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Taking Off the Gender Lens in Women's Studies

Queering Violence Against Women

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Les programmes d'études de la femme ont été des lieux où les lesbiennes/queer ont pu théoriser leurs expériences. Il reste que certains points sont encore perçus sous l'angle du genre telle la violence faite aux femmes. L'auteure souhaite que la violence dans les relations entre lesbiennes devienne une question essentielle dans les projets d'études de la femme.

Women's Studies Programs have generally been important sites within Universities where lesbians/queers have found room to theorize our experiences. In Canada, many universities are claiming severe budgetary restraints and have been reluctant to fund the establishment of autonomous Gay and Lesbian Studies Departments. Therefore, Women's Studies Programs remain as one of only a few key academic disciplines (Sociology, History and English departments being the other three) where new courses in the burgeoning field of lesbian and gay or queer studies are able to be established (see Ristock and Taylor for more on the development of lesbian/gay/queer studies in Canada). Women's Studies is enriched by housing developments in Queer Studies; similarly Queer Studies is enriched by the interdisciplinary focus of Women's Studies, with its emphasis on understanding interrelated systemic conditions (such as racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism) and its many different strains of feminist theorizing (such as postmodernism). That said there are certain areas in Women's Studies that remain steadfastly understood through an exclusionary and limiting gender-based lens. Violence against women is one such area where the overwhelming focus in the field has remained male violence against women and where topics such as abuse in lesbian/same-sex relationships have been more difficult to bring forward.

In this paper I explore the ways that I have re-designed and developed a course entitled "Feminist Perspectives on Violence Against Women" that I teach within a Women's Studies program. I discuss some of ways that I have conceptualized the course so that it can and must include an exploration of same-sex domestic violence that cannot be accounted for by an oversimplified (and at times essentialist) gender-based analysis. I was compelled to re-conceptualize my course, in part, because of a large scale research project that I completed on violence in lesbian relationships (see Ristock). I describe the process of doing this project and present some of the research findings that in fact show how our theorizing of violence against women can be furthered if we adopt a queer lens: one trained on the areas where lines are blurred, categories uncertain, boundaries challenged. Queer theory interrupts a focus on binaries such as male/female, straight/gay where we define our understandings against another and instead works to disrupt the establishment of authentic, totalizing, and normative positions. This lens offers a different view from the strong beacon of a gender lens that illuminates its own subject powerfully (for example exposing the workings of patriarchy and male privilege) but makes it difficult to see anything beyond its scope.

How Women's Studies Currently Talks About Violence Against Women

Violence against women is now more publicly acknowledged as a human rights issue demanding worldwide attention. For example the international lobbying organization, The World March of Women presents a broad definition of violence against women and recognizes its intimate and systemic forms as well as its diverse expressions that include behaviour, imagery, legislation and the media. The various forms and expressions of violence against women are seen as locally different but universally linked because they are identified as "springing from an imposed hierarchy of men over women that is reflected in the politi-

cal structures of countries" (World March of Women).

This strong gender-based analysis reflects the dominant discourse in the political arena that has been arguing for over 30 years that more action must be taken to stop male violence against women. Numerous studies support this need and have documented a strong pattern of male violence over women—including a recent report by Statistics Canada which found in 2001 the largest increase in spousal homicides was wives killed by their husbands-69 wives were killed in 2001, 17 more than in 2000 (Statistics Canada). Given this urgent context it is not surprising that Women's Studies has been a leading force in researching and theorizing this issue. And while there is certainly agreement in this academic field that violence against women is unacceptable there are differences over what constitutes violence, what causes violence and hence, what should be done about violence. So what then does Women's Studies have to say about same-sex relationship violence? How are queer peoples' experiences of violence taken up?

Efforts to understand violence in lesbian relationships that ignore the differing social contexts run the risk of treating all cases of relationship violence as equivalent when that does not seem to be the case.

When examining the way Women's Studies talks about same-sex domestic violence there are two predominant streams. One is a gender-based discourse that essentially ignores same-sex relationship violence or sees abusive women as having internalized misogyny in order to present them as male-like and preserve a focus on women being victimized because of their gender in a patriarchal context (see, for example, Radford, Friedberg and Harne). The other is a structural discourse that identifies marginalized women as being more vulnerable to violence because of other aspects of their social location. Within this discourse a space is opened up for the recognition of lesbian domestic violence as well as the violence experienced by other marginalized populations such as disabled women, indigenous women, and visible minority women who are seen as having heightened powerlessness in society which then translates into increased victimization in public and private spheres (Duffy and Cohen). While a gender-based analysis can be criticized for oversimplifying and universalizing women's experiences, a structural analysis can also be criticized for treating marginalized women's experiences as separate, special, homogeneous cases while ultimately keeping the experiences of white, heterosexual western women as the norm and at the forefront. Thus a gender-based analysis is still preserved. There are other discourses on violence that reflect postmodern and postcolonial influences (see, for example work, by Lamb; Razak) but the gender and structural approaches remain as the strongest overarching frameworks within the area of violence against women in Women's Studies because of their politically strategic value of uniting women.

Teaching Violence Against Women: Pedagogical Confessions

As a professor in Women's Studies who teaches a course on violence against women while also engaging in research on violence in lesbian relationships, I have often found myself caught between these two limiting discourses and their tendency to oversimplify stories of violence in their efforts to be all-explanatory frameworks. While leaning more to the structural discourse that allowed me to at least include topics such as same-sex domestic violence, gay bashing, and violence in/towards Aboriginal communities, I often felt these issues became the sensationalized sideshows, add-ons to the more familiar forms of violence that we were studying in the course. In addition I found I had to counter the sometimes homophobic or racist reactions about these pitiable "other" groups of marginalized women as well as curtail the anti-feminist reactions that wanted to see any example of women's violence as being far worse than men's. At these times I would find myself countering with the solid gender-base discourse as a pedagogical way of reasserting a shared stance as oppressed women.

What concerned me is the way that each of these discourses on violence against women ends up positing truth claims that oversimplify, obscure, delegitimize or subjugate certain knowledges in order to legitimize or normalize others. I found myself asking "What are the ethical implications of this simplification of the spaces of violence and what are the subject positions that they create?" I was better able to understand the effects of a gender-based analysis as a "regime of truth" through my research on violence in lesbian relationships.

Researching Violence in Lesbian Relationships: Differing Truths

I recently completed a cross-Canada study that involved interviewing 102 lesbian/queer women who had experienced abuse. The women that I interviewed reported many different experiences of abuse including physical, emotional, verbal and sexual abuse. Beyond the different forms of abuse that women experienced, their accounts suggested different patterns of intimate vio-

lence arising from various societal roots and interpersonal dynamics, indicating that not all violence is the same. Efforts to understand violence in lesbian relationships that ignore the differing social contexts run the risk of treating all cases of relationship violence as equivalent and interchangeable when that does not seem to be the case. The blanket homogenizing categories of a structural analysis such as working-class, lesbian, Latina, are not subtle enough to illuminate the local context.

In fact, both the research process and the results confirmed the need to constantly interrogate the language, categories and assumptions that we currently have available to us to talk about and theorize violence against women. I provide a few examples to make this more concrete.

Language

One of the first women that I interviewed asked me if she was qualified for the study since she did not identify as lesbian and was in fact married to a man but had been in a relationship with another woman for several years and it was that relationship that was physically abusive. This is a reminder that woman-to-woman abuse itself is a challenge to the feminist focus on male violence against women. Further this example not only caused me to change my own language so that the study more clearly included lesbian, queer, bisexual, transgendered and/or straight women involved in intimate relationships with other women, but it also served as an important example of the limits of our binary categories for defining sexual and gender identities.

Another woman that I interviewed felt the limits of our language categories when she explained to me why she never sought any help for the violence that she was experiencing:

> *I feel like I can't talk about it, I mean how many therapists/social service providers are going to understand queer, s/m, abuse, intersexed, interracial [all features of her abusive relationship]—it's too complicated, there is too much explaining that I'd have to do.*

Categories of Violence

What also became clear when I was concentrating on relationship violence was the fact that I was just illuminating one aspect of women's lives when in fact many women had experienced multiple forms of violence. For example one woman spoke to me about her experiences of being sexually abused as a child, of working as prostitute, being beaten by johns, using drugs and alcohol, getting involved in an abusive relationship with a woman, and then she herself becoming abusive in another relationship with a woman.

> *As I look back my mom's physically abusive to me and my brother, I was sexually abused by my grandfather and that was huge for me...plus I'm from Alberta and there is a lot of racism towards Natives. People running people over and not caring. What I seen is what I thought was acceptable.*

She spoke with out offering excuses. Her account reflects a context of violence in which the neat categories of victim and abuser no longer seem to hold. Her account also shows us the way stories are linked to social contexts that influence and shape people lives and further reveals the way racism, sexism, and homophobia interact and affect one another in contexts of sexual abuse, child abuse, domestic violence, and so forth. Seeing the various and differing contexts in which relationship violence takes hold and recognizing the multiple subject positions that they in turn create became a significant finding of my research (Ristock).

Power

So much of feminist theorizing on violence has focused on violence as a form of power and control—universally men's power over women and secondarily the greater powerlessness of vulnerable, marginalized women.

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As Aysan Sev'er asserts:

> in feminist explanations, the gender, power and control triangulation determines relations in work, politics, law, health, and education, as well as, the domination pattern within coupled relationships. (51)

Yet, this binary model of power and control/victim and perpetrator cannot account for an unemployed waitress who is abusing a woman who is a prosperous chartered accountant. Nor can it account for dynamics where power shifts and a victim retaliates with physical violence. And it cannot capture those incidents in which a woman might be both a victim and a perpetrator; for example a victim of emotional abuse while a perpetrator of physical violence in her relationship. These differing power dynamics were all evident in my research.

A feminist service provider that I interviewed acknowledged that certain layered relational power dynamics are often ignored in anti-violence organizations because they do not seem to fit with a dominant feminist understanding of power:

> *I think racism is another thing we*

don't talk about—the ways white women might use power over their partner who is a woman of colour—there is power and control there ... how do we talk about that and then also talk about other power complexities in the relationship?

The Image of a Victim

Finally, the example of women fighting back, sometimes in self-defense sometimes as a form or resistance and sometimes in retaliation as an intentional act to cause harm, was another finding from my research that challenges dominant essentialist constructions of what it means to be a victim of violence. Most often we are presented with the image of a victim as female, passive and innocent. Yet 38 of the women that I interviewed described physically fighting back within their abusive relationships with another woman. For example:

The next thing you know we were in fisti cuffs.

(Interviewer) And both of you were physically fighting?

Yeah, yeah, well I wasn't going to stand there and let her beat on me you know, I mean I was a street kid myself you know, and you protect yourself.

Overall then the findings from my research challenge the either/or binaries within which we most often work, challenge constructions of what a victim looks and acts like, and demand that we develop more localized and contextualized understandings of people's experiences of violence rather than seeking to posit all-explanatory grand narratives.

Queer(y)ing Violence Against Women

The differing experiences of women in abusive same-sex relationships serve as powerful examples that concretely show the complexities of violence and remind us of the need to disrupt any normalizing and totalizing truth claims. I now use these examples in my course on violence against women as a way to open up an examination of the differing spaces of violence. While we still remain concerned about the strong pattern of male violence against women, the knowledge that women can be violent requires us to look at our own complicity in different forms of violence (for example, in racialized violence between women, in the history of colonization, etc.). The knowledge that gays, lesbians, transgender persons can both experience and perpetrate violence reminds us that we must examine the multiple subject positions that people hold. Queering a feminist lens for studying violence requires an ongoing reflexive analysis of the multiplicity of individual identities and the interlocking nature of systems of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw; Razack) while disrupting simplistic, normative binary thinking (Hawley). Even though we are examining local and specific contexts our analysis remains political/feminist in focus. We see the ways that larger systems of inequality support and encourage violence.

In the course we are raising a set of critically reflexive questions as part of our quest for deeper understandings and responses to violence. These questions include: Who benefits from the way we currently talk about relationship violence? What difference does that make? Who is telling the story and from what social location? Who voices are heard and not heard when we tell the story using the category lesbian relationship violence, heterosexual relationship violence, family violence, violence against women etc.? How else can this story be told? What difference would that make? (Ristock). These questions help make us more accountable, not only because they acknowledge our limited and partial perspectives but because they provoke us to imagine what we do not understand. Students are at times resistant to this less seamless and unifying pedagogical approach but for most students it also opens up more spaces in which to see themselves and their experiences. I share some examples of comments from students' writings in the course:

> I was at first very defensive of the gender-based system. My initial reaction was to defend centering our analysis on gender and my thoughts were if we open the category up to everything than what does that mean anymore? I questioned whose purposes does it serve that the gender-based analysis stays at the core of our understanding of oppression and also who becomes silenced when we do this. It is quite obvious from the readings that when we work from a gender-based analysis then the voices of lesbians, gays, and transgendered persons become invisible in the dialogue.

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As a man in a group of women examining a lesbian's account of lesbians' relationships, I have a special sense of privilege (in the kinder sense) and responsibility to be careful about what I do with this experience. And as a student breaking from the conventions of academia and declaring my learning as a (gasp) personal process, I sense a measure of reciprocating that trust. As you explore in the book, these simultaneous and dissonant power dynamics have too often been oversimplified.... Your analysis of exceptions and limitations of the gender based power analysis made it possible for me to explore more specificity and context to heterosexual relationships as well.... Men who use abuse are still typically constructed as an anonymous and uniform group of oppressors. Their identities are typically described in ways that bind them with their maleness, and all of their behaviours are linked back to their oppressive position. In effect, the binary categories have had one polarity expanded upon, but not the other. Intersectional analysis of power can be safely applied to women, but can we also see men as lying within, rather than on top of, power structures?

I am reminded of Take Back the Night which happened this past fall. Women, queer, straight, transgendered people and allies walked together to demonstrate our strength, agency, and support for one another and our struggles. I hope that feminist theory will take the hint and embrace the hardships that are hard to name or figure out, the problems that challenge our own understandings of what it means to be a woman, lesbian or victim of abuse.

My hope is that, despite the difficulties, work on violence against women within Women's Studies, like students in my course, can embrace the ethical challenge of queering violence against women. It is a move that in fact broadens the field of Women's Studies by requiring a more complex, non-binary understanding of violence, gender, and sexuality which can only help to enhance our efforts to end all forms of violence and to keep Women's Studies Programs as important spaces for lesbian/queer work in universities.

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