violence. The ethics of exploration of an issue when it is considered both intrusion and invasion are not readily evident.

Ultimately, the ethical considerations of this project weigh most heavily at the end, when the project has been completed and the findings will be presented. Given the aforementioned issues, I decided to limit this project (for the time-being) to a critical analysis of the current empirical studies on the issue and a dialoguing of that knowledge with a specific psychoanalytic framework.<sup>9</sup>

#### LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

As a result of the power relations and the ethical considerations that pervade this project, this research will be difficult to carry out. As with any research undertaken on an oppressed or stigmatized group, there is often a difficulty in enlisting participants, and a reluctance of participants to speak openly and honestly on the issues in question. As such, research will primarily draw on already written materials and published quantitative and qualitative studies. Analysis of the written works is woven through a post-structural psychoanalytic lens,

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<sup>9</sup> Here I must add that I would have very much liked to undertake my own qualitative research at this stage, but the ethical constraints proved too heavy to proceed on my own. If this research project would have involved participants at any stage for interviews, then these interviews would need to have been carefully conducted in safe spaces (environments) and off-the-record. Moreover, the anonymity of any sources would need to be guaranteed in order to protect their identity and not to jeopardize their safety. Also, given the sensitive nature of the subject matter that may be discussed (by a lesbian in an abusive relationship), it would be important to have the ability to provide reference information for a professional counselor that is versed in lesbian issues. Should a participant indicate the desire to speak with someone after a research-related conversation, then they may be directed to the counselor for additional help.

There are many psychoanalytic approaches. I have chosen one as the basis of my analytical framework—a post-structural, feminist psychoanalysis that draws specifically from Luce Irigaray, and also from Julia Kristeva and Nancy Chodorow.

to better understand female intimate partner violence and try to develop a causal theory with the aim of better informing service and treatment strategies.

While the focus on written materials for the project helps circumvent some of the difficulties of having direct participants, it does pose certain other methodological limitations. There are no large multi-year, comprehensive studies. Most available data comes from smaller scale or shorter term studies. As Turell and Cornell-Swanson (2005, p. 72) point out, the “lack or uniformity” in this field of research is one of the largest stumbling blocks. Different studies, whether quantitative or qualitative, employ different definitions of “abuse” (woman-to-woman intimate violence) and are therefore difficult to cross-analyze. This lessens the possibility of the researcher to adequately compare and draw out certain generalizations and key themes. Moreover, the generalizability of the research is also limited as the various studies that are currently available overwhelmingly target perpetrators and victims from a certain segment of the population—white, middle to upper class, educated and able-bodied. All these elements contribute to data that is hard to use, but that nonetheless points to the existence of violence, and violence that is a significant problem. This topic calls for further research, and, as this thesis will argue, a new theoretical framework.

Ultimately, irrespective of whether the research for this thesis was conducted with direct participants or from written materials, it nevertheless has failed to draw information from the “silent” segment of the population. The thesis is limited in its scope as it does not involve lesbians that are not “out” (in some way or another) or that are too uncomfortable with their sexuality to speak about violence in their relationships, as well victims of violence that are too afraid or oppressed to speak out for fear of reprisal from the perpetrator. This is a substantial weakness with the thesis as the information that these groups of women might provide could prove to be very enlightening. It is especially the most oppressed and isolated group of women that may have the most insightful information on the experience of violence and of intimacy with their partner. These women are also the ones that could most benefit from effective outreach and help services.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD**

Research into the nature of abuse (or violence) between lesbians in an intimate relationship is relevant and important for many reasons. First, it is of benefit to all Canadian communities, lesbians within them, other researchers, service providers in the domestic

violence field, and policy makers because it works toward building the dialogue on the issue of lesbian partner abuse. Persisting silence maintains the heterosexism (and homophobia) in government agencies and support service providers, the police, and justice system, society at large, and is even internalized by lesbians. It is only through the circulation of accurate information about lesbians and the realities of lesbian relationships that the stereotypes that inform public policy may be dispelled.

Second, this research project has the potential to contribute significantly to the academic literature on this subject – and to inform other domains. For instance, in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies, this project may help to elucidate how violence occurs within, or is perpetrated by, other ‘victim’ or disadvantaged groups.<sup>10</sup> There is a tremendous social fear (taboo) about addressing these issues. Similarly, this research project may indicate new insight for Political Studies and the study of social movements. In social movements that aim to emancipate disenfranchised or marginalized groups, there is often a “larger fight” that trumps any “smaller problems”, and necessitates that a situation or group of individuals/communities be presented as homogeneous in order for the movement to gain more bargaining power/ political clout. In this research project specifically, the more important issue being the fight against patriarchy, voiced in the language of equality through the civil rights movement and the smaller problem figures as the dramatic rate of partner violence among women who love women.

Third, this project also benefits other researchers as it can explore and highlight the impact of a feminist methodology and theoretical lens on the domestic violence movement and on the ways that society chooses to respond (or not respond) to domestic violence. The research may potentially point to how feminism now figures as a hegemonic discourse which may (in certain instances) serve to reinforce a dominant cultural order (in this case, heteronormativity).<sup>11</sup> As this research begins to develop a new theoretical framework from which to view and analyze violence between women who love women, there may be

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<sup>10</sup> I think that a lot of benefit for the Peace and Conflict domain of study can be derived from the research into violence between lesbians (as a “victim”/disadvantaged group). Often, in the conflict between identity groups, the focus is on the more organized marginalized group writ large. Especially when it comes to a struggle of identity politics, the persecuted identity will try to present itself as homogeneous in order to make it more available as a cause (more visible as a disenfranchised group). The “victim” group may also try to fashion itself as similar/akin to the dominant identity group (to indicate that it is amenable to assimilation/integration), if not “better” than the dominant identity.

<sup>11</sup> For a greater discussion on the power of discourse and the problem of hegemony, see the work of Michel Foucault, specifically his text *Power/Knowledge* (1980).

immediate effects on the ground level toward addressing the problem. Specifically, the new theoretical lens may help social service agencies develop (for what may be the first time) outreach strategies, support services and abuse shelters that are actually tailored to lesbians (and to those women that self- identify as being intimate with other women).

Fourth, this research may catalyze and advance the development of new government social policy for health services and policing services, and may promote changes in the how the justice system addresses cases of lesbian battery. Currently, nearly all literature on domestic violence and lesbian domestic violence employs the standard feminist theoretical lens to either avoid the discussion of lesbian battering, deny its existence, or try frame the issue in the language of power and control of a victim by a dominant partner, usually playing off stereotypical lesbian gender roles that are mirrored on heterosexual dynamics (i.e. butch and femme compared to male and female).<sup>12</sup> What this research offers is an opportunity to employ a non-heteronormative framework to a phenomenon that is concerted under studied and ineffectually managed by the community's most basic service providers due to persisting and noxious heteronormativity.

Finally, this research offers the opportunity to examine so-called feminine subjectivity in the current symbolic cultural order, and broaden our understanding of it. It is this portion of the project that may have the greatest impact on modern society by challenging the most implicit aspects of society. Insight into the female developmental process—in a true sense, once sexual difference as per Irigaray's understanding is applied—will lead us to a different idea of the human subject that does not coincide with our current society's ideal of the subject as autonomous.

#### **AN IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT MY THEORETICAL STRATEGY**

I feel it is necessary that I explicitly state my theoretical approaches at the outset of this project, before I present my review of the literature and my analysis sections. Psychoanalysis is a broad and highly interpreted field. Generally understood, psychoanalysis as a theory and psychoanalytic practice as a method has for its goal to liberate the individual from neuroses and unconscious processes that are the source of conflict. Psychoanalysis is founded by—and most typically associated with—Freud, who considers the Oedipal complex as absolutely

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<sup>12</sup> Examples of this will be provided in the Literature Review.

central to the formation of neuroses.<sup>13</sup> He regards that along with the being the root of all neuroses, “the beginnings of religion, ethics, society and art meet in the Oedipus complex” (p. 202, Freud, 1946). I contend that our understanding of female intimate partner violence also must be examined from the Oedipal standpoint as Freud considers that the “ambivalence of emotions” also finds its origin in Oedipus. Freud defines this ambivalence as “the coincidence of love and hate towards the same object, at the root of important cultural formations” (p. 202, Freud, 1946). He also offers that this ambivalence originated in human society from the “father complex” (p. 202, Freud, 1946).<sup>14</sup> It is from this element in Freud’s work that this research departs and supplants Freud with the poststructuralist psychoanalysis of Irigaray, Kristeva and Chodorow.

For the purpose of this paper, psychoanalysis is utilized as a discursive tool to understand and counteract domination and oppression and to uncover the roots of intimate female violence. The psychoanalytic approach does this by returning to ‘origins’. Freud describes the work of the psychoanalyst as follows: “When a physician treats an adult neurotic by psychoanalysis, the process goes through of uncovering the psychical formations layer by layer, eventually enables him to frame certain hypothesis as to the patient’s infantile sexuality; and it is in the components of the latter that he believes he has discovered the motive forces of all the neurotic symptoms of latter life” (1977, pp. 169-170). Specifically, this means a return to the very beginnings of the family, most especially to infancy. The human state of infancy is understood to be the place from which all people, irrespective of cultures, emerge. It is the one experience that is common to all and is believed by psychoanalysts to influence us, and to a certain degree, determine our identities. It follows that a psychoanalytic understanding of subject formation considers that individual autonomy relies on one dualism—a fundamental dialectic between the *Other* and *Myself*—between my *Mother* and *Me*.

There are many psychoanalytic approaches. As has been mentioned, this paper relies heavily on one—a post-Lacanian, post-structural feminist (also referred to as French feminist) psychoanalysis, centered firmly on the work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva (and also Nancy Chodorow, specifically for her account of the developmental process). I find

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<sup>13</sup> Neuroses are thought to develop from once repressed and now unconscious thoughts, desires and conflicts. These may include Oedipal thoughts, incestuous thoughts.

<sup>14</sup> In *Totem and Taboo* Freud footnotes the term “father complex” as the “parent complex”

this adaptation of psychoanalysis is the only one that allows for a more self-reflexive and flexible approach to understanding forms of oppression. In particular, this approach is the only one which recognizes that the traditional feminist “equality argument” is still defined by a masculine understanding of what the standard (for society) ought to be, and that this serves only the patriarchal order. Psychoanalysis, employed under the auspices of post-structural feminism, is able to reveal singularities for women by retracing them to a point when women and their relationship to the maternal can be understood prior to the influence of the current symbolic cultural order. Fights for equality seldom question the power structures that underpin society.

The connection that this research tries to make between psychoanalysis and intimate partner violence is that there are hidden or unconscious barriers to healthy human development; in the case of this research, the unconscious barriers that prevent women from developing as unique subjects also contribute their conflictual and often violent relations. Hence, psychoanalysis advocates a return to ‘origins’ to seek out the roots of these barriers and overcome them.

On returning to ‘origins’, Julia Kristeva claims in “Is there a feminine genius?” (2004) that the route to achieving rights for the person is by seeking what is most singular about them and creating the person from that. She states:

I’m convinced that the highest realization of human rights, and of women’s rights, is none other than the Scotist ideal that we are now, at this moment in history, in a position to achieve: a particular attention paid to the *ecceltas*, to the flourishing of the individual in his or her uniqueness, to what makes an individual *who* he or she is and raises him or her above ordinariness—genius being the most complex, the most appealing, and the most fruitful form of this uniqueness at a particular moment in history and, given that it is so, the form that is lasting and universal. (p. 494)

What Kristeva refers to here as “genius” coincides with what she considers to be the driving idea in the third wave of feminism. The first wave was primarily concerned with the demand for political rights, the second wave sought to assert an ontological equality between men and women, and the third wave (which Kristeva believes we are currently still experiencing) focuses on exposing difference(s) (Kristeva, 2004, p. 494) presumably to use as a basis for equality of human dignity. For Kristeva, this revelation of difference between the male and female sex serves to establish the female as simply “other” rather than as “*the* other” to the

male. If this can be achieved, then the female will finally be able to transcend herself and achieve freedom of being.<sup>15</sup>

Within the poststructural psychoanalytic framework with which I encase my research and analysis, I apply a very contentious lens—strategic essentialism. Strategic essentialism is the practice of emphasizing or visibly attributing importance to a specific aspect or trait (generally understood to be fixed and consistent) of a social, cultural, ethnic, or gender (here I would use the term “sex”) group. Essentialism had been found most frequently in the writings and theories of the second wave of feminism which often employed a “universal” notion of femininity that was equated with the being white, western, and middle-class.<sup>16</sup> Irigaray practices (and is accused of) essentialism often, in respect to how she represents the female’s ability to become a mother and in her work on the nature of female sexual anatomy.<sup>17</sup> She is not naturalizing the discourses premised on female physiology as they circulate in the patriarchal order. What she is doing is advocating a return to a time that predates (or that hypothetically would pre-date) the patriarchal cultural order in order to understand or conceive of the female as “different” and not as defined by patriarchy. It could be argued that for Irigaray, essentialism is *the* contemporary strategy as the civil rights and feminist movements has placed high emphasis on how men and women are equal (equality is now read as “same”). For Irigaray, the ‘equality claim’ is utterly contradictory as it does not critically examine the underlying patriarchal power of this claim. As she states in *Sexes and genealogies*,

If the female gender does make a demand, all too often it is based upon a claim for equal rights and this risks ending in the destruction of gender. Comedy arises out of this collision of rights and duties since it expresses the contradiction of an absolute in opposition. (1993b, p. 115)

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<sup>15</sup> In *Is there a feminine genius?* Kristeva argues that the goal for women is not just freedom, but also autonomy. I am purposely not including autonomy as part of the aim for female liberation, because I think that is a goal that was defined and perpetuated by male dominated order. Research on partner violence between women and psychoanalytic analysis of it seems to indicate that a form of interdependence, rather than autonomy is more accessible and “natural” for women. The work of Irigaray, specifically in *This Sex which is not one*, details how women share their subconscious with others, specifically other women that signify their mother.

<sup>16</sup> The term was developed by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak. For a more in-depth account on strategic essentialism as developed by Spivak and applied to postcolonial theory, please see *A Critique of postcolonial reason: Towards a history of the vanishing present* (1999).

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed account of Irigaray’s understanding of female genital anatomy and the effect it has on the development of female subjectivity, please refer to *This Sex which is not one*, and *When our two lips speak together*.

For the purpose of this research, a type of strategic essentialism is employed, and it is not mutually exclusive of the social constructivist approach either. I reiterate here that I am in no way intending for my writing to support a biologically reductionist determination of women, nor am I intending to privilege the heterosexual model of human relations. This tendency is dangerous and can serve as easily to oppress women as it can others. It should be noted that this type of essentialism which focuses on the ways in which the female body is naturally different is risky as it may be appropriated by patriarchy and used to further disenfranchise women. What I am arguing for is that essentialism be revisited, carefully and on different terms.<sup>18</sup> I have posited that the universal referent is the one shared experience among all persons: birth from the genetic material of a male and a female and subsequent gestation in the womb (and this can be seen as aligned with Chodorow's social constructivist approach as she would also contend that having a mother as a primary caregiver is part of this universal experience)<sup>19</sup>. Otherwise stated, all persons, irrespective of sex (and of gender) have the initial and fundamental contact with the maternal (with their mother's body). The one biological element that I focus on is the female sex anatomy. A role exists for strategic essentialism in revisiting the differences in experience between the male and the female in terms of their ego formation as a result of the difference in their experiences. In tandem with this analysis of the developmental process is the necessity of analyzing how the social environment (the cultural symbolic order) reflects or works to negate the relationship between the female and the mother. It is my opinion that the high levels of intimate partner violence between women illustrate the disjoint between what is "essential" and the symbolic order.

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<sup>18</sup> Some poststructuralist feminist theorists argue that while strategic essentialism is a risk, it is one that should be taken in order to theorize the feminine as other that the opposite and less privileged complement to maleness (here the notion of feminine 'lack' is important). For a more in-depth understanding of the debate and the issues in employing strategic essentialism, refer to the 1993 work of Drucilla Cornell, *Transformations: Recollective imagination and sexual difference*, for explanations in favour, and Patricia Elliot's 1991 work, *From mastery to analysis: Theories of gender in psychoanalytic feminism*, for arguments in opposition.

<sup>19</sup> For Chodorow, mothering is one of the most significant phenomena that has consistently shaped the social community. In the introduction to one of her most famous works, *The reproduction of mothering* (1978), her premise is that the female act of mothering "is one of the few universal and enduring elements of the sexual division of labour" (p. 3). For Chodorow, the gestation period and birth are only the beginnings of the woman's 'commitment' to the social community.

## SEXUAL DIFFERENCE or SEXUATE DIFFERENCE

Irigaray explores essentialism through the idea of sexuata difference<sup>20</sup>. The concept of sexuata difference is foundational for Irigaray (as for Julia Kristeva) and replaces the concept of “gender” in her work. As she states in *I love to you*,

Without sexual difference, there would be no life on earth. It is the manifestation of the condition for the production and reproduction of life. Air and sexual difference may be the two dimensions vital for/to life. Not taking them into account would be a deadly business. (1996 [1992], p. 37)

Irigaray sees it as the necessary step for humankind to make in order to achieve authenticity of existence. In *Key writings* (2004) she defines sexuata difference as follows:

Sexuata difference means that man and woman do not belong to one and the same subjectivity, that subjectivity itself is neither neutral nor universal. From such a reality, it results that man and woman cannot meet together in the same world, unless one of them renounces their own subjectivity. The encounter between them requires the existence of two different worlds in which they could enter into relation or into communication after recognizing that they are irreducible the one to the other. Between man and woman a strangeness must subsist which corresponds to the fact that they dwell in different worlds. (p. xii)

Irigaray argues that the current social, cultural and symbolic order is premised on the lack of sexual difference. Irigaray argues that there is only one gender, the male gender, which is operating in a space where there should naturally be two (at least). Accordingly, the female gender is modeled after the male gender.

The lack of sexuata difference is symptomatic of the primacy of the Oedipal complex in society. In traditional (Freudian) psychoanalysis the Oedipal complex is applied to the woman in the same way it is applied to the man. Therefore, as man must symbolically slay the father to be with the mother (to desire the female), woman must in turn slay the mother to establish her desire for the father (heterosexual desire for a male). Where Irigaray differs psychoanalytically is in the primordial role she attaches to the child’s (male or female) linkage to the womb (the body of the mother). For Irigaray, we must understand that both children (psychoanalytically speaking) will be required to ‘slay the mother’ in order to establish themselves and their own distinct identity. It follows that women are, as men are, foundationally attracted to the female body. This is not to say that all men are necessarily heterosexual, and women necessarily homosexual. What this means is that there must be proper acknowledgement of the importance of the role of the feminine and the intimate female relationship (between women).

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<sup>20</sup> The term ‘sexuata’ difference sometimes appears as ‘sexual difference’ due to the translation of Irigaray’s work from French.

Accordingly, sexuate difference, once established or put in practice, will work to allow for women to develop as subjects (to be self-creating beings). With due respect given to the mother-linkage, women may be able to start imagining and creating themselves as subjects (by having a transcendent ideal in the mother) rather than being relegated to the status of object (as established and defined by men).

Moreover, women would not develop as subjects in the same sense that men do. Rather, it is this influence of the mother on the female child through their sameness and ability for continuation (the infinite and cyclical quality of childbirth and the necessary relationship of dependency) that makes women so singular and less amenable to the autonomous and anonymous self-development as subject.<sup>21</sup>

## **EXPLAINING MY USE OF IRIGARAY AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE**

Focus on the intersectionality of race and class is a necessary approach to thoroughly understand the differences of human experience in respect to a single issue. Yet, I concertededly avoid this level of analysis as I believe that the initial work must be to thoroughly examine the feminine. Therefore this project is *pre-postmodern*, as it addresses the important work in the course of female emancipation that remains unfinished or was pre-empted before completion. The project of forging a complete and deep/vast subjectivity/identity for women must be finished prior to a shift away from the male-female binary to examine the interplay of other layers of oppression. This is not to say that the binary is sacrosanct and that the dichotomous gender categories of male-female are all that exist. Rather, this is a caution against the tendency to automatically label the binary as a violent and exclusionary misconception while persisting to ignore that the “Feminine”/“female” has yet to be acknowledged and developed. While it is true that I do essentialize women, it is only because I see it as a necessary step to liberate the feminine rather than to continue to evade this initial oppression. To focus instead on layers of

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<sup>21</sup> Herein lies what I consider a new frontier to explore: how the subject became interwoven with the notion of autonomy. This is an issue that my research begins to touch on. To explain briefly (as this is something beyond the scope of this research project, perhaps to explore in a subsequent project) the act of caring/nurturing, and the essence of being “dependent” on another person (or of caring for dependents) is largely understood (both implicitly and explicitly) in our society as an undesirable behaviour. Autonomy is privileged above all else and the socio-political community aims to produce the autonomous, rational subject. It is possible that if two women are able to establish healthy (regardless of whether the relations are more symbiotic) ways of interacting, then it may serve as a model for a new type of interrelation, where dependency, and linkage is privileged over autonomy, or valued as autonomy is.

interlocking oppression of race and class is likely to allow the denial of the feminine to persist and become more entrenched.

In *Returning to Irigaray* (2007), a collection of essays edited by Miller, Schwab addresses the criticisms of Irigaray's claim of the priority of sexual difference above the effect of all other differences on our subjectivities. Here, heterosexism and sexual difference must not be confused.<sup>22</sup> Rather, it is that the female-male relationship is one of "ontological necessity in terms of the psychoanalytic necessity of the other, and not simply constitutive of sexual identity" (p. 11).

In Schwab's essay, *Reading Irigaray and her readers and the twenty-first century*, she writes:

The choice to live separately, apart from men and exclusively among women, is itself a choice that foregrounds the existence of two genders. It can effectively fulfill a generic identity, and define a community, but nonetheless owes a debt to sexual difference—not to heterosexuality, but sexual difference, which, again, is not dyadic, not about heterosexual couples, or couples at all, but about, in the words of Liz Grosz, "the right of the other to have its other." (2007, p. 42)

In fact, for Irigaray, sexual difference has nothing to do with sexual orientation (the choice of object of desire, whether that be homosexual or heterosexual love). What does matter is that sexual difference is necessary to achieve a universal change for relations between men and women and for relations man-to-man and woman-to woman. Sexual difference is based on the only real commonality that all people have—that they were born of the genetic material of both a mother and a father, and that they were gestated in a mother's womb.

Emily Zakin (in Miller, 2007) also dismisses the criticism of Irigaray's theory as reflective of the dominant, white, western, heteronormative perspective. In her essay, *Between two: Civil identity and the sexed subject of democracy*, she states:

Irigaray is thus attempting, with the idea of sexuate rights, to introduce the feminine into politics, and the body into language, in a way that does not simply position the feminine as the outside, the limit, the subversion of the political. It would thus be mistaken to assume that the idea of a feminine

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<sup>22</sup> For more in depth discussion on Irigaray's indictment for heteronormativity and for implying that the heterosexual love model is somehow more ethical and less self-involved than all other love models, please refer to Cheah and Grosz' "The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell, in Cheah et al (eds). 1998. *Diacritics, Vol 28, Issue 1 (Spring)*. You may also refer to Cornell separately in her 1998 work, *At the heart of freedom: Feminism, sex and equality*, in which she agreed with Butler's critique of Irigaray as not taking into account the variety of practices and differences among women. Finally, refer also to Judith Butler's (1990) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*.

For the counter discussion, please refer to Elizabeth Grosz' chapter "The hetero and the homo: The sexual ethics of Luce Irigaray" in Burke et al, (eds), *Engaging with Irigaray* (1994), New York: Columbia University Press. In this article, Grosz basically explains that Irigaray positions her argumentation in a way that all sexualities are on an even level. Grosz contends that Irigaray considers both heterosexuality and homosexuality as phallogocentric sexualities.

universal must imply a reversion to content over form, status instead of rights, substance rather than subject, to a closed concept of the feminine. By demanding rights as women and not as persons, Irigaray is not basing political claims on an essential or substantive identity, but on the formation of universality itself. In this way, she aims precisely to give form to a feminine subject. (2007, p.194)

The common feature for all women, irrespective of race, class, sexuality, age, is the inability to act and interact as subjects. The lack of sexual difference is the one universal that Irigaray has identified as common to all women (not just white western women). I focused on this now, rather than on the intersectionality of these elements. This is not to mean that this must not be analyzed and should not be accounted for in order to understand the variations of female abuse; it is intended to explain why an automatic dismissal of Irigaray as heterocentric and western focused is unfair and premature.<sup>23</sup>

Ann V. Murphy (in Miller, 2007) defends Irigaray's seemingly very narrow focus in *Beyond performativity and against 'identification': Gender and technology in Irigaray*. She explains that Irigaray has always and consistently privileged sexual difference over all other differences of race, class, religion, etc, and that only sexual difference merits status as truly "natural and universal" (2007, p. 80). For Irigaray, one can only justify sexual difference as it is the only constant across race, class and religious lines. In *I love to you: Sketch for a felicity within history*, she states

Without doubt, the most appropriate context for the universal is sexual difference. Indeed, this content is both real and universal. Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal. The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and nothing else. The problem of race is, in fact, a secondary problem...and the same goes for other cultural diversities—religious, economic, and political ones. Sexual difference probably represents the

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<sup>23</sup>While it is beyond the focus of my research, I feel that careful thought must be given the issue of an intersectional approach in women's studies, especially given that it is currently the most respected method in the field. Irigaray is often criticized for what seems to be an avoidance of cultural and racial differences. This concerted tendency of hers runs counter to the current third wave feminist perspectives which emphasize and indeed advocate the necessity of an intersectional approach to female emancipatory issues. Yet, it can be countered that Irigaray addresses these concerns and explains her choices in her work *Between east and west* (2002 [1997]). Basically Irigaray is saying that current society lacks the ability to recognize and respect differences (such as color, culture, language etc). Rather society feigns to do this by rendering all these differences "equal" – a tactic that really paints all differences with a brush of the same. There is indeed no neutrality or equality, merely erasure of the multiplicity of otherness. As Irigaray (1997) states in *Between east and west* (2002 [1997]): "To make the Black equal to the White, the woman equal to the man, is still to submit them, under cover of paternalist generosity to models put in place by Western man, who resists living together with the different. He even accepts becoming a little Black or a little female rather than going through a revolution of thinking that is today unavoidable (p.127)."

For a greater discussion of this, see Penelope Deutscher (2003): "Between east and west and the politics of cultural ingenuité': Irigaray of cultural difference."

most universal question we can address. Our era is faced with the task of dealing with this issue, because across the whole world...there are men and women. (1996 [1992], p. 47)<sup>24</sup>

That said, however, while Irigaray does emphasize the importance of sexual difference, she sees it as a starting point in what can be a new way to structure society and define ourselves. In *Sexes and genealogies* (1993c) Irigaray acknowledges that we need to question all the standards that are set as the norm— as “good” (and as a marker of civilization). She states:

Claims that men, races, sexes, are equal in point of fact signal a disdain or a denial for real phenomena and give rise to an imperialism that is even more pernicious than those that retain traces of difference. Today it is all too clear that there is no equality of wealth, and claims of equal rights to culture have blown up in our faces. All those who advocate equality need to come to terms with the fact that their claims produce a greater and greater split between the so-called equal units and those authorities or transcendencies used to measure or outmeasure them (...) Any woman who is seeking equality (with whom? with what?) needs to give this problem serious consideration. It is understandable that women should wish for equal pay, equal career opportunities. But what is their real goal? (1993c, p. vi)

Irigaray’s work demands that we perpetually question “who benefits” from the established social order, and this is a question that must be applied to the ways we address lesbian intimate partner violence, as to all established standards and conventions.

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<sup>24</sup> A note is required here on Irigaray’s position of transgendered identities, the notion of androgyny and performed gender identities. Ann Murphy, in her chapter in *Returning to Irigaray: feminist philosophy, politics, and the question of unity* (in Miller, 2007), calls out Irigaray for her “pernicious tone” and “forthright dismissal of discourses on androgyny, the neuter, performativity, and gender identification” (p. 77). Murphy explains that Irigaray is both angered and alarmed by the ways in which the neuter and the practice of androgyny try to achieve equality for women. (p.77). For Irigaray, these attempts are “doomed insofar as they are already complicit with misogynist cultural norms that render the specificity of the feminine invisible” (p.77). While I understand Irigaray’s position, and her commitment to the integrity of her thought, I think that Murphy is right in signaling the real danger that Irigaray invites when she closes the door so decisively to these “discourses that have given a voice to marginalized and oppressed sexual identities.” (p. 78). Murphy is particularly worried by one passage in which Irigaray (1996 [1992]) writes:

“Some of our prosperous and naïve contemporaries, women and men, would like to wipe out this difference by resorting to monosexuality, to the unisex, and to what is called identification: even if I am bodily a man or a woman, I can identify with, and so be, the other sex. This new opium of the people annihilates the other in the illusion of a reduction to identity, equality, and sameness, especially between man and woman, the ultimate anchorage of real alterity” (p. 61-62).

Here, Irigaray easily sounds phobic. What I think, given the sum of her writings, is that she believes not that transgenderism, performativity, and transsexualism are wrong, but that in the current social order, they can be counterproductive—a hindrance to female emancipation, and that they merely serve the male patriarchal order by mimicking and reproducing the predominant order.

But here I think that Irigaray needs to be more careful. What does she propose then for those humans that are transgender or androgynous. Is she asking them to “wait” until what she considers the more important work of inscribing sexual difference is in motion before the practice of androgyny and performativity can be genuine and creative? Is this right to ask? I think that Irigaray would be more productive if she worked to highlight the problems of active feminist strategies that advocate these practices rather than vilifying the *individuals* that do. I believe that while an Irigarayan perspective may be interpreted as vilifying transgendered peoples (for instance) a feminist perspective that can be interpreted as forcing transgendered people to choose and classify themselves as on one side of the gender spectrum of the other may be equally destructive.

## SECTION I – LITERATURE REVIEW

*This literature review focuses almost exclusively on categorizing the existing data on female-female intimate partner violence. I have chosen not to include a survey of the psychoanalytic theory or the writings of the key theorists I use to analyze the phenomenon of female intimate partner violence as I consider this to be part of my research section. This is largely owing to the fact that the psychoanalytic framework I apply to the issue of lesbian partner abuse, especially the essentialist aspects I focus on, is not addressed in any of the existing written material. In the available literature, female intimate partner violence is mostly explored from a socio-psychological, or socio-cultural lens. This tendency, I think, has led to a lack of analysis of the issue, and I feel that psychoanalysis may fill this gap.*

*On the topic of lesbian domestic abuse most research and literature can be categorized along four main categories: listing the data and statistics; describing the abuse using testimonials from victims; interpreting the silence on the issue and discussing strategies to draw out a marginalized population; descriptions of services, service providers and shelters. Much of the literature is from the counseling and feminist perspectives. None of the literature attempts to address causal factors of abuse from outside of the typical power and control model, and none of the literature really tries to explore how the nature of intimacy between women may relate to the experience of violence. This literature review reflects these tendencies.*

A preliminary review of the literature and research on the issue of domestic violence in the lesbian intimate partnership indicates that few statistics are available on the rates and types of violence experienced in the lesbian relationship, and are from varied methodologies (including quantitative, qualitative, participatory action research, and mixed studies). The dearth of research on the topic is due not just to undercurrents of homophobia, internalized homophobia and heterosexism in the academy, but to more tangible causes such as a basic non-recognition by certain social institutions of the legitimacy of same-sex couples. As Carolyn West (1998) indicates, for a long time, police units and government statistics did not

even gather information on same-sex couples (p. 165). Moreover, from within the GLBTQ community, efforts have historically been concentrated in fighting hate crimes and discrimination. Attracting further stigma to the GLBTQ community by signaling a dysfunction was considered counterproductive to acceptance by wider society (West, 1998, p. 166).

Available research designates rates of abuse that are, at a minimum, comparable to heterosexual and gay male statistics, but are in major part, significantly higher. It is important to note that research on the issue is a recent undertaking, and collection of data began only in the early nineties (McClennen, Daley, & Summers, 2002; Ristock, 2003). There is also no consensus on definitions of abuse to use; some focus on physical violence, others also account for emotional and psychological abuse (Burke & Follingstad, 1999). As stated by Burke & Follingstad (1999), “researchers in this area have often failed to distinguish between various forms of abuse, (...) and by not knowing how the researchers or participants have defined abuse, construct validity is limited” (p. 490).

Generally, the range of abuse in lesbian couples is estimated to be between 17% and 52% (Ristock, 2002, p. 10). Lockhart, White, Causby, and Isaac (1994) studied 284 lesbians and learnt that 31% of them identified as having been the victim in the past year of physical abuse at the hand of a female partner. Coleman (1994) reported that 46% of the 90 female-female intimate partnerships she studied experienced violence in their relationships. Yet given the severe underreporting on the violence,<sup>25</sup> some research contends that rates are estimated to hover around the range of 70% or higher (Elliot, 1996), as indicated in the extensive Lie et al study (1991), where 169 lesbians were surveyed, and 73% reported experiencing some type of domestic violence in a lesbian relationship. In another study authored by Lie and Gentlewarrior (1991), of nearly 1100 self-identified lesbians surveyed at the Michigan Womyn's music festival, 52% indicated being abused physically, emotionally and/or sexually in previous female-female intimate relationships.

In addition, abusive relationships are also reported to be long in duration (1-5 years and up) with abuse surfacing early in the relationship (within the first 6 months) (Renzetti, 1989).

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<sup>25</sup> The problem of underreporting is also conflated by the fact that many women in intimate relationships with women will not identify as lesbians (or as bisexual) and may not report abuse at the hands of a partner. Some lesbians will also not report abuse if they fought back in any way or if they were abusive at any point in the relationship as well (Waldron, 1996).

Moreover, patterned battery was significant, as over half of the lesbians reported that during the relationship, the abuse totaled 10 or more incidents (Renzetti, p. 159). The types of abuse reported by women in lesbian relationships vary and are not limited to emotional and/or psychological abuse, which is the predominant perception of female violence (Renzetti, 1989).

Theoretical writings and social scientific studies are extremely sparse. As stated by Vickers (1996), there is a “silence that encapsulates same-sex domestic violence,” which figures as a central theme and concern in existing research on the subject (Vickers, 2001, para. 4; see also Merrill, 1996; (McClennen, Daley, & Summers, 2002; Ristock, 2003; West, 2002). Researchers articulate that while the social sciences have long undertaken the study of partner battery in heterosexual relationships, there is still a dramatic gap in knowledge and research of gay relationships, specifically lesbian relationships (Burke & Follingstad, 1999; (McClennen, Daley, & Summers, 2002; West, 2002). As McClennen, Daley, & Summers (2002) found, the void in published works translates into limited resources for social workers “in assessing and providing appropriate intervention with lesbians experiencing abusive relationships” (p. 277-278). The lack is attributed to “discrimination, most notably homophobia, the irrational fear and hatred of lesbians, and heterosexism, or the belief that heterosexuality is normative” (West, 2002, p. 122). These factors have significant influence on societal conceptions of partner violence, even penetrating the lesbian community to the extent that the community often rejects its occurrence for fear of perpetuating stigmatization (West, 2002, p. 122, see also McClennen, Daley, & Summers, 2002). There is also the raised level of isolation that, as Elliott (1996) indicates, battered gays and lesbians contend with due to an often missing layer of civil rights protection and protection in the legal system. According to Elliot, the reality is that “gay and lesbian victims are beaten by their lovers and then re-victimized by the state” (p.5). This in turn leads to an implicit/tacit practice of accepting the abuse because “being victimized by their lover is less frightening than being victimized by the system” (Elliott, 1996, p. 5). Conflating the issue of what Gregory Merrill (1996) labels the “outright refusal of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities to organize around this issue” is the dominant domestic violence theory which avoids delving into possible explanations of same-sex domestic violence (p. 10).

Heteronormative categories and concepts have, up until now, dominated the field of domestic violence research, while the feminist fight against patriarchy has politically directed the domestic violence movement. It follows that much of the limited literature that acknowledges lesbian abuse has not even begun to address certain particularities of violence in the lesbian relationship (Burke & Follingstad, 1999). These nuances include differences/variations in abusive acts, as well as the interaction of layers of shame, social stigma, and isolation. Rather, most research indicates an overwhelming bias toward looking for similarities and defining lesbian relationships and experiences in terms of male-female traits (Poorman & Seelau, 2001). This may partially be the result of the fact that the typical feminist lens, which assumes that men are naturally more violent and controlling than women (presumed to be naturally more caring, nurturing and mutually oriented/ symbiotic), and thereby are more prone to be aggressors in relationships (Burke & Follingstad, 1999; Elliott, 1996; Merrill, 1996). For instance, service providers and police agencies, as do many researchers, use the butch femme-dynamic as explanations for violence in the lesbian partnership or as the primary categories of partners from which to evaluate abuse between lesbian partners. Here, the heteronormative assumption is that the butch expresses and embodies male traits and must therefore be the aggressor, in emulation of the heterosexual couple. There is a need for more research that is directed at the lesbian partnership's abuser-abused dynamic without relying on heteronormative assumptions of butch-femme. Research must also be aimed at discerning whether the existence of gender-roles in the lesbian relationship do influence the patterns of abuse. If so, researchers must examine to what extent, as well as how internalized homophobia and heterosexism by lesbians affects the experiencing of abuse by lesbians performing different gender roles (i.e., the shame that inhibits reporting abuse, seeking help, and the likelihood that a butch will report battery or sexual assault by her femme partner).

These heteronormative assumptions are a by-product (a relic) of the second-wave feminist led domestic violence movement—the major proponent of the analysis of domestic violence as “a gender-based phenomenon, a socially-based illness used as a tool of the patriarchy to keep women down” (Merrill, 1996, p. 11). A related effect is that the domestic violence movement is being used as a tool to fight sexism, thereby excluding gays and lesbians

(Elliott, 1996, p. 6). Presumably, it is because lesbian violence does not fit nicely into the feminist model of male violence that lesbian battery is systematically excluded.

Internalized homophobia by the lesbian community has also contributed to a concerted and political avoidance of research on this issue (Ristock, 2003; Vickers, 1996). As Ristock argues, “there is always the fear that publicly acknowledging this issue will fuel negative stereotypes that pathologize lesbians (and by association, gay men)” (Ristock, 2003, p. 329; Elliott, 1996; Merrill, 1996). There is also the undercurrent which expresses an anxiety that a focus on female domestic violence will undermine and hinder feminist work to counter patriarchy and male violence against women (Ristock, 1997; Ristock, 2003; Vickers, 1996).

In some more recent research projects we see attention being increasingly drawn to the abuser-abused dynamic in lesbian partnerships. This is part of a move away from traditional feminist discourse as the primary lens of analysis for a more gender-neutral model. This is done on the premise that there are common factors of power and control in all abuse dynamics that are experienced similarly by individuals, irrespective of gender. Here, gender is considered significant only insofar as it adds a layer of “social oppression as a factor” (Ristock, 2001, p. 61). Part of this assumption focuses on the effects of abuse as they are felt by the individuals. Yet, there is a misleading simplicity in linking abuse in all types of relationships into a single category of study.

This move toward a gender-neutral lens also translates into a focus on the individual character (personality traits) of the abuser, assuming that the aggressor will naturally exhibit controlling tendencies, overt aggression. (Poorman & Seelau, 2001). The gender-neutral framework also aims for a type of inclusion, idealizing a framework where the domestic violence movement and the gay rights movement work together to address what is understood as a common problem (Istar, 1996).

## **AREAS OF CONTROVERSY IN THE LITERATURE**

In conducting this literature review, I found that research on the subject is noticeably limited for political and logistical reasons. Most often, researchers have relied on “small, self-selected, non-random samples, which are often recruited from one geographical location, [...] or who were contacted through lesbian social and friendship networks” (West, 2002, p.122). There is also indication that there is severe overrepresentation of educated white middle class lesbians that are “out” and comfortable with their sexual orientation (Renzetti,

1989; West, 2002; Burke & Follingstad, 1999). Concerted effort must be made to draw from the stories of other lesbians and of other cultural backgrounds and ethnicities (West, 2002, p. 123). There is also space to delve further, and examine how intersectionality of race, class, and religion, alters/nuances the experience of abuse. Interlocking oppression analysis could be a beneficial tool, as it might help to elucidate the many ways in which lesbian abuse differs significantly from heterosexual or gay-male abuse.<sup>26</sup> One of the most notable differences is the way that the abuser may further isolate her partner by playing on the external world's homophobia, as well as her partner's own internalized homophobia as a psychological control tactic (West, 2002, p. 123; see also Merrill, 1996). This would include threatening to "out" her partner to various segments of her partner's social life, such as to her co-workers or family.

Mutual battery, or mutual abuse, is an understudied and highly contentious issue in the lesbian literature on domestic violence. Often, gay and lesbian domestic violence is defined as a control issue. In the definition of gay and lesbian domestic violence that Elliot (1996) provides, abuse is "not a gender issue, but a power issue" (p. 3). Accordingly, perpetrators are people who "given the opportunity to get away with abusing their partners will do so because they hunger for control over some part of their lives, lives over which they feel they have no control" (p. 3). Following from this definition, many researchers, including Elliott (1996) address mutual battery by stating that the dynamics of same-sex abuse are similar to those of heterosexual abuse with one very important and troubling difference: "that the opportunity to abuse goes both ways with lesbians and gay men (...) both partners have the opportunity to get away with battering in same-sex relationships" (p.4-5). While it may be true that the "power base can shift in same-sex relationships" (Elliott, 1996, p.5) it is unclear that the reason for this is the partners' shared gender and the absence of the automatic and identifiable gender differential that is typically considered the basis for abuse in the

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<sup>26</sup> While interlocking oppression analysis is an important tool which should be applied, it is my argument in this paper that initial analysis should be focused on re-inscribing alterity in an Irigararian sense prior to engaging in examinations of intersectionality. As will be explained further on in this paper, until there are two sexes (and not simply in a nominal sense), and women can develop as proper subjects, then it verges on counter-productivity to move beyond female oppression to view the interrelations of other layers of oppression. I feel that while this is a necessary step in understanding the complexities of oppression, this can sometimes be interpreted and function as implicit consent of the cultural order as organised with the male sex as the fundamental referent. In this model, women, irrespective of race, class, or religion, all exist only as complementary and contrasting objects to the male subject.

heterosexual relationship. There may be another explanation for this, particularly in lesbian relationships, and this reinforces the probability that lesbian battering is a different phenomenon in light of the significantly high statistical reports on lesbian intimate partner battering.

It is widely revealed in the literature that there is a significant and highly controversial debate on mutual battering in lesbian relationships. Most researchers consider mutual battery between lesbians as a mislabeling of self-defense (or self-defending victims) (West, 2002; Burke & Follingstad, 1999). The preference for classifying mutual battering as “self-defense” stems partially from the logistical constraints in conducting research on the topic. As stated by Burke & Follingstad (1999), “it is necessary to separate victims from perpetrators in order to accurately estimate the prevalence of abuse” (p. 491). In practice as well, among service providers, the notion of the need to separate batterer from victim is also prevalent. As Istar (1996) indicates, this reflects the domestic violence movement’s stance against sexism, when the rationale for the separation of victim and batterer was “protecting and empowering the battered woman” (p. 95). This tendency by domestic violence service providers (shelters, information providers, clinics, etc.) to definitively indicate a distinct victim and abuser does not reflect the possible ambiguity of the lesbian relationship.

For other researchers, this categorization is a theoretical decision. As indicated by West (2002), “lesbian battering is seldom reciprocal violence; rather, it involves a primary aggressor and victim” (p. 124). She asserts that it is difficult to discern victim from aggressor, as the victim may often become withdrawn and/or blame herself for fighting back or acting in self-defense. It follows that much of what *is* written about mutual battering in lesbian relationships is primarily centered on the notion of “self-defending victims” rather than “mutual combatants” (Marrujo & Kreger, 1996, p. 25).

Some research even upholds the notion that mutual abuse is a homophobic misinformation tactic intended to keep the gay and lesbian community from accessing help. As Elliott (1996) indicates, “mutual abuse or mutual combat are designed to prevent battered gays and lesbians from receiving services” (p. 4). While mutual abuse remains a contentious issue, it must be further studied. As indicated by numerous researchers, mutual abuse is a

prevalent phenomenon in lesbian relationships<sup>27</sup>, regardless of whether it is considered “fighting back” or reciprocal “battery” (Marrujo & Kreger, 1996; Renzetti, 1989; Ristock, 2002). As indicated in more recent research on the issue, rates of reciprocal violence (mutual abuse) are very high in the lesbian dyad (Balsam & Syzmanski, 2005; see also Renzetti, 1992)

### **GAPS IN THE RESEARCH**

The most substantial gap in the literature is in the development of theories of why abuse and violence occurs in the lesbian relationship. Many researchers express a clear intention in their research to refrain from addressing “theories of causation” (Vickers, 1996, para. 6). This implicit ban (upheld it seems by convention) is, arguably, due to a real fear to attract stigma to a marginalized community, and also a fear to alienate, infuriate, and endanger that community. This paralysis of exploration into theories of causation has real consequences and extends into the academic world. Rather, researchers overwhelmingly commit to focus on the aspects that are critical to breaking the silence on the problem, enhancing support services, and shaping policy (Ristock, 2002; Vickers, 1996).

While outing the problem of female partner violence is the absolute necessary first step to progress toward community health, the development of policy and the resulting services for women in violent situations cannot be undertaken without an honest understanding of the nature of the issue. Here, there is a lacking will to take a critical look at the bigger picture and at the primary assumptions that underlie all gendered theories of violence. The literature review indicated that often in the domestic violence movement, gendered violence is assumed to be about power and control (even between women, it is thought to result from patriarchy and internalized homophobia). Yet, there are other theories to consider. This

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<sup>27</sup> In much of the domestic violence literature, mutual abuse between women is denied, or explained instead as a phenomenon of self-defense. Further on in this paper, mutual abuse will be explained from a psychoanalytic perspective. The theories of Irigaray will be used to examine how sexual (in)difference has contributed to an underdevelopment of feminine identity. Sexual indifference operates in two ways. First, rather than be modeled after a feminine ideal, female identity has been faceted from male identity. Consequently, women are able to interact only as objects and do not interrelate as autonomous subjects. Second, women have great difficulty in severing the ties to the maternal. This leads them to see in their female partners—their mothers. The female intimate relationship approximates the initial unity experienced in the mother’s womb, but cannot replicate it. This may contribute to a more depressive and more conflictual type of love between women. Accordingly, this research will focus on the occurrence of mutual abuse, and will define it as a “lashing out”. The idea of “lashing out” is not to be confused with mutual battery; it is not based on the misconception that same-sex partners abuse each other because they have similar stature. Rather, it is symptomatic of the identity conflict of women that is intensified when they interrelate intimately.

research will contend that, between two intimate women, partner violence is the result of the female individual's identity conflict. These theories are not really engaged with as the notion that relationship violence is the same phenomenon across the board and across sex and gender predominates. In the existing research there is the occasional mention of the sense of merger or fusion that two intimate women experience. This interdependence and thick intimacy is only superficially explained as contributing to the lack of separate identity and autonomy between female partners, which may lead to relationship conflict (Renzetti C. , 1992; see also West C. M., 1998). Here a post-structural psychoanalytic approach into understanding the intimacy between two women might be highly beneficial and may lead to a more refined and more resonant theory of violence between women.

Also requiring further study is why partner abuse—especially among the lesbian community— is ignored, why its severity is minimized, or why certain aspects of it are concertedly denied. As has been mentioned, existing literature focuses on heteronormativity and internalized as well as external homophobia. However, while there is a general reluctance to acknowledge and intervene in the egg-like universe of the intimate same-sex relationship, this reluctance is exponentially enhanced due to the call for privacy that is woven into the civil rights movement. The privacy argument was one of the principle routes chosen to obtain equal rights. This issue is not dealt with in the literature at all, except by Vickers, who only superficially addresses the same-sex reliance on the 'privacy arguments' and how such an approach "leaves untouched institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism and may serve to inhibit open discussion of same sex abuse" (Vickers, 1996, para. 26).<sup>28</sup>

Health Canada (1998) echoes that women are enveloped by the larger Canadian social context in which misogyny and homophobia are prevalent. These oppressive elements and the mechanisms by which they are internalized must be considered when trying to establish an accurate representation of the experience of abuse in lesbian relationships. As explained by the Department,

(...) in our society, women often experience being devalued or seen as sexual objects or property. Lesbians are often ostracized, discriminated against and seen as sexual deviants, threatening the social and moral fabric of patriarchal society. This may be in addition to and

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<sup>28</sup> Further research into how the civil rights movement may serve to suppress and marginalize the particularities of the lesbian relationship would be interesting to pursue. There is much value, not just for gay rights, but for other marginalized populations as well, to understanding how a larger social movement deals with particularities and inconsistencies in their broad message (political message) as a result of the groups they include.

interwoven with racist and classist discrimination against some lesbians. These reinforcing ideologies of oppression are internalized by all of us – lesbians, gays and heterosexuals. [...] Anger, fear and rage can be misdirected at partners who can come to represent the things we have been taught to hate in ourselves and fear in our culture where heterosexist and misogynist views exist. (1998, p. 7)

Accordingly, there are several additional areas to explore in order to develop a viable theory on the phenomenon of violence in the intimate lesbian relationship.

## **CONCLUSION OF LITERATURE REVIEW**

Given the assumed intimacy of the lesbian relationship due to the assumed (or real) effects of the inculturation/socialization process of women), the abuse may be more penetrating (if abuse is indeed about intimacy). Moreover, although data on lesbian partner abuse is sparse, the research that is available indicates that the lesbian community experiences higher rates of abuse than heterosexual and gay male couples. There is also evidence of a high rate of mutual battering among lesbians. In light of these two issues, it seems that abuse in lesbian relationships is an altogether different phenomenon than that of gay-male and heterosexual relationships and must be studied accordingly. Further research would benefit from the eschewal of a feminist perspective, while employing a psychoanalytically based, gender-specific (and as this paper will argue indeed even a sexuality-specific approach). This approach will allow us to engage more effectively with the marginal theories and less acknowledged findings on lesbian partner abuse and intimacy (such as mutual abuse, or abuse without clear power differentials/ dynamics), which is critical to a full understanding violence between lesbians. As McClennen, Daley, & Summers (2002) note, a fuller and more nuanced knowledge of the issue is the first step to developing positive services; “the scarcity of knowledge about lesbian partner abuse often results in their receiving inappropriate, and even harmful assessment and treatment” (p. 278).

## **SECTION II – EXPLAINING SOME KEY DEFINITIONS AND PSYCHONALYTIC CONCEPTS**

*This section does two things. First it addresses the way abuse is defined and studied. I provide the standard definition of partner abuse and indicate the disconnect between the definition of abuse and what the experience of abuse between women suggests. Then I redefine “abuse” in a way that makes more sense for the female-female intimate partnership. Second, I provide definitions of some key psychoanalytic concepts that are central to the thesis and I link them to the issue of female-female partner abuse.*

### **THE (RE)DEFINITION OF ABUSE**

The Canadian government-endorsed definition of abuse is “a pattern of behaviour in which physical violence and/or emotional coercion is used to gain or maintain power or control in a relationship, and a single incident of assault also constitutes abuse” (Health Canada, 1998, p. 9). Given the intriguing and dramatically different findings on abuse rates and types of abuse (i.e., ‘mutual abuse’, which I rename ‘reciprocal violence’), it is necessary to contextualize this definition within a lesbian relationship. For lesbians, perhaps the notion of partner violence would be more appropriate, as the phenomenon of mutual abuse seems to indicate that control and domination, while existing factors in lesbian partner violence, may not be the primary characteristics. Rather, for lesbians, there are strong indicators that control is not necessarily the chief end and that the violence may often be primarily intended to inflict hurt/pain either emotionally, psychologically, physically, or to “lash out” (a seemingly spontaneous retaliation). Moreover, often there is no clear or set power differential in the lesbian relationship—the power circulates and is appropriated by each partner at different moments. Turell and Cornell-Swanson (2005) have adapted a definition of domestic abuse in the same-sex relationship that may be applied to the female-female intimate relationship. According to them, intimate partner violence is defined as “encompassing physical, verbal, or sexual acts that are experienced as a threat, invasion, or assault, and that have the effect of hurting or degrading one’s partner” (p. 72).

Also, as Ristock (2002) notes, the category of lesbian partner abuse should be “broadened to “woman to woman abuse” which would take the limiting emphasis off lesbians, be more inclusive of bisexual and queer women, and force all women to look at their own propensity for violence” ( p. 4) She argues that this new category is necessary to “challenge the dominant feminist analysis of violence against women in intimate relationships, which most often assumes a male perpetrator and sees the roots of violence in patriarchy and misogyny” (p. 4). She argues that, accordingly, the phenomenon of lesbian partner abuse is seen as necessarily contradictory, or as “internalized misogyny and homophobia” (p. 4). This change is also important as it indicates that the conflict between women is not limited to their intimate partners (to lovers) but that the tension, albeit to varying degrees, may exist between mothers and daughters, sisters, and friends. This re-labeling may also, I hope, dispel some of the fear from the GLBTTQ community over drawing attention to (signaling) a “problem” that overwhelmingly affects lesbians. Using a more inclusive term will publicly announce, in a manner of speaking, that the issue of female-female intimate violence is something that may affect all women and that may require a change in all women to address.<sup>29</sup>

While I agree with Ristock’s redefinition of lesbian abuse to “woman to woman abuse,” I would argue for another subtle change—that “abuse” becomes “violence.” Given the way that “abuse” is generally and primarily correlated with power dynamics in the commonly circulated definitions, it is appropriate to establish a clean break from the term. Here I mean that the word ‘abuse’ most often connotes the domestic violence movement’s model of contrasting victim and perpetrator. Within this model, the two categories appear to be presented as mutually exclusive. As will be address later in this research paper, female-female intimate violence seems to exhibit less clear categories of victim and perpetrator. This difference between the typical domestic violence model will need to be examined. Moreover, using the term ‘violence’ is more suited given the prevalence (rather than “predominance”) of the phenomenon of

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<sup>29</sup> The linkages between female intimate partner violence and the feminine sex (taken as a whole) are explored in the psychoanalytic section of this paper, focusing heavily on the theories of Irigaray and Kristeva.

“mutual abuse.” Finally, psychoanalytical study of female identity and intimacy indicate that the love of women, given the specific formation of our subjectivities and our relations to our mothers,<sup>30</sup> are always somewhat conflicted (by virtue of being inherently most intimate), and therefore may prone to violent interpersonal exchanges.

In this project, “mutual abuse” is also included in the category of woman-to-woman violence (female intimate partner violence), and as per the consideration applied to the term “abuse”, it is re-termed ‘female-female reciprocal violence’, ‘intimate female reciprocal violence’ or woman to woman reciprocal violence.

## INTERPRETATION AND USE OF KEY PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPTS

### THE OEDIPAL COMPLEX AS THE PERSISTANT UNDERPINNING OF MODERN WESTERN SOCIETY

Although the Oedipal complex is no longer widely used or accepted across all psychoanalytical schools (save perhaps for French psychoanalysis), It must still be recognized for its subtle but concrete influence and underpinning of our western social system. The term “Oedipal complex”<sup>31</sup> was coined by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and references the Greek myth of Oedipus.<sup>32</sup> In a broad sense, it refers to the basic sexual attraction of a child toward the parent of opposite sex, and a feeling of ambivalence and resentment toward the parent that shares the child’s sex. The Oedipal complex generally surfaces in the phallic stage of the child’s psychosexual development, around three to five years of age. For Freud, the occurrence of the Oedipal complex is integral to the development of all relationships between people. Generally, the Oedipal complex is made in reference to male psychosexual development, but it is largely believed by psychoanalysts to apply equally to the female.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> According to Irigaray, this phrase should be reworded to mean the lack of subjectivity formation, as she contends that women are formed as objects in the male symbolic order. This aspect of her theory will be addressed in detail in the forthcoming section on sexual/sexuate difference.

<sup>31</sup> For more on the Oedipus theory, see Freud’s *Totem and taboo* (1946) and Freud’s *Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis*, (1962). For an in-depth case study on the Oedipal complex, see the section on “Little Hans” in Freud (1977) *Case histories: ‘Dora’ and ‘Little Hans’*

<sup>32</sup> In the Greek myth of Oedipus Rex as told by Sophocles, Oedipus is said have unknowingly killed his father, King Laius, and married his mother, Jocasta.

<sup>33</sup> Occasionally, in its application to a girl’s psychosexual development, it is termed the Electra complex. The Electra complex was developed by Carl Jung.

Feminist psychoanalysts<sup>34</sup> often criticize the Freudian understanding of the Oedipal complex for being far too phallogentric to carry weight in its application to women. As applied to the girl child, the Oedipal complex is the result of the female child's realization that her little penis (the clitoris) has been castrated by her mother. She then develops penis envy and turns to her father (to a male object) in order to vicariously appropriate his penis (either through intercourse and/or eventually by giving birth to a baby).

It can be argued that Irigaray subverts the phallogentrism of Freud's Oedipal complex by indicating how the female sex organ is singular and utterly unlike the male penis. Therefore, the experience of having the female anatomy is utterly singular and would in no way be evocative of that of the male. Irigaray argues through much of her philosophical work that the female anatomy ("this sex which is not one") is constituted of two lips, which are continuous and touch continually. The female child never experiences penis envy because what she experiences by virtue of her anatomy is a constant relationship with her mother. Irigaray's exploration of the female sex organ renders Freud's focus on female castration secondary to the female ability for the infinite (the continuous aspect of two lips touching themselves). The notion of there being a feminine 'lack' is rendered slightly ridiculous when we consider Irigaray's description of the female sex (all throughout *This sex which is not one*) as self-pleasuring, continuous, and continually evoking an 'other' (the mother).

One of the important pieces of the Oedipal stage of development is the infant's initial linkage to the mother's body (from gestation and from birth). Freud contends that irrespective of gender, the child has a primordial psychological bond with the mother. In response to the incest taboo and in order to reproduce social ties (namely to replicate the family unit) the male child must repudiate his mother and accept a new female object. To adhere to social and cultural mores, the female child must psychologically slay the mother altogether, and thereby cast the mother into abjection.

The prevalence of Freud's Oedipal theory rests on how generally accepted the symbolic cultural order is. The Oedipal complex seems to serve the current heteronormative order which reifies the heterosexual family. When the Oedipal stage is overcome, the child is also losing his capacity (or tolerance) for the basics of intimacy, dependency, and care toward the

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<sup>34</sup> See Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Nancy Chodorow for expanded discussion and criticism of Freud.

weak and fragile.<sup>35</sup> All these qualities become therefore associated with the female body, with the mother who was forsaken. It is then conceivable that the male child will denigrate those people that display these characteristic (mostly women) and that the female child will self-loathe and exhibit misogynistic tendencies. If one accepts that that model is the way that ‘civilized’ society ought to be, then the Oedipal complex is logically sound. Eyal Chowers (2000) interprets Freud’s Oedipal complex as supporting social reality and shaping the individual to being more adaptive to their social and cultural circumstances (p. 24). She states:

The complex breeds a new psychic agency, the super-ego, which thereafter represents social demands for normalization and decisively limits the freedom of self-formation. The super-ego has the essential role of directing, motivating, inhibiting, and censoring the individual according to imposed expectations and prohibitions; the Oedipus complex, in fact, could be seen as a generic narrative that defines normalcy in terms of the symbolic subordination of the ego to the super-ego, and the self to its civilization. More precisely: while Freud condemns certain aspects of modern civilization, his self psychology categorizes escapes from its grip as a pathology. (p. 24)

Feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow criticizes Freud’s formulation of the Oedipal complex for its simplicity and inherent contradiction. In *Feminism and psychoanalytic theory* (1989), she draws attention to the “asymmetry in the feminine and masculine Oedipus complex” (p. 69) stating:

According to psychoanalytic theory, heterosexual erotic orientation is the primary outcome of the Oedipus complex for both sexes. Boys and girls differ in this, however. Boys retain one primary love object throughout their boyhood. For this reason, the development of masculine heterosexual object choice is relatively continuous. In theory, the boy resolves his Oedipus complex by repressing his attachment to his mother. He is therefore ready in adulthood to find a primary relationship with someone like his mother (p.68-69).

The contradiction lies in the female child’s development and Chodorow indicates here that the concepts of “normalized” and “normative” have been confused in Freudian psychoanalysis. The underlying judgment (or major assumption) is that heterosexual love is the desired goal (in Freudian psychoanalysis heterosexuality is a “developmental goal”) (p. 69). Because the girl’s first love object is a woman, she must reassign her object choice to her father and men, generally, in order to continue her “proper heterosexual orientation” and develop as male children do (p. 69).

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<sup>35</sup> This analysis of the effects of the Oedipal complex resonates given the way modern western society approaches the issue of caring for dependents. Work in the fields that involve contact with the vulnerable segments of society, such as health care (nursing), care for the elderly, child care and mothering are always viewed as lesser pursuits (as jobs that necessitate less education, less training, and which should be remunerated at a much lesser rate). To read more about the discussion of the notion of dependency in modern Western society, refer to Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) work *The reproduction of mothering*.

It is important to engage with a more sociological interpretation of the development of sexuality, and Chodorow is useful here. Chodorow tells us not only that the shift to a heterosexual love-object innately difficult for the female child, but she cites sociologist Miriam Johnson's work to explain that this shift requires the emotional and physical input of the father. This type of input has been historically absent in industrial capitalist society.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, if the female child shifts her choice of love-object to her father she still does not exclude her mother.

Instead, the girl retains and builds upon her pre-Oedipal tie to her mother (an intense tie characterized by primary identification – a sense of oneness; primary love – not differentiating between her own and her mother's interests; and extensive dependence) together with Oedipal attachments to both her mother and her father. These latter are characterized by eroticized demands for exclusivity, feelings of competition and jealousy. She retains the (internalized) early relationship, including the implications for the nature of her unconscious but fundamental definition of self in relationship, and internalizes these other relationships in addition, not as replacement. (p. 69).

When the female tries to transfer her love to her father and men, it is more of a strategy to break from the "original experience of oneness" with her mother. As Chodorow (1989) explains:

Oedipal love for the mother, then, contains a threat to selfhood which love for the father never does. Love for the father, in fact, is not simply the natural emergence of heterosexuality. Rather, it is an attempt on the girl's part to break her primary unity and dependence (p. 71).

What Chodorow adds to the psychoanalytic understanding of female development relates to the lesbian dyad in an important way. First, Chodorow intimates that from a sociological (socio-psychological) perspective, the conditions by which the female child may feasibly shift her object choice to the male do not significantly materialize in modern western society. This challenges the common understanding of heterosexuality as normal. Second, in critiquing the role and effect of the Oedipal complex on women, she suggests that the one predictable element in female development is the tendency to hold on to the mother and develop symbiotic attachments to women, resulting in a persistent fluidity of identity between women – an identity, as Irigaray indicates, that "is not one", but that blurs the boundaries between two people.

The significance of this understanding of the Oedipal complex and female development is immense for the problem of female intimate partner violence. It can help explain how intimate partner violence may be the result of an identity conflict between women. If two

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<sup>36</sup> For more discussion on the social psychological role of the father in industrial capitalist society, see Miriam Johnson, "Fathers, mothers, and sex-typing," *Sociological Inquiry*, 45 (1975) pp. 15-26

women have difficulty differentiating between themselves then there may be a crisis of self-definition for the two women. It also points to the tension that women feel between the high value that society places on the development of personal autonomy and the attachment that the female preserves to the mother.

### THE RELATION TO THE MOTHER AS TABOO

Taboos are prohibitions or restrictions that were at one time communally defined, and that are now upheld and perpetuated by the structure of a social community. Over time, the origin of the taboo dissipates from the collective memory and it is passed unconsciously between people. The transfer of the taboo is achieved through legal rules, political ideas and semiotics and the structure of languages. In *Totem and taboo* (1946) Freud writes an account of the history of taboo and demonstrates how it mirrors the compulsive prohibition (as a psychological neurosis). He states

Taboos are very ancient prohibitions which at one time were forced upon a generation of primitive people from without, that is, they probably were forcibly impressed upon them by an earlier generation. These prohibitions concerned actions for which there existed a strong desire. The prohibitions maintained themselves from generation to generation, perhaps only as the result of a tradition set up by paternal and social authority. But in later generations they have perhaps already become “organized” as a piece of inherited psychic property. Whether there are such “innate ideas” or whether these have brought about the fixation of the taboo by themselves or by co-operating with education, no one could decide about the particular case in question. (p. 43)

Freud considers the most important taboo—the foundational element of modern human society—to be the prohibition of incest (the incest taboo). Freud bases his theory of incest prohibition on the findings of Frazer, and he relays Frazer’s explanation as follows:

The law only forbids men to do what their instincts incline them to do; what nature itself prohibits and punishes it would be superfluous for the law to prohibit and punish. (...) Instead of assuming therefore, from the legal prohibition of incest, that there is a natural aversion to incest we ought rather to assume that there is a natural instinct in favour of it, and that if the law represses it, it does so because civilized men have come to the conclusion that the satisfaction of these natural instincts is detrimental to the general interests of society (1946, p. 160).

Freud (1946) adds to Frazer’s comments by explaining the incest prohibition from the psychoanalytic standpoint, stating that “the experiences of psychoanalysis make the assumption of such an innate aversion to incest relations altogether impossible” (p. 160). He continues by reminding us that the infant’s first love-object is incestuous and that it is social teachings and inculturation that act as impressive repressive forces to the natural incestuous impulses. In fact, Freud states that so strong are these initial impulses to love our mothers that this repression later becomes the root of neuroses in the individual (p. 160).

It can be argued that in modern western society, the relation with the mother (intimacy with the mother) is taboo. First, relations with the mother (between the mother and the child) are part of the general prohibition on incest, as in the early stages of a child's development, its initial sexual desire is for its mother. Second, women have the unique ability to birth children, and this ability is often considered as a power which renders the woman both sacred and profane. Contact with the woman (the mother especially) may be viewed (unconsciously) as polluting, especially in a patriarchal society that upholds the power of the male patriarch as the most important. As Freud indicates in *Totem and taboo* (1946), the taboo of the mother is transferred to those that have contact with her.<sup>37</sup> He states

This transferability of the taboo reflects what is found in the neurosis, namely, the constant tendency of the unconscious impulse to become displaced through associative channels upon new objects. Our attention is thus drawn to the fact that the dangerous magic power of the mana corresponds to two real faculties, the capacity of reminding man of his forbidden wishes, and the apparently more important one of tempting him to violate the prohibition in the service of these wishes" (p. 46-47).

This passage indicates that the implicit power of a woman-as-a-mother and the draw of the potential reunification with her can prove to be a source of conflict for the individual (both male and female).<sup>38</sup> Third, intimacy with the mother reminds us too readily of the initial unity with the mother in the womb. It also connotes dependency, a concept that runs counter to modern western society's definition of the individual—the subject—as rational and autonomous. It is this reminder of dependency that is so threatening to the social order (which masquerades as the natural order in our modern western society). In this sense the woman-as-mother is taboo in that she becomes both sacred and profane, revered and feared. In Freud's *Totem and taboo* (1946), he describes the history of taboo as it is found in the figure of the sovereign. The figure of the medieval or feudal sovereign is very much representative of the contemporary figure of the woman. Freud states:

[...] the sovereign in them exists only for his subjects: his life is only valuable so long as he discharges the duties of his position by ordering the course of nature for his people's benefit. So soon as he fails

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<sup>37</sup>Here I am referring to a statement made by Freud in reference to the so-called "primitive tribes" that still consciously prohibited actions such as incest. Specifically, Freud states: "the contagiousness of the taboo is above all manifested in the transference to objects which themselves become carriers of the taboo" (*Totem and taboo*, 1962, p. 46). But it must be understood that Freud also states that taboo is still applied and maintained in modern societies (yet now on more of an unconscious level). This is why I apply his analysis of "primitive societies" to the modern western society.

<sup>38</sup>I will argue below in the theory section of this paper that the pull of potential unity with the maternal is stronger for females than it is for men. Accordingly, the conflict (internal and subconscious) may be exaggerated for the female and may be the source of externalized conflict as well. As has been mentioned in the literature review of the paper, the data existing on the incidence rate of partner violence between women is significantly higher than the rates for heterosexual and even gay male partnerships.

to do so, the care, the devotion, the religious homage which they had hitherto lavished on him cease and are changed into hatred and contempt; he is ignominiously dismissed and may be thankful if he escapes with his life. Worshipped as a god one day, he is killed as a criminal the next. But in this changed behavior of the people there is nothing capricious or inconsistent. On the contrary, their conduct is quite consistent. If their king is their god he is, or should be, also their preserver; and if he will not preserve them he must make room for another who will. So long as he answers their expectations, there is no limit to the care which they take of him, and which they compel him to take of himself (p. 59-60).

It is in her role as mother that the female must fulfill expectations and abide by certain conventions. She cannot be related with as a person, but only as an object, owing to the fact that that all attachments to her that fall outside of the mother-child relation must be severed. The woman-as-mother is the totem in the same way the medieval sovereign was, and accordingly, contact with her is strictly taboo. As Freud states (1946):

A king of this sort lives hedged in by ceremonious etiquette, a network of prohibitions and observances, of which the intention is not to contribute to his dignity, much less to his comfort, but to restrain him from conduct which, by disturbing the harmony of nature, might involve himself, his people, and the universe in one common catastrophe. Far from adding to his comfort, these observances, by trammeling his every act, annihilate his freedom and often render the very life, which it is their object to preserve, a burden and a sorrow to him (p. 59-60).

Biologically speaking, when we consider the symbiosis that mothering entails between the child and woman in the womb and during the times of primary intensive care-giving, this symbolic isolation is especially hard for a woman to achieve.

#### **OUR DISCOMFORT WITH DEPENDENCY**

The woman-as-mother is the original totem, and this status is specifically attached to her ability to have children and to care for dependents. Our modern western discomfort with dependency is evident in our treatment of persons that we define as dependents such as children, the elderly, and the related workers in the area of care such as nurses, teachers, child and elderly caregivers, and especially mothers. Ofelia Schutte (2003), in her text "Dependency work, women, and the global economy", terms this aspect of the division of labour as "dependency work"<sup>39</sup> (p.138). As Irigaray, Chodorow and Schutte argue, dependency work is most often relegated to the woman. It is typical that these jobs receive lower remuneration than others as caring/care-giving, although deemed essential, is not attributed high financial value. The bulk of dependency work is done by women when they mother/nurture. In this society, women must always be mothers, and their work will always

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<sup>39</sup> This term was initially used by as defined by Eva Kittay (1999) in *Love's labour: Essays on women, equality, and dependency*.

be trivialized. Schutte reminds us through her concerted use of the term “dependency work” that the roles that mothers perform are always unpaid, although it is indeed *work*. She states that “this terminology highlights the fact that dependency work is work, regardless of whether it is also motivated by love, duty, feelings of responsibility or gratitude, or any other emotional or moral attitude binding the relationship between the worker and her charge” (2003, p.138).

Dependency relates to feminism in obvious ways. Because sexual difference is denied, women are not subjects in their own right (they are not genuinely self-defined) and instead are constrained to the identity that the current symbolic order mandates—they relate only as objects and are relegated to the role of mother in a biological sense. If her role as a mother moves beyond the biological, it is not valued in modern western society in the same way that autonomy is.<sup>40</sup> As Irigaray states in *Sexes and genealogies*:

It is clear that our societies assume that *the mother should feed her child for free*, before and after the birth, and that she should remain the nurse of man and society. She is *the totem before any totem is designated*, identified, represented. This state of affairs must be understood if we are to learn how a woman, or women, can find a place without remaining shadowy nurses. This traditional role that is allotted to women almost ritually paralyzes male society as well and permits the continued destruction of the natural reserves of life. It sustains the illusion that food should come to us free, and, in any case, can never fail us. In the same way, women could never fail us, especially mothers. (1993, p. 83)

It is only if sexual difference is realized that women will be able to create themselves as subjects.

Dependency relates to female intimate partner violence as the rates of intimate partner violence between women shows us that they interrelate in a more symbiotic way than men and women do. That is not to say that the inherent symbiosis between women is as hindrance to the development of their subjectivities. It is possible that the linkage to the mother that women perpetually carry is a physiological and then subconscious reminder of unity in the womb, and may serve as a basis for women to create for themselves a new goal for the human being—one based on interdependence rather than autonomy (as it is currently understood in modern western society).

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<sup>40</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the notion of dependency work and its relation to feminism, please refer to the work of Eva Kittay (1999), *Love’s labour: Essays on women, equality, and dependency*, for a theoretical discussion of “dependency work” and to Ofelia Schutte for a discussion of dependency and women as they relate to neoliberalism and modern western societies. Also, refer to Chodorow (1978) *The reproduction of mothering*.

## THE MATERNAL AS A SOURCE OF CONFLICT

Signifying the Mother, the maternal is the one discourse that truly calls into crisis our own identity and the tarnishes the veneer of it being a stable, singular, autonomous identity. For both men and women, Freud emphasized the fundamental impression made by the infant's linkages to the mother (beginning from its time in her womb) in a symbiotic unity and wholeness. This symbiosis between the infant and the maternal is to eventually be replaced by autonomy and a singular identity (subjectivity) for the infant. However, because the Mother is without 'boundary'/boundaries, it is the most threatening to the stability of the subject (especially for the woman).

Freudian psychoanalysis posits that the maternal (the unity of the child with the maternal) must then be given up in different ways for the male child than for the female child. While the male child must replace the maternal with a new female object, the female child must relinquish her bond with the maternal altogether. This is symbolic matricide.

For Kristeva, our original relationship on a psychological, and even physical level, is that which we have with our mothers. As Oliver states in *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the double-bind*, "The importance, the primordialism of the maternal body in the direction of our social order is immense. It is fundamental" (1993, p. 56). From our birth, it is the maternal body which will shape the direction of our identity and the development of our subjectivities. The maternal body will also govern (to various extents) our relationships with others.

For Kristeva, the maternal body is the utmost of abjection. It is that from which the child must extricate and exclude itself from in order to claim its body and subjectivity as its own. Within this psychoanalytic model, the maternal body remains the eternal threat to the social order, to community. Oliver (1993) interprets her position as follows:

Even jettisoned, the abject can still threaten the social, the Symbolic order. The Symbolic can maintain itself only by maintaining its borders; and the abject points to the fragility of those borders. The Symbolic is the order of borders, discrimination, and difference. Reality is parceled into words and categories. Society is parceled into classes, castes, professional and family roles, etc. The abject threat comes from what has been prohibited by the Symbolic order, what has been prohibited so that the Symbolic order can be. The prohibition that founds, and yet undermines, society is the prohibition against the maternal body, whether it is the oedipal prohibition against incest formulated by Freud, the prohibition against the mother's desire or *jouissance* formulated by Lacan, or the prohibition against the semiotic *chora* formulated by Kristeva. All of these prohibitions are directed against the maternal body. It is what is off limits. (p. 56)

Therefore, for the child to become a true and proper subject, the mother (the maternal body), which is psychically and physically enmeshed with the child, must be expelled. This leaves the child's identity in a precarious and conflicted state. As Grosz (1990) explains:

The ability to take up a symbolic position as a social and speaking subject entail the disavowal of its modes of corporeality, especially those representing what is considered unacceptable, unclean or anti-social. The subject must disavow part of itself in order to gain a stable self, and this form of refusal marks whatever identity it acquires as provisional, and open to breakdown and instability. (p. 86)

For Kristeva, this conflict is so fundamental that the establishment of a clean and proper body is never entirely possible for the subject. The maternal body will always pollute it in some way, and it is in fact necessary for both socially revered activities (art, literature) and such socially unacceptable forms of sexual drives (Grosz, 1990, p. 87). It is from the subject's cognizance of the impossibility of a complete schism that the feeling of abjection derives (Grosz, 1990, p. 87).

Oliver's analysis of Kristeva's work on the power of the mother (of her body and as a figure of authority over the child's body) brings to mind several interesting questions. Kristeva focuses much attention on "the archaic impact of the maternal body on man", "its terrorizing aggressivity" (Oliver, 1993, p. 51). The threat affects all children. Men are able to escape its hold, however, by virtue of their physicality. As Oliver (1993, p. 51) states: "It is as though paternity were necessary (...) in order somehow to admit the threat that the male feels as much from the possessive maternal body as from his separation from it—a threat that he immediately returns to that body.

For Kristeva and also for Irigaray, psychoanalysis affords us a way to "return" to a time when we were nascent; to the beginning of infancy and the origin of the conflict (the closeness and the separation from our mother). They would argue, unlike Freud, that the challenge of psychosexual development is not for the child (both male and female, but primarily female) to successfully give up the mother, but rather the challenge vis-à-vis the maternal is for the child to return to the place/time (at birth) without repudiating it. What Kristeva (2004) urges in *Is there a feminine genius?* is for us to return to it with some insight, or as she calls it "genius", into the ambiguity of separation and identity, and of 'creation' rather than 'violence'.

The "genius" may reside in Irigaray's approach the problem of the maternal. Irigaray's theory that there is currently no real differentiation between the sexes can provide insight

into why relations between women are so intimate and yet so conflictual, as well as why relations between men and women persist in operating under the patriarchal model.

Following from Irigaray's work, if we succeed in relating to the maternal without repudiating her, then we may be closer to developing a feminine ideal that women could aspire to. A quasi-reverence of the maternal, or an acknowledgment of what women owe Her (our mothers) would open up a space and a language for women to be subjects. To extend Irigaray's work, this could even be useful as the basis for a new ethics to guide the social community.

### **THE ROLE OF ABJECTION IN IDENTITY FORMATION**

According to Kristeva (1982), it is the notion of the abject that is so critical to our own identity formation. The "I"/the self is asserted and produced through the action of rejecting all that is "matière", the bodily, the scatological, sickness, and especially death. Ostensibly, the abject is "opposed to I" (p. 1) It comprises those elements that defile and threaten the clean and proper body, that are foreign to the bounded body/subject. Simultaneously, however, the regulation and exclusion of the abject enables the assertion of self. In this way, the existence of the abject both threatens and engenders the assertion of a unified subjectivity.

Therefore, according to Kristeva (1982), the fact of death, and the physicality of the dead body reminds the living self of its own finality and temporality. It threatens the fiction of the social community. She states "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (p. 4). It is this pollution of the pristine cultural, social, symbolic and political order that is the catalyst for violence and confusion in the social community.

Psychoanalytically, we can say that the mother, and more generally the female body, also too readily reminds us of what is '*base et matière*'. The linkage that we feel with the mother's body threatens the self and threatens the fiction of autonomous living, of singularity and of self-creation. Moreover, the female body is confirmed as abject several times over, as once the mother is symbolically slain, even the idea of her, and of closeness to her becomes problematic.

For the lesbian, or for women who love women, this means that relations and intimacy are troubled. They are difficult to maintain in the social and cultural order (by and large a

homophobic and heteronormative space). They may also be difficult to maintain on a personal plane, as the natural symbiosis—which two women in intimacy can slide so easily into—is at odds with a social and cultural understanding of the human being as autonomous.

#### **THE FEMALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIP AS DEFINED BY DYADIC ATTACHMENT**

The label of the “feminine dyad” indicates the nature of the female-female intimate relation. McClennen et al (2002) qualify this feminine tendency toward dyadic attachment<sup>41</sup> as resulting from the unique socialization of women, partially ascribing to the proclamation of Simone de Beauvoir (1989) in *The second sex*, “One isn’t born a woman, one becomes one” (p. 267). As stated in McClennen et al (2002):

Being socialized as women (i.e., to place others’ needs before their own), women tend to develop dyadic attachments (Istar, 1996) resulting in their becoming insulated against and isolated from the outside world. Paradoxically, being socialized as feminists with the need for self-actualization, lesbians encourage independence. As one partner tends toward individual development in lieu of devoted dedication to the dyadic relationship, the other partner may often retaliate with abusive actions out of fear of loss (p. 287).

This dual movement that McClennen et al refer to is important, and operates on additional layers. Another part of the resentment that develops is due to the natural and strong symbiotic element of a female relationship. The difficulty for partners to see themselves distinctly from each other (because of their shared sex) leads to a tendency to see themselves through their partner. A lesbian may try to self-actualize (or feel this type of satisfaction) through her partner’s actions and achievements. The conflict and frustration may stem from the couple’s view of themselves as a unit, as one entity with fused ideas of what their actions and life choices should be. Conflict can develop from the additional strain and pressure that the burden of another person’s expectations can place on the relationship; expectations that result from an easy merger of two people into one unit.

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<sup>41</sup> Nancy Chodorow, one of the leading contemporary feminist psychoanalysts, utilizes the notion of the dyad and dyadic attachment often in her work. She intends it differently that I do, and our two uses should not be confused. For Chodorow, the dyad is what the male child typically experiences with his mother. Chodorow considers that the female child has a different experience—a triadic attachment between her love for the mother, the love for the father and the anxiety over relations between the father and the mother. For more on Chodorow and the notion of dyadic and triadic attachment, refer to her book, *Feminism and psychoanalytic theory* (1989).

Although Chodorow does not use the label “dyad” in the same way that McClennen et al (2002) do (and the way that I do in this research), she nevertheless refers to this same phenomenon. As she states (1989), “Feelings of inadequate separateness, the fear of merger, are indeed issues for women, because of the ongoing sense of oneness and primary identification with our mothers (and children)” (p. 108).

Irigaray's theory that a woman typically is only able to relate as an object rather than subject is also illustrated here. Women as subjects would have a stronger ability to defend their singularity in choice and action. Women as subjects would also have a lesser need to be realized through the lives of their female partners. Women as subjects would derive self-satisfaction not primarily through their partner, but through themselves. Because women relate mostly as objects, their achievements or choices are not interpreted (and self-interpreted) with as much importance as they ought to be. The explanation for partner violence between intimate women (in addition to the strong symbiotic element) may also be understood as 'acting out' in frustration due to the lacking respect for the individuality of choice. The frustration may stem from the couple's view of themselves as a unit, as one entity with fused ideas of what their actions and life choices should be. Freedom is less respected or understood between women, because as objects, women do not practice it. Under this hypothesis, it is conceivable that one partner would act out (violently) in anger at the other partner for choosing or doing something that she would consider counter to the well-being of the dyad (of the couple), or even simply counter to what she would have chosen for herself.

The feminine dyad is reinforced in other ways as well. It is very difficult to build a healthy relationship with a partner when social pressures to conform to heteronormative society are often overwhelming. Much resentment gets internalized and unleashed on each other rather than through a positive outlet in society. Much that should be public remains trapped in the private sphere of the intimate relationship. These types of issues that are typical of the feminine dyad must be accounted for when constructing and mapping theories on gendered violence.

Psychological/emotional abuse may also be more prevalent in lesbian relationships given the specific way that intimacy is experienced in the dyad. There is an almost immediate tacit understanding between women (through a shared socialization and experience) and a cultural formation that lends toward more emotive interactions with others. If women are more prone to being taught to care ("mother") than they may also be more aware of how to revoke manipulate or pervert it in relations with their partner.

## CHALLENGES TO DIFFERENTIATION FOR WOMEN

The process of differentiation (separation-individuation) is central to the psychoanalytic account of subject formation. Differentiation is the progression of the child (male or female) to perceive itself as a separate entity from its mother. It is one of the critical markers of infantile development. According to Chodorow (1989), what is particular about differentiation is that it happens “*in relation to the mother*” (p.102). It involves first “perceiving the mother or primary caretaker as separate and “not-me”, where once these were an undifferentiated symbiotic unity” (p. 102). Second, as Chodorow explains, differentiation and separation, to be successful, involves also perceiving not just separateness from the mother but also perceiving the mother as a subject and individual with distinct drives and ideas:

They involve the ability to experience and perceive the object/other (the mother) in aspects apart from its sole relation to the ability to gratify the infant’s/subject’s needs and wants; they involve seeing the object as separate from the self and from the self’s needs (p. 103).

The psychoanalytic notion of differentiation is important for our understanding of the developmental process of women and the intimate female relationship (the lesbian/feminine dyad). As a feminist, Chodorow (1989) points out that society needs to pay special attention to perceptions of the mother. She maintains that modern western perceptions of the mother shift from understanding her as a developed and valued individual to viewing her as a mere extension of our own selves, existing solely for our gratification (and to care for us) (p. 104). She continues to explain that both men and women seem to preserve this infantile attitude toward their mothers throughout their lives. A case can be made for approximating the relations of intimate female partners to the relations we have with our mothers. The intimate contact with another woman, especially given the more obvious physical similarities and emotional similarities that two women have from shared socialization is enough to catalyze and invoke the old (and nascent) feelings of symbiosis and unity that all children once had in the womb. This can blur the boundaries between the externality and internality of a person.

Because differentiation may be more difficult for the woman, it is important to understand its significance for female intimate partner violence. As Chodorow (1989) states, “Feelings of inadequate separateness, the fear of merger, are indeed issues for women, because of the ongoing sense of oneness and primary identification with our mothers (and children)” (p. 108).

Chodorow is addressing something that relates to Kristeva's idea of the feminine genius. Chodorow's use of psychoanalysis is primarily to defend her wish to shift what society values away from the rational autonomy that is so highly privileged in modern western society. Her aim is to establish the "goals of emotional psychic life other than autonomy and separateness" by shifting them to "an individuality that emphasizes our connectedness with, rather than our separation from, one another" (p.108). This notion is premised on psychoanalytic understandings of feminine development. Chodorow argues for a development of the self that is positively formed; rather than the negatively formed "I am...what you are not":

However, autonomy, spontaneity, and a sense of agency need not be based on other self-distinctions, on the individual as individual. They can be based on the fundamental interconnectedness, not synonymous with merger, that grows out of our earliest unconscious developmental experience, and that enables the creation of a non-reactive separateness." (p. 108)

This relates to female intimate partner violence because, as this research posits, it is the symptom of the fundamental discomfort and difficulty that women have with the symbolic murder of the mother that the current western social order necessitates.

#### **THEORY OF RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR AUTONOMY**

Chodorow (1989) explains that symbolic separation from the mother (matricide) is, psychoanalytically speaking, very difficult to achieve developmentally for the woman. She believes that differentiation must occur relationally, and that the most important relation, for both the male and the female, is the one that we have with our mothers (here she also includes "primary caregiver"). Her theory of the relational construction of selfhood (identity) is the following:

Along with the earliest development of its sense of separateness, the infant constructs an internal set of unconscious, affectively loaded representations of others in relation to its self, and an internal sense of self in relationship emerges. Images of felt good and bad aspects of the mother or primary caretaker, caretaking experiences, and the mothering relationship become part of the self, of a relational ego structure, through unconscious mental processes that appropriate and incorporate these images. With maturation, these early images and fragments of perceived experience become put together into a self. (p. 105)

For Chodorow it is therefore the attitudes, impressions and feelings that we have toward our mothers that matter the most in the development to the self. The problem lies in the fact that the mother remains an object in the eyes of the child. She has less value, she exists only to gratify the child (a task which is taken to be a natural impetus, programmed and not selected)

or her existence is viewed as threatening to the child's own selfhood. Chodorow (1989) describes the effect of the current symbolic cultural order on the mother and our relationship to her as conflictual and problematic for identity formation.

She is not accorded autonomy or selfness on her side. Such attitudes arise also from the gender-specific character of the emotionally charged self and object images that affect the development of self and the sense of autonomy and spontaneity. They are internalizations of feelings about the self in relation to the mother, who is then often experienced as either overwhelming or over-denying. These attitudes are often unconscious and always have a base in unconscious, emotionally charged feelings and conflicts (p. 108)

The mother is our primary object and she is objectified by the child. This is disastrous for the relational establishment of our selfhood.

The importance of this to the feminine dyad is significant. If we return to Chodorow's relational idea of development of self, we note that the distinctions between the inside self and the outside are not entirely stark. Identity for women is based on a "sense of continuity and similarity to the mother, a relational connection to the world" (p. 110). Women build themselves from their sense of unity with their mothers, and their self-identity does not require what Chodorow terms "impermeability of ego boundaries" (p. 110). While both sexes participate in the process of separateness in relation to their mother, the male can use differences (physiological, etc.) to establish his identity away from his mother (negatively). The female builds her identity positively, starting from her mother's. These differences in the developmental processes of men and women may cause autonomy problems for the woman, and yet, these are not the root problems for women. Women are susceptible to identity conflicts (which, as this paper has explained, are most evident through the interactions in the feminine dyad – found to be conflictual and highly violent for intimate female partners), but these can be attributed more to the "identifications, learning, and cognitive choices that it implies" (p. 110). Chodorow theorizes that these conflicts arise from "identification with a negatively valued gender category and an ambivalently experienced maternal figure, whose mothering and femininity, often conflictual for the mother herself, are accessible, but devalued" (p.110-111).

## SECTION III – THEORY

### MOVING TOWARD A THEORY OF SEXUALITY: DEFINING THE NEW PSYCHOANALYSIS

*In this section, I will first address the main concerns associated with the use of psychoanalytical theory. This is necessary as psychoanalysis in general can be interpreted as heavily patriarchal and can therefore appear to be an inappropriate approach to understanding female-female intimate partner violence. This section thoroughly outlines how the specific psychoanalytic approach of Kristeva and Irigaray can be applied without being patriarchal or even heteronormative and can contribute to a new theoretical understanding of the linkages between intimacy and violence and ultimately development of an authentic feminine sexe.*

Working to understand the problem of violence between women, specifically between women as lovers, to alleviate this violence, and, on a practical level, establishing effective support networks and support services to address violence between women is part of the larger program of female emancipation. The current mechanisms to address it are managed by the domestic violence movement—by and large a feminist movement, born out of the second (or third) wave and still largely premised on the equality of rights. Yet, the domestic violence movement and the traditional feminist theoretical model is largely directed by the patriarchal cultural order—the current symbolic order which premises society and social interactions on the denial of sexual difference.

Psychoanalysis affords the possibility of examining the effect of the cultural order on the development of women as a sex, and the linkage between the development of the feminine and violence. For Irigaray, there is a definite chance of allowing for first the duplication of discourses (by including a feminine way) and then eventually a multiplicity of discourses will be possible. Irigaray's thesis in *This sex which is not one* is that there “might be the possibility of a different, non-masculine discourse: ‘the problem is that of a possible alterity in masculine discourse – or in relation to masculine discourse’”(1985b, p.140). Her work on language is an attempt to make visible the deep emotional structures conveyed in discourse:

in a nutshell, the underlying Oedipal structure of language and culture, which distributes different roles to men and women (Irigaray, *The Irigaray reader*, 1991, p. 4).

The common criticism of psychoanalysis, especially by feminist theorists, is that it is heavily patriarchal – Freud’s focus on the Oedipal complex, and on ‘feminine lack’. Psychoanalysis, and especially that of Freud, is indeed very patriarchal, and does not really acknowledge what is owed to the “mother” in terms of the mother’s role in subject formation, especially for women. As such, classical psychoanalysis (that of Freud and later, Lacan) remains necessarily phallogocentric, essentializing women in a biologically reductionist way.

However, Irigaray’s use of psychoanalysis departs from the phallogocentric Oedipal model of Freud. For Irigaray, psychoanalytic practice is a means to re-inscribe alterity from the very beginnings of women, as once they are born they enter the Symbolic Order as objects of male sexual desire. She redefines the practice of psychoanalysis by re-evaluating the logic of a fundamental tenet—the oedipal complex. Irigaray does not do this not in a phallogocentric or oppressively biological essentialism. She is, I would argue, the best type of essentialist, practicing careful essentialism to say that there is something different in the birthing process for a women which ties her (the woman) to others in a different way than men.

Irigaray indicts Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis (which largely explains the current socio-cultural-economic order) when she discusses the notion of *acting out*. She asks who the *show* is for (Irigaray, 1991, p. 100). Traditional psychoanalysis posits that the show of women is intended to signify something to her father. Irigaray demands to know why it would not be more likely that women are trying to signal something to their mothers and to other women. She states: “the fact that the father sees this as purely something that has been staged for his benefit can presumably be interpreted as meaning that in his case the scopophilic drive predominates, as the *belief* that a woman’s desire can only be addressed to him” (1991, p. 100). The choice of the father as the woman’s object of desire indicates how entrenched patriarchy is.

For Irigaray, it is also unacceptable that Freud considers the girl’s clitoris as a mini penis, as not quite a penis, and yet still indicative of a female’s masculinity. That Freud interprets this as proof of her bisexual nature astounds Irigaray (1985b, p. 35). Contrarily to Freud, Irigaray does not believe that the libido is masculine. In fact, Irigaray aligns herself much

more closely with Lacan and the weightier emphasis he places on the symbolic role that castration plays for women (1985b, p. 61). She states:

In order to delineate more sharply the symbolic articulation that castration has to effect, Lacan specifies that *what is at issue as potentially lacking in castration is not so much the penis—a real organ—as the phallus, or the signifier of desire*. And it is *in the mother* that castration must, first and foremost, be located by the child, if he is to exit from the imaginary orbit of maternal desire and be returned to the father, that is, to the possessor of the phallic emblem that makes the mother desire him and prefer him to the child. (1985b, p. 61)

The Freudian assumption that women possess an inherent maleness also constrains feminine sexuality in other ways. From a Freudian standpoint, homosexuality in women mimics homosexuality in men. Accordingly, the lesbian is believed to behave as a man that desires a woman. Irigaray (1985b) considers this woman-object of the lesbian's desire must either be "equivalent to the phallic mother and/or who has certain attributes that remind her of another man, for example her brother" (p. 65). Within the Freudian model, it is inconceivable and prohibited that women have a desire for female resemblance. Irigaray (1985b) contends that it is wrong that even the mother-daughter relationship be modeled after male homosexuality (p. 65). She states:

What is the purpose of this misreading, of this condemnation, of woman's relation to her own original desires, this nonelaboration of her relation to her own origins? To assure the *predominance of a single libido*, as the little girl finds herself obliged to repress her drives and her earliest cathexes. Her libido? (1985b, p. 65)

The repression of woman's origin from her very birth (from her exit from the womb) is a central theme of Irigaray's.

The thrust of this theme is that society is built on the illusion of two sexes, when in reality there is only the logic of male sexuality. In her essay, "The power of discourse", Irigaray (1991) teaches us that the dominant discourse which circulates in relation to women is that it is sexualized, not in terms of the difference between sexes, but rather in terms of the lack of difference. Indeed, as Irigaray (1991) challenges and indicts Freud for building psychoanalytic theory on the "lack" (p. 122), so can we challenge the feminist domestic abuse models for being premised on a masculine model.

For Irigaray, the real and primordial task is to re-inscribe difference between the sexes and thereby allow women to forge and own their identities. Irigaray's practice of psychoanalysis allows us to theorize, analyze and conceive of women as "other" and understand better the roots of the violence between women.

## IRIGARAY ON INTIMACY

Irigaray relays how both the man and the woman relate to the maternal in *This sex which is not one*. She says that both have “nostalgia for a regression in utero” (*An ethics of sexual difference*, 1993, p. 50). Both man and woman yearn for a return to the womb—their original object of desire, yet only the man is able to accomplish this as an “other.” The male, Irigaray states,

Finds imperatives dictated by the enactment of sadomasochistic fantasies, these in turn governed by man’s relation to his mother: the desire to force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate for himself the mystery of this womb where he has been conceived, the secret of his begetting, of his “origin”. Desire/need also to make blood flow again in order to revive a very old relationship—intrauterine, to be sure, but also prehistoric—maternal. (1985b, p. 25)

For Irigaray, woman cannot completely choose how, when, and on what terms she will engage with the maternal as she is always in contact with it by virtue of her sex (“Retouching”) (*The Irigaray reader*, 1991, p. 110). The woman, Irigaray states,

Touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman “touches herself” all the time, and moreover, no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other. (1985b, p. 24)

Here we may interpret Irigaray to mean that the woman’s self is always appropriated or shared by the mother (the maternal body). It is the woman’s very physicality that predisposes her to a perpetual duality. The woman constantly mirrors herself—is in constant mimesis, for as Irigaray states “Woman is already self-feeling” (1991, p. 56). It is the female sexual organ that makes her more than just one. Irigaray describes this aspect as follows:

(The/A) woman is always already in a state of anamorphosis in which all figures blur. The discontinuity of a cycle in which closure is a slit which merges its lips with their edge(s). And so she cannot *repeat herself* or produce herself as *wholly other* in pleasure, for the other already in her affects her, touches her, without her ever becoming one – masculine or feminine [un(e)] – or the other. (1991, p. 56).

Women also will never completely understand how to interact with *an other*, as they can never be separate enough from *an other* to relate to them. This is especially true for how a woman interacts with other women. As Irigaray explains:

Woman always remains several, but she is kept from dispersion because the other is already within her and is autoerotically familiar to her. Which is not to say that she appropriates the other for herself, that she reduces it to her own property. Ownership and property are doubtless quite foreign to the feminine. At least sexually. But not *nearness*. Nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible. Woman derives pleasure from what is *so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself*. She herself enters into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either. (1985b, p. 31)

Because of the woman's singular relation to exteriority (a relation which is inherently nearly impossible to achieve for the woman), self-love is a very difficult and intricate undertaking. Irigaray explains that the woman can only achieve self-love by extracting objects of desire out from herself—such as her children (*An ethics of sexual difference*, 1993a, p. 63). As Irigaray states: “Woman is loved/loves herself through the children she *gives birth to*. That she brings *out*. She herself cannot watch herself desiring (except through another woman? Who is not herself?” (1993a, p. 63).

The inherent symbiosis that results from love between women also contributes to an ever-menacing threat. Women will fuse and confuse their identities. This is what Irigaray refers to as the “lack of respect for perception of differences” (1993, p. 63). This is an intrinsic tendency of the feminine:

Without realizing it, or willing it, in most cases, women constitute the most terrible instrument of their own oppression: they destroy anything that emerges from their undifferentiated condition and thus become agents of their own annihilation, their reduction to a sameness that is not *their own*. (Irigaray, *An ethics of sexual difference*, 1993, pp. 103-104)

In their *nearness* there is the impossibility of the dialogical relationship. All that results is more of the same until an inevitable schism occurs. This inability to meet as other is reflected in our language—inadequate for women to express themselves to each other—and the end is necessarily violent. As Irigaray states:

Whatever you may think, women do not need to go through the looking glass to know that mother and daughter have a body of the same sex. All they have to do is touch one another, smell one another, see one another – without necessarily privileging the gaze, without a beautifying mask, without submitting to a libidinal economy which means that the body has to be covered with a veil if it is to be desirable! But these two women cannot speak to each other of their affects in the existing verbal code, and they cannot even imagine them in the ruling systems of representations. Love and desire between women and in women are still without signifiers that can be articulated in language [*langue*]. The result is paralysis, somatization, non-differentiation between one woman and the other, enforced rejection or hatred, or at best ‘pretence’ [*faire comme*]. (1991, p. 101)

This conflict of the feminine is fueled when we consider what happens to the woman as she enters the symbolic cultural order (patriarchy). Founded on matricide, the cultural order demands of the woman that she forget the mother and render both herself and the maternal object in the process.

## **THEORY OF WOMEN AND CONFLICT – IRIGARAY RETHINKS OEDIPUS**

Irigaray's reconceived psychoanalytical practice re-focuses the Oedipal complex. In “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother”, Irigaray (1991) explains to us that our modern western

society is founded, not as Freud explained to us with the story of Oedipus, on patricide, but on matricide. It is, for Irigaray, the birthing process and the physical severance of the umbilical cord which our cultural order demands must be accompanied by a symbolic act of severance. It is in understanding this lost relationship with the mother that we can understand much of the hatred she dwells against women.

Returning to gestation and the birthing process, Irigaray describes the genesis of the woman. The story of woman is the story of substitution. Irigaray states:

Partial drives appear to be concerned mainly with the body which brought us into the world. The genital drive is said to be the drive thanks to which the phallic penis takes back from the mother the power to give birth, to nourish, to dwell, to centre. The phallus erected where once there was the umbilical cord? It becomes the organizer of the world of and through the man—father, in the place where the umbilical cord, the first bond with the mother, gave birth to the body of both man and woman. That took place in a primal womb, our first nourishing earth, first waters, first envelopes, where the child was *whole*, the mother *whole* through the mediation of her blood. They were bound together, albeit in an asymmetrical relationship, before any cutting, any cutting up of their bodies into fragments (1991, pp. 38-39).

It is on this obliteration, this displacement of the mother in the genesis of the child that the modern western symbolic order is premised: “The social order, our culture (...) wants it this way: the mother should remain forbidden, excluded. The father forbids the bodily encounter with the mother” (Irigaray, 1991a, p. 39).

### **KRISTEVA AND THEORY ON LESBIAN LOVE AND ABJECTION**

As has been mentioned, psychoanalysis is useful as it locates the primary area of subject formation in birth and considers that our original relationship on a psychological, and even physical level, is that which we have with our mothers. Within Kristeva’s psychoanalytic framework, “the importance, the primordialism of the maternal body in the direction of our social order is immense. It is fundamental” (Oliver, 1993, p. 56). From our birth, it is the maternal body which will shape the direction of our identity and the development of our subjectivities. The maternal body will also govern (to various extents) our relationships with others.

The maternal body, and our connection to it, is also foundational as our social and cultural order is premised not on patricide, as the traditional psychoanalysis of Freud contends, but on matricide. Psychoanalytically, as per Kristeva and Oliver, the maternal body is considered as the utmost of abjection. It is that from which the child must extricate and exclude itself from in order to claim its body and subjectivity as its own. Within this

psychoanalytic model, the maternal body remains the eternal threat to the social order, to community. As Oliver (1993) states:

Even jettisoned, the abject can still threaten the social, the Symbolic order. The Symbolic can maintain itself only by maintaining its borders; and the abject points to the fragility of those borders. The Symbolic is the order of borders, discrimination, and difference. Reality is parceled into words and categories. Society is parceled into classes, castes, professional and family roles, etc. The abject threat comes from what has been prohibited by the Symbolic order, what has been prohibited so that the Symbolic order can be. The prohibition that founds, and yet undermines, society is the prohibition against the maternal body, whether it is the oedipal prohibition against incest formulated by Freud, the prohibition against the mother's desire or *jouissance* formulated by Lacan, or the prohibition against the semiotic *chora* formulated by Kristeva. All of these prohibitions are directed against the maternal body. It is what is off limits. (p. 56)

Therefore, for the child to become a true and proper subject, the mother (the maternal body), which is psychically and physically enmeshed with the child, must be expelled. This leaves the child's identity in a precarious and conflicted state. As Grosz (1990) explains:

The ability to take up a symbolic position as a social and speaking subject entail the disavowal of its modes of corporeality, especially those representing what is considered unacceptable, unclean or anti-social. The subject must disavow part of itself in order to gain a stable self, and this form of refusal marks whatever identity it acquires as provisional, and open to breakdown and instability. (p. 86)

Within Kristeva's framework, this conflict is so fundamental that the establishment of a clean and proper body is never entirely possible for the subject. The maternal body will always pollute it in some way, and it is in fact necessary for both socially revered activities (art, literature) and such socially unacceptable forms of sexual drives (Grosz, 1990, p. 87). It is from the subject's cognizance of the impossibility of a complete schism that the feeling of abjection derives (Grosz, 1990, p. 87).

Oliver's analysis of Kristeva's work on the power of the mother (of her body and as a figure of authority over the child's body) brings to mind several interesting questions. Kristeva focuses much attention on "the archaic impact of the maternal body on man, [...] its terrorizing aggressivity" (Oliver, 1993, p. 51). The threat affects all children. Men are able to escape its hold, however, by virtue of their physicality. Oliver (1993) states:

It is as though paternity were necessary (...) in order somehow to admit the threat that the male feels as much from the possessive maternal body as from his separation from it—a threat that he immediately returns to that body. (p. 51)

This same threat plays out for women, albeit differently. Women, Kristeva will argue, have far more difficulty at committing "the necessary matricide" (Oliver, 1993, p. 62). For women and their sexuality, it is absolutely requisite that the mother be eschewed, or *lost*, in order to participate in the symbolic order that constitutes the dominant culture. As Oliver (1993)

states, “the child must agree to lose the mother in order to be able to imagine her or name her” (p.62). The problematique of the mother becomes remedied only when the figure of the mother is rendered purely symbolic.

Necessary for the woman to establish an identity, abjection is already difficult for the heterosexual woman (in opposition to the male). “Abjection is the underside of the symbolic. It is what the symbolic must reject, cover over and contain” (Grosz, 1990, p. 89). However, for the lesbian in a heteronormative society, it becomes even more difficult to commit the “necessary matricide” (Oliver, 1993, p. 63). The lesbian finds in her partner—her mother. She likens the intimacy of her relationship to the egg-like fusion that she experienced in the maternal body with her mother. Yet, what happens is two-fold. The woman may realize that she may never be fused with her female partner as she was with her mother. Second, she becomes equally frustrated when she observes that the fusion of intimacy that she experiences with her partner is a lesser re-creation of her linkage with the maternal body, thereby slowly effacing her own perceived autonomy and otherness, while never delivering on the promise of utter unity with the maternal. The lesbian, in a couple, is only ever brought closer to her pseudo-object of desire. As Oliver (1993) states,

On the level of personal archeology, abjection becomes a kind of perverse protection in the face of primal repression. The not-yet-subject with its not-yet, or no-longer, object maintains "itself" as the abject. Abjection is a way of denying the primal narcissistic identification with the mother, almost. The child becomes the abject in order to avoid both separation from, and identification with, the maternal body—both equally painful, both equally impossible. If the abject "is a jettisoned object, it is so from the mother." The child is this jettisoned object, the waste violently expelled from the mother's body. The "subject" discovers itself as the impossible separation/identity of the maternal body. It hates that body but only because it can't be free of it. That body, the body without borders, the body out of which this abject subject came, is impossible. It is a horrifying, devouring body. (Cf. 1980a, 39.) It is a body that evokes rage and fear. (p. 60)

Accordingly, Kristeva argues that, for women, matricide does not necessarily foreclose suicide. Rather, they occur in tandem:

Whereas the son splits the mother in order to unify himself, if the daughter splits the mother, she splits herself. In addition, feminine sexual identity does not have to divide the mother. Rather, within the heterosexual narrative, her sexual identity requires that she abandon her mother as love object for the father. [...]Now it would seem that within feminine sexuality the mother need only be abject. But when the female makes her mother abject in order to reject her, she also makes herself abject, rejects herself, and not just temporarily. (Oliver, 1993, p. 61-62)

Kristeva also argues that feminine sexuality lends itself toward being more depressive than male sexuality, and especially heterosexuality, due to the woman’s “bodily identification with the maternal body” (Oliver, 1993, p. 63). She also states that “Feminine perversion is

very rare [...] because of the difficulty women have in "combat" with their mothers" (Oliver, 1993, p. 63). Lesbianism is prevalent (as according to Health Canada (1998), 10-15% of Canadian women publicly identify as lesbians). Rather, this "combat" still plays out, but what this research posits is that women in lesbian relationships or intimate partnerships are more likely to act abusively or violently toward their partners. Kristeva is right when she proposes that feminine sexuality will always be inherently depressive and bittersweet. Oliver (1993) interprets Kristeva as saying that our heterosexist society constrains the choices of love-objects for women:

*Feminine sexuality is melancholy because within our heterosexist culture a woman cannot have a mother-substitute as an object of desire in the way that a man can. In other words, feminine sexuality is melancholy because it is fundamentally homosexual and must be kept a secret within a heterosexist culture. ( p. 64)*

It is the perpetual conflict between the woman and her mother (the maternal body), and between the woman's semiotic nature and the Symbolic cultural order that provides the potential for greater abuse and violence.

If Kristeva is right, then lesbian love will always be somewhat depressive, but, at the same time—women, she thinks, always love women in a sense. She does not mean to essentialize/flatten (de-singularize or neutralize) lesbian love. Rather, what she does intend to say is that really, our first love is for a woman's body, and that loving a female partner again takes us back to this infantile time. It does not render us infantile, it can be nascent, but it does bring us back. And, because it is our mother's body, and we (women) must both separate from her—from that who we also are (ambiguity and ambivalence), then our love is always depressive. This in part might help us to understand why lesbian love has the potential to be depressive, melancholy, and possibly even more likely to be abusive, especially in a patriarchal culture.

#### **PSYCHOANALYSIS AND VIOLENCE: HOW IRIGARAY DIFFERS FROM KRISTEVA**

Irigaray's theory is important here as it may help establish a way to overcome/solve the problématique of the woman's participation in culture versus the self-violence that she must engage in so that she may participate in the patriarchal symbolic order.

Irigaray's psychoanalytic theories on female sexuality support the work of Kristeva and Oliver up to a certain point. Irigaray, like Oliver and Kristeva (and Chodorow), maintains that the female child and the mother are irrevocably intertwined, and that to try to sever the

tie between the two is tantamount to death for the daughter. The female child will never develop the language to refer to herself and to speak of herself in relation to others in a way that maintains her distinct subjectivity. Where Irigaray departs from both Kristeva and Oliver is in her recognition of their reliance on the common patriarchal model of human sexuality. Irigaray would contend that Oliver and Kristeva do not depart enough from Lacan and Freud and persist in their reliance on the model of a single sex—masculine. This model that is seemingly necessary/naturalized, in fact serves to re-enforce the patriarchal symbolic cultural order that our society operates from, and which represses women. Moreover, as Irigaray, Oliver and Kristeva all believe that women are foundationally homosexual (Irigaray more so than the other two), then to employ a model which denies a second sex serves only to further oppress/suppress/pre-empt women. The woman will never be able to overcome the abjection of the mother and develop the ability to relate to her if she cannot even establish herself and speak of herself in relation to her mother.

When the linkage to the mother is lost, the child also loses the language of which to speak to the mother, and to relate to the mother. This spells disaster for women's relations *to* women by leading to violence. A woman becomes not only disconnected from other women, but also from herself. As Irigaray (1991) asks:

The imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life and of the first bodily encounter with the mother ... where are we to find them? In what darkness, what madness, have they been abandoned? And the relationship with the placenta, the first house to surround us, whose halo we carry with us everywhere, like some child's security blanket, how is that represented in our culture? (p. 39-40)

The problem is that when there is no outlet for representation of the mother, it is the representation of the Father that takes over. It is the imagery and the symbolic of the Father that becomes the prime referent, the baseline for all meaning and value in our society. If "mother" remains unarticulated then there is the threat of seeking "mother" in our partners. As Irigaray states: "In the absence of any representation of it, there is always the danger of going back to the primal womb, seeking refuge in the open body, constantly living and nesting in the bodies of other women" (1991, p. 40). While this is a problem for heterosexual men, it is a condition which is even further enhanced for lesbians. It may be that violence within the lesbian relationship is a violence which springs from a frustration, a dissatisfaction with the partner who can never provide the warmth of the initial womb, yet who always dangles its possibility, its memory uncomfortably close.

What does this mean for lesbian love and lesbians? Are they constantly in a bittersweet relationship? Is lesbian love always and necessarily destined to be a more depressive love as women as constantly put in such close proximity to mother proxies? It is at once a more comforting love and a more frustrating love? Accordingly, what does this mean for the lesbian who at once seeks the mother and feels that she is being sought as such? All women, in a way, are destined to be treated as mothers by their sexual and emotional partners.

It remains that, according to Irigaray, the key for both men and women is to engage with the mother, with the feminine. She states:

Throughout all this, what we have to do (not that we necessarily have to do one thing before the other) is discover our sexual identity, the singularity of our desires, of our auto-eroticism, of our narcissism, of our heterosexuality and our homosexuality. In that connection, given that the first body they have any dealings with is a woman's body, that the first love they share is mother love, it is important to remember that women always stand in an archaic and primal relationship with what is known as homosexuality. For their part, men always stand in an archaic relationship with heterosexuality, since the first object of their love and desire is a woman. (1991, p. 44)<sup>42</sup>

When the initial connection to the mother's body – the female body – is severed, the woman loses the ability to know herself, speak of herself and speak to others. The woman loses her ability to relate. Irigaray (1991) develops this further, and indicts traditional psychoanalysis which posits that the heterosexual model is natural:

When analytic theory says that the little girl must give up her love of and for her mother, her desire of and for her mother so as to enter into the desire of/for the father, it subordinates woman to a normative hetero-sexuality, normal in our societies, but completely pathogenic and pathological. Neither little girl nor woman must give up love for their mother. Doing so uproots them from their identity, their subjectivity (p. 44).

Irigaray argues that as women, the nature of our love for other women is primordial and essential to the formation of the second sex. Moreover, the symbolic representation of the feminine body is required in order for the woman to learn to speak of herself and know herself. Women require more ways to speak (refer) to themselves as women than just as “mother”/as a body, the body which bears children. The woman is often just body:

The womb, unthought in its place of the first sojourn in which we become bodies, is fantasized by many men to be a devouring mouth, a cloaca or anal and urethral outfall, a phallic threat, at best reproductive. And in the absence of valid representations of female sexuality, this womb merges with woman's sex [*sexe*] as a whole (Irigaray, 1991, p. 41).

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<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that with this statement, Irigaray is not implying that the only “natural relationship a woman may have is with women, and that men are essentially and fundamentally heterosexual. Irigaray maintains that there is a fluidity of sexuality. What she does mean is that, given that the mother is our first bodily contact, we must address this primary relationship and acknowledge its weight in shaping our identities.

Developing a language for dialogue between women is necessary to reverse the basis of the current culture which resides on the premise of matricide. The cruelty of the project of matricide is that women can never commit the necessary murder. Ultimately, in casting the mother into abjection, they also render themselves abject, and eliminate any possibility for a relation to the divine. Irigaray (1991) states:

In psychoanalytic language, women do not become separate or have an autonomous identity, they remain merged with the mother. As a result most women are dependent; they live in dereliction (abandonment) and their greatest terror is that of being abandoned, since they have no self-identity which would provide them with their own 'home'. Without an imaginary and symbolic home of their own, they live in the world of the quantitative, and so find themselves in competition with each other. (...) Women too need a 'divine', so that they can measure themselves against an *ideal* (the qualitative) instead of against each other (the quantitative) (p. 74).

Competition between women has devastating consequences. Here, Irigaray's outlook is as bleak as Kristeva's. When the 'necessary matricide' has been committed, the daughter simultaneously effaces her own ability to desire. Also lost then is the daughter's ability to speak of her mother and to speak of herself.

The danger in relations between women is that the daughter will eat the mother alive, as it were, use her insides, her body, her mucous, her membranes, to form her own outer; protective skin; in the process the mother, devoured and sacrificed, disappears, and there is no longer anyone there – no mother, and particularly no sexuate and sexual woman who desires. The daughter cannot identify with a desiring woman; there is nothing there for her to identify or have a relation *with*, so it is then impossible for her to articulate her own desire" (Irigaray, 1991, p. 74).

The way that one woman will use another to shield herself is what Irigaray (1991) refers to as "mimetic appropriation" (110). Because women have no relation to the divine and no female or maternal ideal to symbolically align themselves with, the mimicry results in a violent "abduction." (1991, p. 110-111). Irigaray (1991) describes this as "(...) the flaying of one woman by the other, the reduction of the skin and of the most mucous to forms [*figures*] into which they flow in order to exist, often quite unconsciously. They take the appearance of the other before there is any image, and may leave her their own, which they no longer want, for lack of a self-representation to venerate, contemplate, admire or even adore" (p. 110-111).

Important also is the fact that this hostile way of interaction between women exists prior to any decision about love or hate of the other woman. Irigaray would consider that the inability of women to distinguish meaningfully between themselves often results in an ambivalence prior to the formation of a visceral opinion. She states:

In the absence of a valid image [*figure*] of themselves in the other – or the Other – they take apart the face and appearance of the other—woman in order to feed and clothe themselves. They are deprived of the artistic, iconic, religious(?) mediation that might allow them to look at and admire themselves in some ideal her, which might support the eventuality of their face-to-face encounter, some work of beauty that would be neither one nor the other and that could facilitate the transition between the infinite/unfinished that they are morphologically and the quest for the infinite (1991, p. 111).

Irigaray's proposed solution is to seek out a "female *jouissance*"<sup>43</sup> in the mother, and it is not until this has been realized that women will be able to distinguish between themselves. This will only be possible once a feminine ideal is available for women to relate to, and against.

As Irigaray (1991) explains:

The very openness of their bodies, of their flesh, of their genitals [*sexe*] makes the question of boundaries difficult. That requires a qualitative difference. Of course no woman has the morphology of another. That might allow us to get beyond competition with the quantitative? But the more, the struggle for superiority between two same persists in the absence of the discovery and valorization of a sensible-transcendental – a female transcendental against which each woman can measure herself rather than progressing only by taking the place of the mother, the other woman or the man. Which is assigned her as a task? And without any indication of the subjective operation at work in it" (p. 112).

The need for the mother to be revalorized as an "ideal" is critical. If the female does not need to slay the image of her mother in order to enter the current cultural order, then she would be able to model herself after an ideal "woman". The woman might also be able to model her relationships after a new "feminine" model of human relationships (for women there might exist an ideal type of connection and intimacy as well, rather than measure themselves against other women in their lives and either fuse/merge with them or try to overtake them...slay them again as the mother was slain symbolically).

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<sup>43</sup> "Jouissance" is a term that Irigaray uses in her writing to designate pleasure and enjoyment (yet with a sexual connotation as it also refers to the act of orgasm).

## SECTION IV – PRIORITIZING SEXUATE DIFFERENCE OVER THE EQUALITY APPROACH TO ACHIEVE RIGHTS

For Irigaray, women’s struggles for equal rights are an important and necessary project, yet true progress and equality can only be achieved when women are no longer contextualized as objects of male sexual fantasy. Irigaray (1991) is skeptical that equal rights and “equal laws for all” (p. 206) is the appropriate approach to take. In the case of domestic violence, the parity approach has in fact, served only to mask how different men and women are. Accordingly, laws, and the social policies and programs which are premised on them must take into account that women and men are not equal. Irigaray (1991) calls this the “concept of sexuate law” (p. 206) based on the notion of “sexuate difference”<sup>44</sup>. As Irigaray (1991) states:

I think that in certain areas, we have to struggle for equality of rights so as to bring out differences. At least I did think that. I now think that what appears to be the path of rational method is a utopia or a delusion. Why? Women and men are not equal. And the equality strategy, when it exists, should always aim at the recognition of difference (p. 206-207).

It follows that when reading and applying Irigaray, it must be remembered that she is focused on re-inscribing the most initial and most denied difference. Irigaray (1985a) responds to the struggles and liberation challenges of the women’s rights movement as follows:

For my part, I refuse to let myself be locked into a single “group” within the women’s liberation movement. Especially if such a group becomes ensnared in the exercise of power, if it purports to determine the “truth” of the feminine, to legislate as to what it means to “be a woman,” and to condemn women who might have immediate objectives that differ from theirs. I think the most important thing is to expose the exploitation common to all women and to find the struggles that are appropriate for each woman, right where she is, depending on her nationality, her job, her social class, her sexual experience, that is upon the form of oppression that is for her the most immediately unbearable. (p. 167)

Irigaray does acknowledge that equality struggles are legitimate in that they are undertaken with a genuine intention to better the lives of women. However, their methods

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<sup>44</sup> Irigaray defines sexuate difference as follows: “Sexuate difference means that man and woman do not belong to one and the same subjectivity, that subjectivity itself is neither neutral nor universal. From such a reality, it results that man and woman cannot meet together in the same world, unless one of them renounces their own subjectivity. The encounter between them requires the existence of two different worlds in which they could enter into relation or into communication after recognizing that they are irreducible the one to the other. Between man and woman a strangeness must subsist which corresponds to the fact that they dwell in different worlds.” (*Key writings*, 2004, p. xii)

and even their goals are misplaced. In their aim to achieve a similitude in terms of social weight and perceived value of social role in society, what they are actually achieving is the right for women to be equal to men. In essence, these struggles are progressively liquidating women of their potential to define themselves (and their social roles) in ways that are truly feminine, and replacing this with a right to become “full-fledged men” (Irigaray, 2000, p. 111).

Very often, the right to parity doesn't take into consideration the different values that suit men, on the one hand, and women on the other; so there's the risk of bringing along with it an identity loss for women, a neutralization of the identity linked to gender. What seems to be liberation then turns in on itself and becomes the opposite. (Irigaray, 2000, p. 111)

It becomes obvious that for Irigaray, equal rights and “equal laws for all” (*The Irigaray reader*, 1991, p. 206) is not the appropriate approach to take. In the case of domestic violence, the parity approach has in fact, served only to mask how different men and women are. Accordingly, laws, and the social policies and programs which are premised on them, must take into account that women and men are not equal.

To demand equality as women is, it seems to me, a mistaken expression of a real objective. The demand to be equal presupposes a point of comparison. To whom or to what do women want to be equalized? To men? To a salary? To a public office? To what standard? Why not to themselves? (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 12)

For Irigaray, the role of “parity” in liberation struggles led by women is irrelevant. Often, in demands for equal rights, equal services, equal representation, the difference between the genders is neutralized/neutered. Women are in a sense erased and replaced by trying to solve the problem of oppression by removing the sexual difference upon which the exploitation was based. The only solution to the oppression of women will come through a route that explicitly acknowledges, respects, uncovers, and reveals sexual difference in all its variations. Any work of feminism that avoids this will surely result in the obliteration of women. As Irigaray states in *Je, tous nous: Toward a culture of difference*: “Equality between men and women cannot be achieved without a *theory of gender as sexed* and a rewriting of the rights and obligations of each sex, *qua different*, in social rights and obligations” (1993b, p. 13).

Equality (parity) is an illusion that is reinforced and maintained by our system of values, and even by the very struggles which seek emancipation of certain groups. Struggles for equal rights irrespective of race, class, and sexuality, “entail *one part of humanity having a hold over the other*, here the world of men over that of women” (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 16).

Irigaray deems this a manipulation of the highest order that is subversive enough to remain unrecognized and even be masked as emancipatory battles. She considers societies as constituted by several genealogies (crossed genealogies as well). And yet, social relations are currently structured by subjugating all genealogies to that of the heterosexual male.<sup>45</sup> As Irigaray (1993b) argues,

what is now termed the oedipal structure as access to the cultural order is already structured within a single, masculine line of filiation which doesn't symbolize the woman's relation to her mother. Mother-daughter relationships in patrilineal societies are subordinated to relations between men." (p. 16)

This is the tendency to reduce all difference, all others to the logic of the same, as defined and represented by the masculine subject (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 74). This is important because I think that here is where there is a key to recognizing how Irigaray's theory may be able to address other relationships outside the heterosexual and the lesbian (female-female) relationship model. What Irigaray is drawing attention to is the idea that the mother must be acknowledged for her role in the creation of subjects (something which she seems to treat as not just a role of equal weight as the Man/father's; but a role that may be more important due to the sheer physicality of the tie to the female body, especially for women.

This is why it is important to go back to the source as one of the several efforts necessary to re-instate the feminine and examine the basics of how subjectivity is formed and knowledge created (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 74). A careful and strategic essentialist examination, guided by psychoanalytic principles, is helpful here. Hence also the importance of starting with projects/efforts that re-examine how women and relationships between women are conceived. It becomes crucial to look at a locus that concerns women exclusively (the homosexual/lesbian relationship) in order to understand how the current feminist lens

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<sup>45</sup> Irigaray offers us a way to analyze and see how the female genealogy has been subordinated/ subjugated to the male. This is important because I think that here is where there is a key to recognizing how Irigaray's theory may remain relevant and still be able to address the linkages between intimacy and violence for the transsexual/ transgendered person and the hermaphrodite. When reading Irigaray I chose to not focus on the ways in which her theories could be read as narrowly focused on the heterosexual relationship (i.e. on relations between the two sexes and on inscribing difference between them).

Rather, it is important to recognize that Irigaray is telling us that the mother must be acknowledged for her role in the creation of subjects (something which she seems to treat as not just a role of equal weight as the Man/father's; but a role that may be more important due to the sheer physicality of the tie resulting from childbirth). Irigaray is telling us that this role figures more prominently and has more impact on women (as opposed to men) as they share the same physical body and the same sexual anatomy as the mother. Irigaray can be also be read to say that the role of the maternal is nevertheless relevant and under acknowledged for both trans persons and hermaphrodites.

operates to oppress or emancipate. There must be a psychoanalytic “reading”, an examination of the dominant threads of discourse and theory (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 75).

What is most important for Irigaray in the re-examination/re-utterance of discourse on women is to undertake it in a way that counters what most feminist analyses do, the “recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, non-recognition” (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 78). While Irigaray (1985b) does concede that most women’s movements and feminist efforts do work to challenge social and political norms by focusing on changing the status of women (p. 81), she also chastises them for effecting superficial changes that actually work to support the existing order. She states: “(...) when these same movements aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself, then they are re-subjecting themselves, deliberately or not, to a phallographic order (1985b, p. 81).

#### **THE LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP AS A SPACE TO DEVELOP SEXUATE DIFFERENCE**

In the course of this research it became clear that analysis of intimacy and violence between lesbians was not just important in terms of what changes could be made to improve the lives of lesbians, but also what changes could be made to improve the lives of women.

Lesbians are the important group to study because lesbians occupy a space of human relations that are without male presence sexually, and lesbians can offer an island of isolated experiences often more untouched by the most aggressive vehicle of patriarchy—the family—than any other group. However, this is not entirely why I have chosen to focus on this group. That I myself identify as being in a lesbian relationship is not the reason either. This aspect merely gives me opportunities to glean information, insight, and to understand through feeling, experientially, what relations between women are like.

The key reason, however, is that the lesbian relationship makes me optimistic, hopeful of a chance for women, in lesbian relationships or not, to engage in the world—with the world—in a way that is not discursively masculine. Basing this on Irigaray’s psychoanalytic perspective, I think that lesbians have the chance to relate with each other not as mothers and daughters (child and mother) but as subjects (subjects-as-lovers). This was my assumption, and what I expected to find was a healthier type of relation, insofar as it might be less violent, not oppressive, as the interaction between two subjects would imply the eradication

of domination and of the hierarchy that exists when there is no acknowledged sexual difference. What I found were high levels of relationship violence that did not follow the typical model of domestic violence based on abuser and victim, power and control. As has been posited in this research paper, from a post-structural psychoanalytic perspective, these symptoms are indicators of a feminine crisis of nondifferentiation. In this sense, women amongst themselves may work to generate a new discursive economy, a new way to see each other, themselves, herself, that is not confined and defined by a masculine vernacular; a vernacular that denied that there are two sexes, causing women to never become.

Lesbians, I think, as women-among-themselves, have a chance to undertake this activity, to help women to *be*. Irigaray engages relations between mothers and daughters—which Freud (1926) considered as the “dark continent” (p.212)—and does focus a little on trying to elucidate this. Not to entirely confuse relations between mothers and daughters and intimate relations between two women, Irigaray differentiates between somewhat between maternal love and lesbian love. She posits that there is a difference between “archaic love of the mother and love for women-sisters” (1991, p. 45). It seems that for Irigaray, the love for other women-sisters is a crucial love, a political love, and a natural love. It is that which can liberate women from the phallic cult which necessarily severs them from knowing themselves and relating themselves to their identity. It is therefore on this political love, on the love for women-as-sisters that we can focus our efforts to better the social circumstances of women.

Herein also rests the importance for the feminist-led domestic violence movement to focus on the lesbian relationship. In a broader sense, if the reality of domestic violence in the lesbian relationship has taught us (from a psychoanalytic standpoint) that women cannot relate as subjects due to a persistence of sexual indifference, then the critical work should be to foster sexual difference in a social setting that is least touched (or least “influenced”) by the monosexual identity of maleness (patriarchy).

Irigaray has taught us that an important piece toward developing sexual difference in society is to encourage women to interact as subjects. I believe that the effect from women interacting as lovers outside the patriarchal model of love relations is one way that this may be achieved. Lesbians (or women-who-love-women) are well-positioned to do this, as they constantly experience a closeness with their female partner that mimics the closeness they

once had in their mother's womb. They also experience the constant challenge of non-differentiation (of identity) and the challenge overcoming relations as objects. If lesbians are able to nurture their relationships and evade the violence that statistical research clearly indicates to be such a problem, then they may catalyze a feminine sex and, importantly, this feminine sex will not necessarily be comprised of the autonomous subject, but will favour the interdependent subject. Aside from reworking the theoretical conceptions of the feminine, it is at the level of practice in terms of what we can do tangibly to help service providers and lesbians in the situation of relationship violence that we may be politically active in a way that strives toward the ultimate goal of female subjectivity.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the lesbian relationship (female-female intimate relationship) and its propensity to violence and reciprocal violence must be studied because it conceivably will have tremendous effect on society in general. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud (1962) concludes that the individual developmental or personal educational process is remarkably related to the developmental process of human communities and even human civilization. The symptoms and changes of civilization are harder to assess due to the level of abstraction necessary to perform this type of analysis. However, Freud (1962) contends that we are nonetheless able to conduct a "pathology of cultural communities" (p. 91). He asks "If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become 'neurotic'?" (1962, p. 91). It can be argued that modern western society does indeed currently exhibit the pathology of nondifferentiation between the sexes. This has led to the social and cultural repression of female identity and to the related widespread social discomfort with dependency and the idea of care-giving for dependents.

## SECTION V – CONCLUSION

As a woman in an intimate relationship with another woman, I went through many stages in my thinking and understanding of violence between women-as-lovers. I initially denied that partner violence was possible between two women, and I certainly did not imagine that physical and sexual violence was experienced by lesbians in comparable levels to those of heterosexual couples. Slowly I began to hear whisperings of partner violence and notice tension and conflict between the seams of female-female relationships all around me. No longer in denial, I was saddened to learn that the incidence rates of female-female partner violence, irrespective of the underreporting on the issue due to homophobia's ability to stifle and silence, were higher than in heterosexual and gay-male partnerships. My original theory to explain the facts that I found so startling was that homophobia and internalized homophobia, as well as the GLBTTQ community's intense focus on the equality movement had led to a social and political repression of the issue. I took this to be both the aggravating cause of the violence and responsible for the inaction around it. I now believe that there are more complex elements involved at the root of this phenomenon, and in the continued suppression of this issue. Most significantly, I now understand that intimate female partner violence is the acting out of the identity conflict between a woman and her mother. As Freud (1962) says in *Civilization and its discontents*, "at the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away" (p. 13). This blurring of boundaries is more complete and experienced more powerfully for women. The identity conflict unfolds intensely because the initial love object is always the mother and because of the similarities between mother and daughter's bodies, separation is not as accessible for the female as for the male.

The statistics of the incidence and experience of violence in the lesbian intimate partnership are scarce. Research on the phenomenon of lesbian abuse is consistently undertaken with the typical feminist lens, in order to not jeopardize the larger project of fighting patriarchy and domestic battery of women by men. As a result, there is a near universal silence on the issue, even within the lesbian community. The available research, however varied methodologically, does indicate a substantially higher rate of abuse in

lesbian partnerships than heterosexual partnerships or gay male partnerships. Moreover, there is a high rate of mutual abuse, lesbians that identify as both victims and abusers, either concurrently or on separate occasions. Psychoanalytic theory on the female relation to the maternal (the semiotic) posits that feminine sexuality is altogether different from male sexuality, and that the feminist gendered approach to abuse is ineffective. From Irigaray and Kristeva, it is clear that feminine identity is conflicted and entrenched in the maternal. The greater intimacy that is between female child and the maternal body problematizes the autonomous identity of the woman. From Chodorow, we learn that this is not just based on ties to the mother's body, but extends also to the act of mothering—taken generally to be the act of caregiving for dependents. Not only is the women's autonomous identity problematic for her to achieve due to her on psychoanalytic developmental process, but her potential (or possible) identity as an interdependent subject is also deterred. In either case—whether she strives to fit the model of the autonomous person or whether she tries to embody those “motherly”/feminine qualities—the woman has difficulty creating herself as a valued member of the social community. That society seems to exhibit such a discomfort with dependency and ‘mothering’ evident through the value (financial and other) that it places on dependency work is indicative of this conflict between the subject and the maternal. This conflicted and depressive dynamic plays out in the context of the intimate relationship, and may explain the higher rates of abuse, and the way in which the abuse is enacted and experienced. Yet, there is another layer of conflict that is added on top of the difficulty of identity formation for women. Women may strive to become autonomous subjects, but the symbolic cultural order will not permit it as “male” is firmly established as the exclusive referent. Within this framework, the female is constrained to be *the* other to the male, rather than *simply* other.

This paper is intended as a diagnostic guide for future and more in-depth research. Writing this paper has brought to light several interesting questions to pursue and challenged my assumptions about my own relationships. In the end, this research is necessary to help dispel myths about lesbian partner violence. It will also help structure, within a new framework of understanding, better responses to lesbian partner violence and better support services and agencies to deal with the victims, the abusers and those women that identify as both.

There are many other avenues to pursue that are beyond the scope of this paper but which would make for a more complete and full research project. Namely, it would be interesting to examine the support services that are available for women experiencing domestic violence, and how a new lens and framework would help enhance these services and the ways that lesbians access them (i.e., the rate at which they access them). It would also be beneficial to delve further into the issue of mutual abuse, as it would impact how support workers interact with victims, abusers, and “participants” (those women that are both victims and abusers) in order to affectively address the violence and work toward change.

Ultimately, and most importantly, the research into violence in intimate relationships is part of the larger project of equality between the sexes. As Irigaray states, “Equality between men and women cannot be achieved unless we think of genre as *sexuée* [sexué] and write the rights and duties of each sex, insofar as they are different, into social rights and duties” (1991, p. 33). This is how I have approached the issue of abuse in the lesbian relationship. Because the issue involves an oppressed group—women—in a heterosexist/heteronormative culture, it is important to undertake the project carefully and with intention. The crucial difference between this approach and the classical feminist approach is that the former intends to establish equality of rights insofar as they underscore our differences. Irigaray strongly maintains that men and women are not equal, and that these differences must be, whenever possible, identified, understood and accounted for in order to assure dignity through equality of human identity. By this I mean that both men and women should be able to develop and create their subjectivity as spontaneously and genuinely a way as possible. When we assume automatically that women and men are equal (as we do in modern western society), the rights, privileges, goals and norms that are enshrined and practiced easily become those of the dominant group: of men. This is because historically men, having enjoyed the position of power and privilege, become the ideal that other groups aim to achieve. The terms that men have set, now preserved and protected by the symbolic cultural order may not be the same terms and goals that women, or other groups, would set for themselves. Irigaray eschews “equality” not because some groups are lesser or more than others, but because equality has become conflated with the masculine and male prescribed and defined ideals.

Even within feminism, the end goal of female emancipation has been accepted as that which has been established from the male perspective. Chodorow, in her work on mothering and dependency, encourages us to question the end goal of individual development—the autonomous subject. For her, the aim of feminine development may be more akin to a singularity of the interdependent subject.

I would also like to state that I am aware of how my approach and research topic may be easily considered as essentializing women in some way and in painting the issue of woman to woman violence, or lesbian partner abuse, with one homogenizing, monolithic psychoanalytical brush. This is absolutely not my intention. However, I am strongly convinced that there is something common in the child-bearing and birthing experience. There is something about the relationship and intimacy that is forged with our mothers during that time (our mothers as the first women we are dependent on and are part of, and to some extent, but not necessarily—love) that is more primordial than all subsequent differences in our varied social-cultural experiences as female. As Ristock (2002) argues, intersectionality and how social and cultural variations such as race, class, and sexism must be considered in order to accurately and effectively develop services and support for those women that are experiencing violence in their relationships (p.17). However, I believe that the psychoanalytical analysis of Kristeva, Chodorow, and especially Irigaray provides some critical insight into the phenomenon of violence in the intimate female relationship, and that first necessary weight must be placed on exploring effects of the initial symbiosis and connection to our mothers' bodies.

Finally, this research under an ethical guideline that is premised on sexual difference (between male and female) is important insofar as it challenges the patriarchal monopoly on symbolic value that the male sex holds as the universal referent (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 73). A change in the way that feminine sexuality is understood and conceptualized (outside of male-ness and as primordially different from male-ness) would engender social, cultural, and legal-institutional changes as well.

Because in modern western society, man has made himself the universal referent, much is riding on our ability to have, promote and nurture female-female relationships. The health of female-female relationships becomes so critical if we consider the tremendous opportunity that they provide. It is, I believe, the female-female intimate relationship (primarily that

between women as lovers rather than the mother-daughter relationship)<sup>46</sup> that can offer a space for women to develop the feminine (and the feminine language) and become subjects.

As this research has endeavoured to explain, the issue of intimate partner between women engages with the psychoanalytic feminist theory of Irigaray in significant ways. First, the high rates of violence between women as lovers supports the theory that women do not exist as subjects (as a distinct sex)—women are subjects *only* nominally in this cultural order. Irigaray is concerned with the development of a feminine language (different from the language of men) that women could use to express themselves, to create themselves, and to relate to themselves and to others. Irigaray aims to do this by working on a feminine writing that will disrupt the patriarchal order and that will be based on reintroducing the significance of the primary relationship an individual will have—the bodily contact in the womb with the mother. Second, women, by virtue of their *sexe* (their anatomy: the ‘doubling’ of their sexual organs and their access to the infinite through their ability to birth children) always have perpetual contact with the maternal. Lesbians (women as lovers) have the constant challenge of close intimate contact with other women, thereby necessitating that they interact as subjects rather than in conflict. This is why it is so crucial that violence be removed from this space (the female-female intimate relationship) through the provision of adequate support services and outreach services and public/community education.

Therefore, it became crucial for my understanding of female intimate violence to radically deconstruct subjectivity and define the process of how the subject is formed differently for women than for men. There is a dual movement of deconstruction and concerted grounding and return to the corporeal dimension of the human (to the body dimension). This dual movement is important on the level of the individual woman, between women at the level of the interpersonal relationship, and on a broader scale for society.

As Freud has stated in *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (1905), our choice of intimate partner is not random. When a person chooses a love object, they are always doing so in order to resolve their feeling of incompleteness that results from the initial trauma of separation from the maternal body. He states “The finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it” (p. 222). Irigaray has taught us that this trauma is experienced most vividly by the female child due to biology, and it is worsened by the symbolic cultural order which does not

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<sup>46</sup> The relation between women-as-lovers is designated by Irigaray as the more political relationship.

allow for the mother to return symbolically as divine image. The symbolic cultural order renders the mother abject and so commits the female child to the same fate. As Irigaray states in *Elemental Passions*:

Women today can sometimes say *I*. The most difficult thing for them is establishing a relation between *I* and *she*. Sometimes they can do it empirically when they stay among women. This does not resolve the question between *I* and *she*. It does not solve the problem of a female transcendency, which is necessary to construct a valid female identity and a non-hierarchical loving relationship between the sexes. The paradigms of masculine transcendency, which is sometimes considered neutral or bisexual, must be modified in order to establish a feminine transcendency.<sup>47</sup> (1992, pp. 3-4)

It is therefore between women that women must work to resurrect the symbolic image of the mother and honour her. By working to eliminate female partner violence, the lesbian dyad is a space where this can be achieved.

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<sup>47</sup> A note here is necessary to explain that I am not reading Irigaray here to mean that the healthy heterosexual love relationship is the end goal of true female emancipation. What I think can be understood here is that there must be a healthy interrelation between men and women on all social levels

## **Annex – Review of Outreach Materials and Services for Women in violent female-female intimate partnerships**

*What the theoretical section has indicated is that the crux of the problem of violence between women in intimate relationships is how to move beyond the so-called gender neutral approach (which is really gender biased toward a monosexuality as defined by the masculine subject) to a sexe specific approach. Classical feminism which leads the domestic violence movement has informed most of the current empirical research, set the context, defined the issues, established the parameters for all other inquiry into the lesbian relationship and partner violence between lesbians, and established the practical methods for addressing the issue.*

*The psychoanalytic reading of intimacy and conflict between women has shown that a cautious and more nuanced revisiting of an essentialist framework can be helpful in developing a new lens to view the problem of violence between women in intimate relationships. In no way is an essentialist framework sufficient to explain lesbian domestic violence completely. It is very promising however as a tool to understand a phenomenon that classical feminism and the GLBTTQ movement has seemingly ignored for both practical and more philosophical reasons. Essentialism also may be a more strategic and timely tool for completing some of the work of the feminist movement that has been bypassed—i.e., for women to be able to create themselves as “other” instead of as “object”—by focusing on sexual difference rather than on the more current trend of focusing on intersectionality.*

*In a broad way, the more essentialist psychoanalytic approach that is employed here has highlighted three main lines of inquiry that must be explored to understand and address lesbian domestic violence effectively. These are: the notion of reciprocal violence (typically referred to as mutual abuse or mutual battery); the notion of relationship violence (which needs to be revisited as not necessarily about power and control, and perhaps more about lashing out in frustration); and the notion that relationship violence between women may need to be addressed in ways that understand the symbiotic nature of this type of intimate relationship and work within this framework. Moving from theory to practice, in this annex I surveyed the most widely available and circulated outreach materials for women in lesbian partnerships that target domestic abuse (relationship violence) along the three lines of inquiry mentioned above. The following is a brief account of what I did discover which I*

*have included in the thesis as an annex to support and update the findings of the literature review. This section begins with an explanation of the selection method of practical materials (outreach and informational) that I have analyzed.*

## **SELECTION METHOD OF OUTREACH MATERIALS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Initially, I tried to limit myself to materials that were available in Canada and intended for domestic violence service providers and abused women in Canada. I looked for these materials (in terms of pamphlets, information sheets, small independent publications and policy papers) in various ways, from varied sources and in several locations. I first checked with organizations that I had a contact in, such as a rape crisis center from the Ottawa region (a self-labelled “feminist organization”)<sup>48</sup>. I also spoke with an officer at the Partner Assault Unit of the Ottawa Police Force.<sup>49</sup> I looked for booths at three Pride Festivals during the summer of 2007 (Toronto Pride, Montreal Fierté, and Ottawa Pride). I checked for Canadian government-endorsed materials through the Government of Canada National Clearing House on Domestic Violence. I also conducted routine searches of sexual assault and domestic violence support centers to see what materials were available through the internet.

Ultimately, my research did not yield much outreach information that was tailored to addressing female-female intimate violence, or that was even explicitly cognizant of it. I find this particularly unfortunate, as outreach material, for most lesbians, would be the only route that they might take to help address violence in their relationship. As stated by Turrell and Cornell-Swanson (2005), “Among battered lesbians and gay men the sources of help least utilized included police and other legal services, crisis hotlines, clergy, domestic violence agency and shelter services” (p. 73-74; see also McClennen et al, 2002; Renzetti, 1992).

The local/regional rape crisis center, while very open to learning more about the phenomenon of female-female partner violence, was able (within its mandate) to address it only within the framework of intersectionality. This means that the local/regional rape crisis center was, at the time that I spoke with them (2006-2007), defining sexual partner violence as the *same* phenomenon (sexual abuse equated with power and control) across race, class culture and sexuality, but taking into account that sexual violence was experienced

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<sup>48</sup> The organization would like to remain anonymous and I will refer to it as a “regional/local rape crisis center”. I met with a member of the board of directors in November 2006 and with the director of the centre in February 2007, in Ottawa.

<sup>49</sup> The officer would like to remain anonymous and I will refer to him as “the officer”. I met with him for an informal conversation in February 2007, in Ottawa.

differently by different individuals. They did not, at that time, have any outreach materials for lesbians that were sexually assaulted by women.

The officer from the Partner Assault Unit at the Ottawa Police Force was aware of the possibility of partner assault between women and of its occurrence in Ottawa. The officer spoke about some of the particularities of addressing partner violence between women from a policing perspective, namely that it was difficult for the unit, when called to an assault scene, to clearly identify the victim and abuser. When I asked the officer about whether he knew of any local Ottawa area shelters that had experience with female same-sex violence, he replied that he had not yet, but that he was aware that, from a victim protection standpoint, it would be difficult to identify a threat to a client at a women's shelter when the abuser was female. Typically, in shelters, men are screened automatically as possible threats to client-safety. The officer mentioned that it would, in his opinion, be difficult for the shelter staff to easily discern whether a client's visitor was in fact her abuser or a friend.

The Partner Assault Unit is relatively new (it was created in 2000), and while it has not yet had much experience in addressing cases of female-female partner violence, efforts have nonetheless been made to work with sections of the GLBTTQ community to better the services and make them more inclusive and sensitive of female intimate partner violence.<sup>50</sup>

While attending several Pride festivals in 2007, I was only able to retrieve outreach and informational material from Toronto. Specifically, I retrieved one pamphlet that was produced by the 519 Church Street Community Centre regarding their Anti Violence Programme which addressed both hate crimes and Partner Abuse in the same pamphlet and had no mention specific to intimate female partner violence.

From the Government of Canada, the only outreach or information material I found was a policy handbook entitled *Caring for lesbian health: A resource guide for Canadian health care providers, policy makers, planners*, that was jointly produced federally by Health Canada, Status of Women Canada, and provincially by British Columbia Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors as well as the British Columbia Centre of Excellence

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<sup>50</sup> It was the Barrier Elimination Project (BEP) that conducted extensive Ottawa community consultations in order to better inform and shape policing policy with respect to non-heterosexual domestic violence (specifically, violence between lesbian intimate partners). BEP was funded by the Department of Status of Women Canada and sponsored by Interval House of Ottawa. BEP ran from 1994 until 2004 when it produced its final report and published its findings on June 23, 2004. BEP ranked the Ottawa Police and their Partner Assault Unit very high in terms of attention to lesbian issues. For more information on BEP's findings on the Ottawa Police Partner Assault Unit, please refer to BEP's *Final Report* (2004).

for Women's Health. The federal Department of Health also has sponsored the paper *Abuse in lesbian relationships: Information and resources* which is available on-line and in hard-copy from the National Clearing House on Domestic Violence. This is the only material I have found that was sponsored by the Federal Government. It dates from 1998.

From internet searches for other Canadian outreach and informational material, I found brochures that were available online from a few assault centres such as Sexual Assault Sarnia, as well as from the London Abused Women's Centre. I also reviewed the London Abused Women's Centre as it is one of the most developed support programs. Moreover, as it maintains a very comprehensive website, I was able to access a significant amount of data. However, due to the relative general sparseness of available Canadian materials, I also decided to include some information that was created for the American market (such as information from Iowa and from Delaware).

## **INFO FROM OUTREACH MATERIALS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS**

### **1. THE DELAWARE COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (DCADV)**

The Coalition's definition of abuse is: "Abuse or battering is a pattern of behaviour where one person can control the thoughts, beliefs or conduct of an intimate partner. It can include physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual and economic abuse" (DCADV, 2004). DCADV's definition implies that there is a clear power differential between two partners.

The DCADV focuses its services on victims. Outreach material is addressed to the victims, and only to those victims that are certain they are complete victims, stating that:

If you are battered... YOU ARE NOT ALONE. You do not deserve the abuse. There is nothing you do or say that justifies the abuser's physical or emotional violence. There are people who can support you and understand the problems you are facing.

I am not objecting to the idea that no one is deserving of abuse. I realize that the need for an automatic and clear (and stark) identification of a victim and an abuser is important for service providers to provide support for lesbians (e.g., through the shelter system). However, there is the danger of neglecting a large portion of the at risk population by establishing clear roles for victims and abusers. The categories of victim and abuser may not apply as neatly to female-female partner violence as they are considered to for heterosexual partnerships. The definition and approach that the DCADV takes is typical of domestic violence service providers and fails to draw out those lesbians that have been abused and have abused as well.

In consideration of the underrated and often dismissed findings on mutual abuse between lesbians, a more inclusive phrasing in the outreach material would likely enhance the probabilities of speaking to a fuller segment of the risk population. A mention of ‘mutual abuse’ may convince a woman who is indeed a victim of abuse, yet also considers herself as a participant in the abuse, to come forward and apply for services (for help). Additionally, it might be helpful to write outreach material in a way that focuses less on the two parties involved, but more on the situation, on the violent dynamic. I believe that inclusive phrasing would go a long way to assisting these women.

Here I think, it is also important to understand how a proactive openness to ‘mutual abuse’ as a reality of the intimate female partnership may also be effective in penetrating the intimate universe of this type of relationship by signaling to the woman, regardless of whether she is *just* a victim, *just* an abuser, or both, that there is an openness in the service system to treat the partners together. This is important to address the reluctance in the lesbian dyad to look to the support system for help for fear of being separated from her partner. Lesbians may also prefer to be treated together as the drive to have their relationships and lives validated may be stronger than the drive to seek help for an unhealthy relationship. For this to happen, therapists and counselors must first be open to the possibility that female-female partnerships be mutually violent, and that the violence might be tightly woven to the intimacy that the partners experience.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, in light of the theoretical perspectives of psychoanalysts Kristeva and Irigaray, the acknowledgment of the fluidity of violence between intimate women is a step toward realizing the “genius”<sup>52</sup> that can catalyze and invigorate what some consider as a stalled

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<sup>51</sup> While it was beyond the scope of this project, a survey of the opinions and philosophical approaches to partner assault between women of services providers such as counsellors, therapists and shelter workers is an important step for further research. It would likely provide valuable insight to how this issue is addressed on the ground and how this specific population is interacted with.

<sup>52</sup> Here, I am referring to “genius” in the sense that Julia Kristeva intends it in her text “Is there a feminine genius?” in which she initiates her triptych on Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein and Collette—as the essence of uniqueness and singularity, that which raises the individual above “ordinariness”. It is this “genius” applied at this moment in history that can help us to realize the most lasting and universal form of human rights (2004, p. 493-494). Moreover, Kristeva (2004) contends that the three waves of feminism have not yet themselves been liberated from the totalizing and teleological tendencies of the Enlightenment (p. 494). Her chief problem with feminism as a movement is that it has been liquidated of its mission. She states that “it has hardened into an inconsequential form of political activism that, ignorant of the uniqueness of individual subjects, believes that it can encompass all womankind, like all the proletariat or the entire Third World, within a set of demands that are as passionate as they are desperate” (2004, p. 495). It is here that a space for a fresh analysis of female-female violence is opened.

women's movement. It is in managing and navigating this gray area (intimacy and violence between women) that Kristeva would say we can hope to move toward realizing the uniqueness of the individual, especially for women (traditionally the least able to achieve personal freedom of subjectivity). Irigaray is at the cusp of this insight by recognizing that persistent sexual (in)difference between men and women must be re-inscribed so that women may create themselves as genuine feminine subjects and relieve the tension and conflict that is created by the symbolic matricide that modern western society mandates.

## 2. VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULTS IN LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS (SEXUAL ASSAULT SARNIA, ONTARIO)

Sexual Assault Sarnia produces a pamphlet on female intimate partner violence entitled "Violence and Sexual Assaults in Lesbian Relationships". The pamphlet contains the typical section of the "ways that same-gender violence is unique" (p.2). This section is typical of most outreach materials insofar that it automatically "debunks" the "myth" of mutual battery, in this case stating that "It is frequently incorrectly assumed that lesbian or bisexual abuse must be "mutual" (p. 2).<sup>53</sup> The Sarnia sexual assault group analyzes that the reliance on the fallacious myth of mutual abuse results from the idea that lesbian relationships promote and sustain equitable relations. Moreover, the Sarnia sexual assault group ascribes to the commonly accepted batterer-victim model, stating:

In violent relationships there is often a perpetrator and a victim. A perpetrator cannot be distinguished by any features such as size, height or age. Defending oneself against an attacker must be examined closely as it may be mistakenly construed either as initiating or equally contributing to abuse.

This description immediately precludes the possibilities: that there *may be* no clear abuser and victim in a lesbian relationship; that a partner engaging in the relationship violence may not necessarily be acting in self-defence, even if she was not the instigator of the initial act of violence (the very first instance of violence in the relationship). Moreover, this description will discourage a woman to seek help if she feels that she is excluded from the "normal" range of abused women that are permitted to seek help. A service provider that markets itself toward the 'total' victim will ostracize those women that feel they themselves are also abusive. This is a dangerous tendency to perpetuate as it leaves two women (both partners, as opposed to just one—the victim) without help. This trend will also serve to perpetuate

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<sup>53</sup> There are other support centers and outreach materials that include a specific mention that 'mutual battery' (or what I try to term 'reciprocal violence') is a myth rooted in heterosexism and/or homophobia

lesbians' perspectives on the irrelevance of the domestic violence movement's support system and related services, thereby continuing their avoidance of these methods when seeking help. The study that Chelsey, MacCaulay and Ristock conducted in Toronto for Health Canada (1998) for the publication *Abuse in lesbian relationships: Information and resources* that indicates that with 189 participants, while 66% of the participants knew of lesbians who were in violent partnerships, 37 respondents reported themselves as being victims of some form of abuse in their own relationship (psychological, emotional, physical and sexual). Moreover, very few lesbians in the study turned to traditional social, medical, or legal services to address the violence and none of the respondents turned to the police, shelters or distress lines (p. 9).<sup>54</sup>

### **3. CARING FOR LESBIAN HEALTH: A RESOURCE FOR CANADIAN HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS, POLICY MAKERS, PLANNERS**

This resource book is intended to address the barriers to wellness that exist for lesbians in violence relationships in Canada. Published in 2001, with input from health care workers, policy makers, and academics across the country, "Caring for Lesbian Health" is intended to make the health care system "responsive to, and inclusive of, everyone" (p. 7). This resource guide that was jointly endorsed and funded by Health Canada and Status of Women Canada considers that the current system is too exclusive of lesbians and the specific problems of lesbian health. While the authors of the resource book acknowledge that "there are health problems that may be more prevalent among lesbians for which risk factors and interventions may be different", (p.7) the only differences they account for are heterosexism, homophobia, lacking protection in the eyes of the legal system. The fundamental tenets of the heterosexual domestic violence model remain the same, namely that there is always a victim and an abuser, and that intimate partner violence is about power and control.

The "Caring for Lesbian Health" Resource book cites that lesbians in violent relationships are less likely than heterosexuals to seek help from the medical system and the shelter system because they feel they will be silenced by having their violence minimized or deemed "mutual aggression" (p. 18). In this research paper, I have held that violence in the lesbian dyad or female intimate partnership is of a different nature than the violence experienced in heterosexual relationships. This, I explained was due to the specific developmental process

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<sup>54</sup> No statistics were tabulated for women who saw themselves as abusers.

of women—more symbiotic and inherently conflicted due to an intrinsic depression that plagues women resulting from a culturally mandated symbolic matricide.

#### **4. ASSISTING ABUSED LESBIANS: A GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Outreach material was produced by the London Abused Women's Centre (LAWC) in 1994. The Centre states that the intentions behind the development on this publication are to “provide information about woman abuse, specifically focusing on lesbians in abusive intimate relationships; to assist those working in the health professions in responding to lesbians in a sensitive and appropriate manner; and to challenge the assumptions and myths that negatively influence responses to lesbians and lesbian battering” (1994, p.1). The LAWC is a feminist organization that works help end violence for women in intimate partnerships with other women, while understanding that the “vast majority of women are abused at the hands of men” (1994, p.2).

LAWC’s website and related published outreach material is geared both toward women in abusive relationships and the service providers that cater to them. *Assisting abused lesbians: A guide for health professionals and service providers* is specifically concerned with signaling to the lesbian community that female intimate partner violence is a problem and that there are service providers that are willing to help. The LAWC website is committed to being inclusive and “anti-heterosexist”.

LAWC, as did the other organizations whose outreach material was assessed, also maintains a definition of partner abuse that is firmly rooted in the notions of power and control. They define female intimate partner violence as follows, “the intentional and systematic use of tactics to establish and maintain power and control over the thoughts, beliefs, and conduct of a woman” (p. 7). Their published material *Assisting abused lesbians: A guide for health professionals and service providers*, states:

However, in a culture that sanctions and maintains many forms of oppression and discrimination, (sexism, racism, agism, classism, etc.), it is no surprise that anyone, male or female, may choose violence as a tool for control. Lesbians and gay men are not exempt from these dynamics in their intimate relationships. They grew up in the same world that everyone else did – a society which teaches, values and reinforces competition, domination, control and “power over” as acceptable behaviour. (p. 2)

Within this understanding of abuse, female partner violence results from the internalization of homophobia and other cultural values of male entitlement.

LAWC like the organizations behind the other outreach material that I have analyzed, also include a comprehensive section to ‘dispel the myths’ and challenge assumptions about intimate female partner violence. In its outreach material, the myth of mutual battery is debunked (p.3). What is interesting about the LAWAC is that, while it maintains that ‘mutual abuse’ or ‘reciprocal violence’ is a heterosexist myth, the organization still employs a type of analytical mechanism to discern whether two partners that appear mutually violent or whether one partner is indeed engaging in self-defense. As stated on the website:

LBWAC defines woman abuse as systematic and intentional tactics to maintain power and control. So, when women say, "I hit back-I yell too!", we help her to look at the intention behind the tactics. We try to look at who is the one who is fearful and who alters her behaviour. Usually we are able to determine that one partner is afraid and alters her behaviour and one does not. With this expanded definition, we are able to differentiate between assault and mutual battery.

I also found the LAWAC’s approach to ‘mutual abuse’ less detrimental to providing good service to lesbians in violent relationships in the way it did not structure and word its outreach material so as to reinforce that there should be a stark contrast between victim and abuser. In contrast to the other outreach material that was analyzed, this material was not written to ‘speak’ only to the victim and her supporters, and it did not focus on assuring the ‘victim’ that she was not implicated in the violence or that any violence she perpetrated was necessarily in self-defense. This writing of this outreach material which seems to target both victims and abusers also seems to make itself available to women that might identify as both victim and abuser. This is an important step, given the inherently conflictual aspect of female relations to the feminine.

What I find ultimately unfortunate in this outreach publication is the inclusion of two anecdotes from violence female partnerships, both of which have a clear demarcation between the total victim and the total perpetrator.

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