

Circlework

**Circlework as Emancipatory Social Work Practice**

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 1998  
B.S.W., University of Victoria, 2000

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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in the School of Social Work

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University of Victoria

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores the group method of Circlework as an emancipatory tool for social work practice. The intention of this thesis is to better understand how socially popular forms of group work, such as Circlework, can ally with critical feminist, anti-oppressive practice towards personal, interpersonal and community liberation.

This thesis draws upon the experiences of five graduate women from a two-year Circlework training program. This thesis begins by examining how Circlework helped to support the women heal and empower their relationships with their bodies, shifting from an alienated to an integrated experience between the body and self. This thesis then examines how the act of bearing witness and being witnessed through Circlework facilitates personal experiences of validation and self-esteem, promotes awareness to our interconnectedness and interrelation with others, and strives to support intentional community building.

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With love and blessings,

Leanne D.

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**Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my Parents.

To my Mother, Melva, for telling me throughout my childhood that anything was possible if you could dream it and work hard. She put up with me through my adolescence, even though it was clear that my scholastic achievements indicated a significant compromise in intelligence. For her humour and sweet belief in the goodness of me, of others and of life. I miss you everyday.

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In gratitude to the Grandmothers and Grandfathers from whom I've come.

## Circlework

### **Introduction: Circlework as Emancipatory Practice**

Having engaged for many years as a social justice activist and front-line social worker, I often contemplated the ways through which positive change occurs within our selves and community. I entered graduate school interested in conducting research that would help to further radical social work practice and social justice. It was in 2000 that I first experienced Circlework as a group practice encompassing dance, music, guided meditation, sacred feminine spirituality, bodywork, dialogue and storytelling. Experiencing Circlework facilitated a radical shift in my relationship to myself and with the other women in the Circle that I had never thought or imagined possible in so short a time. As I contemplated how this practice affected my life, I began to question how Circlework holds potential for facilitate healing, empowerment and interconnection in relation to women's experiences of their bodies, life stories and their connection to community.

I began the MSW program at the same time that I began a two-year Circlework facilitator-training program. As I worked through these two programs I experienced how the MSW courses taught and theorized personal, interpersonal and social change, and how Circlework was enacting these changes within myself and, to the best of my understanding, was facilitating similar changes for the other women in the Circle. Yet I was aware of the lack of investigation and curiosity from critical feminist, anti-oppressive literature in examining popular group work like Circlework as a potential tool of liberatory practice. From my knowledge within the anti-oppressive, critical community, of which I am a part, I knew that Circlework would be considered a 'new age' form of group work and in so being faced rejection. The term 'new age' is often used to broadly define social movements or group work rooted in promoting love and connection (hooks 2000). From a critical framework, 'new age' groups are often critiqued to exist within a privileged realm where participants do personal emotional work in a way that does not connected them to greater social and political issues of oppression and privilege within our families, communities and society (hooks 2001). While I understood and agreed with the critique of popular 'new age' groups, I experienced the climate of dismissal as also engaging a

narrow and potentially elitist perspective on personal and social change as having to emerge from only a certain set of criteria as determined by the radical community.

I entered this study interested in engaging this uneasy connection between my personal experiences of Circlework and my critical stance on popular group work. Mainly I questioned how a method I saw as not being overtly political, was deeply and politically impacting my experiences of my body, my life, and my relationship to others. Using my own experiences as a starting point, I wondered if the radical academic and political community I was associated with had too soon dismissed these popular forms of group work without looking deeply into how they actually impacted those involved. Despite limitations of critical feminist and anti-oppressive analysis and language, Circlework had facilitated profound and lasting change in my life. From this knowledge, I wanted to ask if other women from the two-year training had experienced something similar. From this perspective I decided to engage in dialogue with other Circlework practitioners to understand how Circlework could be used as a tool for emancipatory social work practice.

### **The Research Question**

The research question: **How can Circlework be used as a tool for emancipatory Social Work practice?** emerged from both personal experiences, academic and activist interests, and observations of Circlework in practice. I came to this question from a social justice perspective interested in understanding how Circlework might lead to a greater awareness of personal and interpersonal experiences of oppression and privilege. In addressing my research question I chose to examine how Circlework offers support for women healing their relationships with their bodies, facilitates greater understanding and compassion for others through bearing and being witnessed, and, as result of these experiences, how this effects the women's relationships in community outside the Circle. In order to address my research question I sought to understand the experiences of other women who had participated in Circlework. From that interest I initiated a dialogue with five graduates of the two-year Circlework training as I assumed their long-term experience would offer significant insight into this study.

### **Purpose, Methodology, and Method**

The purpose of this research has been to offer the participants an opportunity to examine and offer insights into the ways through which Circlework has positively impacted their lives, including their understanding of what they meant by 'positive outcomes'. As a critical anti-oppressive feminist I chose to conduct this qualitative study using a methodological framework that would reflect my feminist perspective, which I will define at length in my methodology chapter. In engaging critical feminist, anti-oppressive research I hoped to offer the participants an opportunity to engage in an emancipatory process through the reflective, interactive dialogue and discussion about how our bodies, experiences and interconnections to others are linked within the personal and the political context of our society (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Dominelli, 2002).

I entered this research in the hopes that the participants' voices and experiences might challenge and provide a starting point to a much needed dialogue between the critical feminist, anti-oppressive social work academic community and those engaging in socially popular healing and libratory group work as Circlework. While I knew from personal experience that Circlework was not explicitly grounded in radical political or critical theory, I saw this research methodology as providing an opportunity to generate dialogue that might expose Circlework as potentially engaging an 'emancipatory consciousness' from which personal and interpersonal libratory possibilities exist (Kincheloe & McLaren 1998).

A significant factor within the research methodology was my insider status. As a member of the two-year training there was a degree of familiarity and intimacy between the participants and myself that supported and deepened the research process. While these particulars are discussed at length in the second chapter, the chosen research method of loosely guided interviews within such an intimate relationship setting offered rich insight into the impact of Circlework on these women's lives. Through personal relationship and supported by methods that encouraged interactive, dynamic dialogue, the research process was one that truly led to the 'co-creation of knowledge' (Potts and Brown, 2005).

In choosing whom to ask to participate in the research I was mindful to engage as diverse a population as possible within a generally homogenous group of women in regards to race, class and ability. From the Circlework training group of 15 women I asked five women to participate who reflected both the wide span in age and geographic location that was present within the entire Circle. The one to two hour interviews took place over a four-month period; two interviews occurring at my home during the summer 2004 and the remaining three taking place during a Circlework reunion retreat in the early fall of that year. During the interviews the participants were offered the opportunity to look at, question, and discover how Circlework impacted their relationship to their body, their life stories and to others. Participants were also encouraged to question and challenge my conceptualizations of the impact of Circlework and engage with me in conversation that deepened and enriched my own understanding. Throughout the process I did my best not to suggest or impose my own opinions on our conversations although this was complicated by the intimacy of these particular friendships and our ability to 'read' one another non-verbally.

I did make explicit the critical feminist, anti-oppressive political and theoretical framework of my research in my letter of invitation for the research. During a pilot interview it was clear that providing some context within which the exploration of the body, bearing witness and community was helpful in guiding the tone of the interview as well as make clear my position and bias as a feminist researcher (Grbich, 1999).

### **Outline of the Chapters**

In the first chapter I begin by introducing and exploring Circlework as a tool for emancipatory social work practice from within a critical feminist and anti-oppressive theoretical lens. Guiding my investigation was a reflection into the ways within which I felt Circlework to have impacted me most significantly; specifically, in my relationship with my body, the impact of being witnessed and witnessing the lives of others, and how these experiences in Circlework led to feelings of liberation and connection towards my self, others and community. This chapter weaves a conversation between Circlework as a group practice and current critical literature on the central concepts of the body, bearing

witness and community building. In my review I explore the literature that talks to the body as a site of oppression and resistance, specifically examining the woman's body within a climate of patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism. In the following section I examine bearing witness as a group practice facilitating healing and liberation in our relationships to self and other. I end chapter one with an examination of how bearing witness acts as a conduit for community building that seeks to dismantle individualism while building greater acceptance of difference and the recognition of our interconnectedness.

The second chapter discusses the relevant methodological perspective of my research, frames and locates the inquiry, and addresses epistemological and ontological assumptions inherent within the research process. In this chapter I discuss the methods through which this research was conducted and why I felt loosely guided interviews best served my research purposes. In this chapter I examine my role as researcher, specifically looking at the exceptional degree of intimacy I held with the participants and how this 'insider' location added to the depth of this research. Being so personally close to the participants of this study I was deeply affected by their insights and sharing of experience, which I examine in this chapter. This chapter concludes with a reflection upon the research process; the ethics and integrity and strengths and limitations of the study.

The third chapter is the first of two chapters that discusses and analyses the participants' narratives. In this chapter I analyze my participants' narratives in terms of their experience of oppression in relation to their bodies and the subsequent experiences of liberation that they encountered as result of participating in Circlework. The focus of this chapter is to examine the women's narratives on how Circlework impacted their relationship to the body. This chapter begins by first examining the nature of oppression that the participants experienced, specifically addressing the body as a site of oppression as expressed by the participants themselves. Subsequently I examine their narratives of embodiment and how their experiences in Circlework supported this liberatory shift in the participants' lives.

My analysis of the participants' narratives on the body as a site of oppression led me to construct the term 'the alienated body' as a descriptor for the impact of oppression experienced on their bodies. The characteristics that define alienation from the body were; endless aspirations towards normative body ideals, disconnection between the self and body, and battling pervasive feelings of shame towards the body.

In the second half of the chapter I examine the nature of 'embodied' liberation that my participants experience as a result of having been in Circlework for two years. I analyze their experiences as resulting in a phenomenon I call 'the integrated body'. By this use of the term I mean to reflect their experiences of liberation as effecting a powerful connecting to their body, reclaiming sexuality, fostering the ability to now uphold personal boundaries and an overall feeling of love and acceptance within the body.

The fourth chapter is a discussion of the practices through which Circlework supports emancipatory practice. This chapter builds upon the participants' experiences of oppression and liberation within chapter three, to discover how the practice of bearing witness acts as a key component to personal and interpersonal healing and supports the second practice concept of intentional community building. I begin this chapter through exploring the participant's experiences of being witnessed in the Circle and how this facilitated profound personal healing and empowerment within their lives. From there I engage with the narratives on how bearing witness to the lives of others changed the ways in which the women came to understand one another through an acceptance of difference and awareness to the interconnection and responsibility we hold within each other's lives. I conclude this chapter by examining how the participants experienced the practice of Circlework as a conduit of community building. I explore how the women conceptualized Circlework as having assisted them in breaking through the isolation of individualism, thereby recognizing our interconnectedness and responsibility to one another, and how the Circle became a representation and approach to envisioning a more just future.

Through the voices of the women and an examination of my own experiences I hope to deepen my understanding of how Circlework can act as an emancipatory tool for anti-oppressive, critical feminist social work practice. Through this work I hope to help build a bridge between the critical feminist, anti-oppressive practice community and Circlework as a representation of a popular form of group work that challenges distrust and offers a more engaging vantage point within which to attract individuals and communities towards positive social and personal change.

## **Chapter One: A Conversation with Literature on Critical Feminist, Anti-Oppressive Practice, the Body, and Bearing Witness**

The intention of this chapter is to provide a sense of a group process called Circlework alongside a theoretical and personal account of how Circlework may be a utilized as a transformative tool in Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP). Anti-oppressive practice is a critical underpinning of progressive social work that I will define at length later on in this chapter. The formulation of this thesis comes from years of personal experience as a Circlework participant as well as a Circlework facilitator. As a feminist researcher, I am choosing to examine a practice with which I am intimately familiar. In addition to having an insider perspective of Circlework, there is also a significant emotional and personal investment in this research. It is not a bold statement to say that Circlework has changed my life. Through the Circle I have experienced significant and profound healing of historical and interpersonal wounds that I did not anticipate or imagine possible prior to Circlework. This process has shifted me deeply in my relationship to AOP, as I have come to understand more fully how my intentions and relationships to others can significantly affect both their lives and my own. Circlework taught me in experiential terms the meaning of connection, empathy and how to hold difference and interconnection simultaneously. Even though intellectually I was familiar and comfortable with anti-racist, anti-oppressive practice and theory, there was a missing component of intentional community building like Circlework that I needed in order to help me to engage more fully with anti-oppressive practice.

I will begin this chapter with an exploration of the group process called Circlework. I will begin by defining the practice approach of Circlework, outlining core values upon which Circlework is built, and provide a personal account of my involvement in Circlework as both a student and a practitioner. I then define and examine the feminist, anti-oppressive theoretical foundation upon which I have based my research of the emancipatory potential of Circlework. From this foundation I will then enter into dialogue on how current literature views the body, specifically the woman's body, as a site of both domination and resistance. I explore the concept of bearing witness as a

powerful method of breaking through the isolation of our individualized notions thereby supporting personal and interpersonal healing, diversity and understanding within community. In conclusion of this chapter I look at how the practice of Circlework supports intentional community building through these opportunities of connecting deeply with our selves and each other, culminating towards emancipatory practice.

### **A Definition of Circlework**

Circlework is defined as “a group process... that teaches people how to create loving, non-religious spiritual community by gathering in circles and by connecting to the circle as a powerful symbol of wholeness. Circlework may include a wide variety of activities and elements such as discussion, lectures, music, dance, poetry, meditation, prayer, communion with nature, writing exercises, art, and so on. Circlework revolves around four interconnected values: Community, communion, compassion, and communication... While Circlework includes many elements of traditional spiritual practice, such as meditation, prayer, and visualization, it also works with relationship practice, creating a field of loving compassion for our shared human condition in which obstacles to love such as shame, judgment, and fear can be recognized and transformed. (Bonheim, 2003)

The four interconnected values of community, communion, compassion, and communication central to Circlework have engaged me deeply with an experience of healing community. To enter into a community where compassion, communication and communion (with self, with other and with one's sense of spirituality or belief system) provided the groundwork that allowed me to engage in positive, healing relationships. Through this process I have experienced a major shift in my attachment to the concept of community. Through the experience of healthy, positive community experiences I have had an opportunity to work through unresolved issues stemming from prior experiences in community and in my family of origin. I have experienced the powerful ability of a healing community to resolve and restore my trust and faith in the potential of others. In conducting this research I hope to gain insight from the participants and their experiences of how Circlework contributed to their understanding of community.

Circlework is a dynamic process. I have attended many Circles and no two have been exactly alike. While there is a predictable flow to the work, such as beginning a

Circle with movement to music, the container of the Circle seems to respond uniquely to the needs of that particular set of participants. Circles can last from several hours to several days. Often, multiple day Circles occur at retreat centres where participants are accommodated for the duration of the workshop. This experience creates more opportunities for closeness and understanding between participants during the time they are not in Circle.

It is important to acknowledge the engagement of the Sacred in the practice of Circlework. While this practice is non-religious, it is in many ways deeply spiritual. A significant component to Circlework is the Sacred Feminine. Stories of the Sacred Feminine/ Goddesses across cultures and religions play a strong role in the practice of Circlework. In my experience this storytelling helped me to see that the themes in my life were echoed in these ancient stories. Discussions and storytelling of ancient stories of different Goddesses across time and cultures provided me with analogies to my own struggles and successes in life. Many of these stories dealt with issues of patriarchy, racism, anger, depression, and relationship from the perspective of the feminine. As Circlework is currently a women's group process, connecting to a feminine sense of the sacred has been very important to me as a feminist. As a woman I feel that we are influenced constantly by the patriarchal overtones of Christianity in this society. For me this influence served to distance me from considering the concept of the Sacred in my life. Conceptualizing the Sacred from a Goddess/Female perspective allowed me to see myself as a woman reflected in my understanding of spiritual possibility.

Circlework facilitation is an important aspect of this practice. All experiences of Circlework that I have participated in have been facilitated by Jalaja Bonheim, who founded the practice. The women I have interviewed for this research were also facilitated in Circlework by Jalaja. I believe that skillful facilitation is essential, in order for the Circlework process to provide a safe and nurturing experience. Jalaja's ability to facilitate this container is an area that I do not explore in this study, although I believe it to be a significant component to the transformative breakthrough that many participants experience. As a student of Circlework, and through Jalaja's guidance, I have, and intend

to continue facilitating the experience of Circlework for people in my community. A major intention of this research is to understand how Circlework can be utilized as an anti-oppressive tool for social workers, therapists, activists and community workers. I hope that this research will support what I have experienced, and that this process is a way to 'walk the talk' of social change and community building, through a process of interpersonal and individual healing and mending together.

### **Theoretical Foundation to the Study**

In this study, I am examining Circlework as a tool for emancipatory social work practice. Emancipatory practice aims to both prevent "the waste of human potential that is caused by oppression and enable groups to realize their capacities to the full" (Dominelli, 2002, p. 76). Western society is based upon systems of power that employ both subtle and overt methods of social control. Systems such as patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism serve to enforce and maintain dominance over some, while simultaneously granting power and privilege to a smaller minority (Mullaly, 2002; hooks, 1994). Often, there is no easily identified locus of control of these systems, as part of the nature of systemic oppression is the insidious weaving into our daily existence, which make direct confrontation challenging. Patricia Hill Collins, in her book *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), views this complex system of oppression as a "matrix of domination" consisting of four "interrelated domains of power." "Each domain serves a particular purpose. The structural domain organizes oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experience and the individual consciousness that ensues" (p. 276). Within this setting of dominance and oppression, the potential of the individual or groups on the margins of Western culture may be significantly hindered, manipulated or destroyed (Dominelli, 1997; Burke & Harrison, 1998). To rise up against these systems of oppression can hold a very real element of personal and political risk. As oppression often subjects people to poverty, racism, ableism and other social barriers, those most affected may not have the ability, resources, or support to fundamentally equally challenge the powerful systems that produce the dynamics of oppression.

Because the fight is not between equally powerful groups of people, an emancipatory path towards liberation requires a critical mass of the people (Freire, 1990).

Emancipatory practice seeks methods that serve to mobilize significant numbers of people, examining Circlework as a tool for emancipatory social work strives to widen the possibilities of anti-oppressive, critical feminist practice.

According to Freire, in his writing *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1990), it is the resistance from the oppressed masses that should fundamentally direct and facilitate the shifting of social structures (Collins, 2000). This process of emancipation is dynamic in nature. "Like individual subjectivity, resistance strategies and power are always multiple and in constant states of change" (Collins, 2000, p. 275). From this perspective the woman who reclaims her body as powerful and the women who march in 'Take Back the Night' rallies all engage in the process of emancipation as their reclaiming and protesting offers resistance to the dominant patriarchal pressure that commodifies and oppresses the female body. While it may not be explicitly intended as emancipatory, the act of women engaging with Circlework claims solidarity with other women thereby offering resistance to those forces that isolate us from one another. "Social change, at both the individual and societal levels lies at the heart of an emancipatory approach... Anti-oppressive practice, with its value commitment to the realization of social justice, is one variant of a range of emancipatory approaches to social work" (Dominelli, 1997, p. 4). In the pursuit of social justice, we must critically examine the distribution of rights, opportunities, goods and services, as well as structural inequities that maintain these conditions of inequity should be examined. "Social injustice from this perspective entails not only an unfair distribution of goods and resources, but includes any norm, social condition, social process, or social practice that interferes with or constrains one from fully participating in society, that is, from becoming a full citizen" (Mullaly, 2002, p. 33). Anti-oppressive and feminist theory will provide a critical foundation to this study, as both of these theoretical approaches are synonymous with emancipatory practice (e.g., hooks 2000; Williams, 1999; Dominelli, 1997; Burke & Harrison, 1998).

As an anti-oppressive, feminist practitioner, I recognize that social experiences and locations exist within a hierarchical framework, wherein groups and individuals may be marginalized or privileged by the social structures that surround them (Lorde, 1984; Collins, 2000; Fellows & Razack, 1998; Mullaly, 2002; Dominelli, 1996). It is also critical to grasp that one is neither oppressed nor privileged, rather that we understand how multiple identities coincide within the individual, resulting in experiences of both oppression and dominance in society (Mullaly, 2002; Bishop, 1994). As the majority of people fall in both categories of oppressed or dominant, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where oppression ends and dominance begins, therefore making resistance to oppression more complicated (Mullaly, 2002). Anti-oppressive practice examines and challenges the interconnected nature of systemic oppression (Burke, 1998). Anti-oppressive practice aims to increase awareness and dialogue regarding how the systemic, economic, cultural and internal systems of domination impact on an individual, societal and global scale.

By confronting issues of exploitation, violence and powerlessness, anti-oppressive practice actively challenges procedures and policies that maintain the dominant status quo, while supporting community organizing of marginalized peoples' towards liberation from these systems that bind them (Dominelli, 1997; Williams, 1999; Mullaly, 2002; Narayan, 1998; Findlay, 1991). From this perspective I intend to examine Circlework as a site for anti-oppressive practice. I am interested in the potential of Circlework in assisting women to confront feelings and experiences of inadequacy, powerlessness, and other oppressive experiences, and as a potential tool for personal and interpersonal community building. I intend to engage in this questioning by entering into a dialogue between myself and other Circlework participants in order to discover how this group process has affected the lives of these women. Throughout this dialogue, I intend to engage in dialogue with the participant in relation to and the understanding of, her own experiences within our social structure as well as offer insight into how her participation in Circlework may provide resistance to the systemic oppressions in, through, and among which our bodies, life stories and connections to community are bound. I enter this conversation from what I believe to be our most powerful individual and collective tool, the body, in experiencing and resisting dominant forces that aim to maintain our

submission through oppression. From this central point I will then move outwards to examine how bearing witness and being witnessed serve to break through our isolation and despair that enable us to engage with community in ways that nourish and heal both individual and collective towards a more socially 'just' vision of community.

To bring Circlework into the critical framework of anti-oppressive practice is risky business. In modern terms one may easily cast Circlework within what is described as the 'new age' movement. The term 'new age' arose from the peace and love 'hippie' movement of the mid to late '60s and '70s (hooks, 2000; Starhawk, 1982). While espousing no one particular approach or political ideology, there is some agreement that the term 'new age' is often used to identify social movements whose fundamental purpose is in promoting the notion of love (hooks, 2000; Thich Nhat Hanh, 2003). From this decentralized perspective, the aim of the movement is to reach greater self-discovery, enlightened spirituality, community building and liberation. While some of these aims are central to critical practice, what has been absent from these writings is a critical theoretical understanding of oppression and how the individual or collective is bound and assaulted by these prevailing social and economic realities (Wilson Schaef, 1999; Gwain, 1989). Fundamental to the anti-oppressive critique is that the 'new age' movement fails to sufficiently identify and challenge the myriad systemic oppressions that influence and impact one's ability to be liberated from oppression (hooks 2000). The concern is that love is simply not enough, that there must be awareness and resistance to those systems that bind us all.

As a radical feminist and activist the concept of writing my graduate thesis on a 'new age' concept provided me with serious hesitation. I have experienced in radical activist and academic communities how the term 'new age' is wielded as a powerful attack and label on any form of group work that is based on love and interconnection as a means to social and personal change. Not only did my academic and activist community reject a potentially simplistic notion of love as the cure for all social ills, I myself was resistant to become entangled in this assumption regarding my personal philosophies on social change and community building. Yet through discussions with respected educators

and activists and through the words of social change leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., bell hooks, and Audrey Lourde, I began to understand that one could hold both a critical perspective and a loving perspective simultaneously. From this vantage point I engage with the examination of Circlework as a potentially 'new age' concept needing reclaiming.

All radical theorists do not share the critique of love as being insignificant to social change. bell hooks, in her book *All about Love* (2000), tackles the critique that love is not enough to create personal and systemic change. She writes that to engage in a "love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well" (p. 87). She insists that while the majority of society may "believe" in love, far too few are willing to allow a love ethic to rule their decisions, especially when it comes to radical systemic change (hooks, 2000; West, 1993). She believes that if people were to fully embrace a love ethic, it would lead to greater human and social awareness that would subsequently "enable us to critically examine our actions" and thereby change destructive behaviour (p. 94). hooks identifies that it is a culture of fear that is our biggest challenge:

Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known. When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, the difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat. When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other. (2001, p. 93)

And it may be that finding a commonality in the other, that an anti-oppressive concept of love and interconnection can fundamentally reject the notion of appropriation or assimilation.

While there is a deep-rooted history of appropriation and assimilation abuses, it may be in determining an understanding and practice of interconnection based upon difference that can hold future promise. "Only within interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively "be" in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters" (Lorde, 1983, p. 99). Circlework holds a vision to the development of

connection between people that both recognizes and transforms fear. This connection between individuals does not require 'sameness'; rather it views the human condition as interconnected in "that we cannot separate our own welfare from the welfare of others" (Bonheim, 2003). As Circlework recognizes the healing and growth potential that arises "when a group of formerly separate individuals comes together as a harmonious whole", it allies itself closely with bell hook's notion of engaging in community through a 'love ethic' (Bonheim, 2003). In researching Circlework I am engaged in furthering understanding whether this method serves to facilitate a broader awareness and connection between ourselves, one another, and the world around us.

While in theory and practice I have perceived Circlework to engage with hooks' 'love ethic', a question remains as to whether this form of loving practice is emancipatory. Is bell hooks' climate of loving acceptance of self and other, enough to lead our society towards both an individual and a systemic challenge of oppression? Other anti-oppressive theorists complicate this approach as problematic claiming that while love may positively engage with issues of internalized oppression, it may not engage as directly or concretely with the correlating concepts of systemic violence and oppression. Is living by a 'love ethic' enough to engage an emancipatory approach that "aims to empower [marginalized people] by helping them to understand their situation, make connections between their personal plight and that of others, examine power relations and their impact on the specifics of their daily routines and acquire the knowledge and skills for taking control of their lives" (Dominelli, 1997, p. 4).

In examining the emancipatory potential of Circlework, I have chosen to focus upon two central themes: 'the body' and 'bearing witness.' In choosing these specific concepts I recognize how my own personal experiences and politics factor into my curiosity. In choosing to examine the body my experience as a large woman within our society of thinness as idealized I have grappled both politically and personally with issues surrounding women's relationships and acceptance of their bodies. To be a woman in patriarchal system means that my body is for others; specifically, it is for the sexual pleasure of men (Burstow, 1992). As a large woman, to love and accept my body is an act

of resistance to the pervasive social conformity of thinness as beauty. My participation in Circlework directly facilitated a stronger relationship with my body that enables me to regard myself as beautiful, powerful and capable of any task. After many years of dealing with an eating disorder and strong negative feelings about my body, this was a welcomed change. Thus the 'body' becomes a significant site of exploration in my thesis due to my personal experience of the body as a site of oppression, as well as subsequent liberation. I found upon conducting the field study that the theme of the 'body' also powerfully resonated in the experiences of oppression by the participants.

In questioning the liberatory potential of Circlework I asked the question "How did Circlework facilitate this liberation with my relationship to my body?" In other words, "what were the practices of liberation that occurred within Circlework that resulted in my own experiences of freedom from this particular form of oppression around the body?" I realized that the experience of being witnessed and witnessing other women engaging in deep emotional work radically shifted my experience of safety in community, thereby allowing an opening up to parts of myself and others that I might not have previously been able to address. This opening up of parts of myself was not only limited to issues around my body. As a survivor of early childhood trauma, I struggled with feelings of abandonment and mistrust in relation to community. As a child and family counselor, I witnessed these same struggles within the clients at work. Prior to my experiences in Circlework, I did not imagine that there could be a social container beyond counselling, to hold the immense grief and rage that I felt. To be compassionately and fully witnessed through my grief and anger in community was a major risk, yet one that allowed me to feel understood in ways that was more complete than ever before.

To experience the impact of my story on the lives of others also acted as a form of liberation to the isolation that was part of the continuing pain of this trauma. This experience of isolation was further reduced by the profound connection that developed between me with the other participants after having gone through this emotionally vulnerable process. It was at that point that I realized that as my trauma occurred in the context of another, so did my healing need to occur. It is from this place that my curiosity

and interest in bearing witness emerged. This interest was furthered when analyzing the narratives of the participants of my study, and finding that they not only echoed, but also expanded and complicated how the practices of bearing witness acted as a tool of emancipation for them in dealing with their own experiences of oppression, particularly in relation to their bodies.

While the prospect of “social change” can be too big, or broad to really provide people with a way in which to engage changing the world around them, it is in the small steps that change can be actualized. Steps such as how one listens when another speaks, and an ongoing awareness-raising of issues of privilege and oppression, all contribute to the process of shifting relationships towards greater co-operation and understanding. I have experienced Circlework as a positive method for engaging community in a way that can hold a love ethic, while simultaneously maintaining awareness and appreciation for personal difference. There have been many times where there are significant interpersonal conflicts between participants that ordinarily may not get resolved in a different setting. Circlework makes room for interpersonal conflicts and differences that may not ordinarily get addressed in group settings as there is a clear sense of personal and interpersonal accountability within the Circle that exerts pressure towards recognition and acceptance of individual differences. Within the context of facilitating a loving community, a safer space can be created that may assist an individual in examining these spaces of difference and connectedness. The experiences of the participants attest to this creation of the communal container of bearing witness wherein issues were seen and addressed through not only talking, but also hearing and emotionally engaging in the lived experiences of one another.

As an activist, I have used Circlework methods in my political approach to community-based social justice issues while supporting a ‘love ethic’ rooted in compassion and connection to others. In organizing a memorial for the women killed in the Montreal Massacre, I used concepts from Circlework in the structure of the event. Through the use of silence, movement, dance, singing and a circle within a circle placement of participant’s bodies, we blocked a downtown intersection and delivered our

message in a completely different way. After the event many women came to me to talk about how this protest had impacted them like none other. Repeatedly, what I heard was that they felt engaged and a part of a community expressing our collective grief and rage regarding violence against women. For many of the women the silence and the singing had a very strong and emotional effect. One woman stated that she felt more in her body than she had in years and was surprised at her own feelings of both strength and vulnerability. I later heard from a participant that a bus driver who had been held up by our protest, stopped his bus for 1 minute at the side of the road, full of passengers, and asked the people to remember all of the women who have died through violence. I was intrigued to learn of this, and delighted to hear of this ripple effect of the event. It is from this vantage point that I enter curiously into an exploration of Circlework as a step towards the enormous task of progressive personal and social change.

### **A Conversation with Literature on the Body and Bearing Witness**

#### **The Body**

In reviewing anti-oppressive and feminist literature on the body it is immediately apparent that while defining the body may be a straightforward task, the body is not a simple concept. Although we all have a body, discussion of the body cannot be held under an assumption of sameness, or 'one' body. "The generic category 'the body' is a masculinist illusion. There are only concrete bodies, bodies in the plural, bodies with a specific sex or colour" (Grosz, 1999, p. 270). Failing to recognize the diversity of the body engages in these masculinist notions that regulate the body through an assumption of fixed value. This rigidity eliminates flexibility for the body to transform or liberate from its socially or culturally prescribed identity. This regulation is often monitored through dominant societal norms and values that serve to maintain the status quo through fluidly subtle, yet coercive, pressures to conform.

Relations of force, of power, produce the body through the use of distinct techniques (the feeding, training, supervision, and education of children in any given culture) and harness the energies and potential for subversion that power itself has constructed... [These relations of force] punishes those resistant to its rules and forms; it extracts and processes—and uses this information to create

new modes of control, new forms of observation, and thus new regimes of power-knowledge as well as, necessarily, new sites of resistance. (Grosz, 1994, p. 148–9)

And while “the experience of living is mediated through the body” we are engaged in an evolutionary game wherein the rules and guidelines shift intentionally to enforce social conformity towards the dominant culture (Gustafson, 1997, p. 264).

To engage a feminist perspective on the body is a substantial task within the diverse perspectives of feminist literature and the politics of the body. Conceptualizing the body is highly politicized, as there are multiple perspectives that propose radically different understandings of the notion of the body. Biological determinist feminism understands the body, specifically the woman’s body, as the body of the mother, the nurturer. A significant critique of this position is that it fails to adequately address the historically and currently oppressed role of mothering, and serves to maintain the woman’s body as a concrete limit to the emancipation of women (Birke, 1999; Grosz, 1994; Shildrick, 1999). This perspective relegates the feminine body to the specific physical function of mothering, which neglects to address women who chose not to be or cannot be mothers.

Polar to a biological determinist perspective, is feminist theory that aims to “transcend” the body. This perspective hinges upon a more spiritual perspective of commonality, or ‘oneness’, through the essence of creation and human existence. This perspective lends itself to heavy criticism, as the ability to truly “transcend” the body is one of ‘luxury’ that is impacted by race, ability, and sexuality (Shildrick, 1999; Bakare-Yusuf, 1997; Wendell, 1996). The concept of interconnection through the practice of Circlework must be critically reflected upon to understand how it can resist this realm of transcendence of the body.

I identify strongly with feminist theorists who have come to conceptualize “lived body” as one upon which social, political, and individual experiences are continuously constructed. This body resists essentialist notions, and instead attempts to convey upon and within that body, form and image, the enormous and seemingly endless potential of human existence. Grosz defines the lived body as “the body insofar as it is represented

and used in specific ways in particular cultures” (1994, p. 18). This perspective acknowledges the body as a highly political site, a site of resistance, meanings, transformations, which are influenced by culture, religion, and the changing nature of social norms (Butler, 1999; Grosz, 1994; Irigaray, 1999). It is from this dynamic perspective that the unruly body may exert considerable threat to the social conventions of the mainstream, and in doing so, may engage in significant risk of coercive force from the dominant culture. This is the body I have come to experience as my own. Through my experience of Circlework, and the ensuing relationship I have forged with my body I have experienced liberation from the rigid social constraints that I had been held by, internally as well as externally. While I continue to feel pressure to conform to the dominant infrastructure, this experience of liberation has allowed me to explore and challenge what I perceive as social norms and customs because I feel strong within myself. I believe that the experience of authentically creating a relationship with my body has helped to allow me to engage this way with the world around me. I feel strong in my inner knowing of my worth, which in turn helps me to respond to experiences of oppression and inequity in my own life and the lives of others around me. In conducting the interviews, it was very powerful for me to hear the participants speak of and echo these experiences of empowerment and self-worth through Circlework.

Bodies are central to the order and function of the capitalist, imperialist, and patriarchal regime. As quoted in Grosz (1994), Foucault theorized that

the body is the object, target, and instrument of power, the field of greatest investment for power's operations, a stake in the struggle for power's control over a materiality that is dangerous to it, precisely because it is unpredictable and able to be used in potentially infinite ways, according to infinitely variable cultural dictates. (p. 146)

The woman's body, with its capacity to bleed monthly and bear children, further induces threat to the regime, as women's bodies are seen as “intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive”, which then evokes fear, a loss of order, or control within the patriarchal paradigm (Shildrick, 1999, p. 3). The dominant white, male perspective regarding the woman's body, with its ability to bear children, its menstruation, the

'endlessness' of the vagina, its overflowing, "[its] ability to contaminate and engulf" has served to perpetuate a viewpoint that women should be regarded as "inferior beings whose civil and social subordination is both inevitable and justified" (p. 3). In the subjectification of women, capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism forcibly maintains the norm of the inferior woman (race, class, sexuality, disability), through social coercion, self-perception and violence, in order to maintain its fragile position of dominance (Butler, 1999; Bohan, 1993). The struggle to maintain dominance is unyielding as dominance relies upon the subjectification of another. As women resist their subjectification, they threaten the position and security of the forces that dominate them, often resulting in negative or violent consequences. "That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (Butler, 1999, p. 236). Without docile bodies to dominate, capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism will be fundamentally threatened.

While Foucault has been strongly criticized for his male-centred theories, his writings of the 'docile body' have had significant influence and impact upon feminist thought (Bordo, 1993 & 1999; Rose, 1993; Howson, 1998; Bakare-Yusuf, 1999; Shildrick & Price, 1999). Foucault defined the docile body as one "that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (1984, p. 180). Any threat, whether real or perceived, to the systemic control of this docile body have historically resulted in swift and often violent consequences (Gatens, 1996, p. 228). These controls and consequences can be found within religious doctrine, laws, institutions, inter-personal relationships, and ultimately within our internal dialogue.

As we exist immersed within a world that largely commodifies and subjugates the body for the purposes of capitalist, imperialist and patriarchal control, it is critical that anti-oppressive feminist practitioners engage in a discourse of the woman's body from a perspective that exposes how this system intersects and devalues the black body, the poor body, the body with disability, and the queer body (Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1994; Grosz, 1999; Bordo, 1993).

What of the body that is always under the seduction of death, white racist violence, diseases, perverse heterosexism, pervasive addictions and unemployment? I am talking about the body that is marked by racial, sexual and class configurations. It is this body, this fleshy materiality that seems to disappear from much of the current proliferation of discourses on the body. (Bakare-Yusuf, 1997, p. 313)

In describing the black body, the body with disability and the homosexual or queer body, the dominant gaze continues to maintain this discourse of other.

“In this white world, the Black body, my body is always on display” (Simmonds, 1999, p. 55). From our attempts to describe the body, the dominant gaze maintains a racist discourse as “colour is a key signifier of difference, but only those seen as different from the master subject are designated ‘coloured’” (Rose, 1993, p. 362). Writings on race and the ‘lived body’ hold accountable the dominant culture for its racist history. “To call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professional elders, who have been usually white and male” (hooks, 2001, p. 191). The Black woman’s body has a history of being exploited “via mechanisms such as employment discrimination, maintaining images of Black women that construct them as mules or objects of pleasure, and encouraging or discouraging Black women’s reproduction via state intervention, Black woman’s labour, sexuality, and fertility have all been exploited” (Collins, 2000, p. 132). How colour impacts the lived experience of the body is an elemental discourse that was neglected by early feminist theorists (Lorde, 1984; hooks, 2000; Davenport, 1981; Chrystos, 1981). This failure has had lasting consequences in the relationship between the feminist and anti-racist movement that has only recently begun to be recovered (hooks 1994; Fellows & Razack, 1998).

While engaging with the feminist perspective of the ‘lived body’, how does feminism engage the body with a disability or the body in pain navigates through the pervasive pressures to transcend or reject the body in its entirety? While feminist theorists are busy trying to reclaim the female body and escape essentialist and biological notions, “feminist theory is in danger of idealizing “the body” and erasing much of the reality of lived bodies” (Wendell, 1996, p. 169). Lived experiences of disability and/or

body pain require that attention be paid to the body as the “body insists on the here-and-now, and alienates us from others as we become focused on managing or stopping the pain” (p. 326). In cases of extreme body pain, a “way of perceiving the body permits the one who is being inflicted with pain to shift from the position of sufferer to being the agent of his/her own annihilation” (Bakare-Yusuf, 1997, p. 316). It is from these lived bodies that feminism must recognize that the body can also be “a source of frustration, suffering, and even torment” (Wendell, 1996, p. 167). Alongside recognition of the differently-abled body, it is critical that a feminist perspective of the lived body maintain a challenge to the notion of the ‘perfect’ body while engaging in the construction of methods towards healing our relationship and our understanding with suffering and/or differently-abled bodies.

The queer body poses a significant, and often a violent response from the patriarchy. For a man to engage in any activity that would render his masculinity to question, he is characterized as “grotesque, his body is usually feminized” (Creed, 1993, p. 12). Not only does this expose the sexist hatred embedded in Western thought, it signifies the danger inherent in abandoning the status of male/ masculinity within the patriarchy. For if his body is to become feminized, he is not only to be subject to commodity, he is viewed as a gender-traitor (Vaid, 1995). For a woman to challenge the walls of sexual behaviour and preference defined by patriarchy is to engage in a battle for the ‘domain’ of masculinity, the right to power which has so often eluded her (Creed, 1993). But it is in her taking of this power that the threat for violence lies, for the patriarch becomes threatened by her sexual choices as “she may look but not enter” (p. 121).

The continual subjection of the body to the critical gaze of the dominant society manufactures a process by which the external experience of oppression becomes one of internalized oppression (Bartky, 1995). It is through this process that the oppressed begin to monitor and police these positions of oppression (Hill Collins, 2000; Bartky, 1995; Bordo, 1993; Howson, 1998). I have found the image of Foucault’s Panopticon to provide a framework to understand and explore issues of internalized oppression and self-

surveillance. The Panopticon is the model of a circular prison wherein the walls are exposed from front to back, and a single guard maintains watch from within the central tower. From this perspective, the prisoner or subject exists in a state of constant surveillance, as while one is not certain, one comes to believe that the 'eyes' of the guard are upon them, and thus the prisoner begins to internally monitor ourselves (Foucault 1988). "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other" (Bartky, 1995, p. 248). Through the process of internalizing the patriarch, the white supremacist, and all representations of our dominance, we begin to believe their coercions, myths and lies, and therefore become undermined from within (Burstow, 1992). We come to believe that the way in which our bodies are conceptualized through patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism is a true reflection of whom we really are. Breaking free from this circumstance is difficult, as "the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors tactics, the oppressors relationships" (Lorde, 1984, p. 123). In the movement for freedom it is important to resist essentializing patriarchy. While this gaze is pervasive, care must be paid that feminism does not essentialize patriarchy, and therefore remove it from the possibilities of disruption. As our identities become built upon our societal 'role,' and how we feel ourselves to be perceived, breaking free from the forces of both internalized and externalized oppression is difficult, as it "threatens women with a certain de-skilling" and may ultimately "call into question that aspect of personal identity which is tied to the development of a sense of competence" (Bartky, 1995, p. 252). Beyond risking 'de-skilling', many women, specifically white, wealthy, and heterosexual women, risk elements of privilege, a 'comfort' of real or perceived safety, as the patriarchy establishes women as creatures to be protected and cared for. In challenging their internalized dominance, women in turn risk losing the places within this experience that provide privilege (Fellows & Razack, 1998; Bohan, 1993). Navigating and liberating the depth of our internalized oppression is a formidable task, one that involves risking our

subjugated and oppressed identities and all of the privileges and comforts that may accompany us.

The body offers a site of immense resistance. Foucault maintained that power and resistance are deeply connected, as “there is no power without potential refusal or revolt” (1988, p. 84). As mentioned previously, oppression requires the docile body in order to survive. As women claim their bodies as sites of strength, power and resistance, and as we begin to understand how the forces of society construct our bodies, we begin the process of tearing down the walls of oppression that house us (Butler, 1999). As we refuse to buy into the magazine covers of beauty, starve ourselves, pluck every strand of hair from our body, and groom each other and our female children to become ‘good’ (read; docile) women, we tear away at our imprisonment within the Panopticon, and must forge new ground into our own self-concepts and diversity of what it means to be female (Bordo, 1999; Irigaray, 1999). “What is required, and what has emerged over the subsequent years, is a theory of embodiment that could take account not simply of sexual difference but of racial difference, class difference, and differences due to disability; in short the specific contextual materiality of the body” (Shildrick & Price, 1999, p. 5).

In this movement to reclaim our diverse bodies and our unique selves, Luce Irigaray eloquently states, “The fact that you live lets me know I’m alive, so long as you are neither my counterpart nor my copy” (1999, p. 89). Her writing encourages us to see ourselves in one another, but not to lose ourselves in that vision, rather to hold onto our own sense of self and to help one another build and define their own.

[W]e only touch each other naked. And that, to find ourselves once again in that state, we have a lot to take off. So many representations, so many appearances separate us from each other. They have wrapped us for so long in their desires, we have adorned ourselves so often to please them, that we have come to forget the feel of our own skin. Removed from our skin, we remain distant. You and I, apart. (Irigaray, 1999, p. 90)

While Irigaray’s vision is critiqued as an unattainable feminist utopia (Riley, 1999), it is with curiosity that I engage with Circlework as an emancipatory tool in engaging the body as a site of power, resistance and a beauty unique to each individual.

Circlework encourages participants to engage with experiences of oppression and liberation within their body. Through the simple use of music and movement women are invited to find a rhythm within themselves that is uniquely their own. At first I experienced this process to be very difficult. I experienced a great deal of anxiety regarding my body, being seen in my body, having my body move in a way that was not 'okay' or 'good enough' in relation to the other women. In Circlework one is invited at first to move in their body using soft vision, where your eyes are not looking with intention, rather your eyes are used only to maintain awareness of bodies near you. This helped to ease some of my anxiety, yet I still experienced a sort of terror of my body being on display. My internal dialogue was highly self-critical. To truly engage with my body in community was scary. To engage in this intimacy of my body in the presence of a group of women made me feel very vulnerable, naked. Before this experience I had only engaged sexually with others with my body. To have a relationship with my body that moved beyond function and sexuality was radical work for me. The more I moved, and explored my body in the presence of other women, the deeper I engaged with the complex emotions and feelings that were held within my body, in my cells perhaps. At times I experienced great joy and at times profound suffering in my body. But somehow throughout these experiences I recognized that this was my body's way of healing from all of the neglect, oppression and disconnection that had been experienced over this lifetime. Forging a relationship with my body has been a profound act of resistance and healing for me, and one that I take with me into my work and all aspects of my life. I now see the body as a sage and not just a machine to get us through this world. Circlework allowed me the room to discover, heal, and build this relationship with my body. From these experiences I conceptualized the body as a site of oppression and liberation as a starting point to this research.

### **Bearing Witness**

As Circlework engages in a practice of compassionate listening in order to facilitate a deeper connection and understanding with one's self and with others, examining the liberatory practice of bearing witness was a central concept to this research

(Bonheim, 2003). Through the practice of Circlework, the individual is encouraged and supported to examine aspects of their own life story. The discussions cover critical topics such as power, relationships, family, self-esteem, spirituality, gratitude and grief and it is through the sharing of stories and experiences that the women make connections between their lives and the lives of others. Through this sharing, Circlework assists in making the connection that “our personal wounds are in fact collective wounds [and that with] each step we take on our personal healing journey, we are making an important contribution to healing the collective” (Bonheim, 2003). Anti-oppressive and feminist practice insists that we understand the interlocking nature of oppression, and how the key to liberation of one lies within an awareness of our interconnection and intersecting of oppressions (Fellows, & Razack, 1998; Lorde, 1984; Dominelli, 1997; Diprose, 2001).

Martin Buber proposed “a soul is never sick alone, but always through a betweenness, a situation between it and another existing being” (1947, p. 47). In my own healing journey I recognize that there was a limit to the personal work I would be able to do in a traditional, one-to-one therapeutic relationship. I experienced through Circlework a deep resonance with Buber’s concept of the interpersonal “betweenness” of pain and oppression. A significant experience of my healing came through being heard with compassion, and witnessed through an empathy that allowed me to recognize the commonality of the seemingly isolated and individualistic struggles between ‘me’ and ‘them.’ I began to experience how the words of another woman resonated through me, as though it was my own story or the story of my sister, my mother, my best friend, and my enemy. Through this act of listening and sharing, I experienced a breakthrough in the isolation of my individual story and an opening to the complexity of how our stories are simultaneously linked, and yet unique to one’s own experiences.

In witnessing, we participate in the reconstruction and recognition of the violence of the past and of the present that it creates. In turn, we come to see that we each, individually, have the responsibility to witness our own failure to recognize another’s history. Through this participation, we come to see our individual selves as a “we” who

together make the choice to recognize and respect each other's differences—or not—and contribute to the future survival of us all—or not (Lorde, 1984, p. 151).

In the construction and maintenance of our own identity, we experience interactions and relationships with other(s) that influence, shape and may even define our relationship with self and with other (Foucault, 1984; Irigaray, 1999; Butler, 1999; Grosz, 1999; Fellows & Razack, 1998; Dominelli, 2002). In effect, we may come to 'know' ourselves to the extent we are seen (Fanon, 1982). Within this perspective there can be little room to grow outside of how society inscripts its classifications, locations and limitations upon the individual. It is in the journey to authenticate self-definition that the battle lines are drawn.

To claim her body as her own... a woman must learn to acknowledge her own feelings, desires, and pains as her own. This means turning from the other as arbiter of needs and desires toward the self, toward a sense of self within. To develop this sense of a spirit internal to the self is... parallel to claiming one's body as one's own. (Steele 2000, p. 96)

My experiences of speaking in Circle have been powerful. Within the context of sacred space it is difficult for me to avoid my own truth. I can feel it very strongly when I am not being truthful when talking in Circle, it is an experience of internalized pressure, an urge to 'come clean' with myself in a meaningful way. To 'come clean' and honour my feelings while being witnessed by others has been transformative for me. To acknowledge my feelings, desires and pains within this context has given me permission to own them, and in owning them I have grown stronger. To be witnessed in my confusion, ugliness, beauty, has been an experience of stepping even more deeply into my own power. And as I witness other women work through the same struggles I have been struck by the immense power and possibilities that we have within us to return to our inherent wholeness, personally as well as communally. Claiming the self while in the community of the Circle is an important aspect to healing from isolation, as the process requires the claiming of the self within the individual as well as to the community surrounding them (Graveline, 1998).

Coming together through Circlework embodies the act of bearing witness to our collective and individual struggles. To participate in active and engaged listening to the story and experiences of another, brings us further into our own understanding of the interlocking nature of our oppressed experiences (Steele, 2000). In attempting to break through the walls of atomization and surveillance that isolate us from one another, we combat the internalized plague of Foucault's Panopticon (1984). "By witnessing, the separate individuals become a *we*... Witnessing opens the way to survival by creating the possibility of a collective "we" that was destroyed by the history of traumatic violence" (Steele, 2000, p. 80). It is through "sharing and mutuality [that we] build individual and community strength (Graveline, 1998, p. 152).

From this experience we come to find within the 'other' a sense of connection to self and in connecting we begin to dismantle the socially constructed walls that separate us and maintain our experiences of powerlessness within society (Lorde, 1984; Freire, 1990; hooks, 2000).

How one engages with the act of bearing witness is of critical importance. To bear witness is not simply to listen casually, half-heartedly, with no engagement in how the speaker's story influences your own ideas, understandings or experiences (Steele, 2000; Diprose, 2001). To engage in this way is to be a voyeur into the life and experiences of another. It is to be what Audrey Lorde identified as a "false witness," a witness that remains personally and emotionally distant from the life of another, and in doing so chooses to "contribute to the continuation, to the perpetuation of violent destruction" (1984, p. 80). This 'violent destruction' resides within how the maintenance and construction of 'Other', serves only to further distance and alienate us from one another that, in turn, can only lead to more social, political and personal violence (Steele, 2000, p. 80). When we do not see ourselves in the lives of others, we erase our involvement, our responsibility to engage, and in doing so we serve to perpetuate our own oppression as well as our own privilege—we maintain ourselves as 'innocent' (Fellows & Razack, 1998). To bear witness means to participate in the story of your own life, to actively

witness and hear the stories of others, and in doing so face the historical complications of privilege and oppression and how these experiences have joined us together.

### **Intentional Community Building**

The experience of being witnessed and bearing witness to one another is key to intentional community building as “the physical experience of hearing, of listening intently, to each particular voice strengthens our capacity to learn together” (hooks, 1994, p. 186). Within the narratives it was clear that bearing witness engaged a communal aspect, both inside and outside of the Circle, which powerfully impacted the participants’ experiences of liberation. Given this impact, I feel it important to explore my participants’ experiences of community building as a distinct, yet not entirely separable, practice arising from their experiences of witness.

Emancipatory practice requires that we not only work to liberate our own oppressions, but that we actively engage ourselves in the liberation of others (Dominelli, 2002; hooks, 1994; Williams, 1999; Milner & Bryne, 1998). Coming together in community offers resistance to the rampant individualism championed in dominant society. As individualism serves only to create and maintain divisions between people, rendering them isolated and powerless, dominant systems exist as a means to atomize groups of people into smaller units through a process of fear, ignorance and anger (Irigaray, 1999; Bordo, 1993; Mullaly, 2002). Individualism severely minimizes the human potential for cultural and political solidarity to resist the dominant status quo (Freire, 1990). It is through this process that we begin to experience our lives as separate and disconnected from the lives of others, and in doing so we are unable to recognize ourselves, both implicated and connected, in the lives of others. In our failure to recognize the connections between our struggles for liberation we remain “in a state of submersion, impotent in the face of oppressive reality” (Freire, 1990, p. 37–8). Breaking through this learned impotence, Circlework offers a practice through which participants can work together to recognize and confront shame, judgment and fear (Bonheim, 2003).

Today we face the necessity of bridging difference between the culture with few processes that are not based on the same individualistic philosophies that have been used to “divide and conquer.” The Circle can act to deconstruct the Western dualism of individual/ community by allowing us to work individually, in a transpersonal context, while building a community. (Graveline, 1998, p. 131)

From our state of individualism, it is easy to overlook the role that positive relationships play in the building of community (Ansbro, 1982; Williams, 1990). Ackelsberg (1988) summarized several studies in determining that “women’s coming to political consciousness (and I suspect that this applies to men as well) may be more a phenomenon of *relationship* and *connection*, than one of recognizing *interests* in the traditional, individualistic sense” (305). Social justice and community building movements have a long history of recognizing the importance of relationships and connection within movements and communities. Movements headed by such visionaries as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King have provided concrete examples of movements based on spirituality and loving relationship as a path to social justice (Ansbro, 1982).

Martin Luther King perceived that the ideal state “is a community held together by and required by the interdependence and interrelatedness of humankind. It rests on neither the biological power of blood nor the compulsive power related to self interest nor the possession by the individual of certain qualities or attributes, but on the social nature of human individuals and the bonding nature of love.” (Williams, 1990, p. 23)

Woven into recognizing our interconnectedness is the ability to resist the divisive and alienating forces of dominant western society (Faver, 2001). Feminist theorist Rosemary Ruether writes of a process of ‘soul making’ through which we “enhance our capacities, both personally and socially, for sustaining just and loving relationality, of curbing and curing fear of and contempt for others and for ourselves” (1994, p. 39). Her definition of ‘soul-making’ aligns with the four interconnected values of community, communion, compassion and communication of which the practice of Circlework revolves (Bonheim, 2003).

Ruether engages the reader to understand that “feminist soul-making must also break out beyond the boundaries of the personal journey and become a journey in solidarity with others, others of one’s own group and also others across class and race. This recognition that one’s own liberation is an integral part of the liberation of a community, a people, comes much more readily to women of oppressed races and groups. The ideological and cultural encapsulation of middle class white people, women as well as men, make it much more difficult to see beyond the personal/ inter-personal arena”(42).

The concept of ‘soul-making’ connects with the Circlework practice of “peaceful co-existence, skillful communication, and compassionate love for self and other... [while simultaneously holding a] commitment to individual, social, and planetary healing” (Bonheim, 2003). As “individual empowerment is strongly associated with community empowerment” the emancipatory experiences of individual Circlework participants offers solid potential to the capacity to create and nurture intentional community that is rooted in compassion, awareness and responsibility to our interrelatedness (France, 1997, p. 28).

### **Conclusion**

As I conclude this chapter and enter into this study, I feel hopeful that my research will provide additional insight into the field of critical social work. While delivering an emancipatory practice is a rather large task, I begin this research curious to the impact Circlework has on women’s experiences of their bodies, of their life stories, and their connection to community.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology and Method**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will describe the research methodology and methods through which I conducted my research on the practice of Circlework. Through a course of interviewing five participants from a two-year Circlework training program, I was able to explore and deepen with these women, our understanding of how the experience of Circlework has impacted our lives.

### **Purpose of Field Research**

Motivation for this research arose from personal experience of the practice of Circlework. As an activist and critical social worker, I have always been interested in personal and collective ways through which to support personal, community and environmental healing and social justice. Through years of experience and personal transformation through engagement with Circlework, I came to wonder how this practice might be used as a tool in the quest for emancipatory social work practices. Having participated in a two-year training on the facilitation of Circlework, I began to seriously investigate this group work approach as having the potential to facilitate emancipatory personal and social change for participants. In examining the emancipatory scope of my research I chose to focus on two specific areas of interest in relation to Circlework: a) women's experiences of their bodies and the bodies of others through the practice of Circlework; b) how the experience of bearing witness and being witnessed, impacts women's understanding of their life stories and the stories of others, facilitating greater connection to community.

### **Research Question**

My research question is how can Circlework be used as a tool for emancipatory social work practice? Having participated in Circlework for a number of years, I approached this question through my own experiences of Circlework as emancipatory, specifically in my relationship to my body and to the experience of witness and

community. From this perspective, I entered the research interested in understanding how the practice of Circlework impacted women's lived experiences of their bodies as both a site of oppression and resistance. Secondly, I examined the experience of being witnessed and bearing witness within the Circle as a path to personal, interpersonal and community healing. Based upon the reflections and experiences of the women interviewed in this study, I hoped to gain insight as to the liberatory possibilities of Circlework, through an examination of how Circlework can be used as a tool for emancipatory social work practice.

### **Methodological Concerns**

#### **Framing the Inquiry**

I have chosen to approach this research through a critical feminist, anti-oppressive methodology. In a number of ways this methodological approach best reflected my political and professional stance as expressed in the previous chapter. I will begin this section by first defining my methodological perspective and identify several of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical feminist, anti-oppressive methodology.

The heart of critical feminist and anti-oppressive research strives toward personal, political and structural liberation from systems of oppression (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Potts & Brown, 2005). At the foundation these theoretical perspectives influence one another as critical feminist research and theory is both committed to and informed by anti-oppressive social work and research (Potts & Brown, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998). While Potts and Brown suggest, "there are no fixed or bona fide set of methods or methodologies that are inherently anti-oppressive," I am guided by their definition of an anti-oppressive researcher (p. 281). The anti-oppressive research stance of Potts and Brown aligns with my interests as a researcher, as it recognizes a "political purpose and action" to my research, the importance of "making an explicit, personal commitment to the people you are working with personally and professionally in order to mutually foster conditions for social justice and research," as well as the importance of "paying attention

to, and shifting, how power relations work in and through the process of doing research” (p. 255).

Anti-oppressive research methodology, like any critical research methodology is rooted in undertaking research for the purpose of enhancing social justice.

Critical social science and critical social theory attempt to understand, analyze, criticize, and alter social, economic, cultural, technological, and psychological structures and phenomena that have features of oppression, domination, exploitation, injustice, and misery. They do so with a view to changing or eliminating these structures and phenomena, and expanding the scope of freedom, justice, and happiness.” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 146)

It is with the purpose of resistance to oppression, and in the interest of expanding the scope of liberation, that I engage in this research of Circlework as a tool for liberation.

Critical feminist research focuses on gender inequities by recognizing the interconnections between gendered oppressions and patriarchal structural inequities. The feminist “research process is seen as a consciousness-raising arena for researchers and participants, while the objective is to transform prevailing knowledge paradigms so that theory and practice incorporate, rather than just accommodate, women’s lives” (Neysmith, 1995, p. 101). While critical theory extends to cover all locations of oppression, critical feminist research involves itself clearly with the emancipation of women (Reinharz, 1992). Bringing together a critical feminist and anti-oppressive research methodology grants a sense of freedom from a singularly gender-centred analysis that may be found in some feminist analysis, and provides spaciousness for a difference-centred research perspective (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). “Anti-oppressive theories reflect both a normative stance against oppression, and are difference-centred by seeking to interrogate normative assumptions, acknowledge multiplicity of social positions, and disrupting essentialist thinking” (p. 64). In defining a difference-centred perspective I choose to locate this research within a context that resists essentializing experience through a gendered lens, allowing a focus on difference as opposed to a focus on gender, and allows for a broader scope of experience and influence into the lives of others. While

I recognize this research is specifically examining the lived experiences of women, I am invested in the political intention of constructing a methodological stance situated around difference, hopefully leading to a greater depth of understanding to the multiplicity inherent in the human experience.

### **Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions**

There are several ontological and epistemological assumptions of a critical feminist, anti-oppressive stance, as I interpret it, which guided my research process. The first is that experience is subjective and particular to the individual (Creswall, 1998). This assumption recognizes that experience cannot be universalized and maintains an awareness of experience as individual in nature. As experience is subjective and multiple in nature a central tenet to critical and anti-oppressive ontological assumption locates the participant as active and owning agency to their experience (Dominelli, 2002a, in Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

A second ontological and epistemological assumption is that knowledge is multiple and lived. "Knowledge is understood as situated by one's social location as a result of privileges and oppression that one has experienced" (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 66). This stance recognizes that we experience multiple locations of status and positions, culminating in a unique individual perspective. From this perspective knowledge cannot be essentialized or seen as universal. Knowledge, however, is seen to be constructed as a process of dialogue or sharing wherein "something is gained by the interaction of the subject and the observer, where both are understood as having agency" (p. 67). This process commits itself to inclusive inter-active social research where the researcher does not assume a position of 'expert' in relation to the subject matter. The participant is seen as the expert in their own lives, allowing for the experiences of both the researcher and the participants to be viewed as subjective and individual.

Beyond relinquishing 'expert' stance, the researcher must also identify and name their bias as an active component to their research process (Neysmith, 1995). Rejecting an 'expert' approach to research, a critical feminist, anti-oppressive methodology serves

to challenge the historically patriarchal experience of research, wherein women's lives and experiences were examined from an alienated and detached 'researcher' who held little to no connection to the life of the participant (Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 2001; Stanley & Wise, 1993). In my research this connection is well made, as I enter the study from an insider standpoint and share a long and emotionally intimate peer history with all the participants in my research. I enter this research as a collaborator with the participants so that we may come together through our different and multiple perspectives to gain a deeper level of insight into the practice of Circlework.

Ultimately, critical feminist and anti-oppressive research must be emancipatory in nature and intentional. In conducting my research through a critical feminist, anti-oppressive methodology, I seek not only to develop a greater understanding of how oppressive structures intersect and manipulate individuals, but maintain a deep commitment to the participants through facilitating research that aids to expose structural and interpersonal inequities that maintain or foster a climate of oppression. Conducting feminist, anti-oppressive research allows the process to "become a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label "political" and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998, p. 264). In engaging with this perspective, I acknowledge that critical research has also failed to "deliver emancipation for oppressed groups", and has been criticized for "the failure of critical theorists who belonged to the academy of scientists, to recognize their own patriarchal practices which continue to marginalize and silence women academics" (Smith, 2001; Grbich, 1999). As a critical feminist, anti-oppressive researcher I am committed to conducting my research in ways that facilitated a critically reflexive, intersubjective and collaborative relationship with the participants, their stories and my own process as researcher with the intention of furthering an emancipatory consciousness for all.

### **Research Method**

I chose a qualitative research methodology using loosely guided interviews as my method of research. Approaching my research through a qualitative methodology best

served my anti-oppressive, critical feminist intentions in conducting research. Qualitative methodology allows a researcher to engage their research from multiple and subjective positions, accounts for how a researcher has subjective experiences that may impact the research, and encourages a researcher to enter into their subject of inquiry (Grbich, 1999; Creswall, 1998). I appreciated an approach that encourages researchers to “begin where they are. That is, they look at their own lives to see if they can find anything interesting to study, an unusual angle or puzzling event or phenomenon” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 26). “Qualitative, inductive methods of research are most suited to the ontological and epistemological assumptions” of researchers coming from a critical feminist, anti-oppressive research approach (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 67).

My chosen method of loosely guided interviews was particularly appropriate to the qualitative stance I took as it permitted for an informal, conversational interview, which focused upon the thoughts and experiences of the participant. “Informal and guided interviews allow for extensive exploration in a setting that is as close as possible to a conversational ideal. They emphasize the interviewee’s expertise” (Grbich, 1999, p. 95). In engaging in this research it was important that the conversations be relaxed and “provide a minimally directive framework that enables both researcher and informant to access and identify key areas” (p. 94). This method allowed me to comprise “a set of broad-ranging questions derived from theory, previous research and *intuition* (notions that the interviewer has in mind from his/ her own experience and that required exploration)” (p. 93). While a pre-set research question format loosely guided the research direction, the interview process was one in which participants were encouraged to investigate additional ideas and assumptions that arose through the research interview process. My approach to the interview process was one of active interviewing wherein the interview process “may judiciously engage the respondent, working interactionally to establish the discursive bases from which the respondent can articulate his or her relevant experiences” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 47). Through this approach participants “are not so much repositories of knowledge—treasuries of information awaiting excavation—as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers” From this

perspective I wanted to create with the participants a greater understanding of our experiences, both personal and collective.

Prior to my research, I piloted a guided interview with a Circlework participant, and through this I came to recognize that to discuss the body, bearing witness and community without providing any context or background to my critical feminist, anti-oppressive theoretical bias and interest was problematic. While the participant knew I was looking at Circlework from a particular theoretical perspective, they expressed feeling uncertainty to that vantage point and expressed their struggle to engage in the conversation. This feedback greatly impacted how I thought about entering this research, as I began to understand that the participant experienced me as not neutral to the process. After this feedback, I shared with the participant my anti-oppressive, critical feminist theoretical perspective and approach to these three concepts using 'mutually familiar language' to express my perspective (Strega, 2005). Immediately the conversation began to pick up and by the following day the participant shared with me how profound the dialogue regarding the theoretical context was in assisting her to look more deeply into my questions. A day or two following our initial theoretical conversation, she expressed how Circlework had "totally changed her relationship with her body" and that she'd never really thought about it or had been asked, before our conversation. This is congruent with the critical framework through which this research was formulated wherein critical social research "should uncover myths, reveal hidden truths, and help people to change the world for themselves" (Neuman, 1997, p. 74). It is from this experience that I recognized the importance of providing some theoretical context regarding my critical feminist, anti-oppressive perspective on the body, bearing witness and social change in a way that is careful not to lead but rather to expose the participant to my bias as a researcher. "When conducting research, feminists do not define the reliability of their analysis to consist of statements that are measured by the degree to which they are seen to be objective or neutral. Rather, they seek to make their own biases and values transparent, consistent with their epistemological assumptions" (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 56).

An active interview research method allows an interactive, dynamic dialogue that serves to deepen the experience of Circlework for both the participants and myself. “Anti-oppressive research is not a process to discover knowledge, but a political process to co-create and rediscover knowledge” (Potts & Brown, 2005, pp. 261-2). Inserting anti-oppressive and critical feminist theory into the invitation letter seeks to engage praxis by asking “us to be aware of the ways in which our selves, our lives, our relationships, our society, and the things of the world are distorted and deformed by economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological oppression, domination, exploitation, violence, and repression” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Freire, 1990; Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1994). As little research has been conducted on naturally occurring community groups that may covertly facilitate anti-oppressive group work, I became interested in how Circlework might be a place for this praxis to occur as it “puts the theory into practice and uses the outcome of practical applications to reformulate theory” (Neuman, 1997, p. 78).

### **My Role as a Researcher**

As a Circlework participant, I entered into this research as a student of Circlework and as a graduate student. Most clearly I am an insider researcher to this study. From this perspective I have multiple locations of the insider position in this research. I am very familiar with the practice of Circlework, and I am emotionally intimate with the participants in the study because of a two-year Circlework training program that we have all completed together. While critical theorists like Bentz and Shapiro (1998) suggest that we all have ‘insider status’ in our interpretation of the social reality because we all live within a social reality, that we are ‘inside’ this world of being human, I see this claim to the position of ‘insider’ as problematic, as it negates both the historical oppression from the outsider ‘expert’ position as well as asserts inclusion into a setting or community, wherein a researcher may or may not be intimately familiar (Smith, 2001). In my experience of being an insider, I understand myself as a member of ‘Our’ circle; a member of our community, known, and easily identified within the ‘scene’ of this social research site (Smith, 2001). As a member of the Circle, I am aware of the intimate and deeply personal knowledge that we share regarding one another’s life. Holstein and

Gubrium (1995) stated, “the interviewer’s background knowledge can sometimes be an invaluable resource for assisting respondents to explore and describe their circumstances, actions, and feelings. Indeed, citing shared experience is often a useful way of providing concrete referents on which inquiries and answers can focus” (p. 45). In engaging with critical, feminist practice, I saw my role as researcher to be one of making links between the experiences of the participants and my own, alongside examining more conceptual questions and issues stemming from my research (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kirby & McKenna, 1989). While this particular researcher- participant relationship poses significant advantages, it also requires a depth of critical reflection and considerations when conducting the research from the vantage point of an insider perspective.

The preceding relationship between the participants and myself is critically significant to this research. As Circlework is an intensely personal experience, it is hard to grasp the experience unless one has lived it oneself. As a member of the two-year training I was aware that these participants/ dear friends had their own experiences and feelings about me that moved well beyond a surface level. In conducting the research I found that the participants spoke candidly, agreeing, disagreeing and questioning me throughout the interview process. From my perspective I experienced that the participants saw themselves as the ‘experts’ in our dialogues. This is in itself a reflection of the practice of Circlework; wherein a woman is seen and recognized as the source of her own knowledge and congruent with my methodological stance. And while I assumed and was reflective of how my location as a Circlework participant/researcher might influence the data or participants, I was reassured by the critical and reflexive nature of the conversations with these women. While “even in many qualitative or what are termed “empowerment” approaches to research, the relationship between researchers and the research is often paternalistic” I believe that in the end the fact that the women knew a great deal about my life seemed to help negate the possibility for power relationships within the research environment (Potts & Brown, 2005; Reinharz, 1992).

In conceptualizing the location of outsider to the research I am aware that I entered into this research as a graduate student looking to complete her thesis

requirement by conducting research on Circlework. From this perspective, I question if I am entering into an outsider location, as not everyone I interviewed holds a post-secondary degree and that I stand to gain both professionally and personally, by the completion of my graduate thesis as “most feminist research is carried out by middle-class female researchers to further their careers” (Grbich, 1999, p. 55). In reflecting upon other areas wherein I may occupy an outsider role, I have found that there are relatively few in relation to class, race, ability, and gender. To the best of my knowledge we are all women who come from Anglo-European or Jewish heritage, a significant majority have a middle, upper/middle class background with current access to this privilege, most if not all the participants are post-secondary educated, and to my understanding we are all relatively able-bodied. “When you interview people from the same class, race, and gender there is a different concept of vulnerability in terms of power and accountability. It is not so intense and the need to hold for these possibilities is not as critical as it is more unlikely to occur” (p. 87).

The critical feminist, anti-oppressive methodology I adopted guided my engagement with “thinking critically about [my] process, [my] relationships and the quality and richness of [my] data and analysis” (Smith, 2001, p. 137). While in feminist research it is an illusion to believe that one can completely control or eliminate researcher bias, what is possible is for me to name the bias and to “name it as an active component to the research” through engaging in reflexive thinking (Neysmith, 1995, p. 101). As a person committed to the process of Circlework I acknowledge entering into this research with a strong hope to see the outcome indicate that Circlework is a useful tool for emancipatory social work practice. And while I tried to leave my ‘baggage’ of this checked at the door of my interviews, I was reflective of how my language, facial expressions, or other non-verbal cues might have impacted the conversation. In some instances I employed an additional method of maintaining awareness of my bias by addressing my perspective in the interview when it seemed relevant, or when I felt it might encourage any unstated differing of opinion, experience, or perspective. “Insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble. It needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the

community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position” (Smith, 2001, p. 139).

In researching the impact of Circlework upon the bodies, lives and connections of other women from my circle I inevitably opened a deeper understanding and examination of my own Circlework experience, specifically, personal emancipatory shifts in my relationship with my body, my story and my community engagement. To engage in this questioning was difficult, as it stood to challenge what I could otherwise assume to be similar experiences felt by all participants. “One of the difficult risks insider researchers take is to ‘test’ their own taken-for-granted views about their community. It is a risk because it can unsettle beliefs, values, relationships and the knowledge of different histories” (Smith, 2001, p. 139). Entering into this research required that I abandon the questionably arrogant stance of ‘knowing’, and instead engage in learning and understanding the diversity of experience within Circlework. “It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view in them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours” (Freire, 1990, p. 85).

Becoming a researcher in the context of Circlework created anxiety, as I entered into an unknown realm of relationship with such close friends. I felt vulnerable to being judged in my capabilities as a researcher, and worried that a poor performance from me might impact the dynamic of these very important personal relationships. As one of the youngest two-year Circlework participants, I faced some insecurity of being ‘believed’ as a researcher. “If you decide to do your research in a setting where others already know you, you need to think about how they may see you, for that will certainly affect your research” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 65). One strategy I used was to discuss and name these issues with the participants. Exposing this vulnerability was powerful for me as it allowed me to release the pressure of having to ‘live up’ to my subconsciously internalized notion of researcher as ‘expert.’ This provided a good opportunity for critical reflection in minimizing the power relationship between the participants and myself and furthered my experience of collaborative research.

## Research Process

### The Dialogues

I undertook this research through a process of conducting loosely guided, open-ended interview questions that encouraged participants to explore how Circlework has influenced their feelings about their body, life story and connection to community. I interviewed five participants from the 2001–2003 two-year Circlework training. Interviews took place over a period of six months. Three interviews took place within one week during a yearly reunion of our Circlework training. The other two interviews took place in my home in Victoria, BC, during visits from the participants. All of the interviews occurred in person in a quiet and private setting chosen mutually by the participant and myself.

Prior to the dialogues, a letter of invitation was mailed to each potential participant in order for the individual to review and determine their interest in participating in the study (Appendix 1). In this letter participants were advised of their rights as participants and their ownership over their personal interviews. Participants were also informed as to the anti-oppressive, feminist nature of the research and given some underlying theoretical perspectives through which to consider my approach to this research. As with feminist research it is important to expose the researcher's position, emotions and values and how these affect her view of reality (Grbich, 1999). In the letter participants were asked to write, e-mail or phone to indicate an interest in participating. All invited participants chose to engage in the research process.

All the conversations were audiotaped with the consent of the participants. A verbal reminder was given at the beginning of the interview that they could choose to stop or pause the tape at any time. While I planned to take notes during the interview if needed, I found that during the interviews I did not take many notes. I experienced the conversations as dynamic and interactive, and found that to take extensive notes resulted in my feeling disengaged, or somehow behind the conversation. I did write notes after each interview describing my experience, and any hesitations or questions that emerged

for me with the process. A professional transcriptionist transcribed all interviews within a month of the final interview. The audiotape, transcription of the interview and the field notes taken during and after the interview has all been included in the data analysis process.

### **Profile of Participants**

The five study participants are Circlework graduates, and were chosen based upon previous conversations that indicated individual interest with this research. While the sample of applicable research participants is small and relatively homogenous, principles of inclusiveness within the limitations present in terms of Circlework members were undertaken in order to ensure the most diversity possible. "Qualitative researchers usually choose research participants for the specific qualities they can bring to the study" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 93). In choosing participants, I chose to interview a wide age range, spanning from 35 to 62 years, as well as a geographically diverse sample. I interviewed women from the San Francisco Bay area, Ithaca, New York, rural Iowa, and Minneapolis. In doing so, I hoped to get a broader perspective that reflected the spectrum of life experience and diversity based on where the participant lived, and the socio-political climate also influencing their lives. While researching participants who reside on the West Coast of the US was more cost effective, I believed that I should opt for the widest geographic range as political and cultural perspectives of those in central USA may be different from those on the west coast, as indicated by political demographics, which might influence how participants experience and conceptualize Circlework. As with any group, I was careful to not only choose women with whom I have a deeper bond, and engage with women who I do not feel as intimate with. It is important here that I also clarify the significant depth of connection with every woman I interviewed; rather, I feel it important to acknowledge that the process of choosing participants was not one of 'picking favourites.'

### Questions for Interview Process

The following questions were used to loosely guide the conversations between the participant and myself. Each question covered a conceptual area previously researched within the literature review and served as an entry in which to explore the topic through dialogue.

1. In what ways has your experience with Circlework influenced your relationship with your body?
2. How has Circlework influenced how you think or feel about your body in relation to other bodies?
3. Have the changes in your relationship with your body continued or grown beyond the Circlework training?
4. How has the process of sharing your personal stories and experiences within the Circlework training impacted your feelings about your own life history?
5. Has, and in what ways has bearing witness to the stories and experiences of other Circlework participants furthered your understanding of the connection between your life and the lives of others?
6. As Circlework revolves around four interconnected values of community, compassion, communion and communication, how has your participation in Circlework influenced your engagement with your family, your community or a wider social sphere?

As the interviews were conversational, additional clarifying questions unique to each interview were asked through dialogue for clarification, or the intention of deepening the conversational exploration when appearing relevant to the initial questions. Careful attention was also paid to not engage in a process of leading the participant into any particular direction.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I e-mailed each woman a copy, with a letter inviting them to make any changes, clarifications, deletions or additions to their voice in the transcript. In reviewing the transcripts, it appears that the women have most

frequently made clarification to their original responses, adding in context or additional clarity for the research. One participant chose not to make any changes to her interview.

### **Post-dialogue Process**

The analysis has been conducted using thematic analysis, wherein the data, including tapes, transcribed text and autobiographical notes, were compiled and underwent a critical and investigative reading of our conversation. Grbich provides a process through which collected data may be thematically interpreted which begins with

1) contextualizing each theme and placing it within a thematic file; 2) examining each file for theme typologies, which determines specific responses or language patterns in regards to each theme; 3) examination of the identified typologies with the intention of generating propositions; and 4) to lay these propositions across all other identified themes and typologies to see whether there are more complex aspects and associations that need to be incorporated. (1999, p. 234)

In the interpretation of the emerging themes, I have engaged with the data using a critical feminist, anti-oppressive perspective. In conceptualizing the data, I have intended to maintain the participant's voice as centrally as possible, through the process of deriving themes and propositions. As a critical feminist, anti-oppressive researcher, I invited the experiences of the participants to guide the emerging theorization and analysis. As the findings emerge from the participant's experience, I wove into the analysis chapter any relevant critical and/or anti-oppressive literature originally guiding my research question, in order to deepen my understanding of their experiences in Circlework. In addition, I engaged with the interview data the intention to acknowledge how my perspectives were shifted and/or challenged through the conversations, given the understanding that participant experience may differ significantly from my own experiences of Circlework.

### **Integrity and Ethics in Research**

In engaging in critical, feminist research I have ensured that all participants and participant statements in this study have been strictly regarded and directed by the Tri-Council (1998) policy on the ethical treatment of human subjects engaged in research.

The Tri-Council guideline is congruent with anti-oppressive, critical feminist ethics, as it requires research that respects the dignity and the rights of the participant as being more important than the aims or purpose of any research study. Prior to participation in this study, participants were given a letter outlining all of the ethical guidelines that support the study (Appendix 1). In this letter participants were informed regarding the aims of the research, their right to confidentiality, that they may withdraw themselves or have their statements removed from the data, in part or in entirety, without penalty at any time or for any reason, that the welfare and security of the participants will be of first importance in all aspects of the study, and that experiences and voices of the participants will guide the theoretical direction of this study. To the best of my knowledge I did not question or step outside the boundaries of these guidelines at any time throughout the research process.

As the purpose and intention of the research was disclosed to the participants in the letter of participation in the study, I took this opportunity to outline a general view of my anti-oppressive and feminist theoretical background and assumptions underlying the study as well as my location and perspective as a researcher. In providing this theoretical information and background to my study, I attempted to provide a degree of structural analysis and anti-oppressive, feminist analysis to the participants to consider prior to the study. The intention for this was to engage in what Bentz and Shapiro (1998) maintain as the “tradition of critical theory [that] asks us to be aware of the ways in which our selves, our lives, our relationships, our society, and the things of the world are distorted and deformed by economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological oppression, domination, exploitation, violence, and repression” (p. 166). And while this information sharing was not intended to make for instant ‘converts’ to anti-oppressive analysis, as an anti-oppressive, feminist researcher, it is within my ethical outlook to engage in research that contributes “to a long-term project or goal of human emancipation, even if this goal is unrealized in the present or the immediate future” (p. 153).

In providing participants with my theoretical approach to research I also must acknowledge bias as an ethical concern in this study. As previously discussed, the location of insider in relation to this research positions me in a potentially more

influential role than an outsider location and held additional ethical issues. While I am aware of and openly disclose having a set of assumptions and values that influence my conceptualizing of Circlework as an emancipatory tool, I acknowledge that I walk the line wherein “feminist researchers are not objective or detached; they interact and collaborate with the people they study” (Neuman, 1997, p. 81). And furthermore, as an insider, I carry my own assumptions and beliefs about the usefulness of Circlework, which I risk challenging through this research. “One of the difficult risks insider researchers take is to ‘test’ their own taken-for-granted views about their own community. It is a risk because it can unsettle beliefs, values, relationships and the knowledge of different histories” (Smith, 2001, p. 139).

In this research I have been deliberate in making transparent, issues of bias, assumptions and values during the entire process through naming and providing definition of myself as an anti-oppressive, critical feminist researcher and documenting areas wherein my assumptions are incongruent with those of the participants. I recognized throughout the process that critical research requires I stay self reflexive and open to the research process, emerging themes (whether or not anticipated) and to the dialogue between myself and the participants, in order to best facilitate the voices and experiences of the participants (Smith, 2001). Simultaneously allowing that the “consciously active interviewer intentionally, concertedly provokes responses by indicating—even suggesting—narrative positions, resources, orientations, and precedents for the respondent to engage in addressing the research questions under consideration” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 39).

Participant interviews have been kept confidential and remain in a locked filing cabinet during all times when it is not being utilized by the researcher. All transcripts of our conversations have been edited to remove the participant’s name or other identifying marks. In addition, each transcript has been provided with a pseudonym in order to maintain an anonymous voice in the study. All participants were informed and approved in advance that a transcriptionist would transcribe their spoken interviews, and that my thesis supervisor may read this transcribed text. The research audiotapes were transcribed

by a professional transcriptionist who signed a confidentiality agreement with the researcher in agreement to maintain the confidentiality of the participant's voices. During the process of writing and completing the thesis paper, pseudonym labeled transcripts are available to the researcher's thesis supervisor, committee members, as well as an external investigator, if requested as part of the thesis defense. Transcripts and audiotapes will be destroyed three years following the defense of the thesis.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There were several strengths and limitations to this research. As a member of the group I chose to research, I entered from an insider position. This entrance permitted me with a level of relationship to my research participants reflected by the depth of conversation and personal disclosure that was experienced throughout the interviews. One participant who had experienced domestic violence openly discussed this issue in our interview with the understanding that this topic is not known or shared with her peers outside of Circlework. Without this prior relationship I believe it unlikely that she would have chosen to disclose this impacting life experience with an outside researcher. Being a member of the Circlework group enabled me to have an intimate knowledge not only with the participants, but also with the practice of Circlework. This shared experience often served to facilitate discussion leading to further deepening of our exploration of how Circlework has impacted our lived experiences.

While I mainly consider this insider perspective as strength, there was the potential for it to have been a limitation to the study. As the nature of our relationship is deeply engaged and ongoing there was potential for the participant to respond to interview questions in a way that provided me with what the participant might think I want to hear. In order to mitigate this possibility I began each interview with a statement to the participant that I was interested in their experience and their perspective on how Circlework did / did not impact their lives. Further to this I was conscious to respond to participant's challenges to or disagreement with my perspective in a positive and encouraging way. My ultimate interest was to allow the space for the participant to further explore her own experience of Circlework in her life.

Diversity was a limitation to this study. While several women identified as bisexual or lesbian, the participants were white, middle to upper middle class, and able-bodied. While there were partial scholarships available to the participants in the two-year training, the expense to participate in Circlework is often outside of many people's capacity, as the meetings are held in residential retreat fashion and require significant travel, both adding additional cost. Cost to attend Circlework retreats is a major issue for the Institute of Circlework that is continuously addressed through fundraising.

Within the research the issue of similarity within the participants' backgrounds (i.e., White, middle to upper-middle class) presented a lack of diversity critical in assessing how Circlework might work across difference from a critical feminist, anti-oppressive perspective specifically addressing issues of privilege and oppression. Within relatively homogenous groups, opportunities to confront issues of difference that are not made present by others as representing 'diversity' can present limitations to the degree to which issues arising from difference are addressed (Smith, 2001).

Another limitation to this study is that the participants involved in the study were relatively long-term Circlework participants and facilitators. Their repeated and prolonged exposure to Circlework, coupled with a personal readiness to become a Circlework facilitator, provides a snapshot of Circlework from a more privileged angle not always seen within traditional or front-line social work settings. The fact that the population of this study had to meet a certain criteria of personal and emotional stability in order to be accepted into the two-year training may reflect a readiness in the participant pool that may be more conducive to intense personal work. This is not to say that the participants in the study do not have significant issues and challenges in their lives.

In relation to the particular sample population of this study, as the research was conducted with a small sample of women very familiar with Circlework, there are limitations to the extent to which it can be generalized to the larger community. Having experienced Circlework through a long-term training and under the facilitation of the founder of Circlework, there were several factors such as skillful leadership and a long-

term commitment between the participants that likely influenced outcomes to this research. These limitations are not to discount the impact of Circlework on the lives of the women in the study or the emancipatory potential of Circlework as a practice; rather it offers insight into Circlework as a template from which future research can be conducted.

### **Conclusion**

Can the group process of Circlework assist in positively shifting women's lived experiences of their bodies, their life stories, and their engagement in community? At a California book launch in March 2004, bell hooks asserted that little research has been conducted regarding the impact of group processes utilizing an interconnected 'love ethic' based in compassionate community building. hooks called for the need of praxis to occur, wherein we critically examine community building approaches that aspire to work through social experiences, engaging and building a love ethic. Understanding how Circlework fits upon a critical anti-oppressive framework as well as examining how the personal, social and community impact of this group process impacts lives, has been necessary exploration.

Ultimately, my intention in researching Circlework in collaboration with these five participants was in order to obtain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the meaning of Circlework in our lives, with the hopes of applying this experience to the field of radical social work. The feminist "research process is seen as a consciousness-raising arena for researcher and participant while the objective is to transform prevailing knowledge paradigms so that theory and practice incorporate rather than just accommodate women's lives" (Neysmith, 1999, p. 101). In interviewing the five participants in the study I found this to be overwhelmingly true; that we made meaning of our experiences, at times linked our experiences to the larger social understanding of oppression and privilege, provided constructive critique of Circlework methods, as well as experienced several instances wherein themes and stories emerged, opening up new conceptual doors of investigation for me as a researcher. As a collective of voices, we

moved closer to an understanding of how Circlework has impacted our lives, and how Circlework might be used as an emancipatory tool for social work.

### **Chapter Three: The Body**

As I began the process of interpretive analysis of my participants' narratives, I recognized that many of the participants spoke about their body being experienced as a site of oppression. When conducting my literature review I anticipated that the participants would talk about experiences with the body as being negative. While the literature often talks about coercive forces of oppression and domination visited upon the body (Bordo, 1993), the participants furthered my understanding to how this experience is lived and reinforced within the individual body. As the participants in my study were white women of middle to upper-middle class there was little to no direct exploration of oppression or privilege as result of race, class, or ability. I anticipated this particular limitation to the study as there is a tendency for those with privilege to not recognize the power and security inherent within these locations (Fellows & Razack, 1998; Hill Collins, 2000). However, as locations of privilege do not constitute the absence of experiences of oppression (Mullaly, 2002), the women brought forward a myriad of systemic demands they experienced within society and themselves that manifested in feelings of oppression, self-rejection and shame in relation to the body. From the deeply personal context of the interviews, what emerged was a sense of how powerfully systemic experiences of oppression rooted in gender expectations and bias, served to facilitate disconnection and rejection between the body and the self. It is this theme of disconnection between the body and the self that I label and explore, as the alienated body. Drawing from the interviews and the themes that emerged, this chapter explores the participant's experiences of their bodies.

#### **The Alienated Body**

There were three predominant themes through which participants characterized their experiences of alienation: First, participants described how aspiration towards the idealized normative body fostered feelings of separation from the body. Secondly, how the pressure to remain docile through control and surveillance maintained disconnection from and shame towards the body. And thirdly, the women spoke to the depth of shame

they carried within the body as result of normative demands and their endless attempts to attain what is idealized, yet unattainable.

### **The Normative Body**

Throughout all of the interviews a clear theme emerged from the women's voices that spoke to the constant pressure of conformity to dominant notions of the 'ideal body'. Their reflections discussed in depth the pervasive demand, both internally and externally, to meet notions of sameness while rejecting difference within themselves and others. These aspirations are critical in producing the normative body (Burstow, 1992). The pressure to conform was most often described through the sharing of experiences where the women felt on the outside of social norms that dictated what their 'ideal' body should be.

Please Note: Pseudonyms have been used in place of the participants' real names.

One interviewee explains why people fear bodies outside the norm:

*I feel like a fat person is everyone's worst nightmare... They think we're a walking reminder of what they don't want to be... They don't want to get, they don't want to be like that. At least that's always been my feeling... And so sometimes I have felt that I threaten people just by being. That I'm a symbol of what they don't want... In our culture... And so then the judgment, the fear, comes up. (Leah)*

Leah's experience and recognition of her large body as threatening people 'just by being' presents itself as a powerful indicator of how much pressure there is to conform to dominant rules of size. Her understanding of her body as a symbol of what is not wanted in our culture is addressed at length within the literature on how dominant society penalizes, oppresses and rejects, both subtly and overtly, those bodies that are considered different and thereby fail to conform to rules of sameness, in this case thinness (Grosz, 1993; Thompson, 1994; Lorde, 1984; Bartky, 1997).

Leah's experience that her large body was an issue for other women was something she noticed early in the two-year Circlework training:

*I was aware that there were several people early in the circle, at least in the training one and then continuing on into the two-year training, that for them my fat was an issue.*

This awareness that Leah talked about gives an insight into the unspoken language of prejudice and oppression, and that while Leah did not say that any of the women in the Circle directly criticized her large body she still experienced judgment. Leah locates the judgment as residing specifically with her body size, as she does not suggest that she felt 'completely' judged, rather she interprets the judgment as one where 'my fat was an issue.' This interpretation suggests a disassociation between her 'self' and her 'fat,' which is at issue. In this splitting, Leah does not appear to be angry about this compartmentalization of her 'fat' from her 'self,' which seems to support how oppression works to alienate us from ourselves, while simultaneously holding ourselves accountable to problematic normative ideals (Burstow, 1992).

This resonates with my own experience of the way people have reacted to my body. I experience my 'fatness' in what seems like a similar way; there's me, and then there's my fat, and somehow we are separate. I see this stance as having emerged from repeated experiences of having my large body reflected as not normal or good enough, and as a result have come at times to believe it myself. I'm curious if there is some element of survival within this, that to separate from/ attack/ or deny that which is unacceptable, i.e., the fat body, there is an offering of the rest of the self as normal and therefore acceptable. When I reflect on the velocity of attack launched upon the fat body I think about the feminist concept talked about in the first chapter regarding the dynamic, essentialist-resistant, politically engaged 'lived body' and how the fat body offers resistance to mainstream governing of the normative body, and in response, is penalized both personally and politically (Grosz, 1994; Butler, 1999).

Leah continued to talk about how the rejection from the other women affected her.

*Because I already had done so much work about it I felt, "well, that's their problem." But of course it also affected me, made me feel bad that they had that problem with me. I wished that maybe they would have been able to see past it.*

So while Leah talks about having an awareness of the judgment being the problem of the other women, it seemed that there was also a need for Leah to find connection with the other women that overlooked her fat as a barrier. This desire to 'see past' the fat body seems to suggest transcending the 'rejected' body even though it sees past Leah as a whole. Yet paradoxically while the body is being compartmentalized or disassociated as not really being 'self', it is also recognized as being the thing by which Leah is essentialized. "When you are fat, you are primarily, fundamentally, seen as fat. It is your essential characteristic" (Tisdale, 1994, p. 22). From this essentialist viewpoint it becomes apparent how the desire to disconnect, and in turn become alienated from the perceived faulty body, is a powerful response within our normative body image conditioning.

Leah talked about the degree she would go in order to fit in and comply with normative demands even at the expense of her body and her health. For example, at the beginning of the two-year training, Leah was suffering from a back injury, yet because of her size she did not feel comfortable sitting separately from other women. Leah's decision to attempt to fit in with the actions of the other women speaks to the fear of difference and the resulting potential for alienation from community even at the expense of denying the body its needs, which in this example is a body in pain (Wendell, 1996).

*When I came the first time [to the 2 year training] I had a more vulnerable back and I felt embarrassed. Everybody sat on the floor and I didn't really think that was good for me, but of course I did it until the middle of the first circle in the middle of the week I was in enormous pain. Fortunately I could have a massage which helped, and then I realized I couldn't sit on the floor anymore so I sat on the couch. I was embarrassed about that. Actually there were I think a couple of other people sitting on chairs. But I thought they were going to say, "there's the fat lady, she can't sit on the floor" and all that.*

Leah's desire to sit on the floor with the majority also resonates with Freire's perspective of alienation:

the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and his [sic] way of life. Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration. In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble their oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. (1994, p. 44)

Furthering the discussion around size, Ruth talked about how her childhood experience of being too big for a first grade desk impacted her feelings about her body image and femininity.

*When I got to first grade I was like a head taller than everyone else... They didn't have any desk to fit me... And they had to go to the fourth grade to get a desk big enough for me... Yeah. And so you know, being bigger than all the other kids and getting my growth in all kinds of ways, it was just that I felt like oh my god what's the matter with me. Just always being just a little bit heavy and always thinking that everyone else liked my sister. She was older than me. She was the cheerleader. The popular one... She had boyfriends and all that sort of thing. I just, I just felt like I was never really a girl. I mean I was a girl but I was a tomboy and I wasn't like all the other little girls... The girly girls. And so I didn't like girly girls... But all of it had to do with my body image. I just felt not acceptable.*

As normative inscription upon the body is generally determined through physical conformity, Ruth's experience supports how the female identity is held to rigorous and unforgiving standards that support alienation from the body. This alienation is made clear by Ruth in how her experience of not attaining the normative body image defining the small, feminine 'girly-girl' served to alienate her from her female body, as she discussed feeling that she 'was never really a girl.' While this experience alienated Ruth from her feminine self, it also served to alienate her from the other girls she identified as feminine. Mullaly suggests that these experiences of alienation and challenge towards one's identity, in turn produces a threat to that identity which can initiate a coping strategy whereby the individual rejects in entirety that which one believes one does not belong (2002). In Ruth's case, she experienced alienation not only with her own feminine body, but a greater rejection of the feminine as reflected by her classmates. While Mullaly considers this stance as an act of resilience, he also recognizes that this process "leads to a loss of personal identity, a sense of inferiority or low self-esteem, fear, powerlessness, suppression of anger, alienation, and isolation, and guilt or ambivalence" (p. 62).

Leah's interpretation of how she felt her large body judged by the other women was reflected in the dialogue from the average-sized participants and while they did not refer specifically to Leah's body, their views on larger bodies generally supported Leah's

feelings of judgment. Both Ruth and Leah's experiences speak to how a woman's body is held against a standard of femininity wherein the ability to attain normative size and physical beauty ideals determine a woman's feelings of engagement and acceptance with her feminine identity. The pressure towards complying with normative demands can be seen from any physical recognition of difference such as race, gender and ability, and lies at the core of intolerance and prejudice (Mullaly, 2002). While Ruth and Leah did not talk to this, the normative body in Western culture is generally defined as a slim, white, fully able body and as with body size, falling outside of that classification is regarded as less than ideal (Burstow, 1992).

Rachel acknowledged how she relied upon social and historical stereotypes as guiding her judgment of the large body.

*For a very long time, probably because of the way I was raised, I thought that fat people don't take care of themselves.*

Rachel's assumptions about the large body provide insight into how our society tends to blame or ostracize those who do not comply with normative rules. Rather than question these normative guidelines Rachel, as part of the dominant majority, engages with the issue of difference as the individual's failure to comply with societal rules governing body size. In our culture there is a climate of penalization that is, to varying degrees, socially supported through these responses of judgment and rejection of the 'offender' (Burstow, 1992). This process in return further marginalizes the oppressed individual and leads to greater alienation in their experience of community and in personal self-worth (Butler, 1999).

Demand for the body to comply with social norms was further reiterated when Sarah and I talked about her feelings about large bodies, specifically my body. When I shared with her my experience of feeling shame and isolation as a large woman, Sarah responded by recognizing my experience as situated within a certain cultural context through offering an alternative viewpoint.

*[Shame] is in you because it's in the society in which you live. If you were living in Turkey... You would feel no shame because this is the beauty ideal... I would feel shame. Look at these arms. They're so skinny. Poor thing. Who's going to marry her?... But we definitely internalize society's view, the view of the society that we live in.*

As Rachel and Sarah are both average sized women, I was surprised when they engaged in the topic of body size without prompting. I'm left feeling curious as to whether the topic of size arose as a critical issue in their relationship with their bodies or because they were talking with me and recognizing my perspective as a large woman. This curiosity can be extended to question the women's responses to race and ability should I or another member of the Circle not been white or able-bodied, and the potential for discussion around these experiences as a result.

Ruth discussed how she had relied upon the validation of another in order to experience acceptance and belonging.

*[I had] a feeling that I was not okay. That somehow in order for me to be okay to feel like a real woman or an attractive woman I had to attract somebody. Otherwise I wasn't attractive. Somebody had to love me in order for me to be loveable... And you know here we are feminists right... And yet it's there... It doesn't go away. And I do think some of it is cultural...a lot of it, and political.*

Ruth's ability to express how she believed herself only to be lovable if she was loved by another, offers insight to the power to suppress or determine worth when a woman determines a sense of self and value largely through the reflection that one is acceptable to another, specifically a romantic other (Burstow, 1992). That the woman's body is only made 'real' through this reflection offers insight into how the female body, without the approval of a lover, denotes failure and subsequently serves to further alienate her from herself. In her experience Ruth is able to recognize these deeply embedded patriarchal roots through which she determined herself as lovable and acceptable (Bartky, 1995). Ruth's quote also speaks to the entangled nature of experiencing oppression; how on one hand Ruth felt her self-esteem linked to the positive reflection of attracting another, and on the other recognizes herself as a feminist, and that this reliance is rooted in oppression. Her experience highlights the impact of difference,

and the resulting alienation that women feel about their selves and their bodies due to the difficulty in confronting normative assumptions, even when there is a certain political self-awareness present (Bartky, 1995; Burstow, 1992; Grosz, 1994).

### **The Docile Body**

The constant aspiration and subsequently failure of the individual to produce the unachievable normative body, paves the way into what Bordo terms the 'docile body.' "Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, "improvement"" (Bordo, 1993, p. 91). The objectification of the body through the constant measuring against and failure to fully comply with normative rules, results in individual self-governing and regulation of the body that focuses attention towards compliance to dominant rules rather than resistance, thus producing docility. Through this definition, the docile body can be regarded as alienated because the body becomes objectified, and through this externalized self-definition, the body remains vulnerable and disconnected from itself (Burstow, 1992; Grosz, 1994; Foucault, 1984). Pressure to comply with the normative body, and the ensuing experience of docility was experienced by all participants, regardless of size.

An early theme I saw emerging from the interviews was how the body under surveillance produces the insecure body. The insecure body is a direct consequence of the unrelenting and unattainable process of objectification and regulation governing the docile body, provoking shame and insecurity towards the body (Bordo, 1993). It is through this dominantly manufactured idealized beauty illusion that power serves to maintain itself through relegating the woman's body as insufficient and insecure "generating deep ontological anxiety" producing docility in the ceaseless quest to attain perfection (Shildrick, 1999, p. 3).

Yet as Rachel so clearly articulates, aspiration of the normative and idealized body cannot be fully attained, in effect there seems to be no escaping the pressures producing the docile, insecure body.

*Beauty is a hard thing, too, it's like the goal, the unattainable goal. If you think that you're beautiful, then obviously there's something wrong with you. What is up with that?*

In the pursuit to reach the unattainable goal of beauty, Rachel offers some insight as to the underlying motivation of staying thin, working out and watching her weight as part of maintaining compliance towards normative body and beauty standards.

*I know women who are...they have that fear all the time and they're constantly in the gym, working out, watching their weight, they don't dare do this, they drink diet soda for god's sake. And because they have this equation in their head that unless they are beautiful, something bad will happen... they'll have some loss, some tragedy will happen to them if they're not beautiful, whatever that means. But it keeps them on that little hamster wheel in their head.*

Rachel's insight of a 'hamster wheel' that functions to maintain women's oppression within our bodies supports how "we continue to memorize on our bodies, the feel and conviction of lack of sufficiency, of never being good enough" and we remain docile in the face of this never-ending demand to conform (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Shildrick, 1999; Butler, 1999). It is this endless cycle of aspiration towards attaining that which is unattainable, or if attained, fleeting, that maintains the woman's body as alienated through the constant experience of failing to measure up to normative images. Rachel's quote speaks eloquently to the constant drive to attain physical perfection, even at the cost of our emotional and mental health, as imagined by the futile hamster wheel that produces docility while alienating the body.

In this drive towards the normative, docile body, the body becomes alienated from the self as structurally dominant systems such as patriarchy and capitalism engage the body as a commodity (Bordo, 1994, Shildrick & Price, 1999). Rachel's quote surrounding the women's fear of something 'bad' happening if they fail to maintain their beauty speaks to the underlying current of the alienated body that is not only an object

but a commodity wherein failure to meet the demands of the broker (read: capitalism and patriarchy) renders the body useless at best, at worst the body becomes a threat to systems of dominance (Gatens, 1996).

Sarah talked about how she internalized this maintenance upon her body in order to present a public image that she feels is acceptable.

*Now my arms, you know I feel like I should cover them. They have like this, this gravity pull, wrinkly, crêpe quality that's beginning but it's definitely there. I even have to say before I go to work, well do I care more about comfort or how I look and certainly if I ever am in front of a group I'm not going to be sleeveless. I'm going to put something on top because I don't really want to show my crêpe arms and show my age.*

Sarah's experience of wanting to hide her aging body supports how normative body images (i.e., the young body as ideal) gives rise to the docile body through its endless aspiration towards the normative body (Bordo, 1993). Through this experience of the docile body that alienation from the body is maintained as Sarah's desire to hide her aging and assumed undesirable body maintains her body as objectified. Furthermore, her energy is consumed with attainment of an ideal rather than questioning or resisting this ideal as oppressive (Burstow, 1992, Bartky, 1995, Hill Collins, 2000, Bordo, 1993). Sarah's quote also offers insight into the experience of internalized oppression. While our society celebrates youth and beauty as ideal, Sarah has internalized this culturally dominant belief of age as something to be ashamed of and hidden. From this perspective, Sarah experiences her aging body as undisciplined and unruly, and thereby requiring monitoring and regulation of which hiding of her arms offers an example (Burstow, 1992). It is through this process of manifesting the docile body where alienation finds fertile ground to take root.

Emerging from the research was also the fact that the women were not totally docile in relation to normative demands; in fact in their interviews there was evidence that the women recognized how their own agency held a role in the oppression they experienced. In our conversation Sarah offered an interesting insight into the role of agency and relationship when looking at experiences of oppression.

*And depending on how the woman inhabits her body that has so much to do with it. If she's projecting shame I will feel uncomfortable and judgmental. If she's projecting bigness, expansiveness, spaciousness, strength in the largeness rather than skinny I, I feel it and admire it.*

Sarah's statement disrupts the notion of oppression as purely a 'top-down' force through suggesting a relationship of agency between the oppressed and the oppressor. In her questioning of agency she identifies a relationship between herself and the large woman that regards the woman as having some power to influence Sarah's interpretation and judgment of her body. Sarah's suggestion of a 'two-way' relationship between the docility and oppression was an unexpected yet intriguing insight within our conversation. Sarah radically assumes a relationship of agency between herself and the other woman that impacts Sarah's response to the non-normative body. From this it is important to recognize how powerful the experience of oppression is in manifesting alienation and creating powerlessness for those who experience oppression, and how cautious one must be to not reinforce this oppression through blaming those who may not openly resist their oppression (Burstow, 1992). While problematic, Sarah does offer an insightful exploration into the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor that supports the tentative relationship between oppression and the docile body that maintains agency of the oppressed to resist and challenge this relationship.

As women, we are not only victims, we also have power. We have the power to engage in the patriarchal practices that maintain us as sexualized objects for men... and we have the creative power to resist that grip. (Bordo, 1993, p. 254)

### **Shame and the Body**

Emerging from the participant discussion surrounding alienation was how normative body ideals and constant pressure to attain them produced feelings of shame towards their bodies. As they spoke of their bodies as not measuring up to these ideals and their experiences of shame, there was an underlying tone of the structural power at work in producing this internalized oppression of the body. Hannah identified how insidious these cultural, religious and patriarchal influences have been in shaping these feelings about her woman's body.

*it's a very ancient sort of wound that gets passed on. We believe that a woman's body is shameful, and that it is bad. So there's that larger cultural or just the religious... the patriarchal attitude that tells us that the body is bad. And I don't know that I was really conscious that that was part of what the shame was about. I certainly had enough early childhood stuff that happened to make me feel that way, like all of us have had. Who knows exactly where it can come from? I don't think I realized how sticky it was... how thick and how deep it was...how it was really paralyzing me.*

Through Hannah's conceptualization of the depth to her feelings of shame, she gives us a very tactile insight into how shame can be internalized within the body. Her words seem to capture the essence of oppression and powerlessness in its most raw form, as a force of enormous weight tying itself to the self, manifesting a condition of paralysis within the body. Her insights offer an understanding of the effects of oppression upon the body that is not greatly discussed in the literature, as the focus of the literature surrounding oppression is often aimed towards understanding the psychological and inter-personal repercussions (see Mullaly, 2002). While feminists and anti-oppressive writers do talk about internalized oppression and the body, the embodied nature of oppression and the detail to which internalized oppression manifests within the body, is an area that I have found to be lacking in academic writing (Bartky, 1995; Bordo, 1993; Howson, 1998). Although there are writers, specifically writers on disability and queer issues, who address the body from a deeper investigation of how internalized oppression is actually manifest in the body, which is supported by my participants' narratives (Wendell 1996, Vaid 1995).

Hannah makes clear the connection between her relationship with her body and the force of western culture as maintaining her body as inferior, specifically through the manifesting of shame in the body (Grosz, 1994). Hannah identified shame as a key part of her experience of rejection and alienation from herself.

*[Before Circlework] I didn't see how the shame had kept me from being free to be who I really was, and from becoming who I was really called to be. I feel like I was only one dimension... like a paper doll... It felt like this deep core, in my belly, of something saying, "I'm not enough," "I'm not good enough" "I'm awful," this toxic sort of worthlessness that says, "I'm just bad. I'm bad. I'm essentially bad." That's what it felt like to me.*

The depth of Hannah experiencing her self as worthless and intrinsically bad provides an insight to how internalized oppression maintains the body as a site of domination and alienation (Mullaly, 2002). She came to see how this shame was acting as an emotional prison, jailing and rendering her powerless by reducing her to a singular dimension 'paper doll'. Through the experience of oppression, "each of us can at any time become objectified, can at any time be robbed of our freedom. It means that we have an outside that is always in the other's hands, and that leaves us forever vulnerable. This "outside" from which we are alienated and that renders us alienated from ourselves allows us to be categorized and used the way objects are, and it extends to both our bodies and our consciousness" (Burstow, 1992, p. 2).

While addressing critical issues of race and class was absent in this research data on the alienated body, the experiences that the participants shared supported how the body is constantly under dominant pressure to attain normative body ideals. As the narratives provided insight into the experience of 'fat' as oppression, the participants added to the complexity of how oppression is experienced and perpetrated. Through the participants' voices it is possible to gain insights into understanding the relationship between experiences of oppression, and how they come to foster alienation from the body. This study provides an insight into the nature of oppression experienced when the body is a site of oppression. Addressing and recognizing the lived impact of alienation is critical as "there is hardly a concept as pertinent to the situation of oppression as alienation" (Mullaly, 2002, p. 62).

### **The Integrated Body**

In this section I will explore how the participants' experience of Circlework served to shift the experience of alienation, through a liberating process of integration in the body, positively impacting their feelings towards their bodies. The participants' narratives, stories, and insights deepened my understanding of the meaningful role that Circlework played beyond facilitating liberation from alienation, into experiences of integration with the body. I am defining integration as a process through which women confronted and overcame feelings and experiences of inadequacy, and in turn gained

confidence in their right to self-definition, autonomy and power within themselves and their bodies. The integrated body is synonymous with the 'lived body,' a site of resistance to the very systems of oppression and dominance that manufactured the body as alienated (Grosz, 1994). Bonnie Burstow recognizes this process of healing as one through which individuals "reduce splits" within the oppressed and fragmented self with the ultimate goal of "coming together" through a greater sense of personal or interpersonal wholeness (1992, p. 112). In this section I will explore how the participants constructed their lived experiences of the integrated body through four emerging themes: First; the participants explored how they experienced embodiment, secondly, the women talked about reclaiming sexuality; thirdly, the women identified improved clarification and honouring of personal and physical boundaries; and lastly an overall experience of greater love and acceptance for their bodies.

### **Embodiment**

Several of the participants talked about how Circlework helped them to break through feelings of disconnection to an experience of embodiment.

*I'm bringing my body along. And so in not leaving it behind it doesn't have to sort of catch up or something. And I think that, that being able to take in, like really take in experiences, release experiences, let go, feel okay about letting go... I think my body hasn't needed to have those illnesses. ... I'm not saying it isn't going to happen... But I feel very healthy... And I guess I just feel that my body's not just being dragged around anymore... I'm really in it... we're participating together. (Ruth)*

Ruth's notion of herself and her body 'participating together' offers resistance to the dominant societal pressures determined to control and thereby alienate the body. Rather than try to control her body and emotions, Ruth recognized the freedom in letting go the need to control, and in turn allowed herself to take in and own/embody her life from this perspective. The experience of integration as engaging the freedom of letting go of control over the body is a powerful shift from how the participant's previously talked about the alienated body as needing control and regulation. Rather than have it 'all fall apart', which is often the fear of repercussions in failing to comply with the normative,

docile body, Ruth's statement proposes that this act of letting it go and allowing oneself to feel and experience one's body, not only curbed physical illness but gave her back to herself in a more complete way. Echoing the insights of some disability theorists (Wendell 1996), and queer theorists (Vaid 1995), Ruth supports their claims that rather than transcend the body, liberation comes from owning the 'unruly' body (Grosz, 1994; Butler, 1999).

Rachel and Leah echoed Ruth's experience, as they identified how their bodies were no longer being transcended, rejected or shamed, and instead their experiences had shifted their sense of self as embodied.

*Well, you know, truly I think that I'm a different person since the circle work... You know I really am more, more me. I'm more in my body I believe... Who I am includes my body...*

This experience helped Leah to embody her large body rather than comply with the social pressure to hide her size.

*[I felt that] maybe I don't need to hide my body so much... Being less apologetic about it. Being less willing to hide it...*

Liberation from the alienated body requires an engagement with the body itself. Germaine Greer (1999) suggests that freedom is not an out-of-body experience, it is an embodied state where a woman has the right to "be at ease in her body, unembarrassed about her body, proud and protective of her body, the body she has now. She wants to be free from forever criticizing it, chastising it and forcing it to submit" (p. 324). This stance offers powerful resistance to the capitalist and patriarchal regime as the body resists its subjectification we resist our internalization of the body as needing control, and further, we claim the body as a site of strength, power and resistance (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1988; Bordo, 1999; Lorde, 1984).

For Hannah the awareness of disconnection and the subsequent embodiment through Circlework occurred through a subtle process.

*When we started the training, I had already been teaching and practicing yoga for many years. Yet when I look back there was still a level at which I was disconnected from my own body. I think we are always in a process of becoming more connected to the body, so it's not like, "Now I am connected and then I wasn't." But there was a level at which I wasn't even aware that I was disconnected from myself.*

Her perspective lends support to how we are always in a process of becoming ourselves, and substantiates the notion of integration as an ongoing process of reclaiming the body, rather than an absolute liberation from oppression (Burstow, 1992). Hannah's ability to articulate her return to the body as not an 'either-or' journey, provides insight into theory on the unpredictable and complex 'leaky' body, that offers insight to liberation as in part a resistance towards the notion of becoming 'complete' in healing and reclaiming our bodies (Shildrick, 1999; Butler, 1999). Through these experiences of embodiment, the participants moved towards greater liberation from the socially dominant structures that served to alienate them from themselves.

Within the dialogue that surrounded embodiment, the desire to positively embrace the feminine body rose clearly from the interviews. As the journey towards integration requires a healing of the fragmented self, Hannah talked about how the experience of connecting with the body helped her to recognize how deep her separation was from her female body.

*I was disconnected from my humanness and specifically from my feminine self. My woman's body.*

In the shifting towards embodiment, there was awareness that this was not simply just a return to the generic body; it was a return to the feminine body.

*Every time I come back from a training, I'm more present. I am once again in my heart body, in my humanness. I don't often distinguish the feminine, the woman part of me. Perhaps I could or I should, because I know that's been a big part of this training for me. Embodying the fullness of the goddess, the feminine principle, who I am as a woman. I know that that has shifted as well. I'm more in my female woman's body. (Hannah)*

Hannah's recognition of Circlework having helped her to embody the Sacred Feminine within her feminine identity, offers a path through which a woman can become more connected with her feminine body as Sacred. This process challenges engendered oppression as the female body becomes associated and more personally connected to a powerful, embodied feminine archetype. Flinders (1999) speaks to this shift as recognizing sacredness within the body. "Above all else, perhaps, when the feminine is sacred, the body is not left out. Flesh is not demonized" (p. 148). Engaging and embodying the Sacred Feminine provides resistance to the forces of alienation that maintain a woman's body as a source of shame and something to be controlled and managed. Through "embodying the fullness of the Goddess" Hannah also asserts a rejection of sameness, as stories and beliefs surrounding the Goddess are embodied within the vast multiplicity of race, size, and form as symbolizing diversity wherein difference is recognized and celebrated as essential to wholeness (Starhawk, 1982). The shift in Hannah's experience of her body, when considered in the context of the "toxic sort of worthlessness" (p. 4), she previously talked about having felt, offers significant insight to both a woman's potential for healing when introduced to the Sacred Feminine within, and the liberation that comes from deeply embracing the body.

Leah talked about how being able to witness other large women embody their femininity offered inspiration to claim her own body as beautiful.

*I was inspired by some other large women. Some of these beautiful black women singers are huge and they're wearing just gorgeous [gowns]... That's my role model. Why not? Why shouldn't that be my role model? Why should I have these little pinched in people for my role models? ... I had started to get different things and it was because of this group...I could have things that were form fitting...Even if I was heavy. And that would be attractive. So I started to experiment with all that and that was also very liberating... I thought, "Oh I guess I can have my neck show and I can have boobs." I can have... Be feminine.*

Leah's perspective here is a dramatic departure from the earlier experiences of alienation that she experienced as a result of her large body. Leah's claiming of other large woman as role models clearly resists the normative aspirations governing the docile fat body. And her resistance holds great clarity, acknowledging that there is a pressure for

her to aspire to the beauty standards of “these little pinched in people.” Leah’s claiming of her body came through a greater assertion to embody herself as a woman. Her words make it clear that she felt that she no longer had to live in the alienated denial of her body, she could be in her body; could have breasts, have curves, show herself and still be attractive and feminine.

Rachel poignantly expressed how becoming more connected to her feminine body allowed her to re-conceptualize her definition and expression of beauty.

*Beauty is not what you think. It's not the fake nails and it's not the hair piece and it's not the fake eyelashes, or the padding in your bra. It's deeper than that. It starts in your guts, and it comes out through... whatever... the package. That I'm not worried at all about...my hair thinning or ratty nails, it's like, none of the specifics are important to me because I know that I'm beautiful. I feel like I'm going to be one of those little old ladies who'll be gnarled and shrivelled and wearing purple and I'll still be walking like that, that is if I can still walk, and... and I'll still feel beautiful... It's like I let myself out through my body... I really believe that, yes. I wear make-up... I like to wear make-up, but I still think that without make-up I'm still beautiful... with ratty hair I'm still... it's just how I feel about myself. It's not necessarily how I look, it's how I feel.*

Like Leah, Rachel offers us a beautiful understanding of embodiment and the power of being seen and validated by others as an integral part of embracing one self. In this quote Rachel is re-defining and claiming beauty from the disembodied forces of alienation. Her suggestion that beauty emerges from within, that an aging or changing body cannot negatively impact her belief of herself as beautiful, resists beauty standards that enslave women to normative demands that they cannot reach. The notion that she ‘lets herself out through her body’ is a stance that rejects the restrictive docile alienated body in favour of an embodied, imperfect, integrated lived body (Grosz, 1994). Through this resistance “we are demystifying, renaming, and battling against our oppression and the violence on which it depends. We are daring to reclaim our alienated bodies, our stolen selves” (Burstow, 2002, p. 19).

### Claiming the Sexual Body

Claiming sexuality within the body was addressed by several of the participants. Hannah talked about how healing the shame in her body allowed her to open more towards her sexual self.

*I guess other shift could be in the expression of my sexuality. It's been a big issue for me. I know that being in the circle and experiencing the loving touch, though there certainly has not been anything sexual about it, brought to me closer to that sense of love and acceptance of who I am as a person. The healing of the core levels of shame allows me to explore my sexuality a little more freely.*

Healing shame and embracing sexuality is an act of liberation in a culture that relies upon repression, docility, and low self-worth as a means to control and assert patriarchal dominance over a woman's body and sexuality (Bartky, 1997; Creed, 1993). As shame is a face of oppression, Hannah's experience of liberation from the shame-based alienated body has allowed her to no longer be constricted within the normative ideals of compulsory heterosexuality, as she comes to integrate her sexual desires from a position of love and acceptance for herself.

While having always remained private in regards to talking about her sexuality, Sarah discussed how she felt safe enough to disclose her bisexuality with the Circle.

*In terms of my bisexuality it's very liberating because this is something that is very, it's not the hugest part of me but it's not something that I talk about... And I certainly feel in the circle safety, compete safety in that... But speaking of societal things... Certainly bisexuality is still not a mainstream acceptable thing and therefore there's shame connected with that.*

Having a safe place to explore aspects of our selves that are outside of what is considered mainstream, is necessary in fostering integration within the body. Irigaray (1999) offers a poetically political call towards engaging this openness:

How can I tell you that there is no possible evil in your sexual pleasure... That the fault only comes about when they strip you of your openness and close you up, marking you with signs of possession; then they can break in, commit infractions and transgressions and play other games with the law. Games in which they—and you?—speculate on your whiteness. If we play along, we let ourselves be abused,

destroyed. We remain indefinitely distance from ourselves to support the pursuit of their ends. That would be our flaw. If we submit to their reasoning, we are guilty. Their strategy, intentional or not, is calculated to make us guilty. (p. 211)

### **Protecting the Body**

Several of the participants talked about how feeling more embodied and loving towards their bodies helped them assert boundaries that fostered a greater sense of personal security. Through asserting personal boundaries, Hannah talked about feeling *“more safe... I feel like I’m more at ease with other people.”* This feeling of safety within oneself and ease with others opposes the notion of the alienated body, where the fear of judgment manifests as distancing from others and mistrust of self. As discussed earlier in the chapter, when the body is alienated, feelings of self-rejection, worthlessness and commodification pervade our experiences of the body, yet through the process of becoming integrated with the body, a self-confidence and self-worth emerges within the participant dialogues.

For Hannah, this was experienced through a greater ability to be in communion with other people.

*So now it’s like because I’m more in touch with my wholeness and the truth of who I am, I am actually able to feel energized and fed by being with other people, rather than being consumed by them.*

Hannah’s recognition of maintaining boundaries as both a support of herself and a way to set limits towards the needs of others is a radical stance. In a society where a woman’s place is often defined as that of caregiver and nurturer, there is societal pressure to caregive that is often accompanied by guilt and shame when she ‘fails’ to put the needs of another ahead of her own (Bartky, 1995). Hannah connects to her experience of exhaustion through recognizing the pervasive demand that she give of herself to the point of losing herself. Her articulation of how women often feel they must choose between caring for others and caring for self, offers insight to the ‘either–or’ dynamics that serve to alienate or integrate us with our bodies.

Rachel talked about how she claimed herself through asserting her boundaries in relationship with her husband.

*Just like a month ago, he said something to me, something very innocent like :Are you happy with your weight?" and I said 'I would like you to never ask me that question again, because the only time I even think about it is when you ask me that' ... I'm asking you to not talk to me like that anymore. And he's fine with that.*

Rachel's dialogue of protecting her body in response to her husband's questioning, suggests that she feels a sense of ownership, autonomy and integration with her body. This internalized sense of worth and protection over the body claims power and offers resistance to the dominant societal norms governing and perpetuating oppression (Grosz, 1994).

### **Acceptance and Love for the Body**

Several women spoke to the powerful experience of love and acceptance for their bodies that emerged, as they felt less alienated from themselves. It is the experience of wholeness that Hannah talks about having, that provides her the capacity to develop a more accepting relationship with her body.

*I don't think I knew how much more wholeness there was to discover, in terms of my capacity to feel at home in my own body.*

Many of the women connected their experiences of greater love and acceptance of their body as critical to manifesting a deeper respect towards the self. The experience of self-respect helped Rachel to feel less influenced by external pressure on her body to conform to idealized dominant images.

*It has a huge amount to do with taking care of myself and not being prey to outside influences... about my appearance or my health or... I take care of myself and I'm fine thank you.*

Having a sense of not 'being prey' to these dominant influences reflects an internal shift in believing herself to be worthy and acceptable. This internalized belief of acceptability 'as is', offers a considerable shift from how the women talked about insecurity as experienced through the alienated body. Through this shift, the connection

between feeling unaccepted and coming to view oneself as unacceptable has been disrupted, and what appears to be emerging is a liberated sense of self that is not dependant upon the opinion of another. It is through the process of “self-defining their own identity, by recovering their history, and by establishing solidarity with each other, that members of oppressed groups gain a sense of confidence that enables or empowers them to attempt to overcome their situation of oppression” (Mullaly, 2002, p. 179).

### **Conclusion**

Through these women’s voices, I have come to recognize how the process of integration with the body offers significant resistance to the dominant structures of oppression pressuring the body to remain docile and alienated. What the participants have shown me is how complicated and layered this process of re-claiming and embodiment is inside the body and self, as we move through and into the journey of integration. Through the women’s voices, I have learned that a critical factor supporting integration is supportive community to provide acceptance and understanding for the woman’s process. In the following chapter I will examine in detail the ways through which Circlework serves to facilitate this process of integration with not only the body, but also the whole individual and community.

#### Chapter 4: Circlework as Emancipatory Practice

In the last chapter I examined the nature of both the oppression that women experienced and the nature of liberation they experienced as a result of participating in Circlework. While this went some way towards responding to my research question of whether Circlework can be considered as emancipatory social work practice, it did not speak to the how or specific practices that were liberatory. In this chapter the practices that helped women free themselves of the oppressions described earlier will be centred as the focus.

In examining the practices that Circlework facilitated, two interrelated concepts stood out: Bearing witness and intentional community building. Bearing witness and building community are inseparable as bearing witness contains two components; bearing witness to the other and being witnessed and its impact on self. Hence bearing witness is about increased inter-connectivity. The act of bearing witness is highly political, as it asks that we not merely observe the lived experiences of another, but engage more deeply, investing ourselves in the lives of the other so that we come to understand with greater compassion our similarities and our differences (hooks, 1994; Graveline, 1998). It is in experiencing and recognizing our interconnection through community, that a container is created where experiences of pain and oppression can be recognized and subsequently mended through compassionate witnessing, engagement and understanding of the experiences of one another (Buber, 1971).

In the first section of this chapter, I will explore how 'being witnessed' through Circlework created a sense of validation within the women's lives and experiences; how being witnessed inspired the women to take emotional and personal risks within the Circle that lead to greater awareness of inner strength and resiliency; and how being witnessed liberated feelings of shame that women held in relation to their lives and stories. I will also explore how the women came to reclaim and heal their relationship with their bodies through being witnessed by others in the Circle. From this starting point of the self, I will then examine how bearing witness the lives of others served to foster

greater awareness and understanding towards one another. I will discuss how, through witnessing, the women came to recognize patterns of judgment and stereotyping, engage difference, and gain awareness to the interconnection between themselves and others. Interrelated to these experiences of bearing witness, the second concept of community building arises. In the second section of this chapter, I will explore how through the practice of bearing witness from a loving stance, Circlework laid a foundation for engagement in the practice of community building through increased feelings of belonging, connection and responsibility to one another.

### **Being Witnessed Within Circlework**

#### **Validation Through Being Witnessed**

Throughout their dialogues, the participants talked about how they felt validated by the other women through being witnessed, and how this translated into greater feelings of liberation. The experience of validation reached across several aspects of the women's lives as they experienced shifts in how they viewed their lives and their bodies in ways that manifest greater self-acceptance. Rachel spoke to how being witnessed strongly impacted her self-concept.

*It's very, very liberating... I also feel loved and I feel accepted and I feel validated. And my deepest experiences of that are with the Circlework.*

The experience of being witnessed was, for many of the participants, a critical factor in healing those aspects of themselves that were struggling.

*And it's easier for me to embody my own spirit since circle work. Because circle work was so important in allowing me to have many experiences of feeling accepted and validated in a deeper, richer way than I have ever felt before in my life. (Ruth)*

Ruth's experience of self-acceptance and embodiment offers resistance to the mainstream culture that attempts to determine her body as unacceptable through the normative demands of which she can never fully attain (Butler, 1999). Rachel referred to her experience of validation as having helped her get "get off the little hamster wheel" of negative self talk that promoted feelings of worthlessness and alienation within herself.

Hannah explored how the feelings of acceptance and positive validation were conveyed through 'the reflecting back,' that occurred in their relationships with the women in the Circle.

*I think part of it perhaps is just the constant positive mirroring, the reflecting back of the self that comes from the other women in the circle. There's such an unconditional love that I think is just naturally generated when we are in a field where we're all just being who we are... Part of it is the space that Jalaja helps create. I felt safe to be who I was and it was always validated and reflected back by the other women in the circle.*

An important recognition within this quote is that Hannah's experience of positive validation does not come from some idealized or normative reference point, but in the acceptance of her authentic self. Not having to perform to the normative in order to feel validated is an act of resistance (Macy, 1983).

*I think the act of showing myself and being accepted is a really affirming thing... It totally sticks to me. It's like I'm a stronger person from having done it. I have this self-acceptance. You know, we see ourselves as others see us... we always get some image of ourselves in the reflection from other people and participating in Circlework is really good for my self esteem because I see other people love me... and then from that it's easier to love myself. (Rachel)*

Being heard in community not only brought forth feelings of engagement towards others, but also a deeper sense of engagement with oneself. Validation given through being witnessed in community contributed to significant shifts in the women's self-acceptance and self-esteem.

*In the Circle was really the first time that I had experience that kind of deep listening that we do. All of a sudden one day I realized "they're all listening to me!" In a way it was paralyzing. But it was also enormously healing... I started thinking I'd better take what I say seriously too. (Leah)*

As being heard by others helped Leah to recognize her voice as valid, her experience of being witnessed by the women in the Circle also speaks to the way in which bearing witness requires a level of connection and accountability from the listener beyond that which we often experience in our daily lives. To truly bear witness demands that one be engaged and hold responsibility to the speaker that extends beyond simply

watching or listening (Lorde, 1984). It is in this accountability and responsibility that witnessing becomes both political and highly transformative for both speaker and listener (Graveline, 1998). Bonnie Burstow eloquently suggests,

Women have always been and continue to be profoundly drawn to each other. We turn to one another. We hear each other's secrets. We share our innermost thoughts with one another... In all of this, whether we care fully aware of it or not, we are engaging in a pivotal act of resistance. (1999, p. 19)

Within this climate of resistance the women talked about how they came to recognize and validate their beauty in a way that was radically different from past experiences.

*Now when people tell me they love me and they believe I am beautiful, I believe them. I don't think that I've ever been there before... Because it's not as if people have never told me before that they love me. They have. It's not as if people didn't tell me "you're beautiful" and sometimes I felt good when somebody told me that. In fact, I certainly did, but in the circle work somehow I was able to really take it in... And I also felt that people meant it in a way that I was never able to "get" before. (Ruth)*

Ruth's ability to 'take in' her beauty through the reflected validation of the Circle, offers insight into the power of witnessing, in facilitating a more positive awareness of self. Blythe Clinchy (1996) writes about a process called 'connected knowing,' which lends insight into Ruth's experience of being able to internalize this reflection and feedback from others. Connected knowing relies upon several central concepts; that the relationship between the individuals must affirm the subjective reality of the other; the presence of deep empathy is crucial, and that "thinking cannot be divorced from feeling... and the connection must be felt viscerally" (p. 227). A critical component of connected knowing requires that the empathetic self must not allow itself to merge with the Other, maintaining "the paradox of separateness within connection" (p. 231). Within this climate of connective knowing "it becomes possible to view the self from the perspective of the other" wherein we are engaged with "people who will view us with a compassionate rather than a critical eye, and who will invite us to do the same with them" (p. 236).

*First of all esthetically seeing my body through the arms, through the eyes of women who tell me that it's beautiful... I can hear it and believe it for the first time. Not focus on the imperfection but on the honestly believe that is esthetically pleasing and particularly for me coming to circle work post-50-years- old at a time when it's all going in the opposite direction. (Sarah)*

For Hannah the validation of being witnessed made her feel that

*there was no judgement. So that was part of it. No judgement. It created that safety for me to dare to be who I was and know that it was going to be okay.*

Her perspective added an experience I did not anticipate receiving in the interviews. I find the concept of no judgment to be a challenging issue from a feminist and anti-oppressive lens, as there can be a lack of analysis or reproach to acts of oppression and dominance from this stance. Yet interpreting Hannah's experience through the lens of connected knowing, supports considering the liberatory potential of her experience (Clinchy, 1996). Connected knowing rests upon a fundamental tenet, wherein it "requires that one "affirm" or "confirm" the subjective reality of the other, and affirmation is not merely the absence of negative evaluation; it is a positive effortful act" (p. 217).

*In a process, when you open yourself up to something that's really hard and horrible inside yourself, and you think, God, no one would love me, and they do... it makes it seem, not so horrible. [pause]... [emotional response]... thanks to a lot of things, but really especially to Circlework. (Rachel)*

Rachel's experience of feeling accepted and validated by others while sharing difficult parts of herself with the Circle seems to contribute to Hannah's experience of an absence of judgment, furthering insight as to how Circlework engages in radical, compassionate, and liberatory practice.

### **Discovering the Strength to be Vulnerable**

An interesting element emerged from the dialogues that spoke to the quality of communication in the Circle. Rachel addressed how the climate in the room would shift when she was not speaking from her heart, from this place of vulnerability.

*People get bored, like they're very impatient with me, they're like 'get to the point, why are you talking?' I'm going to the bathroom now because you're not saying anything... and if I can just circumvent my mind, and let my heart speak, then it's so real and immediate and pertinent that, I mean, everyone pays attention when someone does that, you can't... can't look away when someone is being honest and true and speaking what they need to speak.*

Her experience offers insight into the integrity of the Circle, and how “by attending to others and speaking from your heart, you honour yourself, the speaker, the Circle and the spirit of interconnectedness” (Graveline, 2000, p. 140).

*If I'm going through something, if I'm exposing myself, if I'm being honest then it really doesn't matter what I say. The point is not what I say, it's that I'm showing myself and I think the act of showing myself and being accepted is a really affirming thin... It totally sticks to me. It's like I'm a stronger person from having done it. I have this self acceptance (Rachel).*

This choice to risk speaking one's truth, is an act of resistance in a culture that relies upon silence as means to domination. As Audre Lorde notes:

*as we arm ourselves with ourselves and each other, we can stand toe to toe inside that rigorous loving and begin to speak the impossible—or what has always seemed like the impossible—to one another. The first step toward genuine change. Eventually, if we speak the truth to each other, it will become unavoidable to ourselves. (1984, p. 175)*

Ruth spoke of how speaking the truth of her life story and the experience of validation through bearing witness fundamentally shifted her relationship to her voice, and the telling of her story.

*So in terms of how [Circlework] makes me feel about my own life history my life story is damn valuable. You know it is, it just is. And it's not just valuable to me... It's healing. It's healing for other people to hear my story. And to hear it told from this place of being as much truth as I can say... someone needs to hear them.*

In coming to see her story as a valuable resource for others, Ruth recognizes that her journey is of benefit for others to hear. This stance supports the liberatory potential of Circlework through helping us become more aware of our interconnectedness with one another, as we come to recognize how we are not as different as we may have previously thought. Coming together, seeing how our struggles intercede and relate, offers resistance

to the dominant structures that manifest in our isolation and intolerance (Mullaly, 2002; Freire, 1990; hooks, 2000).

For Sarah, this internalized validation helped her to see that

*I had this strength inside myself, that I had refuge. That I had this place I could go. That I didn't, I would not be in a state of complete dependency anymore... Because I had others to support and depend on if I was in crisis. He could feel it. I think that influenced his behaviour as well.*

The freedom of female embodied knowing that comes from remembering our own powerful subjectivity is transformative. It is the power that any individual has to contribute to another and to expand through the presence of another. It is also the power to be present to one-self. That kind of being present to oneself is a form of autonomy (self-determination), a way of knowing oneself that shapes one's thoughts and activities. At the same time, it depends on our mirroring or coaching of those around us. (Tomm, 1992, p. 217)

Through sharing herself with the Circle, Sarah connected to an internal resiliency and strength that comes from breaking through silence and shame. With the Circle, Sarah identified the Circle as the space to share what she could not share in any other part of her community.

*I would be way too ashamed to [share the abuse history] in my group of friends and community. Way too ashamed. Ashamed of myself after the initial anger died down. Protective of him. I wouldn't do it.*

Finding her way to talking, within the safety of the Circle, about the history of abuse, was a powerful example of how the Circle serves to liberate us from our oppression and isolation. Sarah's experience of sharing with the circle offers an avenue of resistance to the power of shame, through the act of telling your story and feeling heard and validated by others in a safe container of community.

### **Liberating from Shame**

Throughout the dialogues, several of the women talked about how the experience of sharing their stories and allowing themselves to become vulnerable, helped to liberate themselves from feelings of shame.

*In telling the history of [my family] I could release my shame... The shame of growing up with my parents and the insanity. The rage my father always had. My mother had her anger too... [Telling the Circle] was just like an unburdening of the shame. Now I still have the story but there's no shame or at least it doesn't feel like there is. It's just my story and I love my parents. (Ruth)*

Ruth's experience of 'unburdening' her shame to the Circle, and thereby feeling liberated from it, supports Burstow's feminist perspective that in order for recovery and healing to take place, a safe container is required in order to share one's deepest wounds and sufferings thereby allowing shame to be confronted and ultimately transformed (1992). The experience of liberating from shame is emancipatory, as shame is a tool of oppression that maintains the individual as powerless. Surrendering our cloaks of shame to the Circle is a profound act of courage and resistance, as it requires the individual face their own internalized dynamics and patterns that have arisen from the systemic domination which first determined our oppression (Burstow, 1992). Ruth's quote also gives poignant insight into how sharing the experience of shame acts to transform not only the internalized experience of shame, but how being witnessed offered her release from the history of shame in relation to her family.

Rachel also discussed how sharing her pain served to liberate her story and release some of the attachment around the trauma.

*[The Circle's] attention on you... and their presence while you go through this, it makes it easier and easier and easier, and then the wound is healed or it turns into some old faded scar and it's not a big deal anymore. You can get on with things and not have this big wound distracting you.*

Sarah added to the discussion on shame through her recognition of how the energy in the room shifted when she was speaking of her secrets and shame that bound her.

*Because yes in bringing out my darkest secrets and my greatest shame it was very liberating but what has been equally liberating is from the very first Circle we were in together is when I speak I see the energy level in the room rise. That has been incredible to my confidence.*

Her positive experience of feeling the engagement from other women during the process of breaking silence, and sharing what is painful requires an act of courage, yet the payoff is liberation. "In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live" (Lorde, 1984, p. 42).

### **Bearing Witness and the Body**

#### **Accepting and Loving the Body**

Altering the structures that maintain our oppression is an arduous process that requires exposure to those elements of ourselves that we struggle to accept (Lorde, 1984). While I have discussed how Circlework facilitates a climate of self-acceptance through positive validation, vulnerability and the sharing of 'shameful' experiences, the degree to which bearing witness assisted the women in feeling good in their bodies was profound.

*You take it on another level when you bring your body there too and to have your body accepted and loved. Even parts that you don't like about your own body, someone else is going to love and really appreciate in a totally accepting and wonderful way. It really just... it's like, it gives you back to yourself.*

Rachel's experience of being 'given back to her self' provides significant insight into the process of healing from the hegemonic forces that serve to alienate us from our bodies. Her insight supports the notion that there is a 'betweenness' to our experiences of both alienation and integration with the body, that can only be found through this reflection from the other (Buber, 1971).

*So that experience of being accepted and acceptable is the primary influence [to feeling more embodied]... Who I am includes my body. (Ruth)*

These women's experiences confirm that while much can be taken away from our connection to our bodies when in relation to others, there is also enormous potential to offer healing to the body through relationship.

Many of the participants interviewed talked about the impact of Circlework on their experiences of acceptance and love for the body.

*If it was possible for me to have more respect for my own body, more respect, more love, more awe for my own body, somehow that came through because of in the circle. (Hannah)*

The experience of recognizing the relationship between the self and the body seemed to grant Rachel and Hannah a powerful feeling of connection and wholeness towards themselves in a way that resists fragmentation.

*[Circlework] gives you back to yourself... and it keeps putting you back onto yourself, that... okay, I am my body too. I'm more than my body... but my body is definitely a part of it. It's a big deal to have a body and it's mine and I love it and it's wonderful... and... it's so exciting for me. (Rachel)*

For Hannah this experience of intimacy with her body opened up a reservoir of love for her body and self.

*It was during that two-year training that I started to get this sense of the incredible love that's present in the body. As if there is a great love between the body and the soul. It was as if this amazing love relationship started to transform my whole experience of my relationship with my body... So it was as if my whole field of listening and seeing and knowing the body was changed at a very personal intimate level. And it was within the circle that there was room for me to open to the intimacy of that love, the love that was present within my own body, within the wholeness of my own body.*

It is through this process of coming to love and connect to the body in a positive, affirming way, that we offer resistance to the insidious surveillance and control dynamics that maintain the body as alienated. I think a critical insight revealed by Hannah is the necessity of a safe and supportive community in which to come into the awareness of love and intimacy for the body. "Community counters estrangement—it connects us with others and re-connects us with ourselves" (Starhawk, 1982, p. 97). As our experiences in community can harm our feelings of self-acceptance, it is equally as important to recognize the power of community in providing a safe container for healing, love and acceptance of the body.

Ruth also talked about Circlework supporting the desire for a healthy relationship with her body from a loving stance.

*So it's amazing how my body image has certainly changed a lot over the years. I became more self-loving to myself but truly circle work has made huge changes as far as that's concerned... I want a healthy relationship with my body.*

In a culture that negatively views older women as unattractive, Ruth spoke to how the experience of loving community in Circlework helped her to embrace her body during these life changes.

*I also feel loved and I feel accepted and I feel validated. And my deepest experiences of that are with the circle work.*

This experience of acceptance of the aging body offers resistance to the dominant forces of ageism that determine a woman's worth as dependant upon the physical beauty of youth (Burstow, 1992).

Sarah talked about how our Circle offered her a sanctuary where she could be in her body, without feeling self-conscious of her aging body.

*Because in life as I approach 60... but most of us when you hit 40 you're upper thighs go. And you're on the beach looking at all those women their upper thighs are all kind of dimpled in cellulite. What I wasn't prepared for that. I'd been pretty vain about my arms. Long thin arms, no fat yet. Now my arms, you know I feel like I should cover them. They have like this, this gravity pull, wrinkly, crêpe quality that's beginning but it's definitely there. I even have to say before I go to work well do I care more about comfort or how I look and certainly if I ever am in front of a group I'm not going to be sleeveless. I'm going to put something on top because I don't really want to show my crêpe arms and show my age. In a circle I could be all loose again and I would not feel uncomfortable.*

Pressure exerted upon the woman's body to be young, slim, and beautiful is a constant force in our society demanding women ascribe to the ideals of the normative body (Grosz, 1994; Butler, 1999). Rachel discussed how the practice of Circlework facilitated a sense of ease and greater integrity in her relationship with her body.

*[Circlework] certainly put me more at ease with my body, with my whole self... I find a lot of integrity comes out of that. Just out of the practice of doing circle*

*work, of being in a circle and participating in it and making it a part of my life. It's really very nourishing and strengthening for me, for my body specifically, I just keep feeling better and better about myself.*

Rachel offers her experience of Circlework as one of facilitating acceptance of her body. Rather than ask for transcendence of the body, as many spiritual new age practices focus upon, Circlework guides its participants towards an acceptance of the body, and through that, an acceptance of difference (hooks, 2001). In supporting an acceptance of the body, Circlework offers resistance to the dominant forces working to alienate and oppress the body.

### **The Sacred Feminine Body**

Fundamental to the practice of Circlework is a philosophy that embraces the sacred feminine archetype as being at the core of all women. Providing women with awareness and experiential teachings around the Sacred Feminine, offered powerful means through which women reclaimed their bodies as sacred.

*Every time I come back from a training, I'm more present. I am once again in my heart body, in my humanness. I don't often distinguish the feminine, the woman part of me. Perhaps I could or I should, because I know that's been a big part of this training for me. Embodying the fullness of the goddess, the feminine principle, who I am as a woman. I know that that has shifted as well. I'm more in my female woman's body.*

Coming to more fully occupy the body through the embodiment of the Archetypal Feminine seems an understandable path in a patriarchal culture that, at best dismisses women's power and sacredness. Even Hannah's comment of 'embodying the fullness of the Goddess' is politically charged with this taking of space, expanding, reclaiming, rather than aspiring to normative rules governing and oppressing women's bodies. This stance serves to deny the patriarchal claim over the woman's body as through embodying "the goddess, we can live from within our own power and enter into relations from a position of strength" (Tomm, 1992, p. 213).

While embracing the Sacred Feminine within the body offers resistance to patriarchy, there is a dimension to Hannah's dialogue that suggests she is engaging more

deeply with heart of feminine emancipation and humanity, through embodying her connection to the feminine. "Drawing from a great many places, little by little, women are putting together a portrait of the Sacred Feminine that is so persuasive and so beautiful that we begin to see ourselves, and our own capacities, in a dramatically different light" (Flinders, 1999, p. 139). From this perspective, Circlework can be seen as holding an overtly feminist ideal, wherein a Goddess is claimed as creator, and an embrace of the feminine is recognized as embodying strength and sacred liberation.

### **Protecting the Body**

Several of the women spoke to how their experiences within Circlework and the physical form of the Circle helped them to assert and maintain personal boundaries in their relationships with others. Hannah discussed how internalizing the symbolic round container image of the Circle helped her to maintain personal boundaries in relation to others. This stance helped her to insist upon relationships with others that fed rather than starved her emotional energy.

*I think that's another really important aspect of the Circle: the integrity of the container and the boundary; the idea that merging isn't the point... the merging and losing myself. That's where all my exhaustion came from. (Hannah)*

Ruth shared some thoughts on this process of claiming and asserting her boundaries while maintaining a connectedness with others.

*I think that what has happened is that this whole experience of being enough, valid, appreciated, heard, seen, those experiences I've had in circle work have really I think assisted me in improving my boundaries and being confident about what I can do to protect my self, to see myself as myself, and see where I end and others begin... So in the midst of this beautiful connectedness that I feel in the circle work I also feel a much more refined sense of boundaries and I really appreciate that.*

As alienation and oppression robs us of our ability to construct protective boundaries through invasively occupying the body, not as one's own, but as a surface through which to inscribe social norms, dominant ideologies and self-surveillance, Ruth's experience offers insight into the liberatory potential of Circlework in helping women

claim boundaries and self-esteem despite pressures to conform (Grosz, 1994; Foucault, 1988).

### **The Body and Touch**

Throughout the dialogues the women talked about how the experience of touch helped them to become more accepting and integrated with their bodies.

*[Touch] makes you feel valued. I really do think for me anyway touch has always felt... if someone touches me lovingly then that means my body's okay. (Leah)*

Leah's experience of the reflection of another as affirming her body through touch offers potential into the multiplicity of ways in which being witnessed can be integrated and experienced by the individual.

Leah continued to examine the importance of the circumstances through which the body is witnessed through touch.

*And I think if you touch someone you've accepted that area: If I don't like my hips but somebody touches my hips then I think that's symbolic that they're fine, they're not avoiding my hips... I think it's a very powerful message of acceptance if it's in a safe container.*

While theories of dominance engage with the body as a site of inscription whereby the normative, docile body is produced, Leah's insight suggests that the act of truly feeling seen through the compassionate and connected eyes of community can be transformative (Hill Collins, 2000; Foucault, 1988; Butler, 1999; hooks, 2000). Leah's insight raises an important gap in anti-oppressive and feminist theories, which do not significantly delve into the embodied nature of liberation.

Several of the women talked about feelings of intimacy that came through as a result of the experience of touch.

*Given the form of the circle and the intimacy is also not the same as in the world. We're much, I feel much more intimate, comfortable with intimacy. Emotional but also physical intimacy... There's that picture, a picture that I have on my desk of all of us when you were at my house all draped on the house like puppies.*

*Entwined with each other. I really, there are very few friends that I do that with. We kiss hello, we kiss goodbye, we give each other hugs but not the way we are... So the body part of it it's not just an esthetic how do I see myself or how do I feel about myself but the comfort level with contact... Skin and body to body contact is unique in my life... in the circle. (Sarah)*

What Sarah is describing as unique in her life offers insight into the degree to which our society struggles to engage with intimacy. In our culture we often mistake intimacy as synonymous with sexual intimacy, which for many women is the source of oppression and suffering (Lorde, 1984; Starhawk, 1982).

*I know that being in the circle and experiencing the loving touch, though there certainly has not been anything sexual about it, brought to me closer to that sense of love and acceptance of who I am as a person. (Hannah)*

Leah's experience of accepting touch gives insight into the courage it takes to find intimacy together.

*The touch comes from your heart and you can have your heart open, you don't have to have it guarded... I still wonder a little bit whether it's okay because I'm so conditioned that people don't necessarily want to be hugged in my environment. Here I feel more like I can practice; it's almost like I have to practice. I feel like a little baby on that in a way. But if I just let my heart open it's easy. But when I first come I freak for a bit.*

Leah's recognition of the Circle as giving her a container through which to practice intimacy, offers resistance to "whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women" (Lorde, 1984, p. 58).

The participants' narratives provided me with the insight that, as we come to understand ourselves and each other through the reflection granted through witnessing, we have the potential to perpetuate or heal those elements of oppression that are created in community. Bearing witness through Circlework offers an opportunity to see beyond what we think we know and understand about others and ourselves through the creation of an empathetic and interconnected listening community. Through Circlework, the experience of being witnessed and witnessing offers liberatory potential to working across

difference, confronting isolation, alienation and shame, and connecting more deeply and compassionately with the body.

### **The Sexual Body**

While shame acts to inhibit the exploration of sexuality, it also serves to enforce a climate of compulsory heterosexuality. Hannah talked about how Circlework provided her with a safe container within which to explore her sexuality in relation to another woman.

*I realized that I not only wanted a relationship, but that I wanted a relationship with a woman... it was very big. It was not socially acceptable, and certainly not acceptable to my parents and so I don't know that I would have felt secure enough in myself to be able to even open that door... without that kind of support of the circle.*

The act of claiming our sexuality is radical work “for not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and antierotic society” (Lorde, 1994, p. 282). In claiming her lesbian sexuality, Hannah liberates herself from the social norm of heterosexuality. Sarah also talked about how feelings of safety and respect within the Circle gave her the room to explore her experience of bisexuality.

*In terms of my bisexuality it's very liberating because this is something that is very, it's not the hugest part of me but it's not something that I talk about... And I certainly feel in the circle safety, compete safety in that.*

Rachel seemed able to more completely explore the full range of her own sexuality in part through experiencing her compassion towards difference within the other women's sexuality.

*... being accepted in (the body) and watching other people. I mean it's another thing that, I mean, you develop so much compassion and understanding for different ways other than your own way... I mean different sexual orientations... I mean, it's almost meaningless to me now to classify myself as heterosexual or bisexual, because I'm sexual... I'm a human, that's kind of part of the deal and how I express myself in this moment, I am so completely comfortable with... it's*

*like it doesn't matter to me how it's perceived, which gives me a huge amount of freedom.*

In feeling the freedom to claim her sexuality as unencumbered by role or gender, Rachel addresses the potential of witnessing as supporting resistance to normative demands of sexuality, gender and, most dramatically offers insight to the power inherent in claiming ones life as their own.

Ruth talked about how the high level of acceptance found in the Circle allowed her to experience the awareness of sexual attraction between the women in the Circle as freedom.

*I'm sure that there was, among people there some sexual attraction. I'm sure that there's you know just a whole range of feelings and whatever. But it just seemed like there was an openness and freedom there. You didn't have to worry about having to respond in a certain way. You didn't have to respond at all... So that level of acceptance I just, well I think I've always longed for it.*

Coming to embrace and allow sexual openness and freedom through Circlework powerfully supports and affirms the authority of women. "In order for us to accept our own authority and that of other women, it is important that our sexual identity be incorporated into our individual and collective consciousness in an affirming way" (Tomm, 1992, p. 214).

## **Bearing Witness to the Lives of Others**

### **Engaging Difference and Unpacking Stereotypes**

One of the themes that emerged around the participants' dialogues on bearing witness was their growing awareness of difference, and through that, learning to respect diversity. While both the women in the Circlework training, and the women interviewed, shared many similarities of race, class and ability, it became clear early in the research that their experiences reflected a process of coming to engage and embrace difference experienced within the Circle.

*It always feels humbling to me that I'm aware of how much I don't know—not in a bad way but as in, "well don't make a quick judgment" or "don't evaluate*

*someone else's life because you don't know"... Even if you know parts of them, everyone is full of all these layers and they are so strong and interesting and valuable that any presumption that I would know them completely or know what they should do or... or how they should be or whatever, is really out of place. Arrogant... We're always in each other's faces in the wider world. We're interrupting or we're telling each other what to do or what's wrong with that person. Whereas in Circle you just sit there and you listen... And you let them be them and they can, and you can be you. And you can still connect but you're two energies. And we don't have to fix each other. (Leah)*

As Leah names the demand for sameness as a stance of arrogance, she offers understanding into how Circlework helps to provide resistance to the normative structures, such as isolation, that act to maintain oppression (Graveline, 1998). Her insight of Circlework as facilitating the bearing witness of others provided her the space for understanding and connection across difference. In discussing difference, Leah also talked about a critical component of respecting and working across difference that requires naming.

*I don't think we have to like someone to respect them. We don't have to agree with them. We don't have to agree with their choices... But we can still have respect. We can still have empathy. We can still have justice.*

This stance of respect, empathy and justice for others regardless of our personal histories, backgrounds and assumptions, lies at the heart of anti-oppressive, feminist practice (Dominelli, 1997; Mullaly, 2002).

*And even though it [fat] wasn't discussed in the circle they got to compassion... I think Jalaja helped it because she talked about how we make these judgments right away about people... But then in the circle you get beyond that, you relate on a deeper level than the personality and you share the universal pain and joy of being a human in whatever form you're in (Leah).*

While the participants in the Circlework training held a number of similarities; such as whiteness, able-bodied, and middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, there were two large women in the Circle (myself and Leah), which created dialogue around judgment and assumptions about body size. Rachel recognized that

*Being in circle with you and other people who are much heavier than me has given me a real different understanding of it [fat], that it has nothing to do with*

*what I thought it did. You know, because I'm watching you and I'm watching these other people living in their bodies, and it just, it makes me much more compassionate.*

Rachel's insight suggests that both the container of Circlework, and the ability to bear witness to the lived experience of the large body, helped her to unpack stereotypes about this body.

*Listening to other people and being with them in circle and really witnessing them, I see how they live in their bodies... It's not just talking, for me it's a...[pause]... I want to say, multi-dimensional experience, because it really is, but I see how people live in their bodies, where if I don't do something like that in the circle specifically, I kind of don't understand them... I'm less kind to them than if I watch them going through their thing and living their life, I can understand how they are the way they are more and it makes me really soft with them... I'm much more accepting.*

While the previous two quotes from Rachel provide insight into the process through which she has come to accept difference with large bodies, there seems to be an unconscious element to her insights that reinforce her societal-based dominance as a slim woman. Rachel talks about coming to compassion and acceptance towards the large woman's body, yet it is through the concept of the large body needing compassion and acceptance that she unintentionally reinforces that body as unacceptable and subordinate. Unknowingly, Rachel's perspective serves to maintain her privilege as an average-sized woman, and, rather than confront the inequality inherent in granting average-sized people privilege, her response is to focus on the oppressed body as needing to determine her experience (Fellows & Razack, 1998). Rachel's dialogue helps us to recognize the insidious nature of oppression, and how—even in our interest to work across difference and come to greater understanding of each other—the structures dictating and reinforcing oppression are woven deeply into our thoughts and actions.

Leah's experience of being witnessed as a large woman was complicated as she talked about experiencing acceptance only after initially facing judgment.

*I think it was knowing me on another level. In other words, when we would share the compassion came out like it does when people talk about their pain and*

*they're vulnerable. Not that I actually talked about my body very much but I talked about my other things and then I became a person, not just a fat person.*

As a large woman when I first heard Leah and Rachel's accounts, I felt a certain hopefulness to their experience of difference, seeing their insights as a road map to how witnessing might provide a bridge between difference. While I continue to feel optimistic, I am concerned by an element within their dialogue that engages being overweight as 'needing' compassion. The notion of Leah feeling 'accepted despite' her size, and Rachel feeling accepting towards fat people once she gets to know them, continues to hold dominance towards the 'average-sized' individual, as the body of the different other is thereby defined as requiring tolerance and understanding. This insight offers a contradiction and perhaps a limitation to Circlework with regard to fully engaging an embodiment of difference, that the fat body continues to remain suspect and at question, even within a liberatory process like Circlework.

What strikes me throughout this exploration of the large body is how oppression is woven into every fiber of our lives, regardless of our best intention to resist. "For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures" (Lorde, 1984, p. 123). As body size was the most predominant marker of difference within the Circle, issues of privilege and difference in regards to race, ability or class were not addressed in a significant way. This lack of difference poses a limitation to Circlework, as building community across difference requires both a diverse community, and an explicit intention to address issues of privilege and oppression based on race, class, and ability (hooks, 2003).

When I decided to examine the concept of bearing witness through Circlework, I hoped to understand how bearing witness might not only facilitate community, but also facilitate a process that engages an awareness of, and respect for, difference and diversity.

Audre Lorde states that

within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged. (1984, p. 112)

### **Recognizing Our Interconnection**

While limitations exist, the women in the Circle poignantly spoke to how facing difference within a climate of nurturing community shifted judgment and opened awareness to the ways in which we are all connected.

*People's perspective is different and their stories are different and their lives are different but there's so much more that is the same. It's just the forms are different. Like one person is skinny and one person is fat. One person is older and one person is younger. (Sarah)*

Rachel offered a beautiful insight to how a wholehearted engagement with bearing witness opened the way for deep communion and interconnection with one another and oneself.

*And when you look into other people, you look into yourself and you see how other people live, and process, and experience the world, you learn more about yourself and you also, I see the interconnectedness between us all... Just in that way that someone is going through a process and there's not a person in the room who's not affected by that, who can't relate to that experience in some way or another, either the content of their process or the way it was hidden in their bodies, their lives, the way it comes out, the implications for their life or their future. Everybody gets touched and moved by everybody's experience, somehow or another. It's... I think it's vital.*

Rachel's interpretation of bearing witness offers insight that differentiates bearing witness from voyeurism. While voyeurism is rampant in our culture of disconnection and sensationalism, standing in witness to the experiences of another without empathetically recognizing oneself as implicated and connected to their story furthers oppression (Lorde, 1984). "If I fail to recognize them [others] as other faces of myself then I am contributing

not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own... I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own" (p. 132).

Bearing witness seems to allow a shift in understanding for one another, a deepening of connection on a very intimate level.

*[Circlework provides] a way of knowing someone and being known by someone on such a core level. Maybe that's what love is. It's being able to see and to understand and to relate. It's not just to relate, but to have true understanding (Hannah).*

Hannah continued to explain that while there is this deep understanding, her experience of interconnection allowed her to maintain personal boundaries.

*I don't lose myself in what they're saying, and it goes beyond the fact that I'm relating to what they're saying. It's as if I share it on a certain level.*

Developing a deep connection to another while maintaining autonomy is not supported in our culture of sameness, where we are more likely to abandon our identity in order to merge into the dominant other (Mullaly, 2002). For Ruth it was through the experience of bearing witness where she realized how,

*our hearts begin to open and we begin to become one of many and yet appreciate our total uniqueness at the same time. When we're isolated we can't value that. We can't even value who we are.*

Luce Irigaray poetically offers insight into this form of connection that Hannah is describing:

*Already, I carry you with me everywhere. Not like a child, a burden, a weight, however beloved and precious. You are not in me. I do not contain you or retain you in my stomach, my arms, my head. Nor in my memory, my mind, my language. You are there, like my skin. With you I am certain of existing beyond all appearances, all disguises, all designations. I am assured of living because you are duplicating my life. Which doesn't mean that you give me yours, or subordinate it to mine. The fact that you live lets me know I am alive, so long as you are neither my counterpart nor my copy. (1999, p. 216)*

Several of the women talked to this quality of connected listening and how it provided an atmosphere for change that was unique to previous experiences.

*The field is somehow different. When we work with that kind of listening, that kind of bearing witness. It's kind of like it draws out the best of us. Even if there is pain, the Circle calls forth the human spirit in the best sense of the word.*  
(Hannah)

In contemplating what separates listening in the Circle to that of other situations, Rachel suggested "it's the quality of your consciousness when you're there listening that makes the difference." This increased consciousness and active engagement of interconnection towards the experience of the other, while continuing to maintain the self as implicated in their story, is a critical element of what defines bearing witness as emancipatory (Lorde, 1984; Buber, 1947).

*When I hear [other's stories] I'm just so awed and moved. The things that people have overcome, the things they are doing, working on, what they're becoming. When I'm able to witness these stories I feel privileged and humbled.* (Ruth)

For Rachel, hearing about the challenges of one woman's relationship with her daughter exemplified this form of interconnected awareness.

*And so I felt huge empathy for J and compassion for her, and fear for my own daughter, for my relationship with my daughter, for myself... all these different things go off, and in a women's circle, there's not a person in the room who's not affected by hearing J telling about her... her story of dealing with her daughter... And I want to help her. And I know there's nothing I can do to help... because I think probably listening to her is the best thing... bearing witness. But it goes so deep inside me and changes so many things about me... And then I go home to my daughter, and I think, oh my, I don't ever want that to happen to you, what can I do... how can I be, so that you don't have to go through that pain.*

It is the element of bearing witness that allows us to see ourselves as within one another, yet not confuse ourselves with one another, that produces a truly powerful force of healing and solidarity. In this moment, there is both autonomy and connection with J as a mother, and compassion and action in regards to the situation. Rachel's experience powerfully speaks to the healing potential of witnessing, not only for those in the roles of witnessed and witnessing, but for the connection and responsibility that this provides to her larger circle of family and community.

### Community Building Through Circlework

Throughout the dialogues the women spoke to the experience of community in the Circle that offered powerful healing and re-visioning of community in their lives. While the participants saw bearing witness and being witnessed as critical and interconnected to their community healing and visioning process, the experience of community emerged as a liberatory aspect in its own right. The women spoke to community as having provided a container within which to explore feelings of profound isolation and fear of one another. They spoke to recognizing our interconnection and humanity as having arisen within the Circle, allowing for a coming together in solidarity and support for one another's struggles as ones own. And ultimately this recognition led to greater involvement and awareness within their communities at home.

*I think that Circlework is a real metaphor for community and I really see it when I'm in different circles too. It is a social organism, it's a metaphor for a bigger social organism. And when you look into other people, you look into yourself and you see how other people live, and process, and experience the world, you learn more about yourself and you also, I see the interconnectedness between us all.  
(Rachel)*

Within the dialogues on bearing witness a theme began to arise that spoke to individual isolation an oppressive experience and coming together in community through Circlework as providing an experience of connection and belonging in community that was healing and powerful. Through being seen in the Circle, the women talked of the experience of knowing and being known that helped to break down the walls of isolation and disconnection.

*I was telling a story and people were looking at me raptly... and I opened my eyes and I saw tears in others eyes... it sure cuts through loneliness. You sure don't feel alone when you can see them, you know they're seeing... that's been a really important part of the witnessing. (Sarah)*

The experience of being 'seen' that Sarah talks about is a crucial element within the politic of bearing witness wherein an engaged awareness between the speaker and the listeners form "an act of resistance, given the level of individualism in society today" (Graveline, 2000, p. 164). Consciously coming together in community offers significant

resistance to the dominant hegemonic forces that support a culture of individualism and fear resulting in isolation and intolerance with one another (hooks, 2000; Macy, 1983).

*When we refuse to acknowledge our connection to a greater humanity, to a greater whole, to all life forms, we are isolated. We are encouraged to do that. Our culture encourages it. It encourages you to think only of yourself, to take care of only yourself. (Ruth)*

Hannah talked about how Circlework acted as a container through which to explore her feelings about community and recognize how deeply we are isolated from one another.

*How many of us never get a chance even to experience that community self, because we're never in a community that feels healthy or safe or whole?... [The Circle] calls forth the community self, that we perhaps need so desperately for global healing. But how can we be that self if we never know ourselves in that grace of community?*

Her conceptualization of the “community self” offers an insightful stepping stone to the process of resisting our isolation and its subsequent oppression, towards the hope of greater interpersonal, inter-cultural and perhaps an eventual global movement towards working across difference. “In community, we discover what we are truly worth as we help each other through the losses and the crises, as we work together to heal the damages inflicted by this culture. Within community, we can identify the vice of self-interest and resist its control” (Starhawk, 1982, p. 97).

Hannah continued to discuss how coming together through community needed to take place within a healthy/safe/whole container as often our early experiences of community, specifically the community of family, were difficult.

*Ideally the family would be a place where we could be whole and healthy and loved, but it hasn't historically been that way. It's often just a place where we get wounded and spend the rest of our lives trying to get better from it... But it's almost like this Circle became my family, in the best sense of the word. It became the family I needed, that I didn't know I needed.*

The experience of estrangement within our families reflects a greater struggle within our societal structures of dominance stemming from imperialist, patriarchal and

capitalist foundations, that constructed the 'nuclear family' in part as a means of isolation from others (Mullaly, 2002). bell hooks writes about the liberatory possibilities stemming from a 'love ethic' where in choosing to compassionately connect with one another can break through our conditioned fear and isolation from one another in a way that can allow us to not only critically examine our actions but also confront those dynamics that maintain our isolation (2000). Coming together in community, feeling a positive attachment to community was recognized by the women as an important step towards building solidarity and support.

*When the circle came to me and supported me in a way that I have never had and it made me feel much, much safer. It made me feel that I had refuge. It made me feel that if Sean ever became abusive I could call you and say Leanne I need to come to you and I would have a safe haven. (Sarah)*

As a sense of safety and feelings of belonging emerged through building community together the women talked about how this was experienced in their lives.

*To have that sense of belonging is incredibly healing. It's even beyond belonging to a community, although certainly that would be another piece that I didn't even really realize I was hungry for... to be a part of a community and to be united at such a deep level... as if we are a part of the same body, (Hannah)*

Lena Dominelli suggests that the heart of emancipatory practice is social change (2002). Through her experiences of Circlework, Rachel shared a story about how she began to engage with community that extended well beyond the container of the circle itself.

*I just started doing little fundraising things and raising awareness of different people, like different groups that I was already in, my dance class, my circle, my friends... there's this shelter that needs help. There are a lot of people, even in our own community that we never see who need help and... And so out of that... out of my talking about this women's shelter that lost their funding, some other friends of my who are much better organizers than I, got together and did this women for women fundraiser and they raised \$11,000 in one night for this shelter. But it's like, I feel like I've just... being more... more connected with my community by doing that. And it's really from doing circle work that I feel like this is my community too, and this is part of my community... Things were there before, but I just kind of like... I don't have any experience with them, so they're not...they're not on my path around town. But I really... it's like, all of a sudden I*

*was aware of all these other people who I hadn't been aware of before. And I'm sure it was part of being in circle and... being able to relate to different people who are very different from me...*

Rachel's experience offers a beautiful example of how the Circle helped her to become aware of others in her community, recognizing herself as a part of this community, and feeling a responsibility to actively respond to inequity and injustice suffered within the community. Rachel continued to express how Circlework helped her to deeply realize the interconnection between her self and others:

*That was a direct thing from Circlework... oh, it's like a microcosm, macrocosm thing...this issue of my body is the world and the world is my body. That... finding out that there were these women in my town, or in the next town, or in the next county or in the whatever, who are really in trouble and needed help and... felt like it could easily have been me... it wasn't a big gap between them and me... that it could, it really could have been me who needed the help. And by helping them I'm helping myself and helping my daughter and helping my mother.*

The desire to engage, shifting to recognize that the personal is political, and understanding that at the core our battles are drawn upon the same lines of intolerance, distrust and ignorance, shows how Circlework supports an ever-widening circle of recognizing oneself in the other, confronting injustice, and reaching out to community as no different than the self. In striving and reaching towards these goals, Circlework offers itself as a tool for emancipatory practice (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2002; hooks, 1994).

While the participants did not identify or label their experiences within Circlework as a radical act of redefining and reclaiming community, coming together in nurturing community offers resistance to oppressive structures that serve to maintain our fear and isolation from one another (hooks, 2000). The need and desire for women "to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by the patriarchal world" (Lorde, 1984, p. 111).

## **Conclusion**

The experience of bearing witness through Circlework clearly poses a significant impact on personal, interpersonal and community healing and connection. Bearing witness to one another as implicated and woven into the same cloth of human experience, offers considerable resistance to the dominant forces that pressure our culture towards isolated individualism, alienation from our bodies, and judgment towards those who are different from ourselves. While there are race, ability and class limitations to Circlework from a critical feminist, anti-oppressive perspective, the experiential impact of individual and societal change as a result of bearing witness through Circlework, supports the view of Circlework as being viable to emancipatory social work practice (Dominelli, 1997).

### **Circlework as Emancipatory Practice**

Critical feminist, anti-oppressive social work practice requires that we seek methods and perspectives that confront and attempt to halt the myriad of social inequities, systemic domination, and human and environmental injustices within our communities and global society. The means through which we aspire to reach these goals are as multiple and diverse as the communities and individuals that we seek to serve. As critical feminist and anti-oppressive theories engage deeply with educating people towards systemic oppression, and recognizing our varying states of privilege and oppression, Circlework as a practice does not offer this education. While Circlework does not directly engage anti-oppressive, critical feminist theories, my research has brought me to challenge the assumption that it therefore is irrelevant to liberatory practice/s. As it is crucial to remain critically engaged and cautious to methods that are not explicit in addressing structural inequalities, the inclusion of Circlework as an ally to radical social work certainly does not alleviate it from the responsibility of confronting inequalities amongst its participants and communities. At the same time the results of my research lead me to conclude that a more loosely structured and dynamic group work such as exemplified in Circlework can yield powerful emancipatory results.

The practice of Circlework clearly helped to shift the participants' experiences of their bodies from an alienated stance, to one of greater integration between their bodies and selves. The participants developed an understanding of the oppressed body through identifying dominance and oppression as a force intent upon producing alienation not only from the body, but also from the self. Their insights spoke to the hegemonic legacy of cultural, interpersonal and internalized assaults by which we are maintained docile through dominant and pervasive expectations governing the normative body. In response to and despite these pressures, the participants offered their experiences within Circlework as a powerful means of support for realizing and experiencing integration with the body and the self. Key to their dialogue of integration was resistance and confrontation of the systems, which produced their experiences of alienation. While there is no explicit anti-oppressive or feminist language given in Circlework, the women clearly recognize Circlework as having supported and nourished their right to claim, heal, love and cherish their bodies while living in a world that does just the opposite.

Integral to understanding the liberatory practices that Circlework engaged, was that of bearing witness. Woven into the greater love and acceptance of the body, was this power of bearing witness, both witnessing and being witnessed, as a process of liberation. The participants offered their experience of both the Circle, and their relationships with the other women as having provided a safe structure within which to unfold their process of self-inquiry, self-discovery, and healing. Through their courage to be witnessed, they found validation, inner strength and self-esteem reflected back at them through the compassion and relational understanding of the women in witness. Through witnessing others, they came to recognize their interconnection and implication in the lives of others, seeing how judgment serves only maintain us as fearful and alienated from each other, and ultimately, ourselves. Interrelated to the practice of bearing witness arose experiences of intentional community building. In the building of community, the participants spoke to how their connections with others broke through various social, cultural and familial experiences of isolation, while simultaneously nurturing a base of solidarity, support and action rooted in a greater understanding, love, acceptance, and responsibility towards difference and diversity.

### **My Learning**

Beyond all, it was an honour to have been involved with the five research participants in the process of coming to better understand the lived experience of Circlework. Their voices added immeasurably to my initial thoughts and expectations for this research, as they deepened, expanded, challenged and confronted my own biases, experiences and expectations of how Circlework contributes to critical social work practice.

While I personally had powerful experiences of liberation through Circlework, I entered this research cautiously, concerned that to study a seemingly 'new age' spiritual group would yield an insignificant academic contribution. As a radical activist, I did not know if Circlework could be considered emancipatory, as it was not engaged in the anti-oppressive, critical feminist dialogue that I'd come to rely upon as determining a 'valid' approach to radical social and personal change. Beyond my own knowing of this liberatory change in my life, this research inquiry was supported and advanced by the participants to realizations far beyond my own experience.

The generosity with which the participants shared their experiences of Circlework was both powerful and, at times, overwhelming. The position of insider to the research process was not something that I considered when choosing to conduct this research, yet it turned out to be a powerful contributor to the degree of intimacy and depth that was captured through the dialogues. I believe that this insider position provided me with data that could have only been obtained through insider research, as so much of the dynamic in Circle is experiential and thereby difficult to express to one who is not already versed.

The information shared by the participants was also deeply personal, and involved risk taking that I can only assume would not have happened without the prior level of intimacy already well established between us. While I felt honoured by this sharing, I also at times felt intimidated in finding my way into writing their words into this thesis. The depth of what they shared, the trust they placed in me to accurately convey their perspectives, and the ongoing relationship between us all, provided me with a number of

personal challenges. At the heart of this responsibility I strove to maintain their voices as guiding the research, while finding the confidence to grapple with the depth of their sharing, in order to produce a thesis they will be proud to read. Being personally so close to Circlework I had to work hard to check my assumptions and biases both during the interviews and during analysis.

### **The Methodology**

Engaging in an anti-oppressive, critical feminist methodological approach has been both rewarding and challenging. The opportunity to engage in dialogue with the participants over their experiences of Circlework was a wonderful experience of deepening my own understanding of each woman's journey through the two-year training in a way I had not considered before.

Entering into the research from a stance of 'not knowing' was a definite challenge for me and at times seemed to be a challenge for the participants. Often they would refer to actual experiences within the Circle as "you know" or "you remember" and while I did often know, I frequently had to remember to remind the participants to explain the process in their own words. This is a common discussion within the Circlework community that the process is difficult to explain as it is filled with multiple, dynamic and changing approaches and experiences that make definition illusive.

I found loosely guided interviews challenged my desire to stay on topic. Often the conversation would begin at the question and naturally find its way into a completely different theme altogether. I struggled with where to intervene, as I felt cautious of cutting the participant off or having them think I was not interested. Being personally close to the participant's naturally led to a more informal, and thus richer, interview, yet challenged me with how to control the focus without engaging the inter-personal dynamic of being controlling, especially with those one knows so well.

### **Limitations and Ideas for Future Consideration**

As hindsight provides fertile ground for reflection there were some aspects to the study that I experienced as limitations. While my insider status afforded me an intimacy with the participants that led to rich narratives, I struggled at times to hold the role as researcher while simultaneously being engaged in the form of listening (as bearing witness) that I am accustomed to with the women from the Circle. As discussed at length in terms of bearing witness, the interactions stemming and continuing from the relationships within the Circle maintain a deep, engaged listening that often had me so rapt in their stories, that I forgot to keep my researcher 'hat' on. From this I sometimes found myself scrambling around for my questions and keeping the process somewhat on track in terms of the key concepts, and as a result I found the interviews became longer than planned. I recognize these experiences as minor limitations to the study, as I experienced the role of insider as a profoundly critical component to the rich narrative the participants shared with me.

I have some concern that my timing may also have posed a limitation to the study, as there were long periods between the interview process, transcription and delivery of the first copy of the interviews to the participants. Ideally I would have liked to be swifter in the turnaround process, in hopes that the interview would have been fresher in the participant's mind, and have yielded more insights and additions to the transcripts. Overall, I was pleased with the solid engagement from the participants in their reviewing and clarification of their transcripts, and suspect that my insider location provided them the necessary motivation to extend this kindness.

If I were to conduct this research again, I would consider making a significant change to the interview process by holding a series of focus groups, rather than individual interviews. There were a number of times post-interview where I spoke with women from the Circle (both in and not in this study) about this research, and found that group conversations about the impact of Circlework offered a rich dynamic playing upon one another's learning, that brought my questions to an entirely different set of insights and analyses than I experienced in the one-to-one interview process. Without knowing how a

focus group would have changed the research, I am certainly interested in the potential for this structure of conducting research on Circlework as it also matches the experience of multiple voices celebrated by the Circle.

### **An Invitation**

In looking at how Circlework can be used as a tool for emancipatory social work practice, I return to bell hooks' examination of emancipatory social change as guided by a 'love ethic' wherein "we utilize all the dimensions of love—'care, commitment, trust, responsibility, show respect, and knowledge'—in our everyday lives... [and in doing so] we can cultivate awareness. Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed, so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn" (hooks, 2000, p. 94). The experience shared by the participants in this thesis support Circlework as an emancipatory tool based upon hooks' notion of a 'love ethic' as guiding our practice.

Circlework offers critical feminist, anti-oppressive practice an opportunity to expand its conceptualization of how personal and interpersonal change can be facilitated and supported. Anti-oppressive and critical feminist practice offers Circlework a degree of structural awareness that could benefit the emancipatory effects of participating in the Circle. Both can learn and take from one another in the interest of improving and expanding social work practice in a way that leads to greater social justice for all.

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Invitation

[date]

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This letter is an invitation to participate in a study called “A Tool for Transformation: An exploration of Circlework in emancipatory individual and interpersonal change” that is being examined by Leanne Drumheller, a graduate student in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Victoria. Additional questions or comments are welcome and I can be contacted at (250)386-7857 or by e-mail at [madronaretreat@shaw.ca](mailto:madronaretreat@shaw.ca). This research is being conducted as a requirement for completion of the Master’s degree in Social Work under the supervision of Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Victoria. Mehmoona may be contacted at (250) 721-8041 or by e-mail at [mehmoona@uvic.ca](mailto:mehmoona@uvic.ca).

As an anti-oppressive feminist social worker and social justice activist I have a strong commitment to exploring ways in which to facilitate and support personal, political and social healing and positive social change. Both during and since our two-year Circlework training I have been thinking about Circlework as a tool for emancipatory social work practice. Emancipatory social work practice aims to challenge and combat social and structural inequalities that marginalize individuals and groups. It is through these aims that emancipatory practice hopes to assist individuals and groups to realize their full potential. In exploring Circlework as a tool for emancipatory practice I have reflected upon my personal experiences with the trainings in order to determine where in my life Circlework has been a powerful tool of healing. Through this process I have come to question how Circlework may facilitate emancipatory experiences for women in their relationships with their bodies, their life stories, and their feelings towards community engagement.

Throughout our lives we construct and maintain our identity through our experiences, our feelings about those experiences and the interactions with others surrounding our experiences. Experiences of trauma, oppression, shame and fear may go unresolved as the path to healing can be challenging and time consuming. Circlework recognizes that ‘our personal wounds are in fact collective wounds’ and in doing so acknowledges that to bear witness to the difficult life stories of others is to understand more deeply our own histories and pain. Emancipatory practice requires that we not only work to liberate our own oppressions, but that we actively engage ourselves in the liberation of others. In this study I am curious to understand how Circlework may facilitate a climate of bearing witness that works to liberate both the individual and dismantle the isolation and oppression that keeps us feeling separate from one another.

In conducting this research I am proposing to interview 5-7 selected Circlework participants from the two year training to discuss, question and theorize their experiences of how Circlework impacted their relationship with their bodies, life stories and engagement with community and social change. With this research I hope to contribute to the field of social work with a proposal for a method from which to facilitate personal and social change. In my review of literature I have found that while some theorists write of the importance of community, connection, and compassion in the path to liberation, few programs or theories have been studied in depth. In engaging Circlework within an emancipatory framework I am attempting to understand how a group process that is based upon connection to self, to other and to a spiritual connection finds itself within an anti-oppressive, feminist framework.

Thank you for taking the time to read this invitation and consider my request for participation.

All the best,

Leanne Drumheller

## Letter of Informed Consent

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

[date]

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled "A Tool for Transformation: An exploration of Circlework as an emancipatory practice" that is being conducted by Leanne Drumheller. I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Victoria and you can contact me by phone at 250-386-7857 or by e-mail at [madronaretreat@shaw.ca](mailto:madronaretreat@shaw.ca). As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a graduate degree in social work. It is being conducted under the supervision of Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha who can be contacted at 250-721-8041 or by e-mail at [mehmoona@uvic.ca](mailto:mehmoona@uvic.ca). In addition to being able to contact the researcher or thesis supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4362).

The purpose of this research project is to gain a deeper understanding of how Circlework may be utilized as a tool for emancipatory social work practice. There are three core concepts to my study. The first concept is to explore how Circlework positively supports women in their relationship with their body. Secondly, I would like to understand how bearing witness within a supportive and emotionally connected atmosphere affects women's relationships to their own life story and to the story of others. The third concept to this study seeks to understand if Circlework, through providing a positive experience in community, facilitates a greater involvement and engagement for the participant's in the wider social community surrounding them. In facilitating community I am questioning Circlework's ability to positively engage in social change.

Research of this type is important because while several theorists, social workers and social change activists have written about how love and the connection between people forms a critical foundation from which social change can occur, there is a palpable absence of concrete practice approaches that engage in individual and social change from anti-oppressive, feminist principals, using notions of love and interconnection between people. In examining Circlework as an emancipatory tool, I will examine Circlework within this critical framework to better understand how Circlework may provide a practice approach for challenging oppression, fostering interpersonal connection, and promoting social change through community building. It is hoped that this research will provide a tool for individuals, communities, and social change activists for fostering stronger connections and movements.

You are being asked to participate in this study as you have been a participant in the two-year Circlework training program. As the interests of time require that I interview only five to seven participants, I have chosen to invite women who have previously expressed interest in the study and women who I believe may find this study to be of personal relevance or interest.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, you will be invited to engage in a loosely guided, open-ended conversational interview, lasting approximately one but no more than two hours. You will be given the transcript of our conversation to review and make changes, clarifications or retractions from the text. A follow-up interview may be requested to discuss emerging themes, points of clarification and/or any additional dialogue important to you that has arisen through our conversational interviews. The follow up interview will last no longer than one hour. Interviews will be conducted face to face for participants in California and via telephone for participants from other regions. The

interviews will take place at a time and location convenient to you and I will cover all long-distance telephone charges. All interviews and follow up interviews will be audio taped.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, as you are being asked to take time for the initial interview, a follow-up interview, and time reviewing the interview transcript. Preliminary data analysis will be shared with you with an invitation for your participatory voice into the interpretation and understanding of the data. Before conducting follow up interviews I will ask for your continuing consent to be engaged in this research. In total, this process should take no longer than six to seven hours.

While I believe this to be a minimal risk study, the research questions are asking you to share personal experiences and feelings that could result in the arising of uncomfortable or painful emotions. Should you become emotionally upset during the interview, I will provide support in strategizing appropriate informal or professional avenues of assistance. I will also provide you with the name and number of a counsellor in your area who I have already contacted and would be available for a timely appointment. In engaging in this research I hope that you will personally benefit through a reflective, engaged and potentially liberating dialogue discussion about how our lives/locations/engagements are linked between the personal and the political context of our society.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study the information you have shared will only be utilized in the research with your written consent. At all times you have the right to eliminate sections of your interview from the data analysis through blacking out the erased sections with a felt marker.

Participant interviews will be kept confidential and will remain in a locked filing cabinet during all times when it is not being utilized by the researcher. All transcripts of our conversations will be edited to remove the participant's name or other identifying marks. Each transcript will be provided with a pseudonym in order to maintain your autonomy and voice in the study. Our conversations will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist who will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement regarding this research. Transcripts will only be reviewed by me, my thesis supervisor and the professional transcriptionist.

The data will be analyzed and coded utilizing qualitative methods by this researcher. The themes arising from the analysis will be written in the research section of my thesis paper. Direct quotes from the participants will be used in the paper in order to support and illustrate themes. Once the thesis is completed and accepted by the University of Victoria, all data will be held by the researcher in a locked filing cabinet for a period of no more than three years. After that period, the material will be appropriately destroyed.

As I have a personal friendship with all of the study participants it is important to me that you only engage in this study if it is truly of interest to you. In no way will a decision to not participate negatively affect our friendship. It is anticipated that the results of this study may be shared with others in the context of educational settings, scholarly articles or other journal publications as prepared by the researcher.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name of Participant*                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature*                                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

Your signature below indicates your consent for audio taping the interview or interviews.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name of Participant*                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature*                                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***