Dissenting Voices

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The Undergraduate Journal of the Senior Seminar in Women and Gender Studies at The College at Brockport
Cover created by Devone Scala.
Our Voices

We reach out to our readers in this second issue of Dissenting Voices and invite you to engage with us in the production of new knowledge and resistance. Our voices continue the commitment to inclusive community building and feminist activism boldly envisioned and initiated by the founders of Dissenting Voices.

The multiple subjectivities enacting our dissent constitute both the charged atmosphere of creativity and interdisciplinary within our topics of abortion, body image, motherhood, interrogation of community in Women and Gender Studies, and media objectification and sexual assault.

This broad array of work represents the continuity of our overlapping commitments to social justice. Our collaboration on this journal is marked by solidarity and negotiation uniting feminist research, praxis, theory and our lived experiences across difference and multiple intersecting forces of oppression.

Ashley McKay, ‘13; Nellie Dennis, ‘13; Molly Stanton, ‘13; Laura Clark, ‘13, Devone Scala, ‘13
Note from the Editor

I am thrilled to launch this second edition of *Dissenting Voices*, a student engineered e-Journal collaboratively designed, authored, and published by undergraduate Women and Gender Studies majors as an extension of their Women and Gender Studies Senior Seminar at the College at Brockport.

*Dissenting Voices* grows out of a course learning structure where Women and Gender Studies students reflect upon their undergraduate experience in the discipline, and through engagement, activism, and synthesis of acquired knowledge, establish a theoretical foundation to inform future feminist practices. Course readings comprise students’ discipline-specific interests, enabling an intellectual forum in which students dialogue on a women and gender focused topic. This work culminates in a meaningful capstone project grounded in contemporary and emerging feminist scholarship.

This second volume of *Dissenting Voices* captures an array of topics important to the Women and Gender Studies discipline as examined by diverse student voices. Authors employ traditional essay format but also play with poetry and images in ways that infuse texture and dimension into the volume. The opening essay, an empirical interrogation of community within Women and Gender Studies, concludes with a poem that the author performed as part of our 2/14 V-Day, One Billion Rising movement. Four additional submissions include a study on abortion and women’s voice that opens with a provocative zine cover, an examination of body image and media that integrates poetic narrative, an analysis of media objectification and sexual assault that mixes images with text, and a feminist theoretical reading of Chilean poet Gabriella Mistral’s treatment of motherhood.

Intersecting our semester long coursework and writings, students staged a series of activist projects including a One Billion Rising Stop Violence Against Women flash mob and open-mic poetry reading, and two information tables, one advocating transgender equality and one promoting awareness on ways to stop street harassment. The volume concludes with a photo essay that documents this activist work and also embeds a video link to our powerful One Billion rising installation.

Bridging praxis with theory, essays comprising this second volume overlay topics intrinsic to college and surrounding communities. Authors draw on tenets of feminist thought as they contest gender equity borders and margins reproduced in structures of person, place, and institution. Collectively, and in the spirit of feminist collaboration, students’ activism and writing embody the impassioned resolve that is women and gender studies. *Dissenting Voices* preserves the authenticity of student voice, sanctioning
a wide range of ability and talent as engendered within students’ senior seminar coursework.

In my early role as Brockport’s Women and Gender Studies Director and faculty developing a new Women and Gender Studies senior capstone course, I had what seemed a pipedream in conceptualizing a student journal. Semesters of dynamic student activism and thought inspired me to imagine a women and gender studies publication that would bring to light undergraduate creative agency realized on the cusp of feminist knowledge.

*Dissenting Voices*, as named and populated by its 2012 student founders, now pioneered onward by this 2013 class, is this dream forward.

Barbara LeSavoy, PhD
Director, Women and Gender Studies
Executive Editor, *Dissenting Voices*

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We dedicate this issue of

*Dissenting Voices*

to

AK

and all victims of gender-based violence.

We Rise

and

Dissent in Voice

for all those who cannot.
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Interrogations of Community from the Women and Gender Studies Program at The College at Brockport

This project draws from hybrid methodologies to enact an interdisciplinary analysis of students’ articulations of community within the Women and Gender Studies Program at The College at Brockport. In order to subvert traditional colonizing research power dynamics, my own positionality as a trans* masculine queer identified person is contextualized within broader networks of power throughout. To highlight the creativity and recognition in relationships, I deploy and document “community” not to collapse any particular identities or other distinctions that exist among my co-participants, but to invite a revaluing of conventional boundaries and a rethinking about how knowledge is produced.

INTRODUCTION

This research project is a collaborative investigation into the perceptions of community among my Feminist Research Methods classmates (majors and minors) within the Women and Gender Studies Program at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. Inspired by what Marjorie DeVault (1999) describes as the intersection between attentions to emotional needs and sustaining intellectual work,
I analyze these perceptions to theorize the program as a site for creative new meanings regarding feminism, difference, and coalition-building, while resisting limiting neoliberal models of progress and community. I depart from much of the most available mainstream rhetoric about Women’s Studies which deals primarily with the limiting neoliberal models of progress and community. I depart from much of the most available mainstream rhetoric about Women’s Studies which deals primarily with the marketability of a Women and Gender Studies Program at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. Inspired by what Marjorie DeVault (1999) describes as the intersection between attentions to emotional needs and sustaining intellectual work, I analyze these perceptions to theorize the program as a site for creative new meanings regarding feminism, difference, and coalition-building, while resisting limiting neoliberal models of progress and community. I depart from much of the most available mainstream rhetoric about Women’s Studies which deals primarily with the marketability of a Women and Gender Studies Programs at Brockport as uniquely positioned for interpersonal spaces of encounter, where new knowledge and models of relationality both challenge and reinscribe dominant models of community, progress, and identity. Specifically, I argue that the interdisciplinarity of the program is both marketable and undermines expectations of marketability itself. That is, the ambiguity – or the challenge to traditional disciplinary loyalties – of the specific community I am interrogating, and for which Women’s Studies more broadly is praised and criticized (1) fosters and expands vocabularies for attending to the nuances of intersecting forces of oppression and finding common attributes of resistance and power, and (2) dismantles the myth of Women’s Studies (and feminism) as a monolithic political program that operates under recurrent threats of being dismantled within the capitalist corporate academy.

The following account of feminist rhetorical research captures my intentions to focus on explicating imaginative futures of resistance by challenging the taken for granted
evidence of progress before us that ultimately reproduces inequality:

[Feminist rhetorical research] is not primarily to reclaim, establish, or invert but rather to challenge the empirical evidence before us and used to further the inequality of women and other subjugated groups of people. Feminist rhetoric allows us to ask questions that have not previously been asked as well as to posit theories and conduct research that would otherwise remain unimagined (Addison, 2010, p.138).

I incorporate this methodology with Sandra Harding’s concept of “cross field appropriation” (as cited in Olson & Hirsh, 1995, p. 194) to interrogate perceptions of community within the program, and to analyze neoliberalism-as-community-as-discursive-practice as one variation of Addison’s empirical evidence before us (p. 220). Importantly, Harding (1995, 2004) distinguishes the processes of cross field appropriation from those of “dissolving disciplinary borders” (Olson & Hirsh, p. 220). I extend this line of thinking about disciplinarity and difference to propose that research-as-community is one way that the Women and Gender Studies Program has engaged with multiple truth claims while facing the threat of being dismantled, or forcibly dissolved from the outside, in order to “think the world rather than being thought by it, to take it apart and understand its mechanisms, and thus [...] reappropriate it intellectually and materially” (Wacquant, 2004, p. 101). I invited my co-participants, all classmates in my Feminist Research Methods class working on their own projects, to bring individual questions to focus group dialogues negotiating our multiple meanings of “community” and the ways in which our experiences within the Women and Gender Studies Program align with these meanings of community (or not), in order to explore new spaces of critique. I also attempted to document the complexities of my classmates’ experiences to illustrate the diversity that constitutes the rich context in which my research is embedded.

**METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

I speak from my own embodied experience, as I can only speak for myself. Theory and praxis are inextricably connected. With regard to the privilege intertwined with bodies in research, Flax (1992) writes:

> To take responsibility […] we need to learn to make claims on our own and others’ behalf and to
listen to those which differ from ours, knowing that ultimately there is nothing that justifies them beyond each person’s own desire and need and the discursive practices in which these are developed, embedded, legitimated (p. 461).

As researchers, students, philosophers, theorists and activists, how can we take responsibility for the political repercussions of our projects entering inherently political spaces? This research project cannot be separated from my continuing identity project of becoming, and of interrogating the power shaping my own incoherency. Epstein and Straub (1991) invite us to engage with the stakes of specificity that often become silenced by mainstream discourses: “The temptation is to reify ambiguity and to celebrate the disruption of binary oppositions without asking concrete questions about how power is distributed through that disruption or ambiguity” (p. 23). Keeping this in mind, I engage with concrete questions regarding diversity and interdisciplinarity within the context of the Women and Gender Studies Program. These questions, as well as my own experience of recognition in my relationships, make the incoherent legible on the one hand, while prioritizing inclusivity by continuing to ask how our communities function as spaces of elitism – the mechanism frequently used “to encourage keeping people out” – on the other (Collins, 2009, p. 104).

For example, how can I interrupt the binary perpetuated by reparative “both/and” framings of reality as real/constructed? Who is being left out, and whose voices are not being heard? Furthermore, to highlight the creativity and recognition in relationships, I resist deploying or documenting “community” here in an attempt to collapse any particular identities or other distinctions that exist among my co-participants. However, I do hope to use this abstraction to highlight the connections of sociality and interconnectedness, and to contextualize our creativities and affective public cultures in their ever-shifting permutations (such as those shaping the encounters where I perceive recognition).


Recognition is a function of two relationships: a relationship of distinction and a relationship of
integration. On the one hand, there must be two bounded entities, a “self” and an “other,” for recognition to occur. On the other hand, the insistence on mutuality is a defining feature of recognition. If one seeks recognition, one must be willing to grant recognition to others. Therefore, recognition is a relationship of reciprocity between two distinct, authentic individuals. (p. 15)

This concept of recognition, to me, speaks in part to the interdependency embedded in our social intersubjectivity in terms of the stakes of coherency and creative potential. At the 2012 National Women’s Studies Association [NWSA] Conference, Patricia Hill Collins addressed the concept of coalition-building within our desegregating society. She identified commitment to social change as the most salient connection between theoretical work and experience in a community within the corporate academy. But how do we define social change in spaces where people are always already excluded from coalition-building and the freedom to define their own needs? Negotiating community within the Women and Gender Studies Program at Brockport – what one participant described as “a mixed bag” – led to discussions of community beyond an uncritical static space – defined not by boundaries, but by movement across those boundaries–toward critical education that considers privilege as a social issue and de-centers margin-center discourse. However, I do not propose this concept of community as a verb over that of a noun to either dismiss or foreground heteropatriarchal white supremacist capitalism’s violent normative discourses and communities, which are far-reaching in their silencing power. For example, the survival of the program itself remains at stake as long as it retains its marginal status as a program as opposed to a department, and as long as the critical discourses of the community continue to be dismissed and devalued from many directions by the larger community of the college/society as a whole.

While I attempt to use the words of my co-participants to deepen the conversations regarding the impact of societal oppressions on individuals, with this project I am pushing for advocacies of attention to the struggles/achievements of relationships divided structurally through disciplinary boundaries in the academy. As an individual in these relationships, I am privileged on many levels within the social matrix in which I am enmeshed: My whiteness, masculinity, educational
access and institutional attachments, able-bodiedness, these factors, among others, shape my positionality as I proceed in the lifelong identity project of challenging privilege/identity construction. Despite my best efforts, I will make mistakes. The embodied assumptions I propose here are informed by my personal experiences within feminist, queer and trans communities, among others, as well as my education within the North American capitalist regime. I propose that the Women and Gender Studies Program is a space of strength and resistance not in spite of its incoherence, but because of it.

The beast is already inside the house.

Brown (2009)

In the 2009 issue of Ms. Women and Gender Studies graduate Erin “Toni” Williams states:

Women’s studies filled mental and emotional voids an entire lifetime of education had not satisfied, enabling me to examine the world with a sense of clarity and purpose I’d never known. Whether I remain in academia or pursue work that benefits women outside the classroom, I’m excited about my options (as cited in “A matter of degrees”, p. 67).

In this particular excerpt, the speaker identifies a connection between her emotional experience and the work she will go on to do following graduation. One salient theme that I gathered from the quotes on this particular page was that Women and Gender studies is a rewarding and useful degree. The more I read, the more I began to recognize that one piece of the dominant rhetoric emerging around and about Women and Gender Studies programs of the corporate academy is linked to the viability of a Women’s Studies degree in an economic sense, particularly for its versatility in a technological, globalizing marketplace. Where and to what extent can we rethink these structurally organized communities as spaces of encounter for imagining new modes of relationality informed by process over production? (McRuer, 2006)

Furthermore, in order to situate myself and my voice as a queer trans* masculine person within my research, and to engage with the above quotes, I would like to flesh out some of the ways that the spaces in which my research will unfold is an already-gendered space. This hierarchy and the violent normative discourses it produces have profound influences on
the ways I articulate my research questions, and organize my project. I cannot dissociate my own embodiment and identity project from the phenomenon of community that I’ve chosen to study. Naming my own perceptions of community as part of my ongoing identity project (as opposed to an intellectual process, for example) is a conscious effort to distinguish this narrative as my own and no more valid than any other. One encounter that shaped the trajectory of this project took place after an exchange with one of my feminist mentors from the English department. We were discussing the experiences of performance, specifically what it might feel like to perform (music in this case) with a large band that can drown out individual talents, or, as M. Obourn put it: “the production of belonging over sound” (personal communication, 2013). Can identity projects produce belonging over sound? Can they create space for others to speak? And what is the cost of creating these spaces in a neoliberal discursive context? These are some of the questions informing my continuous identity project of resisting white supremacist heteropatriarchal oppressive versions of masculinity. And as a researcher, I strive to resist a violent normative colonizer identity through a prioritizing of collaboration (Hesse-Biber, 2004).

In addition to calling for solidarity around commitments to social justice, Patricia Hill Collins advocated a rethinking (and re-prioritizing) of intersectionality and social justice in a desegregating society in her keynote address at NWSA 2012. In this speech, Collins problematizes academic language (intended for specificity) deployed as academic capital at the expense of its subversive potential. For example, she points to the co-opted pluralization of words such as “feminisms,” useful for opening up critiques of power to resist hegemonic versions of feminism, but now with the power to justify itself by mere virtue of its status in academic spaces. As Wendy Brown (2009) observed of reforms at the University of California, “[Y]ou cannot simply say yes or no to privatization because the beast is already inside the house” (“Save the University” of Reclaim UCSD). At the same time Hursh (2008) argues “neoliberalism is neither inevitable nor neutral” (p. 126). In other words, although neoliberalism is one of the powerful, meta-narrated questions to which our social projects much negotiate/respond with and against, it does not mean that inequity is
inevitable and cannot be changed. I invoke the abstraction of neoliberalism not to make a polemic Marxist proclamation, but to attend to the explicit connection that the State University of New York (SUNY) Report Card outlines in the overlap between new liberal policies and economic progress in New York. I pull the following excerpt from the SUNY “Annual Report Card” (2013) to show the explicit articulation of education’s tie to the New York economy in order to de-contextualize some aspects of our perceptions of community in the Women and Gender Studies Program:

SUNY will not only measure success in teaching and research, we will also embrace our public mission to play a role in the critical issues facing our state, including helping to turn around New York's economy and improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers. To do this, we have identified priorities in alternative energy, “cradle-to-career” education, globalization, diversity, research and innovation, health and wellness, and the impact SUNY students, faculty, and staff can theoretically have on building stronger communities statewide (emphasis mine) (para. 4).

The rhetoric of the SUNY report card aligns with neoliberal discourse in its direct linking of political involvement and education to economic progress of individuals and the state. What are the implications of this? My critique is not of the articulation of the specific goals listed above, but for the lack of alternative social registers for progress and value that are not also always tied to capital. Mark Fisher (2009) describes “capitalist realism” as a world in which, “everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business” (p. 17). However, he also departs from Marxist class ideology by highlighting the limitations that capitalism places on ways of being in the world, which includes the ahistorical impulses that haunt the ways we create and negotiate community. When we take capitalism, like civilization, for granted in this way, we are negotiating responsibility within a system that has largely already been outlined for us. The SUNY Report Card further claims, "You can hold us to it" (para. 1) which ties SUNY’s performance to a “competitive New York” (“Report Card, 2011). This invitation is participatory and democratic; how can we then, as students and researchers in this context of “capitalist realism,” access and enact critical pedagogy?
The Women and Gender Studies Program at Brockport, through advocacy, outreach, and collaboration, is a unique space for producing belonging over sound. I draw from M. Obourn’s distinction between “belonging” and “sound” previously discussed. Additionally, Rubin’s (2003) concept of recognition as a relationship of reciprocity, as I have experienced within the program, constitutes the noise, or belonging, produced in space of Women and Gender Studies. Specifically, Rubin’s reciprocity is useful for moving beyond a concept of Women and Gender Studies as a marginal space, into one of discourses produced through movement between and beyond conventional or structurally delimited boundaries we call community. However, in questions of political voice in the contemporary globalized political economy, the discursivity between noise to sound is a relationship that invites a revaluing of coherency imagined differently. Sound is not merely a unit of discourse articulated and defined easily, or delimited by the listener. Within its social context, individual sound both maintains its profound difference and articulating force within the collectivity of noise, and is marked by the interconnections that characterize listening as reciprocal.

“Capitalist realism” as context and the “hidden injuries” of everyday life (Gill 2009)

So, why this particular group? In a general sense, I have a particular affinity to the campus. I have found a community of many non-traditional students such as myself. I experience a sense of shared perspective as well as belonging with my classmates. I also derive a great deal of support from my fellow students who find voice and construct themselves as individuals in ways that I admire. In the course of working together on our own individual research projects, the group of us had the opportunity to dialogue about issues to which we are in close intellectual, physical, and/or emotional proximity. In some ways, this interaction was mitigated by the structure of the classroom and the university itself, with facilitation and expertise provided by our professor. In Crip Theory, McRuer (2006) establishes, “[q]ueer theory and praxis emerge as much or more from nonacademic spaces” (p. 232).

Considering the elitism that haunts and debilitates queer theory/embodiment as praxis from making (particularly) non-white, non-able-bodied and/or non-masculine identities central, I engage
standpoint epistemology and queer theory to acknowledge that my co-participants and I are not merely individual knowledge producers; we are co-participants in the *process* of knowledge production outside of the academy and through interconnections across our heterogeneous investments across the college. Our individual research projects engaged with topics such as study abroad students’ perceptions of human rights/feminism, body image perceptions on campus, and the sex education of incoming freshmen. As Holloway (2009) argues, “such forms of embodied critique emerge not from academic research into one’s condition, but dialectically through the experience of realizing not just that things are not as they should be, but that you exist in the ‘wrong state of things’” (p. 14).

It is this movement, this shifting and expansive field of knowledge production, which constitutes the tensions and affinities between our perceptions of community in our spaces of encounter. Can this framing be used to imagine community differently? And how does this relate to our identities as citizens? Lauren Berlant (1999) explains, “Sentimental politics generally promotes and maintains the hegemony of the national identity form, no mean feat in the face of continued widespread intercultural antagonism and economic cleavage” (p. 53). While I perceive a visceral attachment to the space of our encounters, what can these attachments mean politically? Can feelings that we experience in the affective public sphere be examined to contextualize the limitations of our imaginative futurities without generalizing experience over structure? Do our incoherent communities have the potential to challenge dominant exploitive models without losing their specific lived realities/meanings in their representations? Berlant suggests, with regard to tying our incoherencies to social being-ness:

> Training in one’s own incoherence, training in the ways in which one’s complexity and contradiction can never be resolved by the political, is a really important part of a political theory of non-sovereignty. But we still have to find a place for adjudication, or working out, or working for, or working over, which requires a pedagogy of attention, of paying attention to the different ways in which we engender different kinds of claims on the world, in our attachments or ways of moving or desires for habituation or
aspirations... (as cited in Davis & Sarlin, 2011, para 17).

The “researched” of my project engender claims on the world that differ from my own and from each other; they were also researchers in their own concurrent projects on diverse topics, and it was from listening to their processes that I was inspired to document the listening itself. A community of researchers co-participating in the development of each other’s methodologies and navigating the emotional terrain that these projects entail was a space for “paying attention,” in nuanced ways - for critical “adjudication” that could easily go undocumented and ghosted by the production of completed research projects created with explicit recourse to sanctions in the form of grades. While the political economy of the classroom was structured in both useful and limiting ways, some of the most transformative, engaging, and sustaining exchanges of ideas and mutuality went otherwise unrecorded and unexamined.

There are multiple forces in the form of theoretical and practical norms governing my academic disciplines which construct my own biases, which rendered certain aspects of my project inaccessible, while opening up others. My position of dominance as the researcher is one that I attempted to consciously subvert and make useful in creating a non-dominant identity of researcher as collaborator in order to imagine the researcher/researched dynamic as a space for community. The position of researcher calls me into a position of critical advocacy for others, which is a space of responsibility and privilege.

One of the epistemological questions underlying my research project is, ‘How might this research be distributed within the academic community?’ The audience for my “results” is firstly my classmates, those who chose to participate and those who chose not to. At the outset of the course, through a conversation with my research advisor, I learned that despite her perceptions of community within the Women and Gender Studies Program, there was a lack of a cohesive narrative to document this community. I hope this project will put into motion further interrogations. There are several reasons for this; one is that our Women and Gender Studies Program is currently that – a program – and not a department. Despite lack of resources and support in structural ways, it is my experience that the passion, support, and expertise (particularly from our feminist mentors/teachers) invigorate...
the program with its unique vitality, student support, and intellectual rigor. These qualities contribute to the translation of the noise of belonging and internal community into an externally legible sound for those in power. Being heard from the center is crucial for the survival of the program, but if we are to interrupt the reproduction of inequality, we must continue to creatively interrogate the meaning of listening and politics.

**Experiential knowledge**

In an attempt to frame my experiential knowledge, I draw on feminist queer negativity as articulated by Jack Halberstam’s (2007) queer negativity. Halberstam advocates the negative affects – which are oftentimes subordinated limiting operative binaries (such as success and failure) that structure masculinist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism – for their political potential and power of resistance. In his critique of masculinist, anti-social queer negativity projects, Halberstam (2008) distinguishes between feminist and anti-feminist anti-social queer negativity: he identifies the latter as ahistorical and aligned with liberal progress ideas that ignore women, domesticity and reproduction. Instead, he advocates an anti-social queer negativity that is:

[W]illing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and put, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate, and, to quote Jamaica Kincaid, to make everyone a little less happy! (p. 154)

Beyond establishing this important distinction, Halberstam (2008) also emphasizes the need for affects as sites of resistance that can only be accessed and recognized through an attention to those legacies of queer resistance that may not register within masculinist frameworks. The Women and Gender Studies Program at Brockport provides a register for such legacies. Furthermore, Halberstam (2008) enacts this affective shift with several examples: “Jamaica Kincaid’s colonial rage;” “Valerie Solanas and the War on Men;” “Abromovics and Ono on Radical Passivity.” I open up the affective archive of the Women and Gender Studies community at Brockport into what Halberstam describes as a space for local resistance.
that can articulate itself as a branch of the “many headed hydra” that historically opposed white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism but that was written into history as something else. Previously a debilitating mechanism for isolation and closing off, my personal experience of depression within the temporal, emotional, and intellectual space of the Women and Gender Studies community facilitated an opening up, for creatively “working out, or working for, or working over” (Berlant as cited in Davis & Sarlin, para 17). It became a space not to transform depression into something else, but to experience depression differently. Nurturing this space as one where the co-production of knowledge is constantly in flux allows me to revalue my attachments to skepticism, doubt, and the intellectual joys/pains of experience, not as subordinate to other modes of sociability but as part of the human experience and a viable site for resistance. Furthermore, I carry an attachment to the program with regards to my sincere desire to help create a space that is at once safe and not asked to justify its own existence all of the time. The program’s marginalized location in relation to an institution that is affected by systemic inequalities – among them violence against women, rape culture and oppression – creates a space of knowledge that both runs the risk of becoming a dominant space, and is consciously self-reflective in ways that may be foreclosed by taken-for-granted disciplinary codes. In my experience, there is an overlap of the emotional/intellectual in experiencing shared spaces in that my co-participants and I, pursuing a Women and Gender Studies degree, do not have to justify our choices to each other; I feel in these moments of encounter and recognition that I do not have to justify my existence, and that while our perspectives may overlap in very limited ways, if at all, what is often taken for granted is just the desire to hear each other, and I find this incredibly sustaining.

I also entered this research with a specific experience of interdisciplinarity with Sociology and English minors that I think is worth mentioning. I have been in classes where students claim that affirmative action is reverse discrimination, engage in victim blaming, or proclaim that women have achieved equality so “what is the big deal anymore.” Mistakes will be made, and I am responsible as well. My point is that, for me, these common-place incidents register as individual-level
examples of a larger cultural dissonance that operates structurally. In the absence of dissenting languages and impulses in these spaces, how do I take responsibility for myself and others who might be pathologized, silenced, and isolated, for feeling what they may not be able to articulate coherently to those in power or to each other – that epidemic dissociation between the fetishized, celebratory, dominant narratives of autonomous individualism and those narratives that have yet to even register as a result. As one of my co-participants described her perceptions of recognition within the Women and Gender Studies Program: “I’m not crazy, neither are you,” (Participant G).

When a man murdered Alexandra Kogut on the Brockport campus this semester, I experienced rage with no place to put it. I do not know this woman, but the transformations of this project are in part a result of the rage that I felt/feel. At the same time, I am wary of sharing this in the context of an assignment. I do so because I hope to channel some of the rage productively, and respectfully, and to express my hope that – given the precarious existence of the program, and amid continuous pressure from students, faculty, our families, and others to defend ourselves – if there is a distinctively viable space within the academy to fight systemic inequality, including the atrocity of violent masculinities, it is here. In the novel, Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azar Nafisi (2004) writes that to ignore the suffering of others is to deny their existence. How can we engage in critique, and community, that does not simply “hand down sentences,” in all senses of the word, but that “multiply […] signs of existence” instead, so that all individuals can exist and flourish? (Foucault, 1980, p.326)

Queer Relationships
Researcher and Researched

Pulling from Detamore (2010), I argue that the alternative social worlds co-constructed between researcher and researched as a political space can be used to highlight the ways in which our “embodied critiques” of the “hidden injuries of everyday life” is a site of knowledge production. I shared the following focus group questions for the sake of transparency with my co-participants, however our discussions touched on many different topics, many of which were not directly related to these questions:

• How do you identify yourself?
• Have you experienced a sense of community in your experience at Brockport? What does this feel like?
• Has being a student in the WMGS Program at Brockport changed your identity and/or your goals? How?
• Can you identify any relationships (academic, friendship, mentorship, research, etc) that have facilitated any significant changes in your experience or self-identification at Brockport?
• What does it mean to say that there is an overlap between the intellectual and the personal?

I also shared the following research questions with my co-participants, to which they may have tailored their responses in order to help me with my project, as we were all working on our own individual projects concurrently:
• What would constitute the tensions and affinities between our perceptions of community?
• Where is there language for inclusivity that isn’t digested by the system immediately in its corporate codification?
• How do we navigate/negotiate spaces of rigorous criticality and accessibility within an institution that has been hierarchied for us?

• How can I take an intersectional approach to masculinity?
• Does community relate to our identities as citizens or influence civic participation?
• What can perceptions of community in a pluralistic incoherent sense tell us about the potentiality for inclusivity?
• What sorts of old/new meanings are created in the embodied negotiations of community that take place within the Women and Gender Studies Program? Why are they important?

Synthesis: “I’m not crazy; neither are you”

While it would be disingenuous of me to claim broadly that I have experienced a cohesive narrative from the dialogues with our co-participants, I would like to identify a few themes:
• Disagreement
• Relationships
• Radical listening
• Critical Thinking
• Recognition
• Authenticity
• Responding to persistent pressure to justify choice of major to friends/family
• Discontent
This group of Women and Gender Studies students responds in politically strategic ways to the pressure to de-pathologize the individuals who constitute it by separating stereotypes of trauma, while resisting closing off the space for those whom the program acts as a space of healing and meaning-making.

Participant F’s reputation as an activist on and off campus preceded her. After the second focus group, she and I walked together for a bit for a one-on-one chat. She revealed which of her classes she felt were most fulfilling/challenging, as well as some of her frustrations with the level of discussion in a few of them. She tentatively expressed that she felt her experience was quite different than the others in our focus group because she did not relate to a feeling of community on campus. She touched on this during our group discussion as well, and some of my co-participants who lived on campus said they felt they understood this, drawing on their comparative experiences of immersion in campus life. For example, as Participant G expressed, “School is my life right now.” F expressed her concern that her feeling of detachment would be perceived as “feeling better than” students who learn and experience the program differently from herself. She shared, “I’m a traditional learner, and school is like my job right now. I’m not here to make friends.”

I perceived some similarities between Participants F and G that reflected some themes within the larger group: languages of movement from the shared space of the structured community of the Women and Gender Studies Program into individual lives (whether it be spaces of work, activism, friendships, family, relationships, other disciplines), as well as a gratitude for the mentorship of our program director as one critical support due to her consistent effort to recognize students as complex individuals with a keen attentiveness to our different needs. From our very different discussions about movement – from the space of the Women and Gender Studies community back into our individual lives outside of campus – emerged narratives not of resolution or settling or reconciliation, but of negotiation, different needs, and finding voice. This movement dismantles the constructed boundaries between the consolidated “sound” of external articulations of coherency and the recognizable “noise” of internal productions of community belonging.
Many of the participants reported that they had actually left more “stable” academic tracks – those that they felt would have provided them a sense of certainty about their future – to join the Women and Gender Studies Program. For example, Participant E transferred from a large university abroad. She expressed her sense of community at Brockport in general, not specific to Women and Gender Studies. She explained that at her former institution, she was just a number: “No one would recognize me. If I went back and walked through my former department, not one person would recognize me.” Her original plan was to go to law school with the goal of helping asylum seekers. Now, she says, “I have no clue what I want to do with my life, and that is genuine.” However, when explaining her reasons for continuing at Brockport, she described her communities at home as spaces where she felt ignored:

This is the first time I’m doing something that means something to me. I enjoy it more than I’ve ever enjoyed anything. At home, I was shut down whenever I tried to address anything that meant something to me. I was losing my shit and frustrated with life in general. And my friends talked about boys and hair and drinking and looking for husbands twenty-four seven.

Participant C felt unheard within her family, which she says is because she is the only one in the family not in the medical field. She described how her “family doesn’t give a shit about it [her major] because it’s ‘not important.”’ Participant C is active in campus outreach and activism, working on campus to help educate students and provide support for issues such as sexual health, education, and sexual violence.

Considering the recruitment rhetoric from Ms. Magazine noted earlier, these interactions indicate the usefulness of a Women and Gender Studies degree beyond recourse to neoliberal metrics of economic growth.

I DISSENT

In “Sex and Gender through the Prism of Difference,” Messner et al. (2013) promote analyses that move beyond the “patchwork quilt phase” of studying groups to those that “highlight bridges of interdependency,” because as they observe, “relationality suggests that the lives of different groups are interconnected even without face-to-face relations” (p. 18). Embedded in this patchwork quilt argument is a
critique of the cooption of difference for political divisiveness, but with an emphasis on bridging over our recognized real differences. McRuer (2006), like Messner (2013) and Collins (2009), distinguishes between tolerance and acceptance:

I know that assertions of decisive differences between our present and a problematic past, appeals to things like a seemingly unprecedented "climate of integration and diversity" and triumphant conclusions are generally the necessary components of a progress narrative and, when present, sufficient for constituting said narrative, but in this case, I consent as a reader to not see it. Call it a queer eye for the progress narrative, but you will have gathered that I dissent (p. 178).

In a desegregating society, what constitutes politically responsible feminist narrative and rhetoric that allows us to “make accessible” the sites where our representations are produced? (McRuer, 2006; Collins, 2012). As our political economy continues to reshape the dominant meanings of community, to all of the narratives of progress and equality that constitute the violent normative discourses of Brockport: I dissent.

That the Protagonist Is Always a Man

That Cheney’s daughter campaigns for Bush’s son.
That Bush’s son wins a presidency that hates her.

The way Condoleeza Rice called her boss, her husband. That it was an easy slip.

*That Michelle Obama is called the First Black Lady.
That the 1960s beatniks are the revolutionary poets. That seventh-century-BC Sappho is that lesbian poet.

How the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame describes Joan Baez as “the female Bob Dylan.” That she launched his career.

That in “female musician,” adjective becomes noun.
How Marge Piercy says “the moon must be female.”
That the moon was forcibly penetrated by an American flag.
That plots on the moon are now up for sale.
Because Mother Earth is melting.

How the Security Council of the United Nations has five permanent members. That all five are the official “nuclear weapon states.” That the United States is the only country to have dropped an atomic bomb. That it is called the security council.

The way the old philosophers who declared human nature to be naturally brutish were men.

How that one guy in your women’s studies class raised his hand for the first time in the semester to reprimand that “men can be raped too.” That we respect all voices. That maybe he has a point. That he is a good guy for being there.

That Margaret Thatcher. Queen Elizabeth. Hillary Clinton.

How anomalies save their ass.

That father with the baby in the backpack in the grocery store.

How exceptions erase us.

That Adam produced Eve. That Mary did not birth Jesus.

How miracles screw us.

The way that a Father, a Son and a Holy Spirit exclude us from the highest positions of power in the Catholic Church. How they, condemning women and fags, then don dresses, diddle little boys, devour the flesh and blood of their gaunt, devout, dapper, special man-friend.

The way women, denied education, had to pass down our herstory through stories and poems and dance and music and recipes. How the Great writers and poets and dancers and musicians and chefs have not been women.

That my computer spell-checks “herstory.”
The way the English language carries us inside Man like his fetus. That it is only our wombs that are patrolled.

That the members of Jane, helping to provide safe abortions before Roe v. Wade, were criminals.
That the rounding bellies in South Dakota clinic lines are murderers.

That Emma Goldman was considered a U.S. terrorist.
That they are pro-life. That they take the good words.

That Ann Coulter may consider herself an “us.”
That self-determination is terrifying.
That self-determination is what we fight for.

That we fight for our sisters’ right to choose stilettos. How the women in horror films can’t run in stilettos. That one drag queen who used her stiletto as a weapon during Stonewall.
How the women in horror films can’t run in stilettos.

The way CNN finally devoted an hour-long segment to the brutal systematic government-sponsored rapes in Darfur.
How these women fled bombed and burning homes and still had the courage to testify to Amnesty International. How one sixteen-year-old had been raped by ten men for seventy-two hours straight. How pregnant women are not spared. How women have their nails pulled out. How unmarried women are considered spoiled.
That the title of the broadcast was “Angelina Jolie: Her Motherhood, Her Mission.”
That she was wearing stilettos.

That the Lesbian Herstory Archives can fit no more material into its Brooklyn brownstone.

That Focus on the Family headquarters has its own zip code.

That the National Organization for Women. That the Kitchen Table Press. That the Radical Cheerleaders. That the Feminist

*That the Women and Gender Studies Program at Brockport.
*That the Women’s Center.
*That the center is in the basement.

*That One Billion Rising.
*That Alexandra Kogut cannot rise.

That.

Is why I am a radical feminist.

(Olson, 2007, p. 172-175 [*additional stanzas by A. McKay])

Performed with Dr. Barb LeSavoy at the One Billion Rising open mic night, 2013

References


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"Pro Life"  Abortion is not health care

Aoption, not abortion  ABORTION IS MURDER

Stop abortion now

Smile, your mom chose life!

Everyone should have a birthday

Choose life

As a former fetus,
I oppose abortion

Abortion: the
ultimate child abuse

Abortion kills children

Equal rights for unborn women!

I was a choice!

"Pro Choice"

Knowledge+Choice=POWER

Pro-women, pro-child, pro-choice

Don't believe in abortion?

Don't have one

My body, my choice

Trust women

Let the choice be with you

If you don't trust me with a choice,
how can you trust me with a child?

Someone you know needs a choice

What about my body?

It could happen to you.

Will you have a choice?

Keep abortion safe and legal

Pro-choice is not anti-life

Abortion: Silencing of Women's Experiences by Molly Stanton
Abortion: 
Silencing of Women’s Experiences

The abortion debate, most known for drastic use of the terms “pro-life” and “pro-choice”, is visible throughout the media. Slogans tend to target those considering abortion in varying negative and positive manners. Laws and language play a large part in skewing and silencing women’s voices, decisions and experiences. Without capturing and understanding that women live very different lives, the abortion debate may remain silent of women’s voices. My research seeks to discover why women have abortions, how they are judged and by whom, and where their voices get lost.

INTRODUCTION

Abortion, in the United States at least, has a very controversial and usually negative connotation. Performing a quick internet search the on the terms pro-life or pro-choice will show dozens of statements, pictures, and billboards examining this debate. Not only is there much debate about abortion, there is recent talk of the potentially problematic nature of the terms “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” As much of this debate focuses on the fetuses of women receiving abortions, women’s experiences and opinions are placed on the back burner. With one in three women receiving an abortion in their lifetime, and four in ten pregnancies ending in abortion women deserve to be given the opportunity to make their own choices about their bodies.
One can start to wonder, however, where their voices lie in this seemingly never-ending dispute. In 2005, Susan Hill stated that it is “frustrating to hear other people discussing the fetus but not discussing the women” (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 30). This quote very much sums up my interest in the topic of abortion. I personally tend to define myself as pro-choice. While in college the past few years, I have realized more and more that everyone’s experiences are different. Because of that, I support women coming to their own conclusions about their bodies. Still, I feel that my own views and the views of others about abortion do not have strict boundaries. Through my research, I was relieved to discover that many other pro-choice supporters also hold the belief that “abortion should not be used as birth control” as stated by Senator Hilary Clinton back in 2005 (Ludlow, 2008b, p. 32). With this understanding in mind, my research seeks to discover why women have abortions, how they are judged and by whom, and where their voices get lost.

The Abortion “Debate” and Slogans

The idea of abortion as a debate is, in itself, problematic. As one side usually argues for the choices of women/family and access to adequate sexual health education, the other argues for the life of unborn children. This debate has strengthened the already wide disconnect in thoughts on abortion between groups of people, and has led some away from learning more about abortion in general. However, examining the two sides of this debate reveals that certain topics within abortion are ignored, such as late-in-pregnancy abortion, women who grieve the loss of their fetuses, and mothers who have abortions (Ludlow, 2008a). The feelings of women who experience these instances are often overlooked, for they are sometimes shamed or otherwise questioned for their decisions. Therefore, it is all the more important to examine the experience of every woman who has received an abortion.

Within the current discussion on abortion, typically “we are forced to choose between pregnant women and their potential babies” (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 31). The absence of women’s voices in the decision to choose abortion is troubling on many levels. Working towards looking at the fetus and its place in a woman’s abortion, rather than iconizing it, is important for shifting this debate. Slogans aimed towards the pro-life belief have played a
negative role on trying to open up this discourse as well (Ludlow). These slogans, which range widely from “women need love, not abortion” on the pro-life side to “someone you know needs a choice” on the pro-choice side, are another area I am highly interested in, for they capture the extreme differences in opinion on abortion. Because these sides are so drastically opposed, there is a certain middle ground that is often overlooked for those whose opinions do not fit anywhere in the existing conversations.

Pro-life/anti-abortion slogans and advertising tend to focus on the fetus and its “right to life.” Using images of fetuses in these ads proved more popular after the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973, a landmark case that found that abortion should be a fundamental right. Utilizing images of aborted fetuses strikes an inner chord with anyone who sees it, since we highly value children in our society. A lot of pressure also falls on mothers, but much like within abortion politics, voices of young and poor mothers or mothers of color, compared to their white, middle class counterparts, are lacking (Ludlow, 2008a). You see the hit on potential mothers occurring frequently in anti-abortion slogans such as “Smile, your mom chose life!” and “Abortion kills children.” These slogans, which appear on bumper stickers, picket lines, or anything in between, scream at all those individuals who are already mothers, or those women who cannot fathom anyone terminating a pregnancy. While anti-abortion slogans and images are drastic and certainly shocking, they ignore those voices of women facing an unwanted pregnancy or contending with post abortion emotions. An interesting spin on slogans comes when pro-choice phrases also start to be problematic. Ludlow (2008a) uses the example of “My body, my choice” which implies understanding of women’s feelings. Some would argue, however, that this particular phrase begins to abolish any existence of a fetus at all. Assigning “personhood” to fetuses has emerged as an increasingly controversial abortion issue, especially when images of dead women (due to abortion) started to surface in part to combat dead fetuses versus dead women. How this helps an already complicated and complex reproductive circumstance is unclear, in my view, but both pro-life and choice images are honestly unforgettable, even if for all the wrong reasons.

Planned Parenthood, an organization that has long associated itself with pro-choice arguments, is now
stating that identifying as pro-choice may not fully explain what their views on reproductive freedom truly mean. Cecile Richards, Planned Parenthood president, stated that the trouble here is that the “labels have become irrelevant” (Pollitt, 2013, para 2). The organization argues that the word choice does not account for gray areas of a woman’s life, nor does claiming the pro-choice platform account for the different circumstances women find themselves in throughout their lives. “Not In Her Shoes” is a new slogan Planned Parenthood is developing to emphasize that every woman chooses reproduction differently depending on what has or will happen in her life (Pollitt, 2013). This slogan also stresses the need to keep abortion safe and legal if a woman chooses this option. It is very imperative, therefore, that labels associated with the abortion debate be looked at through a wider eye, and the “Not in her Shoes” campaign is one attempt at clearing up the pro-choice versus pro-life language divide.

Laws and Language

Laws also play a large role in women’s access to abortion. Policies and laws tend to imply that a woman should not make a decision about her body while simply thinking about her own self. The Partial-Birth Abortion Ban, put into place in 2003, prohibits late-term abortions in some states. This type of abortion was apparently banned not because it was unsafe, but because it was disliked and “deemed by politicians to be disturbing” (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 32). This law also banned a form of abortion that is called Intact Dilation and Evacuation (D&X for short: a process where dilation is used to remove contents of the uterus). Unfortunately, these laws mostly affect those women who are young and living in poverty, since access to reproductive healthcare is potentially limited. Ludlow (2008a) points out that this law, therefore, largely affects their most vulnerable group of women. Pro-life activists will sometimes argue that “abortion hurts women” but as one woman claimed, “illegal abortion hurts women, and I am living proof of that” (Lane, 2005). As legal issues grow and laws tighten around abortion, access to safe and legal abortion is becoming even more of a problem with a decrease in doctors trained or willing to give abortion procedures (Ludlow, 2008a). Language on the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban similarly tends to downplay the role of the pregnant women in the abortion process. For example, in the ban, the woman receiving the abortion
is referenced to as “the body of the mother” (qtd.in Ludlow, p. 33) which silences her role as a woman and person in general. Referring to the woman as a body and not a woman becomes very problematic. Language of this sort does nothing to help the women whose experiences and voices continue to be silenced before, during, and after their abortions. The use of this language in the ban supports anti-abortion ideals by removing the personality of the woman and focusing mainly on the life of the fetus.

As of May 2013, thirty-eight states in the U.S. require parental involvement in a minor’s abortion decision (Guttmacher Institute, 2013). These parental consent laws can become damaging, even though formed with good intent to keep younger abortion patients safe and healthy. William Bell is a father from Indiana whose daughter died from the effects of an illegal abortion and requirement of parental consent (Connecticut State Legislature). Bell wishes that his daughter had felt comfortable enough to tell him about her unwanted pregnancy, as it could have saved her life, but he recognizes that this is not always realistic, and thus, argues for states to abolish parental consent. Bell claims that parental consent laws for abortion are punishing and restrictive, often denying women “safe and reasonable options” (Connecticut State Legislature, 2003). He is not alone in his loss either: it is assumed that over two hundred thousand women die from unsafe abortion procedures every year, and this number could be much higher due to underreporting (Maguire, 2001). Still, a young women’s decision not to involve her parents in her pregnancy is usually well intended: she wants to maintain a good relationship or fears being kicked out of her home (Flavin, 2009). The need to provide women with safe and legal abortions is, then, not only smart, but potentially lifesaving.

Abortion Experiences

Dr. Jeannie Ludlow, an Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of Women’s Studies at Eastern Illinois University, worked in and researches abortion clinics. She reports women’s reasons before they get abortions, and shows that even though not required, many women recount their statements during the actual procedure. Having heard many reasons why women have chosen abortion while assisting with around seven hundred abortions, Ludlow (2008b) points out that many struggles women have surrounding bearing children are seemingly ordinary
reasons. These include finances, balancing work and children, setting priorities, and making plans for the future. Avoiding assumptions about women who receive abortions is then very important. Realizing that women seeking abortions are not always single and young, and have other financial responsibilities, may perhaps dispel myths and help others to understand, at least in part, reasons for seeking an abortion.

Ludlow (2008a) recommends that in order to steer away from simplistic ways of fixing what is known as the abortion problem, people in general must gain a more complex understanding of abortion experiences. Women, like everyone else, have morals and feelings about abortion, and sometimes even women who choose abortion have ethical issues with the procedure. The morality of abortion comes, in part, because the human fetus is unique and therefore requires extra consideration (Vilar, 2009). Respecting that a woman’s life is far more developed than the life of her unborn fetus (Lane, 2005) acknowledges the right to choose but also the potential to “feel sad or ambivalent about making that choice” (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 30). Stressing that abortion does not erase emotion is crucial to ensuring those women’s voices are not lost when talking about an abortion decisions and experiences.

Part of the silence surrounding discussion of abortion may have to do with women’s unwillingness to talk about fetuses at all. Since pro-life individuals focus on the fetus, pro-choice persons and women receiving abortions may simply want to steer clear of causing more trouble. Perhaps the awkwardness surrounding discussion of abortion has something to do with lack of acknowledging the point of an abortion in the first place. For example, an abortion clinic director was quoted as stating,

Yes, it’s a baby and yes, it is killed. I want to talk about all the reasons why so many women choose to have abortions even though they know this and why it is important that women are allowed to make that choice (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 42).

This provocative yet direct statement gets across the need to address women’s reasoning for abortions and how the many factors in their lives played a role in their decisions.

Silence, Myths and Potential Reasons for Abortion

In an effort to explore what types of women have abortions and why, Penny Lane created her 2005 documentary The
*Abortion Diaries.* One of the opening statements on the screen sets the mood for the whole dialogue of the movie: if it is so common, why is it such a secret? The silence focused around abortion often made the women in the movie feel isolated, not even knowing that some of their closest friends and family members have had an abortion at some point in their lives. One woman claimed that the social stigma surrounding abortion was so extensive that “the only women speaking about their abortions were the ones who joined the anti-abortion movement” (Lane). The same woman also felt judged on both “sides” of the abortion debate, making her feel all the more isolated. The most remarkable aspect of this movie is the range in characteristics of the women: a large variety of ages, races, and classes, and all different reasons for receiving an abortion.

A frequent myth of women who choose abortion (or even women who get pregnant accidentally) is that they did not have proper knowledge on contraception and safe sex. In reality, about ninety percent of couples use birth control, though not always correctly or consistently (Vilar, 2009). Also, a large number of repeat abortions happen in populations with high contraceptive use. This unfortunately leads to a lot of “slut-shaming” for women seeking abortion. For example, after confiding in a loved one that she was pregnant, one woman said she was told “that’s what you get when you open your legs” (Lane). It is crucial that society starts to view women seeking abortion not as sluts or ignorant, but as women who need all the help they can in order to make informed decisions, whether that decision includes abortion or not.

Many believe that most women seeking abortion are unmarried and young, but sixty-one percent of women who have abortions already have one or more children (Guttmacher Institute, 2013). In addition, even though some of these women consider adoption, they claim that the adoption process is too emotionally disturbing. Most mothers seeking abortion feel that their present responsibilities for taking care of their children play a large role in their abortion decision. Finances also play a role, as one in five women of reproductive age lacks health insurance (Jones, Frohwirth & Moore, 2008). Without proper and stable insurance and other resources, as well as access to further child care, mothers may feel that it is best to have an abortion rather than risk not providing her children with the best care available (Jones et al). It seems
that mothers who have abortions are rarely talked about, and with the number of these women being so high, it is even more puzzling to consider that not all women’s voices are present in the abortion discussion.

There are numerous other reasons that a woman may receive an abortion, including reasons that cannot be seen on the surface. Unlike the popular myth that women use abortion as birth control or to correct other mistakes, rarely do women “take the decision lightly” (Ludlow, 2008a, p. 30). This myth encompasses the belief that pregnant women seeking abortion could not possibly have any feelings towards their fetus. Also important to note is that many qualitative studies on women who have received abortions have found that the decision is very situational (Jones et al). Breaking down the stereotype that the decision to have an abortion is a fast, easy process is central in allowing individuals to understand that abortion is more than just a physical experience. It is often a very difficult, emotional, long and draining process, and depends on the individual life of the women involved. Importantly, advocating for reproductive choice does not remove the tensions and internal struggles that come with an abortion decision.

Late stage abortions add to the abortion controversy. The stage of pregnancy during which a woman receives an abortion and the reasoning for waiting that period of time to seek an abortion plays another large role in the abortion debate. Ludlow (2008a) again uses her assistance in abortion procedures to conclude that the top reasons for later abortions are women not knowing they are pregnant, difficulty in arranging the procedure (including financial struggles), fear of telling family/partner of the pregnancy, and needing more time to think their decision over. With many pro-life supporters believing that the closer a woman gets to full term, the more an abortion may be considered killing a child, it becomes very important to educate individuals on these reasons, and stressing that that not all decisions are straight forward.

Among the explanations of why women may choose abortion, social stigma implies that certain reasons are more normalized than the others. As an example, one might seek an abortion after a rape with more ease of conscience, as opposed to getting an abortion due to failure to use birth control. However, stories from abortion clinics and the people that staff them show that the most occurring reasons
for abortions are often the “the things [they] cannot say” (p. 32) and are typically not the ones everyone else on the outside asks about (Ludlow, 2008b). Those who are not familiar with abortion and the many circumstances under which women choose this option therefore have a hard time understanding the range of experiences, simply because they may not be shocking enough. Ludlow argues that women seeking abortions should therefore talk about their abortion experiences and relationship to their fetuses. This might would allow for a more frequent and less sensationalized abortion conversation.

**Availability and Fear**

Life aspects such as class and location impact a women’s decision about a pregnancy. The availability of local resources also has a constant effect on decisions to have abortions. For instance, eighty-seven percent of United States counties have no abortion provider and one in ten women have to travel more than one-hundred miles to receive their abortion (Flavin, 2009). Lack of finances causes a large number of women to struggle to make a decision about their pregnancy. The areas in which they reside often do not help much either: only seventeen states provide financial help for poor women seeking abortion (Lane, 2005). Rachel Roth, the author of *Making Women Pay*, states that poor women in particular are automatically assumed as caregivers of children and when the resources to do so are not available to them, they are blamed for not providing adequate enough care (Flavin, 2009).

Reproductive freedom is not only about choosing abortion, it is about being free to raise a family under healthy and supportive circumstances. Resources may not prove very useful to women, then, unless they become more visible and common, and ideas about how this can happen must be present in the abortion discussion.

Women’s choices about their bodies and whether or not to continue a pregnancy depend largely on their own abilities to take care of a child or not. This is where some women’s voices start to be silenced. One woman in *The Abortion Diaries* was told about a dream from her partner in which he saw a naked child leave her body and enter into the woods. He believed it to be a sign that she had to keep the child. Another woman honestly stated that she “couldn’t raise the child if [he] decided to leave. Everything I had worked for up until that point would have been gone” (Lane, 2005). Whether
due to financial or physical stress, or their partner’s perspective, women attempt to make the best decisions about abortion that they could make for that time in their life, in order to help themselves in the future.

Some women fear choosing abortion for the worry that they will never have another child. They are afraid of not finding another partner, not being physically able to get pregnant again, or perhaps contemplate and grieve what their lives would have been like if they had kept the child. Because of the expectation in our society that you have to bear children in order to be a fulfilled woman, this is a large area where women’s voices are silenced. People often do not take the time to understand the immense pain and suffering women often go through when making their decision. Just the fact that not everyone supports choosing abortion made one woman believe that “a lot of people thought [she] was a murderer” (Lane, 2005). Since one of the most common reasons for women having abortions is the timing not being right, recognizing that not all people desire to have children or want them during a certain time will aid in helping to ease the fright of these women (Jones et al, 2008).

Fear of telling someone about their abortion, especially the partner that they conceived the fetus with, is another large barrier to open and honest communication. Many unmarried heterosexual women find themselves fearing that their partners would leave them when they stated that they were pregnant (Vilar, 2009). This is very scary for someone to experience, and can also lead to women never wanting to take a pregnancy test in the first place. Young single women who have conceived outside the context of a relationship also have fears. They may question who will be there to support them, and one of the most common reasons for women receiving abortions is fear of being a single mother (Jones, Frohwirth & Moore, 2008). Ultimately, availability, or lack thereof, and financial and emotional help from a sexual partner can alter a women’s decision.

Conclusions: Abortion as a Comprehensive Discussion

Understanding abortion and sex elsewhere in the world is necessary to further acknowledge the silencing of women’s voices through abortion. Sex education is often non-existent or incorrect not only in parts of the United States, but all over the globe. Maguire
(2001) points out that contraception remains unavailable for women all over the world. Social class and its link to poverty cross national borders and leads to many unplanned and sometimes dangerous pregnancies. Making contraceptives more readily available and promoting sex education could be the most effective way to cut back on unsafe abortions. Maguire claims that labeling abortion as shameful and illegal is actually anti-woman and not just pro-life. This statement truly captures the need to open the discourse on abortion and make it safe and available to all those who need it in an effort to save lives.

Asoka Bandarage, a religious scholar, offers some advice on women’s abortion anywhere in the world. She suggests that support systems for women, including those receiving abortion and other sexual health care, should exist to help women come to their own decisions, instead of attempting to punish them on their difficult journeys. She goes on to note that the decision to abort should not be made by the government or a law, but should occur because the woman decided it to (Maguire). This goes to show how abortion and its debate have created plenty of controversy over the past few decades. As women’s voices persist being absent from abortion discussions, media and organizations will continue to utilize pro-life/pro-choice slogans. These slogans rarely address the vast differences in the experiences of women, and what life and personal events led up to their abortions, nor can they describe how truly emotionally impacting abortion can be. Without capturing and understanding that women live very different lives, the abortion debate may remain silent of women’s voices.

References


Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

The paper examines the idea of the “ideal” body image that women strive to achieve, covering the time period of the 1920s – 1990s. The analysis is primarily of narrative texts that debate body types of women that have emerged over the time periods. My research question, Can women ever officially achieve the “ideal” body image? confirms that women cannot fully present distorted social readings of body image, but they can access resources and outlets to discover that there is more to women’s identity and value than her body alone. As this paper explains, this realization is structured by a complex web of cultural influences.

Letting the voices of my Women and Gender peers be heard….

My body is…

Beautiful, I love me, for me; Dysfunctional; Strong, flexible, balanced and in need of overall fitness & weight reducing exercises; A work in progress; Fucking temple; Dismantling; A blanket, a shield, a muscular yet soft representation of my history and a tool for love; Sacred; Powerful and beautiful; Beautiful- My instrument to express myself; Little, but strong; Unique; Like a tea bag… you don’t know how strong it is till you put it in hot water (E. Roosevelt); Everything and nothing, adorned and disrobed, imperfectly beautiful.
Introduction
Throughout so many projects, trials, college courses, and open discussions, body image has been the one thing that I haven’t been able to figure out and completely understand. Where do you begin even slightly to cover the topic? I will primarily focus on shifts in the “ideal” feminine body image between the 1920s and 1990s. I studied body types and the choices women were making about their bodies, across decades. Yet, depictions of women’s bodies were constantly changing. This paper includes an analysis of the social forces that impacted shifts in body “ideals” over time. I then focus more specifically on contemporary women, and the myriad causes and consequences of beauty ideals and body dissatisfaction. My research question, Can woman ever officially achieve the “ideal” body image?, confirms that women cannot fully prevent distorted social readings of body image, but they can access resources and outlets to discover that there is more to women’s identity and value than her body alone. And yet, as I will explain, this realization is structured by a complex web of cultural influences.

Mirror, Mirror
There are a diversity of influences that affect a person’s body image and satisfaction such as gender, sex, age groups, and even the atmosphere you were raised. My research seeks to find an answer as to why there is such an extreme emphasis on body image among women. Body image is a reflection of how you feel your body fulfills or fails to fulfill cultural aesthetic standards like how attractive you perceive yourself to be. Our understandings of beauty, however, do not grow on trees: they are a part of the societies and cultures in which we live. The distorted mentality of what is “perfect” can haunt us and comes from everywhere: magazines, television, friends, family, advertisements and articles. These messages are internalized such that we become our own biggest critics.

..We take for granted that looking good for ourselves will make us feel good. And yet there is a subtle tracery of outside urgings which works on us, creating a new and often dissatisfied relationship with our bodies (Orbach, 2009, p.2).

Our Western culture has put such an extreme emphasis on beauty which has become the focus of our daily lives. But what we regard as society’s standards is not always how we would like to portray our own bodies, but we still live by them.

Certainly, given that negative body image is now a normative experience for many young women worldwide,
there is a need for more serious and knowledge-based efforts by popular culture to promote positive body image (Swami & Smith, 2012, p. 165).

While I research this topic, I struggle to find a way to help women feel comfortable in their own skin and feel beautiful.

Media -- whether it is in print, television, or film, plays a large role in portraying what is an increasingly narrow construction of “beauty.” As consumers, women absorb these messages which impacts body image.

The media, of course, urged us to be pliant, cute, sexually available, thin, and blond, pore less, wrinkle-free, and deferential to men. But it is easy to forget that the media also suggested we could be rebellious, tough, enterprising, and shrewd (Douglas, 1995, p. 9).

It keeps us up to date on what is “right and wrong,” while judging those who do not have those physical features. Our friends and family are a large part of our everyday life. Their opinions can easily influence how we perceive our own selves. We are taught in society that body image is what makes you a woman, such as having breasts, being “beautiful,” or having a certain body type. I think that women are oppressed in many ways because of our gender; how society views women influences our body image perceptions.

Examining historical shifts in the “ideal” feminine body is appalling. Generally speaking, the trend has been toward changing women’s bodies for others’ viewing, rather than for pure health reasons or self-care.

Those who had previously paid little heed to fashion or health now find themselves caught up in attempts to make the best of them and to take responsibility for their health and well-being. The individual is now deemed accountable for his or her body and judged by it. Looking after oneself is a moral value. The body is becoming akin to a worthy personal project (Orbach, 2009, p. 5).

This statement is a perfect example of how women are increasingly treating their bodies like assignments. Bodies are progressively becoming understood as women’s responsibility to discipline through things like diet, exercise, and display.

**Bodies across Decades**

My research on body image begins in the 1920s, around the time of World War I, where many fluctuations outside of body image were changing. Great deals of social transformations were underway during this period. Industrialization was beginning to take hold which had
dramatic and immediate impacts on the household. Indeed, this is part of the period during which the “cult of domesticity” emerged. It was around this time, for instance, that we began associating women with “the home” and men with “the work place.” During this stage, women drastically changed from the stereotypical curvy woman to the “Flapper,” a woman with short haircut, very thin, boyish style, flattened breasts and a small waist line. These women went to bars, smoked, and began to partake in activities that were considered “masculine” at the time. These women were not considered feminine based on their dress. Yet, they did not lack a sexual identity; indeed, they were in the process of redefining a femininity better suited to their interests and desires (Walker). When compared to the 1920s, ideal bodies in the 1930s took a quick turn and went in the complete opposite direction of what women strived to achieve a decade earlier. Images of the small waist and flattened breasts were diminishing. The idea of fuller breasts and a slender waist was the culturally exalted feminine body image during this decade. For instance, shortly after WWII, women’s magazines started to promote the “New Look” of Christian Dior, which required women to have an incredibly thin waist, and to achieve this look, use corsets, girdles, and diets (Walker, 1998). Knowing that women went to these extreme is disappointing but speaks to the power of cultural ideals in affecting not only body ideals, but what people do in search of obtaining those ideals. As a woman myself, seeing others go through these painful processes to even feel beautiful or anywhere near the “ideal” is overwhelming. Images from this decade depict women making physical alterations to their body to become something they are not, a phenomenon that continues to this day (Walker).

Once the 1940s and 1950s came around, the image of fuller breasted women and a thin waist remained a cultural ideal emblematic of this period. The use of girdles and push-up bras were still being used to increase breast size (Walker). Even more so, during these years, women began to use anything and everything to be exactly what they were not. Whether this was through the clothing they were wearing or their hair dyes and makeup, changing the appearance of a woman’s body was accepted and arguably subtly demanded as long as it was to become the “ideal.” A perfect example of a woman that fit every standard during this period is the well-known Marilyn Monroe. Perhaps the most iconic model in history, Monroe defined feminine beauty during her age. She had curvy hips, a tiny waist,
and larger breasts. In looking at photographs of women in magazines throughout the fifties to the present, it is easy to see that women have gone back to this desired body image. Monroe was not only famous for her body but how she displayed it as well. She was a woman that walked with confidence, strength, and power and she showed what women should give themselves credit for!

The 1960s introduced a British model that everyone called “Twiggy.” She did not have to keep up with exercising and diets to stay thin or wear any necessary garments to achieve her look. Seen in magazines and advertisements, Twiggy was the skinniest model that had ever been seen, weighing eighty nine pounds. Her weight was far from healthy for any woman at 5’6, but Twiggy set a standard for models that few women could achieve. Other models tried to attain the same look, but Twiggy helped perpetuate ultra-thin feminine bodies as an ideal. The 1960s marked a time period during which women were beginning to be exploited because of their body parts and looked at as objects to others.

Throughout American history, many decades were characterized by a more voluptuous feminine ideal body. But Twiggy helped to alter the cultural standard for what was considered skinny. Her thinness took a typical average woman’s body and made it look overweight.

Psychopathologies that develop within a culture, far from being anomalies, or aberrations, to be characteristic expressions of that culture; to be, indeed, the crystallization of much that is wrong with it (Bordo, 1985, p. 229).

This feminine aesthetic established unhealthy and harmful norms of female beauty and body image, making eating disorders acceptable at younger and younger ages. A fuller, healthy looking woman rapidly came back in the seventies, but women were told to keep the same thin look, while creating the best of both worlds; fuller breasts and thin waist.

The 1980s and 1990s created a modeling world that included new age variables such as ethnicities and accomplishments. Diversity in culture and race were more accepted and included in society. But the ideal body was still very slim and large breasted. This time period also marks the beginning of the self-help revolution, providing solutions for every “imperfection” in women’s bodies. These years were all about advertising to women who did not “have it all,” selling solutions through products and business services. Beauty ideals began to be
bought and sold in a way not seen before. Media highlighted every nuance of women’s bodies, including small things about women that were considered wrong, while simultaneously offering a “solution” to the beauty “problem.”

In fact we are excited to engage with and reframe the problem: there is something wrong with me that with effort -- exercise, cash and vigilance -- I can repair. I can make my offending body part(s) right” (Orbach, 2009, p. 113).

This taught women to pick out every little part of their bodies that they could improve upon, perpetuating the notion that you can always change, and that you are never good enough.

The now famous Dove® evolution (2006) commercial is a perfect example of how our society portrays body image. The commercial starts out by showing a beautiful woman without any makeup and without her hair done. Quickly, it displays a time lapse of the model getting a make-over for a professional photo shoot, adding ridiculous amounts of makeup and having her hair professionally done. After the photo shoot, the commercial includes the digital alterations made to her image that raise her eyebrows, enlarge her eyes, remove beauty marks, lengthen her neck, plump her lips, and completely change her face entirely. The commercial concludes with the final photo-shopped image that is depicted on a billboard as an advertisement.

The point behind the instructive reframing of this Dove® commercial is to show men and women that the body images we are looking up to are often retouched and changed. Men and women of all ages are comparing themselves to these fake pictures. In the Dove® commercial, they took a beautiful woman and made her what we call “perfect.” If this “ideal” beauty is not real, might that mean that this kind of beauty is unachievable? And yet, we are encouraged to compare ourselves to images like these. Orbach (2009) believes we are doing this to children also, as she states:

Our bodies are increasingly being experienced as objects to be honed and worked on. Men are targeted with steroids, sexual aids and specific masculine-oriented diet products. Children’s bodies, too. Photographers now offer digitally enhanced baby and child photos- correcting smiles, putting in or removing gaps between the teeth, straightening out wobbly knees, turning little girls into facsimiles of china dolls. The web addresses of these conjurors show no sense of irony, since they
believe that enhancing photos is version of natural beauty, the real thing (p. 3).

Not only are we doing this to men and women of older ages, but this lifestyle and mental framework is beginning to affect our younger generations.

The Dove® Campaign for Real Beauty, created in 2004, is a brand rooted in listening to women. This campaign quickly grew, starting a conversation about what women define as beautiful. These findings ended up proving

...the definition of beauty had become limiting and unattainable. Among the study’s findings was the statistic that only 2% of women around the world would describe themselves as beautiful” (Dove®, 2013).

My research shows that women still compare themselves with these models and the unrealistic information they hold. The knowledge and research that Dove® advertises seems to be a resource to women but a reassurance to how unsatisfied women are with their bodies (Dove®). This suggests that the real problem might not be that women are unable to recognize these body ideals as unobtainable, but rather, that recognition of them as unobtainable has not necessarily stopped women from trying to achieve these manufactured ideals.

Victoria’s Secret is another retailer that took on body image in advertisement. In 1986, there was a franchise of 167 stores with a volume of 112 million dollars. These numbers rose over the years. Victoria Secret’s underwear, bras and lingerie reveal more of women’s skin than most brands. The clothing and the advertisements to sell them are clearly sexualized, but is it making women actually feel sexy or empowered? Looking at the women they advertise wearing their products only makes me feel unattractive and as if I need to change myself, whether by losing weight, wearing more makeup, or never showing off my body and skin (Workman, 1996).

In “From Victorian to Victoria’s Secret”, Workman argues,

The blatant commercialism contributes to the victimization of women because it reinforces gender stereotyping and the overall sexual powerlessness of women. While merchandising itself is liberating, it actually reinscribes the idea that women are essentially more ‘primitive’ than men.” (p. 62).

Workman continues to state throughout the article that their clothing and advertisements emphasize traditional sex roles. My research helped me see that the advertising of women’s bodies and sexualizing them does not make a woman feel beautiful. Comparing these
two campaigns (Dove® and Victoria’s Secret), it is easy to see the constant changes in the “ideal” and why women have issues defining what is beautiful while believing it for their own self-worth.

The Dove® evolution commercial is a powerful way of conveying the point that anything that we don’t see in real life could be altered, touched up, and fixed. So what is real anymore? Are we trying to achieve something that doesn’t exist? These are the constant questions I hear and that I can never quite answer for anyone. As a person close to this topic, I wonder how much worse this is going to continue to get and what this might tell us about our culture.

“Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Peer Competition, Television Influences, and Body Image Dissatisfaction,” (Ferguson, Munoz, Contreras & Velasquez, 2011) helps answer some of the questions about the causes and consequences of body dissatisfaction among women. The authors address two different studies within the article. Both studies ultimately found that the media is not the largest cause of body dissatisfaction; peer interactions were found to play a much more critical role. Both studies within the article primarily addressed Hispanic women with similar outcomes. Both found that the largest impact of body dissatisfaction was caused by peer interaction. Yet this article failed to cover different points of view among different racial and ethnic groups to find out more detailed information. (Ferguson et al)

Another study I found, "How Not to Feel Good Naked? The Effects of Television Programs that use ‘Real Women’ on Female Viewers’ Body Image and Mood,” (Swami & Smith, 2012), looks at body-focused anxiety, body weight, thin ideal, mood, attitudes, and demographics. This article caught my attention mostly because it compared “real women” to “thin models,” as if both of these categories are not real women. This study showed a decrease in mood and food intake when they termed “real women,” meaning curvy and average weight women were modeling, versus thin women models. This meant that women in their study felt more comfortable looking at thin models, because they knew it was something unachievable. When looking at “real women,” they more so compared themselves to these women and it made them look negatively towards their bodies. This article showed the exact opposite cause of body dissatisfaction: instead of peer interaction; it is caused by the exposition of television. Yet, it may also account for some of the findings from the Ferguson et. al. (2011) research as well.
Haraway’s (1988) cyborg theory offers a useful framework to see and understand how we construct bodies. The idea of the cyborg, a blending of human with machine, deconstructs binaries of control and lack of control over the body, object and subject, nature and culture, in ways that are central to postmodern feminist thought. Haraway uses the metaphor of cyborg identity to expose ways that things considered natural, like human bodies, are not. Rather, she illustrates the intricate ways in which bodies are constructed by our ideas about them. This has particular relevance to feminism, since Haraway believes women are often discussed or treated in ways that reduce them to only bodies. I think we as people reduce our bodies down to objects on a daily basis because we speak about our bodies in a degrading manner, rather than humans, and more importantly, as women.

Bordo (1985) refers to body construction and objectification as crystallization of culture, where culture in this case, is contextualized to mean western culture. Like Haraway (1998), Bordo denaturalizes the binaries that uphold the mythological ideal body image. She focuses on the interrelatedness of the ways women’s bodies are policed via the reproduction of patriarchy throughout history. Instead of merely looking at the changing images of the ideal female body, Bordo invites us to think about how these changes connect to changes in women’s oppression as they enter public spaces and become empowered in various ways. Both Bordo and Haraway (1998) look at eating disorders as a gendered cultural pathology instead of an individualized pathology.

Coming from a woman’s point of view, I am disappointed. Not only in myself, for trying to keep these flawed beauty standards, not at the society for making expectations, not the media for portraying distorted images, and not our peers for the constant judgment, but because of all of us for not trying to make a change.

It is far more serious than we first take it to be and it is only because it is now so ordinary to be distressed about our bodies or body parts that we dismiss the gravity of body problems, which constitute a hidden public health emergency- showing up only obliquely in the statistics on self-harm, obesity and anorexia- the most visible and obvious signs of a far wider-ranging body disease (Orbach, 2009, p. 15).

We often think about individual anxieties in terms of dominant discourses. In the case of eating disorders and obesity, the dominant voices on the subject in western culture are psychology and science. However, as
I mentioned earlier, Bordo (1985) shifts our focus from physicality as it would exist in a vacuum to thinking about the body as part of a broader system of power. These ideas lead to questions that I cannot seem to answer: How can I bring people into this world at some point in my life, whether that means having my own children, or helping others in the counseling field, when there are few answers to these presenting body image issues?

**Conclusion**

Why do we set beauty standards that are unachievable? Why are we doing this to each other when people are rarely satisfied with themselves? But most importantly, as said before, where do we find the answers to these questions and a lifetime of concern? Through Haraway’s (1988) construction of bodies in the cyborg theory and Swami & Smith (2012) findings of the difference between “real women” and thin women, the research must continue and grow. Ferguson et al. (2011) state that body dissatisfaction comes from peer interaction and the influences of our media. In Dove® and Victoria’s Secret, our society and construction of bodies continue to stay the same. In my efforts to consider potential solutions and to offer a voice to our bodies, I have accepted and created poems from my colleagues and my own personal stories and thoughts as a reflection of the ways body image is experienced by others. This has become my way of helping and supporting my peers find voice and a light in what we call body image today.
How to be Naked

Skin doesn’t have roots,
It peels away easy as paper.

My eyes chafe through fleshy maps
Painted from the Disney World palette
For its 3D effect,
Praying to expose the legends
Beneath my own disorientating canvas

Her fingers unravel from the steering wheel
To tether like roots forming the heart shape
Of the spinal cord,
And I know that she’s trying to teach me,
But I only want to play the instruments
She’s made from her wrists
Against my thighs
Her anatomy textbook is outstretched
Under my hands,
A generous survey of bloodless
Cadavers tapering outward across the spine

Flaying is torture
With chary fingers,
She sweetly builds the imaginary
Map of my interior
Until I breathe,
Feel those branches pushing back
Inside my lungs,
The tectonic plates
In my skull shifting silently

Flaying is freedom
She teaches me how my body began as a tube,
A symmetry forming separately,
Folding in on itself at the mid-line
But I find my birth-marked casing
In the shape of the book itself,
In the fragility of our cores
The cogs of punctuation where
Blood becomes poison
Where oxygen flees into indented white space

She is driving while she explains
That the stress of a birth
Of moving through the woman’s body
Closes the holes
Of the novel heart

And as she shadow puppets the folding
Of the primitive heart tube onto my palms
I fold embryonic in the passenger seat
The cold weightless release of my thighs
As two chapters collide

I will never forget the flurry
Of her eyes on me then
Shifted from the road to break
Me gently back into my hide
A glitch in the binary
Echoing the beat of a pulse

*Skin doesn't have roots.*

-Anonymous
Falling from the stars

When did the rain become a storm?
Even when I’m “perfect”, I cry.
Do I need to keep this form during
My everyday life?
I grow, I change, I become
A woman I am not, but why?
I think it is for me,
But the water from my tears
Does not help me grow.
Hair, makeup, clothing galore
Doing this to be the norm
But is this what I really want?
Teased and picked on is my everyday life,
Losing the battles I chose to fight.

My physical body is not all of me,
So why do you keep telling me how to be?
First impressions and fitting in
Making me spin like a tornado,
Back into my old mentality
But I think I can be beautiful, being me.
My body is too big or too small,
I am never the ideal
People asking if I am eating enough,
Calling to my parents
Anorexia, Bulimia, eating disorders-
All to change me
Eating too much and gaining weight,
Staring in the mirror.
Who am I?

The stars all look the same,
But I am different,
Making me feel all too visible
So I change myself for a compliment,
This is not right, but
Who am I supposed to blame?
Society, family, friends and myself
Giving the media all of my wealth
To achieve the norm, is to change what I am,
Staying awake every night

Questions of concern flew in my direction,
With all good intention
I quickly stopped myself,
Going out of my way to stop these signs,
From clothing, to food, to restroom breaks,
Trying to not make this look all too fake
Spinning in circles, day after day
I am falling

These people, this life, this mentality,
The theories, beliefs and concerns
I can’t seem to ever be right
I am up, I am down
Changing, not growing
Realizing what has become reality
Am I just another, or am I unique
Falling from the stars
References


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We are unalterably opposed to the presentation of the female body being stripped, bound, raped, tortured, mutilated, and murdered in the name of commercial entertainment and free speech.

(Brownmiller, 2013)
Brownmiller has written extensive material on rape and sexual assault and its different affects. The quote above links the presentation of the female body in the media to commercial entertainment. In much of the media found in the United States today, women are often portrayed in these very ways: being raped, tortured and even the suggestion of murder, all for the sake of capitalism. The images found throughout this paper are actual advertisements that can be found both online and in a variety of magazines, many of which portray these situations. Advertising that simulates pornographic scenes and gang rape is problematic to everyone, but these violent and forceful sexual situations become especially problematic for women who have been sexually assaulted.

**Introduction**

The images throughout this paper are actual advertisements found in a variety of magazines. Many people, especially women, might find these images offensive and uncomfortable to look at; how could they not? The media has been criticized for being largely responsible for causing issues with body image in many women and young girls by setting beauty standards that are far from realistic and therefore unattainable. Usually this beauty ideal in the United States is a very thin, young, attractive woman expected to be sexy, sexually available, sexually submissive and desirable (Kelly, 2003). Most women do not fit this cookie cutter definition of what the media says they are ‘supposed’ to be. Among women who have been victims of sexual assault, the impact of this media-imposed beauty standard is even more complex. Messages in advertisements that many times simulate pornographic scenes and portray violent and forceful sexual situations become very problematic for women who have been sexually assaulted.

**What Others Have Said**

Ever since we were all very young, we have been bombarded with sexual images and sex, both in the media and popular culture (Kelly, 2003). Young girls learn from the get-go that to be feminine they have to be pretty and have some sort of sex appeal, while boys learn to be macho and what the ideal pretty girl looks like. There is more and more pressure in the consumer market for girls to be sexy at younger ages. Victoria’s Secret’s line of thongs targeted to girls ages eight to twelve is a perfect example. They are not
alone in this marketing. Target and JCPenny also carry thongs with sexual sayings on them like “eye candy” or “wink-wink” for young girls (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008). Many companies have also started to make padded bras geared toward very young girls. Girls really start to associate their worth with their appearance as a result. These young children want to buy these things because that is what they see all around them on a daily basis: on TV and commercials even their toys dress like this. The fairly new popular Bratz® dolls (below) dress in revealing clothes that are very grown up for the girls playing with them. Levin & Kilbourne (2008), authors of So Sexy, So Soon, boldly state the “sexualized climate we describe most likely contributes to it [child sexual abuse]” (p.9). This sexual climate teaches children from an early age to associate violence with sex, and that sex is the defining characteristic in a relationship (Levin & Kilbourne). I find this association with violence and sex and that sex is what defines a relationship to be extremely problematic. If young girls are learning that sex is really what matters in a relationship, this could lead to even more gendered domestic violence.

More and more companies use sex to sell their products, to the point where they have started to exploit sexuality and make sex out to be something that is readily available. In an interview regarding why they chose to use sexually explicit advertisements, a publicist for Bugle Boy clothing said that sometimes in the competitive market environment, the only way to stand out was reverting to “T & A” [tits and ass] (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995). Even though this technique may work for selling a product because it attracts the consumer’s attention, it has some very negative impacts on women in society (Jacobson & Mazur). Overtly sexual advertisements that simulate pornographic situations reinforce many stereotypes that view women as nothing more than sex objects. Frequently image-based advertisements such as Calvin Klein Obsession depict women as naked or appearing to be naked. These advertisements are telling both
women and men what is attractive and desirable; most times they are telling women what they have to look like to be attractive and telling men what women should look like to be pretty. This image of what is attractive is an unrealistic aspiration because the images of people in advertisements have been edited and combined with images of parts from other models, so much so that the finished image does not even resemble the model. Many advertisements only show parts of women, making them seem less than human. Dehumanizing and objectifying women makes it that much easier to disparage women and can even encourage sexual harassment and violence (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995). Many of the images I have included here are great examples of how women have been dehumanized because only part of their bodies is shown.

Kelly (2003) reviewed several books about advertising and body image and the affects it has on women. Often situations in advertisements display and represent traditional gender roles within a culture (Kelly). In many advertisements, women are portrayed as being passive, powerless and dependent on men (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995). Having nearly naked and very
sexualized women repeatedly on display in advertisements blurs the lines between public and private spheres. The fashion industry displays female images that portray scenes of violence. A beautiful woman wearing a product and then killing her or bringing harm to her is a common theme that often appears in the selling of women’s clothing and perfume. For example, the Jimmy Choo advertisement suggests that the man is going to kill the woman and bury her in the hole he is digging. The constant display and atmosphere these advertisements create is a contributing factor to several social issues such as sexual harassment, eating disorders, rape and low self-esteem, to name a few (Wolf, 1991). The images become very important and fundamental to a woman’s feelings of self-worth because in many of the advertisements, women are constantly told that they are objects that need to be fixed and improved, primarily for the benefit of men (Kelly, 2003).

I find this to be true in my own life. I remember when I was younger looking at women in magazines and thinking that I was never going to look like them, that they were far prettier than I was ever going to be. The images become something that many women compare and hold themselves to.

Naomi Wolf (1991), author of *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used against Women*, looks at what has been defined as beauty and how it has changed. She starts off saying how women have come a long way in assuming careers and acquiring an education. However, Wolf argues that the obstacle preventing women’s complete equality is the socially and culturally constructed ideals of beauty that women strive for regardless of how unrealistic these ideals are. Many women in the United States feel actual hatred towards their bodies, are obsessed with their physical appearance, and are scared to age. They do everything in their power to preserve a youthful appearance, from purchasing expensive creams to pursuing more extreme measures such as cosmetic surgery (Wolf, 1991).

In addition to what is considered beautiful, Wolf (1991) addresses the sexual aspect of beauty, sexual discovery, and liberation that many women are just now realizing for themselves. This link between beauty and sexuality is, according to Wolf, a result of “beauty pornography,” described as the sexualized positions women are positioned in: in advertisements with their eyes closed and with a look that implies they are
close to orgasm. The idea that, in the public’s eyes, women have a sexuality and sexual desires is still relatively new. This attacks the new and vulnerable sense of sexuality they have. Wolf states that beauty pornography makes the claim that the women’s beauty is their sexuality; what is beautiful is ever changing from one time period to another. These beauty ideals have morphed into standards of acceptable behavior and appearance rather than what is actually beautiful. For example, the beauty ideal for attractive women is to be small and timid. In reality, these ideals make women passive.

Wolf (1991) describes overly sexualized, almost pornographic, advertisements similar to the ones presented later in this paper. She refers to these images as being designed rape scenes, saying that some advertisements display rape scenes that have been glorified to seem almost desirable. This is harmful because it lowers women’s self-esteem and represses women’s sexuality (Wolf). I am particularly interested in how women who are sexual assault survivors interpret designer rape sequences manufactured in image-based media. If these scenes have become something that is desirable, how do these women feel having been forced in that situation which was very much undesired?

In 1987 researchers Schechter, Schwartz, and Greenfeld conducted a case study with two young women who had been sexually assaulted and then developed an eating disorder or had one worsen. The researchers looked for similarities and any connections between the two. Sexual assault has been known to cause the survivor to have feelings of guilt, anxiety and inadequacy, as well as loss of control and a distorted body image. Often the survivor feels disgusted with their own body. The first participant developed anorexia nervosa lasting one year after her sexual assault. She reported her determination to lose weight and her “worry about having an unattractive and bloated appearance” (p. 315). The researchers stated the participant thought that she was obese and unattractive, and the only way to fix that was to lose weight. The participant limited her caloric intake to about 200 calories a day and would exercise excessively (Schechter et al, 1987).

In the same study (Schechter et al), a second participant had struggled with an eating disorder prior to being sexually assaulted. She had similar feelings of disgust with her body as well as poor body image and self-esteem.
before she was assaulted. However, after surviving the assault, these feelings intensified. She became even more obsessed with her diet and exercise. The second participant struggled with the idea that she was somehow responsible for the incident. In both cases the women felt significant guilt and had distorted body images. Sexual assault many times involves extreme violence and humiliation which can invoke a loss of control. These women tried to regain that control of their lives by changing and controlling their bodies (Schechter et al).

This research shows how these two participants’ body image changed after they were sexually assaulted. If these participants both felt an increased distorted body image, I think that seeing incredibly thin and attractive women in advertisements could also worsen their body images and self-esteem after such an experience.

It is no coincidence that a woman’s self-worth has been tied to the images women see in the media, because these images are difficult to escape, according to Ariel Levy (2005), author of Female Chauvinistic Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture. Levy argues that raunch culture is a part of everyday culture and there is no escaping it. The idea that women have been sexually liberated and “the feminist project has been achieved” (p. 3) is everywhere from the media to what young girls wear. However, Levy argues that women have not been sexually liberated in this sense. Many people that Levy talked to and interviewed shared feelings that women now had the “right” to look at magazines like Playboy and partake in the popular culture of which men have always been a part. Levy differentiates that women are simply mimicking what popular culture tells them is sexually liberating instead of figuring out for themselves what they want from sex and their sexuality. According to Levy, what women think is sexually liberating for them is really just sexy and beneficial for men. I tend to agree with her. Take a look at what our society deems sexy and attractive: many times men benefit from it, whether it is a skirt so short you can almost see the woman’s butt, or clothing that is revealing other body parts. While I do think that women can wear these and it should really be their choice, I believe that most women wear them because societies -- and men -- find it attractive. Women wear these revealing clothes so men will find them attractive.

The media and much of popular culture tell women that strippers and pornography is sexy. It tells women that
they need to imitate a stripper or an adult film star in order to be sexually desirable, particularly to men, a narrative that reinforces heteronormativity. Levy’s (2005) claim is illustrated by exercise classes such as “cardio striptease”. Adult film performer Jenna Jameson has modeled for an Abercrombie & Fitch brand targeted towards teens. Positive role models for young girls, such as Olympic athletes, have posed nude in magazines like Playboy and For Him. This reiterates to women that being sexy and desirable is what they need to strive for most. In Levy’s book, she mentions Susan Brownmiller, an author and founder of the New York chapter of Women against Pornography. The group brought people to strip clubs and porn shops to raise awareness about the pornographic construction of women (Levy, 2005, p. 60-1).

People and especially women argue that it is their choice to act the way they do. For example, in movies like Girls Gone Wild some women argue that this raunchy behavior is fun and feels sexy. Joe Francis, the founder of Girls Gone Wild, in which young girls have been videotaped flashing their breasts and butts or making out with other girls (among other things), said it is provocative for men while it allowed women to let loose and be free to express themselves. Many women justify the recording of the Girls Gone Wild movies because it is happening whether it is recorded or not (Levy). Many women say they choose what they wear, and that men finding it attractive has nothing to do with it. Stop to think: it is mostly men who run the fashion industry and create the clothes that these women wear. I think it is difficult to say that women really get to choose.

**Media, Objectification, and Sexual Assault**

While scholars (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Levy, 2005; Schechter et al, 1987; Wolf, 1991) have raised very valid points and arguments for why and how these advertisements are harmful to women and girls in general, what about the 17.7 million women living in the United States who have been victims of rape, not to mention the others who have been sexually assaulted (RAINN, 2009)? Many are unaware that these overly sexualized advertisements could re-victimize these women on a daily basis.

Advertisements like Calvin Klein Jeans (below) can be very problematic
for someone who is a survivor of rape or any sexual assault. The positioning of the men in the advertisement is dominant and takes up space. They overpower the woman in the image, who seems to be almost naked. The men take up a good portion of the image, while you cannot even see the whole woman and she takes up almost no space at all. She can do nothing to stop what is happening around her, presumably because their jeans make them so attractive.

Additionally, there are three men to just one woman, analogous to portraying a gang rape. For someone who has been assaulted and had no control of what was happening to her, reading this image could bring up painful memories of the assault whether they are conscious of it or not.

Advertisements like these are also problematic because survivors of such sexual assault already feel powerless; the advertisements reiterate and enforce that this is how they are supposed to feel and act (Jacobson, 1995). Veselka’s (1998) “The Collapsible Woman: Cultural Response to Rape and Sexual Abuse” talks about how society sets women up and tells them how they are “supposed” to feel after such an incident. Much of those expectations include feeling dirty and powerless. Again, advertisements like the Calvin Klein Jeans and the Dolce & Gabbana brand (below) enforce a reaction: that women are helpless and at the mercy of men (Veselka). It’s disturbing that both Calvin Klein and Dolce & Gabbana utilize the gang rape scenario in their advertising because it demonstrates how frequently this theme is used. Both of these brands are major popular brands that people are familiar with.

http://whoareweintheend.blogspot.ca/2011/12/sex-sells-so-buy-it.html

While the next advertisement does not portray a violent gang rape, the potential is presented. It conveys the
message to women where they belong: beneath men -- as well as communicates what is attractive. The SKYY advertisement shows a woman lying on her back wearing a very small bikini that is nearly exposing her breasts. Meanwhile, the man in the image is nicely dressed in a suit and is standing above the woman with a very strong stance. She is positioned under him in a submissive pose. There is a focus on his genitals as if this is as equally desirable to the vodka. In my experience both looking at advertisements and working at a liquor store, a mostly naked woman is used to sell just about any type or brand of liquor. A half-naked or naked body is usually positioned next to the bottle. Some models are sucking provocatively on a piece of fruit or the bottle itself, invoking images that are analogous to oral sex. Many are similar to the SKYY advertisement shown here, but some even further push female sexual objectification boundaries.

This SKYY advertisement, along with the Calvin Klein and Dolce and Gabbana advertisements, could elicit repressed memories of a sexual assault because in the pictures the man seems to have all the power and control, while the woman has none. This more often than not is how a sexual assault plays out. A sexual assault survivor could be reminded of how powerless she was against what happened to her. The image the advertisement provokes makes the assault happen again and again.

The message that is sent by these advertisements is the idea that women are here for the pleasure of men. Levy (2005) characterizes this phenomenon in what she calls raunch culture, arguing that women choose to act and dress in this provocative manner. But, she argues, do women choose this raunchy behavior or are there many other contributing factors that impose such behaviors on women, the constant parade of sexualized women being the
most pervasive? The revealing clothing and flashing of their bodies is primarily for men’s enjoyment. When women are represented like this they are nothing more than objects for men to enjoy.

The idea that women are meant for male gaze could be problematic for sexual assault survivors. Many times after being assaulted, the victims struggle with problems of feeling disgusted with their own bodies. Many have issues with body image and in general do not feel attractive, for anyone’s gaze (Schechter, 1987). As a result of this hatred and disgust towards their bodies, many women develop an array of different eating disorders. Wolf (1991) raises the question that if sexual assault can result in these feelings of self loathe, do images that mirror assault and invade their sexual privacy have a similar impact, since they could re-victimize and do further harm to these survivors? While women who have not been assaulted may still struggle with similar issues, it may be intensified among women who have been violated. Despite this magnified feeling of degradation, media still infuse repeated messages that women need to be attractive for men. Many times after being sexually assaulted, it may be more difficult to trust or be intimate with another man because of the violation of trust a woman feels, which is problematic when there are images all over that enforce the idea that women should be sexual with men.

The advertisement for Mentos gum is another good example of ways product marketing sexualizes women. The advertisement is for gum and yet the advertisement includes almost naked women removing her last piece of clothing. While this ad may not come right out with messages about having sex and what women are expected to be and do; it is a constant reminder that women are and should be sexy. There is no need for the naked woman; she has nothing to do with the product at all.

This could be similar to the Bugle Boy publicist who talked about how sometimes you just have to revert to using sex to sell a product (Jacobson, 1995). It is one more way in which Levy’s raunch culture is on display for everyone to see. To women and especially a survivor, this constant
reminder to be sexy and sexual all the time is exhausting. Moreover, feeling sexy is not always the easiest thing when you hate your body.

The advertisement for the PlayStation® Vita, a hand held gaming device, is pushing a selling point that the device has buttons on both sides of it. The slogan is “touch both sides for added enjoyment.” The image to accompany this slogan is a mannequin with four breasts, two in the front and back, so that the gamer (overwhelmingly males) can touch breasts on both sides of a woman.

Schechter (1987) confirms that after being sexual assaulted many women are left feeling inferior and inadequate as a result of the assault. This advertisement bluntly gives the message to women that two breasts apparently are not enough. Not only are their breasts not enough, but all that matters is their body. Women who have been violated already have problems with their own bodies and not feeling like they are good enough (Schechter, 1987). Advertisements like the PlayStation® Vita sell a product that is unrelated to sex and gender, yet these advertisements act as a reminder and confirmation to women that they are gazed upon and objectified.

The final advertisement I examine is for the KIT KAT candy bar. I chose this ad because the sexuality is blunt and not implied as it was in some of the other advertisements. The KIT KAT advertisement is another example of beauty pornography in which the woman in the image is in a sexual position close to orgasm, with her eyes shut and mouth open (Wolf, 1991). To a woman who is a survivor of sexual assault, this is problematic because it is very sexual, telling them they are supposed to be sexual. There are many more advertisements that use this technique to sell products. Sexually
assaulted women seek to distance themselves from sexual imagery that provokes sexual activity.

**What now?**

All of these advertisements have a repeating theme: the sexualized image of women and their sexuality. This is harmful to women. While some women argue that performing their sexuality can be powerful, and in some ways it is, the sexuality portrayed in advertisements objectifies and degrades women. Women are entitled to have their own sexuality; however the sexuality that many are experiencing falls within men’s institutions and power (Wolf, 1991). In other words, men decide how and what acting out this sexuality means. This sexuality in many ways is primarily for men’s benefit and their desires as opposed to women’s empowerment. For women who have been victims of sexual assault and therefore had their reality altered drastically, these pervasive text and media-produced sexualized advertisements can serve as a constant reminder of sexual violation and the sexual expectation that society imposes. Women who have survived sexual assault struggle to regain any kind of normalcy in their lives, from dealing with altered views about themselves and their own bodies to the other people, particularly men, in their lives. The case study mentioned previously is just one example of how someone’s body image is changed after being assaulted and their attempts to fix that image. One commonality to the advertisements critiqued here is that they all depict images that are often viewed as traditional beauty in women. Like fashion models, the images are of women who are all very thin, young and look desirable. This is partly the work of the advertisement companies, but this is also what our culture deems as attractive. Since there is nothing left to the imagination in these advertisements, women receive a narrow, distorted picture of what to compare themselves to physically. They see very clearly what society sanctions as attractive and desirable. Since many women do not look like this, it reduces their feelings of self-worth, especially among sexual assault survivors already dealing with a problematic body image (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008).

Women Against Pornography adopted a slogan coined by Robin Morgan that I found very fitting: “Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice” (Levy, 2005, p.68). Much of the literature I have read makes
references about how the advertisements simulate pornography and rape scenes. This kind of advertisement is all around us. It is difficult if not impossible to turn off, and even though the advertisements themselves are not totally porn, they simulate it. About one in three women experience some kind of sexual assault in the United States. Media’s constant reminder of rape culture is all around us, becoming a normalized part of our society. However “normal” it is, it is very harmful to women, especially assault survivors who are re-victimized and forced to be reminded of their horrible experience.

References


**Image Credits**


[Jimmy Choo]. Retrieved from [http://wp.me/p2WDbk-C](http://wp.me/p2WDbk-C)


The Hidden Feminist Progressive of Mistral

Gabriela Mistral
(April 1889- January 1957)
This essay focuses on Gabriela Mistral, a Chilean poet well-known throughout the world. Here, I focus on representations of maternity in her poetry, a selected analysis that comes from a larger work that is serving as my senior undergraduate thesis. My examination of Mistral is prompted by my interest in examining women of history who have had positive social impacts on their societies. This particular analysis of Mistral and her poetry aims to look at her representations of motherhood within a feminist theoretical framework where I argue that Mistral’s passionate and frequent use of the trope of motherhood is feminist in its inclusivity.

Gabriela Mistral is a Chilean poet who is very well-known throughout the world. I focus on representations of maternity in her poetry, a selected analysis that comes from a larger work that is serving as my senior undergraduate thesis. My examination of Mistral is prompted by my interest in examining women of history who have had positive social impacts on women and their societies. As a well-known poet, Mistral writes with a female audience in mind. This particular analysis of Mistral and her poetry aims to look at her representations of motherhood within a feminist theoretical framework where I argue that Mistral’s passionate and frequent use of the trope of motherhood is feminist in its inclusivity.

At first glance, Mistral seems like a very traditional poet. She has a respect and passion for the state of motherhood that sometimes leads to the apparent expression in her poetry of the belief that all women should be mothers. While some may read the role of women as mother as restricting to women’s identity, radical cultural feminism theorizes women’s role as mother as powerful and key to the women’s very existence (Tong, 2009). Using a radical cultural feminist lens (Tong, 2009) helps us see Mistral’s use of mother as a space of liberation where she employs the Virgin in order to spread the empowerment of motherhood to all women, even those who are biologically childless. Though this seems to follow patriarchal order, as male centered and women in a subservient role, I argue that Mistral is actually empowering women at the time because she sees the abstract state of motherhood as strong and meaningful for all women, not necessarily only those with children. Mistral’s incorporation of most women as metaphorical mothers shows her alignment with radical cultural feminist thinking, in which women’s capacity to reproduce is a central asset that separates women from patriarchal oppression. Unlike liberal feminist structures, which rely on rules and law as established in patriarchal modes,
radical cultural feminism does not reach for equal access to male privilege as a means to equality, rather, radical cultural feminists position power outside patriarchal structure. Using a radical cultural frame, women as reproducers can function as a variable that challenges patriarchal paradigms. Mistral’s representation of motherhood as a space of power captures this radical cultural rendering.

Radical feminism came about in the United States in the 1960’s and 1970’s (Tong, 2009). Radical feminists believed that achieving equal rights for women was the ideal and that they wanted to achieve this in revolutionary ways (Tong, 2009). Radical feminists are distinct from a liberal individualist model of feminism in that they conceptualize women’s reach for equality as broader in scope and identities and in ways that focus on disrupting the order/rules of society typically associated with liberal feminist causes. Radical cultural feminists encourage women to come together and share personal experiences so that women might better understand and support one another (Tong, 2009). Two main ideas of this theory are that “the personal is political,” which focuses on rebuilding political structures, and that all women are “sisters” (Tong, 2009, p. 56). This concept states that women should be the focus and center of social and political change. Conversely, using a radical libertarian framework, Kate Millett (1970) believes that this idea of sisterhood is problematic because she believes that the sex/gender system is at the “roots of women’s oppression” (p. 219). Millet (1970) argues that androgyny is a more desirable goal than masculinity or femininity because it might diffuse patriarchal power. Mistral’s poems echo ideas of female connectivity associated with radical cultural feminism, as seen in her poetry about maternity. Mistral’s poems suggest that though maternity is expected to take place in the private sphere, that it should be celebrated and recognized, thus pushing it into the public sphere. Moreover, Mistral believed that all women were connected. In essence, the radical cultural feminist idea of woman as center fits with Mistral’s works, particularly, Mary Daly’s (1978) writings, which theorize women as connected via the concepts of goddess as center.

Radical feminism breaks down into radical cultural feminism and radical libertarian feminism. Mistral’s works on motherhood best fit into radical cultural feminism as articulated by Daly (1978).
Daly believed that patriarchy confined and reduced female energy. Daly continues to explain that women have been robbed “of everything: our myths, our energy, our divinity, our Selves” (p. 329). Daly used the goddess image in order to capture the feminine. Mistral, much like Daly, empowers a normally unseen private space of motherhood that has been restricted and removed. In uplifting central images of motherhood, Mistral’s poetry embodies Daly’s ideals of woman as mother as center.

Radical cultural feminism argues for the empowerment of women as mothers while radical libertarian feminists believe that biological motherhood is the one social variable that is in the way of gender equality. Rich (1995) believed that biological motherhood could be empowering, but that it was distorted by patriarchal societies (Tong, 2009). Rich explains this by saying that motherhood in another social context could be very different. Rich believed that motherhood, pregnancy, and birth could have a different meaning in a society that promoted and supported these experiences, meaning that motherhood could be seen as the central space of power that women hold if society functioned under a radical cultural lens. These theories, particularly the radical cultural lens of Daly’s (1978) goddess imagery, give support to the argument that Mistral’s works are feminist because it gives us a lens to better understand her vision of women as mother.

Mistral is known and critiqued for her poetry about maternity. Mistral felt strongly that maternity was key to a woman living a full life. In fact, she said that women’s sterility was a curse (Arce de Vazquez, 1964). Due to her passionate representations of motherhood, her poems “were represented as a uniquely-fashioned vessel for her all-embracing maternalism” (Miller, 2005, p. 136). Due to this phenomenon, the “mythology of ultimate motherhood became attached to her” (p. 136). Mistral’s poetry was very mother-focused and, thus, she was made into a figure for maternity, but her thought about sterility as a curse is limiting to some women. On the other hand, Mistral’s poetry underlines the importance of maternity and echoes Rich’s (1995) ideas that motherhood could mean something totally different in another society that values women and mothers.

Mistral’s celebration of maternity is visible in her book, Ternura, which
contains themes that include “maternal love, its pleasures, [and] enchantments” (Arce de Vazquez, 1964, p. 41). Mistral goes to the extreme of suggesting that the only reason for women’s existence was motherhood, both material and spiritual (Dana, 1971). Mistral says:

Whether she’s a professional, a worker, a peasant, or simply a gentlewoman, a women’s only reason for being is motherhood, both material and spiritual, or the latter alone for those of us who do not have children.

(qtd. in Miller, 2005, p. 141)

These stanzas show that Mistral was not only passionate about maternity, but she envisioned women as mothers in order to be ‘real’ and ‘complete’ women. In the tone of radical libertarian thinking akin to Millet’s (1969) reach for androgyny, I find this idea to be problematic because it puts women into a place where they must attain a certain objective in order to be a significant being. Millett as example would detest the idea of mothers as complete, arguing that women as mother is restricting since not all women are mothers, and since womanhood itself is a much broader space of identity. Conversely, in terms of radical cultural feminism, this quote summarizes the idea that the biological capacity to reproduce is central to female identity. Additionally, this quote of Mistral’s shows her inclusivity of motherhood. Here, she explains that motherhood does not have to be necessarily biological in order to exist. I believe that this is significant because Mistral is broadening the scope of motherhood by including different types of mothering experiences.

Mistral feared the decrease of physical maternity or fewer women having babies. More specifically, she feared for broad cultural changes in relationship between mother and child (Arce de Vazquez, 1964). Mistral explained that there was an increase in “the refusal of many women to bear children or to be the milking fig tree of stories” (p. 43). This quote exemplifies Mistral’s fear: the decline in bonds between mother and child, meaning, Mistral here represents the relationship between mother and child as the mother acting as a “tree.” Moreover, Mistral believed that mothers formed identity for their children, and thus, maternity was extremely important (Alegría, 1966). Therefore, Mistral also is concerned about the decrease in physical maternity because she fears that children will feel unsettled because they will not have had close bonds with their mothers. (Alegría,1966). In total,
Mistral was worried about women and their motherhood, and, at the same time, she feared for the children and their mother-connected identities.

Mistral represents maternity as holding a double meaning, both physical and spiritual. Mistral believed that maternity is part of the divine because it is a joyous creation; it attains the eternal because it scoffs at death and spiritualizes the fleeting pleasures of the flesh” (Anderson, 1964, p. 27). This quote explains that maternity does not just fill the role of sexual desires, but also extends the woman’s life because her offspring will be part of her lineage. Therefore, motherhood is also a way of preserving oneself in the future. This directly aligns with Daly’s (1978) construction of women as goddess because it reflects women as more than just physical beings; they are able to transcend physical limits.

This idea of duality is seen in “Mexican Child”:

Two years ago I left
my little Mexican boy,
but awake or asleep
I comb him with my hands.
It is a maternity
That never tires my lap.
It is an ecstasy I live
Freed from great death!

(Mistral, 1924, 65)

Here, you can see the happiness and relief of this mother. She explains that she does not get tired of maternity, and, in fact, it is an “ecstasy” for her. She feels happy here because she is liberated of death; she knows her son lives and, thus, she does not truly die. This poem’s language is simplistic and straightforward, which shows this mother’s contented spirit. It explains that even if she is not present with her son, she is a part of him.

I find Mistral’s treatment of motherhood as everlasting to be the most intriguing theme in her poetry. To me, the idea of self-preservation and self-importance is a clearly feminist element in Mistral’s work. Her poetry represents motherhood itself as an act of self-preservation. Motherhood becomes a liberating experience for women themselves. I think that this empowers all women by changing motherhood from a subordinate role in support of patriarchy into a position of power and liberation in support of women’s nurturing and caring roles. This analysis is consistent with a radical cultural feminist lens, which, as women-centered, elevates women’s role as creators. While radical libertarian feminism would find this definition of
motherhood to be restricting and in the way of women’s social and economic equality, the power of women as potential or figurative mothers is the piece of Mistral’s work that I find most significant because it structurally situates woman in a position of influence and importance. This is consistent with radical cultural feminist thinking on the female center as knowing and good; motherhood in Mistral becomes an extension of this role.

In addition to portraying mother images, Mistral’s poetry reflects her Catholic faith. Mistral as a mother figure liked to associate her poetry with “the divinely powerful voice of the virgin” (Bruzelius, 1999, p. 218). Mistral used the Virgin/Mater Dolorosa figures as a means to attain power and authority in a “male dominated world” (p. 218). The Mater Dolorosa is another way of describing the Virgin and represents the idea of surviving a “painful and divine condition” (p. 218), and “the feminine that has survived in the social order, deprived of its raw energy” (Ryan-Kobler, 1997, p. 327). Mistral uses the Virgin to show the feminine that has survived and to glorify this strength. In essence, Mistral employs the Virgin/Mater Dolorosa “as a way to address female experience and summon to her side a cultural authority that allowed her to speak as a woman” (Bruzelius, 1999, p. 218). This example is very similar to Daly’s (1978) goddess vision, where women are conceived of as sacred. This also shows that Mistral knew that she lived in an androcentric society where she needed to find alternative spaces for power in her poetry. As citizens of a largely Catholic country, Chileans are familiar with and respect the Virgin. Mistral used the Virgin as a figure in her works in order to grab attention and gain respect in her poetry. Mistral was intelligent and deliberate in doing this; she incorporated a well-known woman into her poetry to fulfill her own desires.

Although Mistral’s poems never literally reference the Virgin by name, they use allusion and imagery to bring the Virgin to mind. “The Strong Woman,” for example, refers to the Virgin through description:

I remember your face that was noticed in my days
blue-skirted women with a tanned forehead,
that in my childhood and on my land of ambrosia
I saw the black groove a burning April.

It rose in the tavern, deep, the impure cup
a son stuck to your lily breast
and beneath this memory, that you
were burning,
fell the seed of your hand, serene.
(as cited in Bruzelius, 1999, p. 219)

This poem clearly alludes to the Virgin. First, Mistral describes her as a woman in blue clothing, a color that is commonly associated with the Virgin. Moreover, there is an image of a dove-like breast, which is another common reference to the Virgin. Furthermore, here, Mistral tries to connect the image of the Virgin and the countrywoman in order to improve the reputation of these women. This association helps the countrywomen and they “become sacred by the evocation of the Virgin’s attributes” (Bruzelius, 1999, p. 220).

These examples help us see how Mistral used the power of the Virgin in order to call attention and respect to the common countrywoman. This idea relates to radical cultural feminism, particularly Daly’s (1978) image of a woman goddess because it uplifts motherhood to a place where it is desired as a key to women’s identity and where the sacred of women as mother becomes synonymous with the Virgin image.

Mistral realized the power that using the Virgin could have in her poetry and decided to personify the principal elements of the Virgin in a way that could help many women. Bruzelius (1999) explains that

...all women fall into one of two categories -- they either are or are not mothers -- Mistral was able to speak for any kind of woman by identifying her with either Mary’s maternity or her virginity. In both cases, moreover, Mistral is giving speech to the speechless under the aegis of Mary” (p. 221).

Mistral used Mary (the Virgin) to represent virgins and mothers, therefore extending her power in order to empower childless women (Bruzelius, 1999). Here, radical cultural feminist ideals are also seen. In extending Mary’s power, Mistral broadens what motherhood means in order to help women who have not borne children, thus creating a position of figurative motherhood for these particular women to occupy. Furthermore, the introduction to The Mother’s Poems explains that that set of poems was written to “redeem unwed mothers in the eyes of a brutal world” (p. 221). These examples show that Mistral was passionate and inclusive to non-traditional women and virgins, or non-mothers. In this way, I believe that Mistral’s hidden progressiveness is most visible because she is being inclusive to
generally unseen women and empowering them. For example, here, Mistral extends the attributes of the Virgin to cover even childless women, thus bringing non-traditional women into the dialogue.

In using the principal qualities of the Virgin, maternity, and virginity, Mistral could represent both types of women in her poetry in a respected position. It is interesting to see how Mistral used her Catholic-saturated culture to represent her audience of women. Additionally, Mistral employs religion to show the connection and support that exist between women and God, similar to the way Daly (1978) envisioned women as goddess and sacred in ways detached from patriarchy. This connection is visible at various points in Mistral’s poetry. In “Song of Taurus,” the poem ends with an image of God and woman. This image shows how God was supported and cradled by women, which positions women as important.

Little son of God the Father, asleep in the arms of woman.

(Dana, 1971, p. 52)

In another poem, “Rocking,” Mistral describes a woman rocking her son. At the end of the poem one can see the closeness and support of God and this woman and the spirituality this evokes:

Feeling His hand in the shadow
I rock my son.

(p. 43)

Mistral’s use of the Virgin is very strategic. Knowing the culture of Chile, Mistral draws on the cultural capital of the Virgin as imagery to convey her ideas and to gain respect and attention for her work, which in turn, empowered many women. Through her use of the Virgin she is able to uplift all women because all can fit under the scope of Mary. Using Mary is also courageous because it challenges patriarchal ideology by pushing Mary into a place of celebration and recognizes her role in supporting the spirituality of God.

The examination of Mistral has forced me to broaden my lens of what I believe feminism and gender expression can mean. At the beginning of the investigation, I found Mistral restrictive and limiting for women and their roles. Yet, after using the feminist lenses of Daly (1978) and Millett (1969) to analyze her ideas, I found Mistral’s poetry actually to be inclusive and accepting towards women. While I believe that Mistral’s writing could appear very restrictive for women at
face value, following the thinking of radical cultural feminism’s female centered ideology, her poetry actually empowers women as a social group.

References


Student Activism:
One Billion Rising, Trans-Awareness, Stop Street Harassment

STREET HARASSMENT is defined by those who experience it. Street harassment is about power; the motive is intimidation to make the target scared or uncomfortable and to make the harasser feel more powerful.

This encompasses any “action or comment between strangers in public places that is disrespectful, intimidating, threatening, and/or harassing and is motivated by gender” (SSN.org). We all have a right to define ourselves on our own terms and feel safe in public spaces. Street harassment is one of the most pervasive forms of gender-based violence and one of the least reported against. Verbal harassment such as unwanted comments, catcalls, groping, flashing and assault are a daily global reality for women and LGBTQ individuals. But it is rarely reported, and it’s culturally accepted as “the price you pay” for being a woman or for being gay. It can intersect with racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, sexism, and/or ableism; street harassment, like other forms of oppression, is not experienced the same way by everyone.

STREET HARASSMENT contributes to RAPE CULTURE. If street harassment is OK, rape is OK. If street harassment is not OK, violence against women is NOT OK.
V-Day Brockport Dances in Opposition to Violence Against Women

To commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of V-Day, a global movement to stop violence against women and girls, Brockport students and faculty joined in the ONE BILLION RISING campaign of women and men from over 200 countries that culminated in a single day of mass action. On February 14, 2013, flash mobs were organized to RISE together in dance as a call to end violence against women. The flash mobs appeared in three campus locations: (1) Drake Memorial Library; (2) Seymour Student Union; (3) Tower Fine Arts building. Links to videos are provided below:

- **One Billion Rising: 2/14 Brockport Breaks the Chain** [Dance steps]. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqCS_o6L7co](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqCS_o6L7co)  Benoit Beauchamp (Video); Nicole Kaplan (Choreography); Nicole Kaplan, Angie Muzzy, and Shawn Powell (Dancers).
• **One Billion Rising – Brockport Breaks the Chain – 10:14am – Library [Flash Mob].** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qN6Et2x4eLk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qN6Et2x4eLk). Courtney Michie (Video).

![Image of the event at Brockport](image1)

• **One Billion Rising: SUNY Brockport Breaks the Chain - Noon at the Student Union [Flash Mob].** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGIKWW1HyI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGIKWW1HyI). Courtney Michie (Video).

![Image of the event at SUNY Brockport](image2)
• **One Billion Rising: SUNY Brockport Breaks the Chain – 2:14pm** [Flash Mob at Tower Fine Arts]. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsPmtw4FLHg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsPmtw4FLHg). Courtney Michie (Video).

In addition to the spontaneous dancing that took place around campus, other events were planned as part of the ONE BILLION RISING movement. An open-microphone poetry reading, musical performance, and visual presentation event were held at 7:14 pm in the Jitterbugs Café inside of the Seymour College Union.

One in three women will be raped or beaten in her lifetime. The ONE BILLION RISING movement is designed as a call to women and men to refuse to participate in the status quo until rape and rape culture ends. It is an act of solidarity that seeks to demonstrate to women the commonality of their struggles and their power in numbers.

Brockport’s participation in the ONE BILLION RISING movement was a collaboration of the Women and Gender Studies Program and the Departments of Dance, Art, English, Theatre and Music Studies, and the Brockport Women’s Center.