

Love as Emancipatory Praxis: An Exploration of
Practitioners' Conceptualizations of Love in Critical Social Work Practice

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between love and critical social work, with the intent of inserting the concept of 'love as emancipatory praxis' into the literature of critical social work, and in order to incite dialogue with other practitioners.

This thesis draws on reconstructionist notions of research, and involves dialogues with a group of practitioners – diverse across gender, race, age, sexuality, and class background. Central to the discussions were notions of spirituality as interconnection, and intersubjectivity grounded in critical analysis. Participants in the dialogues felt that love was not only the context of their practice, but was in fact essential to all their ways of perceiving, being and doing.

From these dialogical discussions, a critical, emancipatory conceptualization of love emerged as a possibility existing between a constellation of elements including: deep presence and engagement; recognition of intrinsic value, sacredness and interconnection; openheartedness; compassionate challenge; and a willingness not to know.

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Love as Emancipatory Praxis: Introduction

This thesis seeks to explore the relationship between love and critical or emancipatory social work, with the intent of beginning dialogues with critical social workers about their conceptualization of love in practice.

Background To The Question:

As my practice has developed over the past seventeen years, within a critical framework and over a wide range of practice settings, I have become more and more interested in and intellectually curious about the transformational role of love in the liberation of human society – communities and individuals - and the planet as a whole. This research seeks to inform and deepen my own understandings of my embodied experience as a practitioner, and to add to the critical social work discourse, exploring the possibility of love as emancipatory praxis.

Through my observations in different settings and systems of practice, and through dialogue with clients and colleagues, I have come to question whether radical¹ societal and individual transformation can be realized if it is not grounded in a loving stance towards others, especially those considered “other” from ourselves. That is, as a critical social worker, I wonder if deep and sustainable change towards social justice and individual wellness - including an end to “othering”² and an end to hierarchical oppressions – can arise, or even be fully conceived of, if the change process is not contextualized in a loving stance that recognizes unity and diversity as coexistent.

I am curious about the possibility of conceptualizing love, not only as an emotion but as a stance, approach or way of being; a choice to move in the direction of a loving way of seeing, hearing and experiencing the “other”; similar to what bell hooks (2000) calls a “love ethic”. This stance is described by hooks as one which “presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well” (p. 87) and which requires us to “utilize all the dimensions of love – care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge – in our everyday lives” (p. 94). Beginning from these assumptions, I wish to explore practitioner conceptualizations of love in the context of critical social work.

¹ I mean ‘radical’ in the etymological sense of ‘to the root’, rather than surface changes in policies, protocols or governments, which may not address the deeper roots of hierarchical oppression that I understand to lie in our ways of perceiving the other as “other” from ourselves. This notion will be explored further in the sections of the thesis relating to intersubjectivity and spirituality.

² Defined here as perceiving or treating the other as an object rather than as a full being with their own full and current subjectivity.

The Research Question:

The research question: “**how might critical social workers conceptualize love in practice?**” emerged out of my own practice observations, and was refined over a two year period, as I surveyed the literature and engaged in discussion with colleagues. Again and again, I have been struck by the disjuncture between the lack of articulation of love in the critical social work literature, and individual social workers’ passion about and willingness to engage in theorizing about love in social work practice. In this inquiry therefore, I sought dialogue with other practitioners in order to conceptualize love, not just theoretically, but specifically in relation to critical practice.

Purpose, Methodology and Method:

The purpose of this research has been to offer the participants an opportunity to speak love as positive, critical practice into existence in the social work literature. In seeking to centre participant voices, this inquiry is of necessity qualitative; and it has been undertaken within a critical, feminist and emancipatory theoretical framework. In keeping with my ontological stance of love, my multi-method approach was by design organic, flexible, and fundamentally dialogic; its foundation was a conversational approach to in-depth interviewing consistent with the “active interviewing” method described by Gubrium and Holstein (1995, 1997).

Specifically, I have conducted qualitative, interview-based research in which I have offered a small, diverse, and purposeful sample of critical practitioners the opportunity to reflect on, discuss, question, and theorize about their own experiences of love in practice; to describe how they imagine love as it is informed by their vision of critical practice and by the means or methods of their work.

My intention was to explore the notion of love in critical practice in a deep and rich way: to learn from other practitioners, and to review, test and deepen my own conceptualization of love in relationship with them. Consequently, participants were approached who a) self-identified, or were identified by others, as critical or anti-oppressive in their approach: that is, engaged in critical reflection, analysis and action; and b) who considered themselves, or were considered by others, to be engaging in *loving* practice. In keeping with a valuing of difference and multiple ways of knowing, participant selection aimed for maximum diversity across gender, race, class background, age and site of practice.

After initial contact, seven of nine practitioners approached agreed to participate. They practiced in a variety of settings in primarily urban areas across British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan. One to one-and-one-half hour interviews were scheduled with each person at a location of their choice; all interviews were completed over a two-week period. Participants were offered the opportunity to conceptualize love in practice for themselves; to question, comment on, and critique my initial conceptualization of love in practice; and to engage in conversation about how

love was manifested in their own practice. In some cases participants also commented on love's relevance to social work practices as a whole. Throughout the interview process I strove not to impose my own views, but to open myself to learning from participants and their ways of perceiving, being and doing.

I consider intersubjective dialogue to be an intrinsic and integral aspect of this inquiry – not only in the actual participant contact, but in its reporting as well. This will be made evident throughout the writing, as participants' presence and voices are reflected at all stages – not just in the description and interpretation of the dialogues, but also in the chapters on literature review and relevant methodological issues.

I began this research with an exploration of aspects of the relevant literature from within and outside the discipline of social work, as they related to and have informed my own working understandings as a critical practitioner. As I engaged in this conversation with literature, my own conceptualization of love deepened and became more complicated, and elements I had not initially considered showed themselves to be important. For example, as I realized the need to invite space for both the co-construction of knowledge and for disagreement – both in critical practice in general and in this research process specifically – 'intersubjectivity' became a key concept to explore. Subsequently, participants centred the notion of 'spirituality', which I had intended to address less overtly, and it became the third key concept. This process of progressive refinement, complexification, and nuanced understanding has continued as my inquiry unfolded, and I expect it to continue beyond this inquiry into my practice.

Outline of the Chapters:

In the first chapter, I will facilitate a conversation with relevant literatures in which these key concepts will be explored; their relation to one another will be more fully theorized in the chapters on description and interpretation of the participant conversations. The chapter is constructed to reflect the dialogical process involved in the conceptualizing. It begins with discussion of the first two key concepts: critical practice and intersubjectivity. Following that, the initial conceptualization of love as presented to participants will be outlined. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a review of relevant literatures on spirituality as centred by participants in the dialogues.

The second chapter reviews relevant methodological concerns, framing and locating the research, and exploring the notion of "seventh moment", reconstructive inquiry (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). I move from there to outline the methods employed in the undertaking of the research, describing the interview questions and dialogue process in detail, outlining pre- and post-dialogue practices, and exploring ethics and integrity as they apply to this research process. The chapter concludes with a section of notes on reading the description and interpretation of the dialogues.

Chapters Three through Five offer descriptions of the participant dialogues, summarize the themes that arose from the conversations, and offer my interpretations of those themes, including the ways in which participants moved and complicated my own understandings.

The first of these chapters explores the emergent theme of ‘love as spirituality’, in which participants frame spirituality as a recognition of the interconnection of all the diversity of life. In addition, participants are heard to comment specifically on First Nations and Buddhist spirituality, and to distinguish spirituality from the oppressive imposition of religiosity.

The second interpretive chapter investigates the notion of ‘love as a mode of being in intersubjective relationship’. Participants describe love in terms of compassion, caring and mattering, and differentiate loving from liking. The notion of open-heartedness is explored as a generative, protective and sustaining element in practice: an antidote to burnout, and an alternative to technological approaches to social work. In addition, participants reflect on mutual change in the helping relationship, and on the practitioner’s relationship to self. In this latter discussion, they centre the necessity for the practitioner to engage not only in reflexivity, but also in physical, emotional, mental and spiritual self-work.

Chapter Five looks at ‘love as critical practice’. Key to this chapter is participants’ discussion of compassionate challenge beginning from an assumption of the intrinsic value of all beings. While firmly grounded in critical reflection, analysis and action in relation to what actually happens in the real world as social relations are currently constructed, participants offer what may appear on the surface to be a paradoxical framing of social and individual transformation: acceptance, non-attachment (rather than detachment) and non-interference, *with* support and truth-telling, *as* change. They suggest that love as they are describing it is liberatory and transformational.

The final interpretive chapter introduces and discusses the notions of ‘principled critical practice’ and ‘spiritually-informed critical practice’. I then move to a description of participant reflections on and challenges to my initial conceptualization of love in practice, exploring moments of disagreement and dissensus, and discussing how I took these challenges up. The chapter concludes with the presentation of a revised conceptualization of love as emancipatory praxis, co-constructed through the dialogical process of the inquiry.

In the final conclusion I will summarize my learning from the conversations (both with literatures and with participants) as described in the preceding chapters; comment on the strengths and limitations of the study as a whole and the methodological approaches employed in particular; and offer suggestions for possible future research conversations.

This thesis explores the interrelation of love, intersubjectivity, and principled critical practice. I have made the choice to use the word love specifically in this work rather than other terms such as

compassion or empathy. My reasons for this are complex, and will become apparent throughout the thesis. Most particularly, I have chosen to conceptualize love because I perceive it to be more critical and disruptive, and less co-opted in a professional context, than other terms typically used to describe 'caring'.

Love as I am describing it here is a spiritual construct of deep interconnection, not simply an emotion or intellectual idea. Love is not one thing that can easily be defined, but rather what might be found to exist as a possibility between the elements of the conceptualization of love as emancipatory praxis with which this thesis culminates. I offer this conceptualizing of love not only to deepen my own understanding, but also in order to (re)insert love into the discourse of critical social work, in the hopes that other practitioners might find it relevant to their lives and practice, and take it up in their own work or in further research inquiries.

I continue my recounting of this research journey in the following chapter, with an exploration of relevant literatures, and the development of my conceptual map.

Chapter One: A Conversation With Literatures On Love, Critical Practice, Intersubjectivity, and Spirituality

This chapter begins with an engagement with relevant literature in critical social work and critical theory, and the conceptualizing of the first two key concepts of this inquiry: critical practice and intersubjectivity. Following that, the initial conceptualization of love in critical practice, which was shared with and critiqued by the participants in the dialogues, will be presented. The final section of the chapter returns to the literature, exploring the emergent theme of love and intersubjectivity *as* spirituality, and offering a review of relevant background materials on the particular notions of spirituality centred by participants.

A Review Of Literature On Critical Practice And Intersubjectivity

I begin this conceptualizing of love on a cautionary note, turning for a moment to notions of love in mainstream practice. In Western liberal social work practice, love has often been understood as compassion (with its English etymological root in the word pity) or empathy^{3,4}. Where care, empathy and altruism are discussed in mainstream social work writing, they are most often conceptualized as a set of specific tools or techniques to be applied. Rossiter (1993) provides an excellent critique of this “technological approach” (pp. 2-4) and the ways in which it delimits our abilities as social workers to engage in reflexive practice as “self-in-relation” and maintain strong connections between individual mental health and social justice (p. 5).

The difficulty in conceptualizing love is complicated further by the conflation of love or care with governing procedures imposed upon dominated peoples (Fanon, 1967; Narayan, 1995; Brechin, 2000b; Davis, 2002). Mainstream social work practice has a history of appropriation and of seeking to be ‘inclusive’ in a way that requires the assimilation of the other. As Brechin (2000b) suggests, care, with a focus towards empowerment, is seen as a central aspect of practice by many social workers. At the same time, the issue of caring is deeply problematic in light of the profession’s involvement in governing activities such as child protection and involuntary mental health work (p. 142).

³ Similarly, I have chosen to conceptualize love and compassion rather than passion, as it seems to me that one can be very *passionate* about one’s practice of social work *without being loving or compassionate*.

⁴ The reader will note in the subsequent chapters on description and interpretation of the dialogues that participants seem to speak of compassion very differently, and more in the Buddhist sense of the word, as deep engagement *and* non-attachment, rather than pity or detachment. This notion will be explored further in the spirituality section of this chapter, and in the chapters on description and interpretation of the dialogues.

While remaining cognisant of these cautions, in this work I will seek to explore and hopefully, with Davis (2002), to affirm the ability of feminism (and other critical practice) to “rescue love from failure”, without “ignoring love’s role in the civilizing mission” (p. 148). While I accept radical critiques of ‘love’ in practice, I would argue that governance, arrogance, self-righteousness, and projects of ‘civilization’ masquerading as ‘love’ are not in fact love, but rather appropriations of the term used to justify oppression. As hooks (2000) argues: “A commonly accepted assumption in patriarchal culture is that love can be present in a situation where one group or individual dominates another” (p. 40).

Nonetheless, while my own understanding of what can be called love precludes objectification, hierarchical domination, and oppression, I enter this research uncertain whether or not it will be fully possible to disentangle or extract love from its colonialist history of missionary ‘benevolence’, in order to imagine how it might look differently. In spite of these cautionary questions, I have continued to wonder how to foreground what I identify as an underdeveloped element in the critical social work literature: the possibility of love, defined most simply at this point as the ability to deeply and respectfully engage in the intersubjective moment, as a key element in critical social work.

Love, as I am imagining it, is available in the spaces between people, in the context of relationships where neither party dehumanizes the other in thought or in deed, and in which there exists the possibility of such respectful intersubjective connection across difference. My own practice experience echoes Bending’s (2002) work on love as a possibility for ending hierarchical oppression. He describes love as existing in those moments when we can reach beyond what we think we know, and see the other in their full personhood rather than simply for their position in hierarchies of social location. We cannot ‘will’ feelings of love into existence, but we can choose to experience the other in a way that facilitates love’s arising by seeing, hearing, perceiving beneath and beyond social construction.

Love, seen in this way, might be envisioned as a possibility, always available, which can be manifested - lived or enacted - through human bodies. The very valid critical analyses of the social construction of surface reality made by critical practitioners - anti-oppressive, feminist and postmodernist - do not necessarily preclude the possibility of deeper, or more universal, realities or truths, which can arguably be experienced and spoken about by individuals from within these systems of construction.

It is my belief that we can choose to see our interdependence - or “mutual dependence” (Yar, 2001) – our shared humanity and coexistence on this Earth⁵, as well as our socially constructed and individual particularities. But if we do this, our relationship to the other may change... perhaps we can no longer “other” them so easily. Perhaps we can come into contact with the paradoxical mystery of life, coming to perceive the unity inherent in the particular, recognizing the diversity of individual waves, and recognizing that each is an integral part of a larger ocean. How, I continue to wonder, might such a loving stance toward others change or complicate our critical practice?

Critical Practice:

Whether one views social work as caring combined with social justice (Lynn, 1999) or as an instrument of governmentality (Epstein, 2000; Margolin, 1997), all western social work practices are typically seen as having to do with what are often considered the profession’s three key elements: relationship with others, notions of purposeful change or transformation, and strengthening communities. How these elements are developed depends on the theoretical stance of the practitioner.

This thesis work is framed within the context of critical practice. I am exploring not just loving practice, but loving *critical* practice. In the following section, I will discuss the writing of critical social work and social care theorists, exploring how critical practice theory might conceptualize these three elements of social work. I am curious particularly about notions of engagement and developing relationships with other(s), as these have the greatest implications for the ways in which I have begun to conceptualize love as praxis – both as a way of knowing and as a way of being that may lead towards ways of doing.

Brechin (2000a) defines ‘critical’ in the context of practice to connote “open-minded, reflective appraisal that takes account of different perspectives, experiences and assumptions”. Further, she suggests that social justice is a fundamental assumption underlying care provision, and argues, “successful caring processes must be both empowering and anti-oppressive... [the] practitioners’ purpose will be to achieve solutions that are at some level felt to be just by all parties” (p. 26).

Drawing on the work of Barnett (1997) Brechin (2000a) goes on to suggest three spheres of critical practice, inspired by two guiding principles, ‘respecting others as equals’ and an open and ‘not-knowing’ approach. The spheres of critical practice she articulates are: *critical action*, involving “sound skill base used with awareness of context, operating to challenge structural disadvantage, and working with difference towards empowerment”; *critical analysis*, including “evaluation of knowledge,

⁵ It is key that we understand love for self and other to include love for the Earth; what Edgerton (1996) calls “eco-erotic... love of the land (local) and of the earth (global)” (p. 70, parentheses in original).

theories, policies and practice, recognition of multiple perspectives, different levels of analysis, and on-going inquiry”; and *critical reflexivity*, which incorporates an “engaged self, negotiated understanding and interventions, and questioning personal assumptions and values”. It is in the interjective space between these domains, she contends, that the self of the critical practitioner is developed (p. 35).

Brechin (2000a) reframes what I earlier called the profession’s ‘three key elements’ in a way I find more useful; referring to what she calls the “three pillars of critical practice: forging relationships, seeking to empower others and making a difference” (p. 35). While I do not believe it is possible to ‘empower’ others⁶, although we might help to construct conditions that might facilitate their empowerment, and while I find her conceptualization lacking in any mention of love, I do conditionally accept, and will begin from her conceptualization of critical practice.

Brechin’s views are echoed by Eby (2000a): critical practice, she states, requires a practitioner who “continually recognizes the relative and contextual basis of his or her own practice, who respects others as equals, who forges relationships through dialogue... who seeks to empower, and fundamentally who makes a difference in the lives of others” (p. 55). Eby also takes up the notion of reflexivity in more detail, and this will be explored further in the chapter on methodological issues.

In their recent volume on critical social work Adams, Dominelli and Payne (2002) accept Brechin’s guiding principles of critical practice as well: respecting others as equals, and adopting a stance of ‘not knowing’. They add to these a requirement for collective action and empowerment for those marginalized by society, differentiating critical practice from more mainstream practice by its insistence on worker reflexivity, and commitment to client agency, social justice, and citizen rights (pp. 2-12, 305). Critical practice sees the ‘client’ or ‘person’ of traditional social work in a socioculturally and historically contextualized way (p. 90; Brechin, 2000a, pp. 34-5; Hugman, 1996, p. 144), and claims to celebrate and encourage the recognition of diverse ways of being and doing.

Critical theorists outside the discipline of social work also contribute to the discussion on love, the relation of self to other, and just communities. Of these, I find hooks’ arguments most cogent and compelling. She speaks eloquently of the connection between personal and political in practice, of the necessity for a transformational ideology underlying practice, and of the impossibility of love without a context of social justice. A “love ethic”, she contends, “presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well. To bring a love ethic into every dimension of our lives, our society would need to embrace change” (hooks, 2000, p. 87).

⁶ For an excellent critique of the notion of ‘empowering’ others, see Ristock & Pennell (1996).

Society, she argues, would need to embrace a “global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet” (p. 88). And she goes further, suggesting that “Domination cannot exist in any social situation where a love ethic prevails... When love is present”, she says, “the desire to dominate and exercise power cannot rule the day” (p. 98). I find this notion that where love prevails domination cannot rule fascinating in exploring the range of what we might or might not name as love, depending on our theoretical frame. I will examine this in more detail in the final section of the methodology chapter on reading the description and interpretation of the dialogues, where we will hear several participants specifically take up the use of language in conceptualizing love.

Habermas, a critical theorist, offers another useful conceptualization of the relation of self and other in community. In exploring the notion of dialectic between diversity and universality Habermas (2001) has written of “difference-sensitive inclusion”, and a “universalism that is highly sensitive to differences”. He suggests that the presence of these principles leads to communities, by necessity voluntary of membership, which are able to make room for individuals, in their individuality. In these communities, he says, “there is equal respect for everyone, not limited to those who are like us, but extend(ing) to the other person in his or her otherness” (pp. 40, 139-45).

He argues that this requires a sense of community connection that does not force members into homogeneity, but rather remains “open for all, also and most especially for those who are strangers to one another and want to remain strangers” (pp. xxxv-xxxvi). Might a love ethic compatible with critical praxis be part of what makes such a responsive community possible? Might critical practitioners be taking such a stance in working towards what Okin (1986, p. 15) describes as a just society – one which provides all members with full opportunities to develop their capacities, participate in political structures, influence social choices, and be economically and physically (and I would add psychologically) secure?

Similar notions of community based on principles of love and justice arise from Bending’s (2002) exploration of whether love and friendship across difference might allow cultures to “transcend” the “competitive struggle for domination” (p. 120), and Lerner’s work on the “progressive politics of meaning” (Lerner, 1996, 1997). I will explore the work of these two authors next.

Bending, a critical development theorist, proposes love as a possibility for ending oppression and hierarchy. Love he contends is “a moment that reaches beyond prejudice, beyond putting people into boxes, into codes. It is about seeing beyond values, seeing the person, not the position in the hierarchy” (p. 132). This possibility is key, he argues, if we are to consider communication across cultural and experiential divides to build solidarity without falling into either cultural relativism or

universalism (p. 133). Is it possible for critical practitioners to bring themselves intentionally to such moments, again and again?

Lerner also explores the ending of oppression. He contends that social workers and others concerned with social justice are working to resist the “current ethos of selfishness, materialism, corporatism, and cynicism” (Lerner, 1997, in Graham, Swift & Delaney, 2000, p. 10) by questioning the value of social policies that put economics before people, and working to build a society that deeply values the humanity of all citizens.

He offers the following goals for social justice work, which he defines as a “progressive politics of meaning”: the creation of social structures that “encourage and support love and intimacy, friendship and community, ethical sensitivity and spiritual awareness among people”; an alteration of the “bottom line” such that institutions or practices would be “considered efficient or productive to the extent that [they] foster ethically, spiritually, ecologically, and psychologically sensitive and caring human beings who can maintain long-term, loving personal and social relationships”; the creation of “social, spiritual, and psychological conditions that will encourage us to recognize the uniqueness, sanctity, and infinite preciousness of every human being, and to treat them with caring, gentleness and compassion”; the creation of societies in which people have “adequate time and encouragement to develop our inner lives”; and the creation of societies which “encourage us to relate to the world and to one another in awe and joy” (Lerner, 1996, pp. 56-7). While Lerner speaks specifically to a traditionally liberal American view, it is as a *critical* practitioner⁷ subscribing to his broad conceptualizations of community and their underlying valuing of love in individual and societal relationships that I will engage in my analysis.

A challenge for critical social work is the realization that regardless of intent, social work often reproduces the oppressive hierarchies it seeks to address. As Leonard (2001) asks: “by what critical means are we able to understand and act upon the realization that we reproduce... intentions notwithstanding, the social relations of class, gender, racism, ageism, and heterosexism, even while we struggle consciously for the opposite?” (p. 4).

Taking a stand with such late modernist theorists as Freire (1993, in McLaren & Leonard, 1993, p. x) and Habermas (1985, 1987, in Leonard, 2000, p. 7), Leonard (2001) struggles to conceptualize a vision for practice that might acknowledge social work’s complicated history under modernism, and still make room for potentially emancipatory narratives which might be seen in part as “an inheritance from the critical, revolutionary side of modernity” (p. 6). Such a vision can only exist, he suggests, if based on a constant dialectical tension between a belief in the interdependence

⁷ I would feel more comfortable if Lerner’s conceptualization specifically referred to social justice and an ending of hierarchical oppression as necessary conditions for changes in current social constructions leading towards ‘progressive politics’.

of all human subjects, and a deep valuing of difference. I believe that love, if consistent with the principles of critical practice, may be one such emancipatory narrative.

Contrary to Leonard and his notion of this dialectical tension between difference and interdependence, many critical theorists foreground the politics of difference. In these models, critical or anti-oppressive practice is seen to involve challenge and change at both micro and macro levels, as argued, for example, by Burke and Harrison (1997). While I share these authors' commitment to reflexively questioning practice and challenging injustice, I do not accept their assertion that "the driving force of anti-oppressive practice is the act of challenging" (p. 232).

Rather, based on my own practice experience and my observations of the practice of others, I contend that challenge might better be described as a *tool* of anti-oppressive practice, while the *driving force* of a *sustainable* anti-oppressive practice might better be described as love for life, for humanity and for the Earth. I imagine this loving as involving a deep reverence for oneself as a person and practitioner, for the people with and for whom one works, and for life itself. It must involve recognition of the inherent interconnection of the 'self' and the 'other', and a movement towards social justice for all. Love; as I am imagining it, recognizes the particularity of each being, and an underlying unity that does not erase difference.

I come to this research wondering if it may be possible to do what Leonard suggests: to come to tentative agreements, as Leonard (2000) calls them, "*universal by consent*", about the values underlying the possibility of emancipation. Such values, he contends, would necessarily begin with a strong emphasis being placed upon diversity (p. 28, italics in original). He suggests that a "politics of solidarity has to be built alongside a politics of difference, but not dominate it" (p. 29)⁸. Is it possible that an ethic of love might inform critical practice in ways that make such liberatory agreement-making work possible?

And yet love remains relatively absent from the discourse of social work practice, both mainstream and critical. One might imagine that the literature of social work, a practice-based profession, would reflect the voices of a range of practitioners, but voices articulating love as a positive force are largely absent. In spite of what appears to me to be a strong possibility that love might contribute positively to practice, few social work theorists speak of love explicitly.

The major exception to the absence of love in professional writings is the notion of 'compassion fatigue', which is ironically one of the more common and easily accessible references to the concept of compassion in social work literature. These literatures tend to conceptualize secondary traumatic stress – suffering and distress arising from working with survivors of trauma

⁸ In keeping with the critical agenda of ending poverty, Leonard notes that the precondition to meaningful "participation in or struggle against cultural discourses" must be the creation of a "level material existence" for all, in recognition that there are many individual and groups whose material poverty prevents them from full participation as "diverse moral agents" (pp. 29-30).

(Baird & Jenkins, 2003), or burnout - “physical or psychological exhaustion resulting from excessive professional demands that drain available personal resources” (Leon, Altholz & Dziegielewski, 1999, p. 43) as ‘compassion fatigue’ (see also Garrett, 1999; Marlow & Urwin, 2001; Prichard, 1998).

While I understand and do not intend to minimize the experience of burnout or vicarious traumatization, nor the potentially harmful effects of constant exposure to stories of trauma, and while I recognize the lack of institutional supports for social worker self-care, I consider compassion fatigue a misnomer which clouds this discussion.

I remain unconvinced that the experience of vicarious traumatization and burnout arises from ‘compassion’ as is suggested by the naming of this state of being in the literature. I believe, rather, that ‘compassion fatigue’ may actually arise from closing ourselves to compassion. It is my suggestion that we may become fatigued, not *from* compassion, but rather from being blocked from our compassion because of the structuring of social work practice. I contend that the fatigue social workers suffer from arises from our constant exposure to the oppressive conditions within which we and the people we work with live; that while secondary trauma as an experience is clearly documented, we might more accurately be described as suffering from ‘hopelessness fatigue’ in the light of socially constructed reality that creates oppression and much more existential pain than necessary.

My intention in this work is to offer love as a positive possibility for social work. I had strongly desired not to inquire into compassion fatigue, because it was the positive aspects of love that I regarded as missing from the discourse. It is noted here because the issue arose in one of the interviews, as the participant discussed lack of institutional support for self-care. While I did not specifically discuss burnout or compassion fatigue with any of the other participants, the reader may want to turn to the description and interpretation of the dialogues where participants are heard to offer a strong contradiction to the notion of love as fatiguing. The words of the participants are consistent with my own experience; that a compassionate stance not attached to a particular outcome or desire to ‘fix’ is not causative of, but rather potentially protective against fatigue and burnout.

There are a few notable exceptions to the absence of love as a positive force in critical practice. One is Brandon’s (1976) book “Zen in the art of helping”, on Buddhism and social work; another is the work of Morley and Ife (2002). The latter article, published during the second year of my thesis process, is the first by White social workers to *specifically* focus on love and the need for love in social work discourse in a way that resonates with my own views, and it is their work that I will address here.

Similar to my own work, Morley and Ife recognize love’s absence from the discourse, and argue for the necessity of its inclusion: “The idea of ‘love of humanity’, though largely absent from

[White mainstream?] social work literature, is a potent concept for challenging the dominant discourses of individual material wealth, greed and power” (p. 69). They suggest two reasons for the absence: the relegation of love to the private sphere in the west, and the “rationalisation of social work, and its framing as a quasi-scientific professional activity from which emotion and subjectivity must be separated” (p. 70).

They argue that the suggestion that ‘love’ should be incorporated into social work discourse is a strong contestation to this separation between the personal and the public; that it “requires our professional actions and identity to be... grounded at the very level of our humanity”; and that it stands “with no need for elaboration... in unambiguous opposition to” a world view based on “commodified rationality” (p. 71). It has been and is exactly my intention to take such a stand.

While Morley and Ife (2002) discuss love of humanity as a “philosophy or way of life [more] than an ethic or theory” (p. 70), I see it, and the interviewed participants describe it, as involving both a way of being *and* a way of doing – both a way of life and an ethic. In keeping with my own work, these authors describe love as assuming nothing about “human experience except that our humanity connects us.” (p. 76)

Morley and Ife contend, as I have, that love is not simply about values, but calls us to action: “it is only in the *living out* of one’s essential humanity that love can be realised” (p. 71, italics in original). This activist component is key in that a loving approach may fairly be critiqued as being part of the conservative element of human-centred practice if it is not clear in demonstrating a commitment to full social justice and to “challeng[ing] existing structures of disadvantage” (p. 73). They contend that key components of love of humanity include “trust, faith, courage and hope” and that these require “constant critical questioning” (p. 75) and “the need to critique power relations, and in some ways invert them” (p. 76).

This necessary reflexivity and the concomitant requirement for love as action as well as the recognition that the ‘personal is political’ leads Morley and Ife (2002) to argue, as I have, that such a loving stance is inherently radical. It is my intention, as I will clearly demonstrate throughout this work, that loving practice as I am describing it and as practiced by the participants I spoke with, be understood to be intricately interwoven with critical analysis and to have deeply embedded within it a movement towards social justice and an end to oppressions.

Key to my conceptualization of love is this necessity for love to be understood not only as a sentiment or an ideal, but also as a political stance requiring a purposeful moving towards social justice. This link between the personal and the political is necessary if we are to explore love in a way compatible with critical, justice-oriented social work practice. Wharf (2003), following Carniol, describes ‘structural empathy’, empathy for particular personal difficulties *and* a clear commitment to providing information about the structural factors involved in the arising of that difficulty (p. 10). I

am beginning from an assumption of ‘structural empathy’ as a necessary element in loving critical practice.

Critical practice is always evolving, and can be seen as “part and parcel of a continual process of theorizing” (Brechin, 2000a, p. 32). Brechin argues that social workers have traditionally used the literature of other disciplines in theorizing to inform practice, and critical practitioners have tended naturally to rely on critical theory, including the work of Habermas, anti-racist, feminist and queer theory, and social constructionism (p. 33). An example of this trend is Rossiter (1993), a critical social work theorist, educator and practitioner, who explores the possibility of grounding social work and mental health practices within a frame of justice and compassion. Following a Habermasian model, she argues that this is best achieved “... when individuals are able to speak and listen in the intersubjective contexts in which cultures (lives) are made.” (p. 15).

In a later article, continuing to build on the work of Habermas (1989)- and that of influential postmodernists including Benhabib (1990), Butler (1992), and Weedon (1987) - Rossiter and her colleagues move the argument further, introducing the concept of “intersubjective respect” in their discussion on centralizing ethics within critical social work. “In our view, ethics is best protected when professionals perceive as their professional duty the responsibility to create relations of intersubjective respect. This responsibility presents us with nothing less than a radical democratic vision.” (Rossiter, Prilleltensky & Walsh-Bowers, 2000, p. 98). In their foregrounding of intersubjectivity and respect in critical practice, these social work theorists offer a jumping off point for the next conversation I am interested in facilitating.

Intersubjectivity:

Intersubjectivity can be understood as communicative action that respects and recognizes the other’s current and full humanity, as well as recognizing that our knowing is delimited by our social location; that we can only know and perceive from our own vantage point. Fowlkes (2001) describes this as recognition of the “radical insufficiency” of individual subjects (p. 114). Intersubjectivity is a requirement for critical practice, and for love, as I will be conceptualizing it here. In order to relate intersubjectively, to come to Leonard’s (2000) “agreements universal by consent” (p. 28), we must recognize that our individual knowing can only be partial.

Referencing Benhabib’s (1986) concept of communicative knowledge formation and action, Fowlkes (2001) contends that the willingness to speak “with and to ‘different others’ in the face of historically and socially constructed differences of power and privilege, creatively opens a space in which to restructure discourse” in a manner congruent with a communicative model (p. 111). The concept of intersubjective knowing offers us a door through which we might move toward the

possibility of “tentative agreements” (Leonard, 2000) through which we might build solidarity towards the social justice-oriented change that is a key element of critical social work.

Yar (2001) also speaks to the partiality of singular subjective “knowing”. In his argument for a dialogic intersubjectivity, he contends that we can only satisfy our own desires and needs by simultaneously satisfying those of others. He argues that in order for this to occur there must be an intentional relation of mutual affirmation between subjects, which preserves the ‘alterity’ or otherness/difference of the other on their own self-established terms. Because we need other subjects in order to experience our own subjectivity, because we require each other in order to ‘know’ intersubjectively, Yar posits an “unavoidable condition of mutual dependence”, and an inextricably bound co-existence for human subjects, *in our difference* (pp. 68-71). Recognition of the other is therefore required in order to allow for movements towards solidarity and social justice (p. 73). This argument implicitly recognizes the notions of interconnection and of diversity and unity as coexistent and will be explored further in subsequent sections on critical notions of spirituality.

Kitwood (1990) also supports a view of our own integrity depending on our recognizing that of others. In seeking one’s own integrity, he asserts, one must “wish and hope for that same integrity for all persons, within their cultural frame. In short, to seek an inner truth and integration for oneself is of necessity to desire integrity on the part not only of a few close others, but of a much larger circle of friends, colleagues and acquaintances. But if these, then why not all?” (p. 211). In his questing for an acknowledging of the rights to integrity and well-being for all persons, those considered like ourselves and those considered different from ourselves, we hear echoes of Lerner’s (1996) notion of “expanding our circles of caring” (p. 16).

Loving intersubjectively, in a critical sense, involves an intentional choice to move towards love outside of one’s likes and affections. In the words of Heyward (1984), from her book *Our Passion for Justice*: “... love, like truth and beauty, is concrete. Love is not fundamentally a sweet feeling; not at heart, a matter of sentiment, attachment, or being ‘drawn toward’. Love is active, effective, a matter of making reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with one’s friends and enemies” (p. 186).

This expansion of caring requires a willingness to take a loving stance towards those outside our intimate circle, towards those we do not know, and towards those defined – by ourselves and by society – as “other”. We may not be able to love everyone, but we can attempt to move towards this loving stance, to engage with the other, in their otherness, over and over in intersubjective moments.

In enacting the loving stance, we can make the personal and professional choice to see the other with what Frye (1983) and Lugones (1987) describe as the “loving eye”. This way of being acknowledges that we can only see from our own vantage point and can never fully know the mystery of the other, yet it requires that we bring ourselves back, again and again, to trying to see

from the point of view of the other as they make meaning of themselves and their world. Lugones refers to this movement between self-location and the “other” as “world travelling”.

In a parallel to the work of Lugones, Yuval-Davis (1997) offers the concept of ‘shifting’. Yuval-Davis’ “transversal politics” are based in foundational assumptions of intersubjectivity and social justice. Transversal politics call for the valuing of difference, combined with a willingness to ‘shift’ outside of our ideologies in order to perceive differently and move towards solidarity. Yuval-Davis describes transversal politics as a “mode of coalition politics in which the differential positionings of the individuals and collectivities involved [are] recognized, as well as the value systems which underlie their struggles” (p. 25). As discussed by this author, transversal politics are based on the practice of Italian feminists working to bring Palestinian and Israeli women together in the early 1990’s.

As conceptualized by Yuval-Davis and these activists, transversal politics (p. 125) helped move away from both universalism which assumes a common point of departure and leads to exclusion, and relativism which assumes that different points of departure mean that no dialogue or common understanding are possible at all. In discussing how to mobilize across difference using transversalism, Yuval-Davis contends that participants must remain aware of the historicity within which they are embedded (p. 126), and that the boundaries between groups must be seen as flexible and open enough to preclude exclusionary politics. These types of dialogue require all participants to take an active stand against the replication of oppressive power imbalances (p. 130), a stance congruent with critical practice.

While asserting the necessity for participants in dialogue to come to conversation rooted in their own identities, group memberships, and ideologies, she contends it is the willingness to shift from what we think we know that allows us to enter into intersubjective communication with others; we can recognize and value not only our own ways of being, perceiving and doing, but those of others as well. If we are able to shift in this way, Yuval-Davis (1997) states, “dialogue, rather than fixity of location, becomes the basis of empowered knowledge”, allowing the unfinished or partial knowledge (see a similar notion in Mathiesen, 1974) of each participant’s “positioning” to replace assumptions of universal agreement or homogeneity (pp. 125-31). Yuval-Davis’ views are echoed by Pryse (2000) in her exploration of interdisciplinary work among feminist academics. These notions of openness to movement and change in relationship will reappear later in relation to the notions of self-work and compassionate challenge.

Smith (1997), in his reflections on “Otherness” also explores the notion of intersubjective relationship without erasing diversity in a way that harkens back to the earlier cited works of Davis (2002), Yar (2001) and Yuval-Davis (1997) on interdependence, and the willingness to ‘not-know’ or shift from one’s own sense of subjectivity and ‘rootedness’. Following Lyotard, Smith describes

communicability of Being, which he sees as “nonempirical, alogical, nonrational” (p. 341), and wonders: “... what are the options for those interested in a philosophy of communication that does not contribute to the retreat of Being, the production of spectacles, and the perpetuation of injustices?” (p. 342).

Rather than focusing on the aspect of movement, as the authors above do, Smith suggests the necessity to stand and meet the “other” in the moment. He contends that “one must learn *to stay put and be questioned by it (Otherness)*” (p. 343, italics in original) and that “One must be anchored in the ‘immediate passion of what happens’ (Lyotard, 1991, 118) and give up one’s freedom with respect to what is witnessed” (p. 344).

It is such a model of intersubjective communication - one which both listens deeply in each moment, and which makes room for movement across difference, inviting a meeting of the other in their “otherness” - that I have experienced in my work as a critical practitioner, and it is the model I will hope to encourage in this research. As Edgerton (1996) argues, “listening is love; love pays attention” (p. 69).

Intersubjective communication is not only a precondition for the relationship building inherent in critical practice and dialogical research, it is also a condition for the critical or emancipatory way in which I am beginning to envision love. If critical practice is about transformation and ending oppression, then there must be two or more subjects in dialogical relationship. If there is a subject and an object/ other, then the relationship is about oppression and not love; when we make the other “other”, there is not love. As I am conceptualizing it, love can be seen as a way of knowing, of “listening on many perceptual levels” (Edgerton, 1996, p. 63); a way of recognizing the Being of the other (Buber, 1958; Levin, 1989) that exists only in the spaces between people who are understood to have equal value *in their difference*. If we are to be critical about love, then intersubjectivity must exist as a precondition.

The notion of intersubjective engagement will weave through the rest of the chapter. It is reflected in my initial or working conceptualization of love in critical practice, and it will be revisited in the final section on spirituality as I explore, in keeping with participants’ discussions, how First Nations and engaged Buddhist approaches to spirituality complicate the concepts of critical social work and intersubjectivity.

Initial Conceptualization Of Love In Practice

From my engagement with the literatures and preliminary conversations with other professionals, in an attempt to explore the three key elements of critical practice, I arrived at my own working conceptualization of love, consistent with the pillars of critical social work. The conceptualization

was an attempt to centre the two key concepts of critical practice and intersubjectivity in imagining love.

As previously noted, the conceptualization exists in a process of progressive ‘unpacking’, refinement and complexification as my practice experience is explored through the lens of critical theory, self-reflection and dialogue. The concept of spirituality is not included in the initial conceptualization of love offered here because it was not included in the conceptualization I presented to participants; spirituality as a salient concept in this inquiry will be explored in the section following my initial conceptualization.

As I began the research, my working conceptualization, in the form in which it was shared with participants, included the following elements:

- Recognition of, and respect and reverence for one’s own and others’ inherent humanity, dignity, and basic human rights
- Deep presence (seeing, hearing, perceiving, caring, experiencing deeply) and engagement
- Willingness to not know or understand (Brechin, 2000a, pp. 31-3; Davis, 2002)
- Willingness to know; openness to others’ experience and definition of self
- Commitment and willingness to shift, self-transcend, change, and be changed (Yuval-Davis, 1997)
- Willingness to allow the other room to shift, self-transcend, change and be changed.

While it felt necessary and most honest to me to come to my research clear about my own current understandings of love, I hold the strong conviction that I can only know my own part of the story. I wished to connect my notions and understandings of love with those of other critical social workers who might be interested in similar things. This is the conceptualization that was shared with the participants in the dialogues, and they were asked to comment on its relevance for and consistency with their own practice.

I undertook my inquiry concerned about how to define my terms to participants without, as Huspek (1997, p. 1) charges “... disingenuously insisting that others communicate with one’s own authoritatively backed, predefined terms” and closing myself off to a “genuine engagement”? My purpose was not to see if I could impose my notions of love on participants, but to undertake research that explored what notions of love they had and how those (whatever they were) were at work in their own practice. How, I wondered, might critical practitioners conceptualize love?

Because of the gaps that exist in the critical social work literature in relation to love, I felt it was essential that practitioners be offered the opportunity to intersubjectively co-construct a working conceptualization that might be inserted into those theoretical spaces and incite further dialogue.

Literatures On Love And Intersubjectivity As Spirituality

As I have begun to suggest above, for me love is both an ethical or political stance and also a spiritual one. I believe it is possible to acknowledge the existence of social construction of 'reality' and a shifting and multiple 'self' and how these constructions delimit people's lives, experiences and possibilities, without precluding the existence of a deeper reality of interconnection. It is vital to acknowledge how my social construction may delimit my ability to see and understand others, and how their social construction delimits their ability to be fully manifest in the world, and still see the essential Self⁹ in both of us. There is always the possibility of willingness to remember and *be* love in spite of social construction.

Love, for me, is about belief in people and heartfelt conviction that a deeper Reality exists running through all beings. The definition of love must make room for a recognition of social constructions of reality that oppress and harm, and for our irreducible particularity, as well as for the recognition of our ultimate interconnection as Being, or self-as-other-as-Self. I did not intend to impose this view on participants, nor centre it in my theorizing; however I was keenly aware it did impact strongly on how I imagine and construct my own practice.

I had intended to discuss spirituality only in these relatively couched terms in my review of the literature and had not included spirituality explicitly in either my initial conceptualization, or in how I framed the inquiry process to participants. What I discovered during the course of the dialogues however, was that I had been so stringent in my attempt not to lead the participants toward my own views that several participants ended up challenging me about why I was not including spirituality overtly.

All participants, even those who did not pose it as a challenge, conceptualized love in a spiritual sense. Because this inquiry is fundamentally concerned with intersubjective dialogue, I have chosen to outline the process by which spirituality came to be the third concept in this inquiry. I feel it is key for the reader to be invited to some level of involvement *in* or embodied understanding *of* the dialogical process as it has unfolded between myself, the literature and the participants, rather than simply being assured that it *was* such a process.

⁹ Please note that I do not mean essential self in the sense of the fixed subjectivity of the Enlightenment liberals, but in the sense of interconnected beingness discussed in Buddhist and non-dualist yogic texts. In the latter particularly, this interconnected existence-consciousness-joy (sat-chit-ananda) is often referred to as the Self/Atman in the individual.

After the dialogues were complete, I came to feel that in order to deeply engage in interpreting the dialogues respectfully and with integrity, I must re-engage in a conversation with literatures in the area of spirituality, in order to have a background from which to understand participants' comments. Whereas my own background in feminist earth-based spirituality, non-dual yoga philosophy and social justice-oriented Judaism was implicit in how I presented my inquiry to participants, their ways of perceiving and being required that I make the concept of spirituality more explicit in the discussion of love in critical social work. The conversations I had with participants complicated my understanding not only of love, but also of both critical practice and intersubjectivity.

In the dialogues, the participants discussed love in two particular ways: all First Nations participants referred to a practice foundation in Aboriginal spirituality; and all non-Aboriginal participants referred specifically to Buddhist philosophy. Because participants centred spiritual issues I feel bound by the principles of love and dialogue to include a description of some of the literatures in these two areas. It is to this task that I will turn now, focusing particularly on the writings of First Nations social work theorists living and working in Canada, and on works by critically engaged Buddhist practitioners and theorists.

The literatures described here are those that felt most helpful to me in understanding what participants appeared to be referring to as love, framed in spiritual terms. Contrary to the work of such professional heavyweights as Canda, who more than one participant encouraged me not to refer to, and who seems often to conflate spirituality with religiosity (see for example Canda, 2002), the writings I have cited here appear to me to be better representations of the ideas put forth about spirituality by participants. I do not wish to engage by *challenging* these notions, because it feels disrespectful to do so without knowing enough about these approaches. Rather, it is my intention to 'listen deeply' to the literature, as I did to participants; and to engage by listening and by presenting what I heard as clearly as I can.

I see this description of literatures as enhancing and setting a background for what we will hear participants say in the descriptive and interpretive chapters. Notably, participants added even deeper insights into love as spirituality than the literature or my own understanding is able to portray here. However, I feel the First Nations and Buddhist models explored in this section are good ones; they have offered me, and I hope may offer readers, a deepened understanding of both love and intersubjectivity in practice. I turn first to a presentation of relevant Aboriginal approaches.

Background on Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work:

Baskin (2002), in her argument for the inclusion of spirituality in social work education, defines spirituality simply as “the connection to all that is in existence” (p. 2) and contends that there is a need for an “action-oriented spirituality” that is congruent with the principle of love as I have conceptualized it. Her understanding of Aboriginal spirituality from her own traditional teachings is “an interconnectedness and interrelationship with all life. All (both ‘animate’ and ‘inanimate’) are seen as being equal and interdependent, part of the great whole and as having spirit”, and all are seen as being a sacred expression of the “Great Mystery” (p. 4, parentheses in original).

While her work draws heavily on structural social work, Baskin contends that structural analysis is an insufficient basis for practice in and of itself, because it “lacks any discussion of culture, values and spirituality” (p. 17). In the realm of spirituality, she argues, structural social work is no different from conventional social work: “While [it] is anti-oppressive and focuses on social change... it does not incorporate spirituality in any way and, therefore, is not a holistic approach” (pp. 17-18). This latter point speaks to my own discomfort at critical practice without a basis in love as outlined earlier, and is supported by the participants as we shall see in the descriptive and interpretive chapters. Baskin’s conceptualization of spirituality as recognition of interconnection seems most consistent with participants’ meanings, and it is therefore the conceptualization that I will employ in my interpretation.

Baskin (2002) distinguishes between religion and spirituality, noting that religion is usually structured and group oriented, whereas spirituality “can include individual experiences with or without a structured belief system” (p. 3). However, she honours the positive *intent* in some historical social work practice based on what she describes as the “religious values” of love, justice, and mutual responsibility for all human beings (pp. 3-4). While some historical social work practice which took a stand for social justice can certainly be argued to have been helpful in meeting individual and social needs, as I have discussed earlier in the chapter I contend that *intent* notwithstanding, much of historical religious social work practice (based primarily on EuroChristian values) was in *function* oppressive and an extension of colonization. Nonetheless, I side (as did all the participants) with Baskin in the suggestion that “Social work practice cannot be whole without including the spiritual dimension” (p. 6), and “cannot be truly effective without it” (p. 9).

Hart (1999) also addresses Aboriginal approaches to social work, in which spirituality is seen as foundational. Like Baskin’s structural approach, Hart recognizes the impact of the historical and the political, addressing the impact of colonization on Aboriginal spirituality and well-being both individually and collectively, and his work was specifically recommended to me by one of the participants. Hart’s approach while congruent with Baskin’s is more detailed; it has been developed after extensive literature review on helping practices addressing “Aboriginal peoples in Canada,

particularly the prairie provinces” (p. 91). Therefore his work feels most appropriate to employ as background in regards to interpreting the First Nation’s worldviews discussed by participants in this study.

Hart (1999) begins with a definition of the medicine wheel, which common to many Aboriginal approaches reflects five key and interrelated elements to helping: “wholeness, balance, connectedness or relationships, harmony, growth and healing” (p. 92). Wholeness, as he describes it, requires that we explore each part and the relationships between the parts in order to understand each part and in order to be able to understand and focus on the whole (pp. 92-3). Balance is momentarily achieved when one is in harmony with other beings and nature, it must be constantly moved towards and is not permanently achieved. It requires that we address each part of the wheel in relation to other parts, not overfocus on one part to the neglect of others (p. 93), and it necessitates an awareness of “the existence and expression of bad attributes by people”, with a focus on the positive, and within a view of human nature as intrinsically good (pp. 97-8). The view holds that this focus on the positive will lead to the “natural death” of the negative (p. 97, following Cardinal), and perceives people as existing in a state of being, or being-in-becoming (p. 98).

Key to this Aboriginal approach is a focus on interrelationship within a framework that recognizes the interconnection within and between all beings, including people (pp. 93-4). All existence is connected, with each being seen as “enmeshed” in the “inclusiveness” of the whole (Ermine, 1995, p. 103, in Hart, 1999, p. 101). This is not same as, but in convergence with, the notions of interconnection and wholeness found in engaged Buddhism, non-dual yoga philosophy, feminist earth-based spirituality and non-dual understandings of social justice-oriented Judaism from and about which the non-Aboriginal participants in this inquiry spoke¹⁰. The notion of harmony in this Aboriginal approach addresses these interrelationships within and among beings and energies. Hart contends: “Overall, harmony involves peace, respect, establishing connections, and sharing” (p. 94). This notion will be seen in the third chapter to be consistent with participants’ views.

Growth and healing are also key to this approach. Growth, defined as “movement through life cycles towards wholeness, balance, interdependence or connectedness, and harmony with oneself and other living things” leads a person to their “true self[f]”. All people are seen to have the capacity to make the choice to grow (p. 95). Similarly, healing is viewed as a process beginning from the individual, which leads towards the restoration of “wholeness, connectedness, and balance” at all levels - for the “person, community, nation” and the Earth (pp. 95, 103). As participants will suggest

¹⁰ Other than the authors cited in this work (Bai, Chodron, hooks, Thich Nhat Hanh on engaged Buddhism; Lerner on social justice-oriented Judaism; Mohan on non-dual understandings of self in yoga philosophy), readers may want to look at Miller (www.nondual.org), and at the work of Earth-based feminist spiritual practitioners such as Spretnak and Starhawk).

in the following chapters, self-work and self-responsibility within a context of family and community are therefore essential.

The central goal of the healing process in this Aboriginal approach is well being and a good and full life (*pimatasiwin*, *minopimatasiwin*, or *pimadaziwin* in various Aboriginal languages) for all. This, again, appears similar to the goal of happiness and an end to suffering for all seen in Buddhism (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1993, 1998). The healing process in both these approaches seems to differ from mainstream western approaches, which begin from a problem-focus. As we will hear participants articulate also, both approaches are based on an assumption of wholeness rather than on something needing to be changed or fixed.

In order to reach this healing goal, Hart (1999) suggests that two values are considered key: sharing and respect. Each being is offered unconditional respect, defined as “honour, esteem... or treat[ment] with deference and courtesy” because all are considered equally valuable and inherently *of* the Creator. This view of all as worthy is seen to lead naturally to sharing and a sense of democratic process (pp. 97-8). Again, relationship is seen as critical, and “good conduct” is understood to include non-interference, non-judging, and non-directiveness, as the alternative is seen to be coercive and limiting of autonomy and self-determination (pp. 99, 103). Change is experienced as “an ongoing transitional process of balancing and connecting relationships within the individual and between individuals” (p. 102).

Helping is seen as a process of “restoring relationships that have become out of balance”. The ‘helper’ is seen less as a reified and constant category, and more as one ‘being helpful’ – a supporter in interdependent relationship with the one receiving. Healing is seen as a “shared experience of learning and growing” (Hart, 1999, p. 103) in which there is no inherent difference between the parties involved (p. 105). Helping is seen to require humility, non-judging, self-care, self-disclosure from the heart, listening, patience, allowing silence, support, and a recognition of both the spiritual and the importance of context and history (pp. 105-7). This is a view very compatible with the view espoused by the participants of this inquiry, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. As we will hear participants suggest in subsequent chapters, this model of healing requires those helping to begin from themselves, engaging in personal practice which attends to all parts of self (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual), and living according to their principles in relationship with the world (p. 106).

Background on Engaged Buddhism in Relation to Critical Social Work:

Buddhism also figured prominently in some participants’ conversations with me. In convergence with an Aboriginal approach as outlined above, non-Aboriginal participants often spoke of

spirituality, of interconnection, non-judging and non-interference. I turn next to several key Buddhist authors, especially those who are critically engaged.

Chodron is a prominent Buddhist author, and one to whom one participant referred specifically several times. While Buddhism as she describes it is necessarily non-theistic (Chodron, 1996; see also Chodron & hooks, 1999), it does appear to be similar in many ways with Baskin (2002) and Hart's (1999) Aboriginal approaches. She addresses interconnection, spirituality and non-judgement in the following way:

What we might call... Sacred Outlook is the main thing. It actually doesn't have anything to do with religion or philosophy... what people are ready for now – is compassion, the importance of our interconnectedness with each other. That would take care of all these rules (trying to be “good”). People need to see that if you hurt another person, you hurt yourself, and if you hurt yourself, you're hurting another person. And then we begin to see that we are not in this alone. We are in this together. For me, that's where the true morality comes from. (Chodron, 1996, p. 300)

She goes on to address self-work:

If it's pushing your buttons, whether it's Hitler or an abusive parent or an immoral war – Hitler was wrong, a parent who abuses a child is wrong – but you have got to keep working with your own negativity, with those feelings that keep coming up inside you. Because we have also had the experience of seeing wrong being done when there is no confusion and no bewilderment and we just say, Stop it! No buttons have been pushed. It's just wrong, unaccompanied by righteous indignation. When I feel righteous indignation, I know that it has something to do with me. In order to be effective on this planet you have to work with your own aggressions, with what has triggered in you, so that you can communicate from the heart with the rapist, the abuser, the murderer. (pp. 302-303)

Chodron does not suggest that we cannot maintain our critical stance and speak out about injustice. However, as with the Aboriginal approaches discussed above, in this Buddhist view self-work and change of the self are seen to precede and proceed with work with others, so that we can act for justice without dehumanizing the other, even when the other is an oppressor or perpetrator.

Non-judging and non-interference in the Buddhist view do not imply non-engagement. In Chodron's discussion with hooks about Buddhism and working to end racism and sexism – hooks, a critical feminist and race analyst, struggles to know how to begin where she is and how the world is, and still have a vision of how it might be different. Chodron suggests it is less a situation of hoping for change (where there is too much hope, she contends, one often begins to have a “strong sense of enemy” or ‘other’), but of aspiring to an end to suffering for all beings. She says: “I give up both the hope that something is going to change and the fear that it isn't. We may long to end suffering but somehow it paralyses us if we're too goal-oriented. Do you see the balance there?” (Chodron & hooks, 1999, pp. 1-2). This is similar to the paradox we will hear participants discuss in the interpretive chapter on critical practice, about hoping for change and speaking one's own truth without being attached to how the change ought to unfold, and without trying to change the other.

Other critical-feminist Buddhist authors also take up the concept of aspiration towards change, along with non-interference and its implicit notion of engaged non-attachment. Klein (1996), for example, argues that:

... self-awareness and simple self-acceptance is the foundation of all practice. Buddhists call it mindfulness, and it involves among other things the ability to just see what is, without rushing in to criticize, enhance, or change. Just see. Just be. (p. 40) The ability to just be is basic and healing... we have to start from where we are. And to do this we must accept the person we are at this very moment, in all its unglory, is the perfect place for us to start from. (p. 41)

She also contends that it is crucial to be able to make effort toward something without at the same time belittling ourselves because this has not yet been accomplished (p. 42).

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, teacher, writer and peace activist who embodies the principles he teaches. He suggests the need for “mindfulness, insight, and altruistic love as the only sustainable bases for political action” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1993, p. 155). He was mentioned by two of the participants during our dialogues as someone who understood, stood for, and lived the principles about which we were speaking. Coincidentally, although I am not a Buddhist, and had not mentioned him to participants, his writings, which I had not reviewed for several years, were fundamental in my own early understandings of love in practice; and bell hooks, whom I have cited extensively, considers him one of her key teachers.

In his work on non-violent resistance to war, Thich Nhat Hanh (1993) discusses ahimsa, Sanskrit for ‘non-harming’, a concept also key in yoga philosophy. In parallel with Hart (1999), and participants who we will hear speak of the need for ongoing self-work before and alongside work with others, he states that ahimsa must first be practiced in relation to oneself, not as an achievable goal, but as a guide of the direction in which to proceed. His argument that “Among the three – individual, society, and nature – it is the individual who begins to effect change” (p. 123) echoes the words of Chodron above.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1993) adds another critical notion to this discussion, complicating the notion of intersubjectivity. In congruence with participants and other theorists who spoke of interconnection, he speaks of “interbeing” (1993, pp. 67-8; see also 1998, p. 134) as a holistic approach to activism. Through the practice of non-harming, he says, we can come to an understanding and experience of “interbeing”, recognizing the roots of violence and oppression in all of us, not just those termed the ‘oppressor’ or the ‘enemy’ (p. 67). In concert with hooks, he suggests that if we are able to recognize this intrinsic interconnection, we will naturally stop creating an ‘other’ to blame, argue with, harm, kill (p. 68). In the concept of interbeing, we hear echoes of Ermine and Hart’s (1999) ‘interconnection’ and ‘enmeshment’, and a connection point with Leonard’s (2001) notion of a constant dialectical tension between interdependence and diversity.

This notion of interbeing is absolutely key to my inquiry because it speaks eloquently to the apparent contradiction between the universal and the particular: “All phenomena are interdependent... but if we truly realize the interdependent nature of the dust, the flower, and the human being, we see that unity cannot exist without diversity. Unity and diversity interpenetrate each other freely. Unity is diversity, and diversity is unity. This is the principle of interbeing” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1993, p. 129).

While he consciously connects Buddhist beliefs to different faith traditions, each of which he perceives as containing the ‘elements’ of each other (p. 136), and while he asserts that some concepts, such as the notion of ‘no-enemy’ is “enshrined in all the great spiritual, humanist, and religious traditions of the world” (pp. 143-4), he also sides with Baskin (2002) in her critique of the absence of spirituality in structuralist social work, saying: “We know there is no place for spirituality in Marxism” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1993, p. 57). In keeping with the Aboriginal belief, cited earlier in this conceptual chapter, and by participants in the next, of the intrinsic value of all beings, he states: “Each person is important. Each being is important. Each moment is important” (p. 99).

As we will hear participants in later chapters discuss love as a guiding force, and non-judging and truth-telling as coexistent, Thich Nhat Hanh, speaking of the juxtaposition of a strongly non-violent stance *and* working actively for peace and other justice issues, names compassion as a guide in knowing how to be and do (or not do) in each moment. “[In] confronting the situation and having compassion in our hearts, ways of acting c[o]me by themselves... If you are alert and creative, you will know what to do and what not to do” (p. 45). “In many circumstances, non-action can help a lot... sometimes it is best not to say anything... [but w]hen we see social injustice, if we practice non-action, we may cause harm” (p. 69).

Like Chodron, Thich Nhat Hanh (1993) suggests the possibility of movements for social justice that do not dehumanize or demonize our oppressors and enemies. The keys to social action he suggests are embodied deep listening, non-harming, lovingkindness and discernment (pp. 68-71; see also 1998, p. 116). The recognition of interbeing, he asserts, is a way towards sustainability of the work for social and ecological justice (1993, p. 138).

In her work on ‘contemplation and transformation’ hooks (1996) takes up contemplative engagement practices as congruent with a critical conceptualization of love and with the notion of interbeing. She conceptualizes love as beyond dualism, and makes a strong link between deep engagement and activism. Her work is so eloquent, and feels so critical to this discussion that I cite some of the text here in detail as a ground from which to move into the rest of the inquiry:

Love as an active practice – whether Buddhist, Christian, or Islamic mysticism – requires that one embraces being a lover, being in love with the universe... To commit to love is fundamentally to commit to a life beyond dualism. That’s why, in a culture of domination, love is so sacred. It erodes dualisms – the binary oppositions of black and white, male and female, right and wrong. Love transforms. (hooks, 1996, p. 287)

She goes on to describe a loving stance as a way of dissolving dualities. In a loving stance, she argues, we recognize the complexity of life, and must come to our critical and political engagements both actively and from contemplative stillness:

If we are concerned with dissolving these apparent dualities we have to identify anchors to hold onto in the midst of fragmentation, in the midst of loss of grounding. My anchor is love. It is life-sustaining to understand that things are always more complex than they seem. This is what it means to see clearly. Such understanding is more useful and more difficult than the idea that there is a right and a wrong, or a good or bad, and you only have to decide what side you're on. In real love, real union or communion, there are no simple rules. (p. 289)

Not only does she argue that love is life-sustaining, as we will hear participants agree later, hooks also suggests that it has the potential to lead us to deeper engagement and clarity in our work towards social justice. Participants will be heard to speak to this as well, suggesting that a loving stance demands that we engage deeply, and that such a loving stance requires the self-care and self-work that hooks contends contemplation can provide.

Love as a foundation also takes us more deeply into practice as action in the world... love leads to a greater commitment and involvement with the world, not a turning away from the world. The wisdom I seek is that which enables us to know what is needed at a given moment in time. When do I need to reside in that location of stillness and contemplation, and when do I need to rise and do whatever is needed to be done in terms of physical work, or engagement with others, or confrontation with others? (p. 289) It is not useful to rank one type of action over the other. (hooks, 1996, p. 290)

What is required, she concludes, and what love might provide to our work for social justice, is a “fundamental shift in consciousness”:

A fundamental shift in consciousness is the only way to transform a culture of domination and oppression into one of love. Contemplation is the key to this shift. There is no change without contemplation... here [she is referring to the Buddha under the Bodhi tree] is an action taking place that may not *appear* to be a meaningful action. Yet it transforms. (p. 292, italics in original)

Whether this shift in consciousness is defined as spiritual is, I think a matter of preference for the practitioner, but the transformative relationship between love, critical practice and interconnection that hooks refers to is key; it brings me back to the notions of intersubjectivity explored earlier.

Revisiting Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity:

Bai, a philosopher, educator, and long-time student of Buddhism, also explores notions of contemplation, interconnection and love as related to shifts in consciousness. Her writing explores spirituality and critical practice in a way particularly helpful to my inquiry in that she engages specifically with the concepts of intersubjectivity and intrinsic value in ways that deepen my earlier understandings, and complicate further the concepts that inform notions of love.

In an article on democracy as a “practice of intersubjectivity”, Bai (2001) argues for recognition of the otherness of the other within a context of attention and respect for their intrinsic

value. She recognizes that it is not that there is no other – obviously the other is before us; but calls for a deep meeting with the other, in their otherness, and within a context of recognition of the underlying interconnection of all beings (p. 307).

While Bai (2001) sometimes uses a capital “O” in describing the other, I have previously stated that I believe there is an other but no Other or “other”. This comes from my own recognition of a biological and spiritual interconnection of all existence that I, following yoga philosophy, have termed Self. I do not wish by this to suggest an essentialist stance that invisibilizes the existence of an other; I agree with Bai that attempts to reduce people to sameness bring suffering and oppression (p. 310); and yet I wish to assert a deep personal experience of interconnection of being such as that connoted by Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1993, 1998) notion of unity and diversity as interpenetrating.

Several other Buddhist authors clarify the notions of self and subjectivity. Klein (1996) for example, talks about how self and others do exist in the Buddhist way of perceiving, but only as constructs in our work towards love and compassion for self and others:

The loving self, the self that is loved, are nowhere denied in Buddhist traditions. That such a self can be permanent, unconditioned, (p. 42) autonomous, or causeless is vigorously denied. The middle way is finding a path, a way of being, that encompasses both these perspectives. It is also seeing that precisely *because* the loving self is neither permanent, unconditioned, autonomous, or causeless, it can respond with love and compassion... the abstract possibility for change is always present. That possibility itself is eternal, unconditioned and uncaused. (p. 43)

Brown (1996), in an article on the “ruthlessness of compassion” also speaks to the impermanent nature of the constructed self and to non-interference. It is the notion of the small, unitary, and impermanent self which compassion must challenge, she asserts. Then we come to see the self as “inherently insubstantial”; self is employed as a conceptual construct only. Without this discernment she argues, we “help” in a way that is really intrusion, domination and demand. Wisdom and compassion must always work together, she contends (pp. 127-29).

Subjectivity, as defined by Bai (2001) is simply the fact of having an “inner’, psychological world of thoughts, feelings, values, and attitudes, as opposed to the ‘outer’ world of physiological processes of the body and matter in motion”. Bai views intersubjectivity as the “transfusion of thoughts, feelings, perceptions and desires... through sharing ourselves [and] open[ing] to each other’s subjectivity... across our individual differences (p. 311). This meeting, which requires what she terms subjunctivity - hypothetically *entertain[ing]* each others experiences and perspectives *as if* they were our own (p. 311, italics in original) - occurs through intersubjective dialogue in an atmosphere of “faith in the emergence of collective wisdom (the *common good*) and... commitment to the process of mutual inquiry, consultation, and deliberation (the *good will* to the common good)” (p. 309, parentheses and italics in original). Echoing notions of expanding our willingness to care that I have cited earlier, here Bai defines common good in this context as good common to all members of

the community, including “non-humans” and “distant others whose faces we will never encounter” (pp. 309, 318). Intersubjective engagement in this analysis is seen as a mode of being (p. 316), not as a tool.

Bai (2001) asserts (as did several of the participants) that intersubjectivity is particularly difficult at this time in history due to the inherent instrumentalism of late capitalist consumer society. She suggests the lack of respect engendered by the perception of the other as an object or *thing*, rather than as a *being* deserving of respect for its intrinsic value, is responsible for domination and violence. This is particularly interesting in light of the contention supported by several of the participants, that where love is present, violence cannot dominate (hooks, 2000, p. 98). This does not mean, Bai states, that there is no conflict. In fact she speaks strongly of the need for conflict and contention, so long as these arise in an atmosphere of respect for the other’s subjectivity and consideration for the other’s well being (p. 314).

Intersubjective dialogue, she contends is difficult and necessitates self-work, self-discipline and effort in order to achieve the “self-transcendence... of ego-centrism” that comes from deep meditative attention (what I have called deep engagement) to the other. As in yoga philosophy (see, for example Mohan, 1993, pp. 182-3), this Buddhist version of attention is not the appropriating and colonizing gaze of the Enlightenment liberal attempting to draw the other into the self, but a move toward absorption of the self in the otherness of the other (Bai, 2001, pp. 316-17).

Bai’s body of work also addresses love, and specifically how love might manifest itself in practice in a Buddhist approach. In an article on mindfulness and lovingkindness as Buddhist approaches to learning love, Bai and Dhammika Mirisse (2000) recommend learning love as “the solution to the pandemic problems of rising violence, exploitation, and degradation both in the human and more than human spheres” (p. 2).

They take up critically the common notions of love as attachment (p. 2), stating – as I have in the earlier sections of this chapter, and as participants did - that the relationship between loving and liking is contingent and not necessary (p. 3). They assert a need to “distinguish love that is based in personal likes and dislikes” from a “more-than-personal”, “moral and spiritual” love which, “like the sun... shines on all, regardless of the qualification of the particular beings receiving sunlight” (p. 3).

We move towards this “love that transcends liking” they suggest, by the “complimentary and synergistic” practices of mindfulness, and *metta* or loving kindness – “universal, unconditional love towards all” (Bai & Dhammika Mirisse, 2000, p. 9) which they contend are common to all forms of Buddhism (p. 4). This is consistent with my call for deep engagement and willingness to ‘not know’, and with my conceptualization of love as an ethical (Bai and Dhammika Mirisse use the term “moral”) ideal.

As I have in relation to social work, Bai and Dhammika Mirrise (2000) assert that such practices lead to insights into the delusion of the notion of separate “ego selves” (p. 9), and the “eradication” of greed, hatred and anger. They concur, as I have stated, that we do not lose our discernment and begin to *like* everything, but we are called to *practice* love towards all (p. 11). Similarly to my own call for love as a radical practice in social work, they suggest that the combination of mindfulness and loving kindness can lead to a “radical”, “foundational and total” transformation of one’s being, as well as in how one perceives and interprets the world (11).

Thich Nhat Hanh (1993) supports this contention: “Buddhists believe that the reality of the individual, society, and nature’s integral being will reveal itself to us as we recover, gradually ceasing to be possessed by anxiety, fear, and the dispersion of mind (p. 123). Through practices such as mindfulness and lovingkindness, Bai and Dhammika Mirrise (2000) suggest, one begins to deeply and genuinely desire the other’s well being, and in so doing moves from simply ‘dispensing’ lovingkindness, to ‘embodying’ it (p. 12). This speaks to the notion of love as an embodied and principled practice, as compared to the notion of ‘empathy’ or ‘compassion’ as tools or technologies as critiqued by Rossiter (1993) and myself earlier, and by participants in the chapters on description and interpretation of the dialogical interviews.

The stance of the critical Buddhists discussed here converges both with the propositions I have put forward in the first part of the chapter, with the First Nations approaches outlined by Hart (1999) and Baskin (2002) above, and with the words of the participants in the dialogues undertaken in this inquiry, as we will see in subsequent chapters. In addition to adding to my understanding of love and critical practice, specifically in terms of how spirituality might apply to critical social work, the writings discussed in this portion of the literature review have helped to clarify my own understanding of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, as well as the relation of self to other, and diversity to unity. The works cited in this section offer a richer and more detailed background against which I will describe and interpret the conversations I had with the participants in this inquiry.

Interim Conclusion

Love can be understood as both a possibility and a practice. Love arises unbidden in the spaces between us, but we also have the choice to bring ourselves back to a loving stance in relation to each other moment by moment. I do not think this necessarily commodifies love, nor in fact that it is ultimately possible to do so. I am, however, interested in how love is a conscious factor in making choices, a way of knowing and being that may lead to principled doings. As explored throughout this

chapter, I am interested in love as a potentially transformational principle, stance, or way of being underlying our intent and actions as practitioners.

Love as I am describing it is not a set of skills, although skills themselves may be useful within a loving context. In my view, it is critical that social work involve a working or being 'with' rather than a working 'on' or 'doing to' people. In my practice, I have observed that the presence of the loving stance itself makes room for deep healing and change to occur on an embodied level. As demonstrated earlier, social work is not a matter of technological application of skills (Rossiter, 1993). However, I have observed that with some groups or individuals, I can do no more than use my skill set (including empathy), because I am not yet able to come to a deeply loving stance towards them. In these cases, my practice may be adequate at best, but does not allow the same depth or quality of intersubjective relation, and I must maintain an intention to keep opening to or moving towards a loving stance. It is this reflexive and conscious choice in each moment that I view as the loving stance; the practice of hooks' (2000) "love ethic" in action; and which I set out to explore in this inquiry.

My inquiry has sought to explore the possibilities for social justice, reconciliation, and transformation that love may offer critical social work, at global, societal and individual levels. Martin Luther King Jr., in his work for social justice, and an end to racial and class oppression, contended that love was "the key that unlocks the door to ultimate reality". As Michael Dyson, a King biographer articulates, "Justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public" (Dyson, 2000, in Alpert, 2000, p.4). As social workers, activists and teachers, it is crucial for us to acknowledge the oppressive and unjust structures within which we live, and the ways they proscribe real learning and change. I believe we must seek not only to be critical of oppression, but also to offer an alternative to the ideology of fear, separation and otherness that underpin oppressive structures. It may be that without love, we see ourselves and others as "other", as objects; and that in this separation, humankind is in danger of destroying itself and the Earth.

In 1905, Bertha Reynolds, a psychiatric social worker and radical political activist, wrote: "Practice is always shaped by the needs of the times, the problems they present, the fears they generate, the solutions that appeal, and the knowledge and skill available" (In Ehrenreich, 1985, p. 13). It is my assertion that our times desperately require an infusion of love, and that my particular experience and skills require me to answer her call; to add to the praxis of critical social work for the coming century. While causal connections cannot be drawn between values or ethics and behaviour, beliefs and principles can and do inspire action.

As Eby (2000b) contends, "Through the use of self-awareness and reflection [by critical practitioners], personal beliefs and ideas arise that can have a direct impact on decision-making" (p. 118). It is my suggestion that a loving stance can facilitate intersubjective engagement and counter

fear and “othering”; and that such a stance is currently being lived by some critical practitioners. If love is relevant in critical social work practice, and if it can be reflexively (re)inserted into our praxis, it may offer new possibilities to our work towards substantial, sustainable and long-term change in the direction of decreased oppression and increased social justice.

Beginning from a ground in critical practice, intersubjectivity and spirituality, I will seek to be relational, dialogical and open in my treatment of my inquiry into love. My critical sensibilities underlie this conceptualizing, and my ultimate goal is both critical and transformational: the facilitation of increased movements – in being, perceiving and doing - towards the manifestation of love in the practice of critical social work, in ways which might increase the emancipatory capacity of critical praxis for communities, individuals and the Earth.

The following chapter offers an exploration of both the methodological issues involved in this research, and the methods employed throughout the inquiry.

Chapter Two: Methodology and Method

In the following chapter, I move on to explore the methodological issues relevant to this inquiry, and to outline the methods by which the practitioner dialogues on love in critical practice were undertaken.

Research question:

How might critical practitioners conceptualize love in practice?

Purpose of the research:

As I have outlined in the first chapter, this research seeks to inform and deepen my own understandings of my embodied experience as a practitioner, to begin dialogues with other practitioners and to add to the critical social work discourse, exploring the potentiality of love as emancipatory praxis.

Because of the gaps that exist in the critical social work literature in relation to love, I felt it essential that practitioners be offered the opportunity to engage in dialogue on love in critical practice. My intention was to offer space for them to define love in practice for themselves, and then to ask them to review and critique my initial conceptualization of love in critical practice. My purpose has been to expand my own understanding of love in critical practice; to catalyze reflection by myself, the participants, and possibly other practitioners; and to add a largely absent voice, or more accurately set of voices, to the theorization of both love and critical practice.

This process allowed us to intersubjectively co-construct a working conceptualization of love in each dialogue, which we could then discuss in relation to their practice and in some cases to critical practice as a whole. I hoped to discuss how love was germane to their practice, and was as interested in the participants' philosophies or modes of practice as I was in their specific methods. I wanted to know how critical practitioners conceptualized love in practice, and how love was involved in the decisions they made in the moments of engaging with the people with whom they worked. I was interested in exploring the edges of the concept of love in practice with them.

My hope is that the description and interpretation of the dialogues, and the conceptualization of love in practice offered at the conclusion of this thesis, might be inserted into the theoretical spaces in the literature in order to incite further reflection and dialogue among critical and other social work practitioners, with the ultimate goal of inviting change in how social work and other human service practice is imagined and undertaken.

Methodological Concerns

Framing the inquiry:

This qualitative inquiry was undertaken within a critical, feminist and emancipatory framework, with room for organic development as the research proceeded (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). I chose a qualitative paradigm out of a belief that “if everyday life is construed as ongoingly social, it can be analyzed only by way of flexible, empathetic, qualitative technique” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 14).

I began from a recognition that the methodology and what was being studied (love and critical practice) were in necessary relationship. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest: “the phenomenon can virtually emerge in the course of the inquiry, in response to the research itself. In this regard, one’s methodological approach unavoidably shapes what the phenomenon can potentially be and vice versa” (p. 73). Therefore, the methodology must necessarily be compatible with what I was inquiring into. My methodology, in its ‘organicness’, openness, and flexibility is consistent with my conceptualization of love as discussed earlier, both in the sense of how I treated participants, and in my willingness to engage deeply, while maintaining a critical curiosity and a willingness to perceive or know differently.

While I position myself as a critical feminist, my inquiry is not feminist research per se, in the sense of centring the experience of women; however it is informed by my own feminist sensibilities. The methodology is consistent with who I am, and with how I am as a person and practitioner. I have attempted to be and act, as a researcher, in accordance with how I practice as a feminist, emancipatory social worker. As Esterberg (2002) outlines it, feminist critical research “seeks insight into the social world in order to help people change oppressive conditions... to work toward emancipation” (p. 17). Her understanding of Reinharz’s (1992) review of themes common to feminist methodologies includes “a critical stance toward traditional methodologies and theories, the goal of creating change, the desire to represent human diversity”, as well as a reflexive exploration of the relationship between researcher and participants (p. 20). It has been my intention in this research to engage within this type of feminist critical framework. Feminism as I am defining it here requires not only an awareness of the construction of ‘gender’, but of ‘race’, ‘class’, age, and other intersecting axes of oppression as well.

Locating the Inquiry:

As a critical practitioner, I recognize that this inquiry exists in a historical context. Over the last quarter century, modernism came to be questioned by feminist, critical race, and queer theorists. These theorists critiqued modernism's inherent dualism, faulty notions of 'objectivity', and assumptions of universality of experience, as well as the vast number of voices missing from the academic literature. Their challenges led to a "reconsideration of the Western canon" and an increase in the reconstruction of previously excluded perspectives (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, pp. 1055-7), as well as a move towards studying the world "from the perspective of the gendered, historically situated, interacting individual" (p. 1047).

In view of their studies of a cross-section of qualitative methodological stances, Lincoln and Denzin (2000) contend that: "Action, feminist, clinical, constructionist, cultural studies, queer, and critical race theorists are all united" on both this conceptualization of the situated individual, and on a "politics of liberation" which begins from the perspectives and desires of those who have historically been oppressed (pp. 1047-8). The goal of such critical inquiries they propose, and here they include Freire as an example, is a "radical restructuring of society towards the ends of reclaiming historic cultural legacies, social justice, redistribution of power, and the achievement of truly democratic societies" (p. 1056). Again this is in harmony with feminist approaches to research such as the one employed here.

These lofty goals notwithstanding, critical and emancipatory research itself has been soundly challenged by such indigenous theorists as Tuhiwai-Smith (1999). In looking at Lather's (1991) work on postpositivist inquiry, Tuhiwai-Smith critiques the absence of "organic and indigenous approaches to research". She challenges the "emancipatory paradigm of postpositivism", and here she includes "critical, neoMarxist, feminist, praxis-oriented, educative, Freirian participatory, [and] action research", for its refusal to acknowledge the notion that inquiry might be generated from different worldviews and value systems altogether (p. 167). Western essentialist feminisms, in particular, are critiqued for their erasing of differences based in socially constructed notions of race, culture and class, and their failure to recognize the "interlocking" and "complex" relationships between these oppressions (pp. 166-7).

She also addresses the feminist critique of supposedly emancipatory practice that accomplishes nothing for those being researched (pp. 166, 175). This notion is echoed by Lincoln and Denzin (2000), who state that there have been "several generations of social science that not only has not solved serious human problems, but many times has only worsened the plight of the persons studied" (p. 1062). In response to these critiques, Lincoln and Denzin call for a [re]turn (parentheses mine) to a mandate that comes from reverence for the human community (p. 1062).

Tuhiwai-Smith (1999), on the other hand, calls for “reflexivity in research, a process of critical self awareness... and openness to challenge” (p. 166).

In this inquiry, I have attempted to find a middle ground between these two calls for change. I strove to work from a place of reverence for all beings – that is, a deep sense of respect for the sacredness of all existence (Baskin, 2002, p. 2), and attempted to act according to my own conceptualization of love in practice as I have defined it so far. Throughout the inquiry I attempted to minimize the effect of power imbalances between myself and the participants in the research dialogues; and opened myself to being questioned, not only by my supervisory committee and colleagues, but also, and most particularly, by the participants.

In examining power dynamics, particularly the impact of colonialism, on research, and exploring the ensuing need for critical reflexivity, we must acknowledge that the history of research in the West is one of colonization and complicity in imperialism. In spite of the suggestion by qualitative researchers that “we have... admitted our guilt and complicity in the colonizing aspects of our work” (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p. 1057), indigenous researchers such as Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) argue that this colonization continues and that ends are used to justify means in the name of the “good of mankind” (pp. 24-5).

It was important to me to participate as little as possible in academic research’s exploitive and appropriative colonizing project; I attempted to heed Tuhiwai-Smith’s (1999) call for researchers to have a “critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices” at all stages of the inquiry (p. 20). This questioning of each step of the process led me to make particular choices, which will be examined in further detail in the section on researcher-participant relationship.

While colonization is the most virulent of the power dynamics present in research with those constructed as “other” from ourselves, there are many other imbalances in action as well. Esterberg (2002), for example cites the fact that researchers are often of higher social class than participants, derive the benefits if the work is published, and have the power to determine the direction of both the research and the final analysis. She suggests that while “there is no single feminist approach to research ethics, many feminist scholars believe that the researcher needs to address the power relationships that are embedded in the research” (p. 48).

Lincoln and Denzin (2000) concur, stating that “speaking from an institution of higher education... automatically means speaking from a privileged and powerful standpoint”. They argue that regardless of intent, differences in power and knowledge exist (p. 1051; see also Ristock & Pennell, 1996). These imbalances across role and class were minimized to some extent in this inquiry due to the choice of participants, but were not mitigated entirely. In the course of this inquiry, I was

also involved in dialogues across race, and I attempted to remain aware of the power dynamics implicit in the research process. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) was again instructive here:

Researchers are in receipt of privileged information. They may interpret it within an overt theoretical framework, but also in terms of a covert ideological framework. They have the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate and to draw conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings. They have the potential to extend knowledge or perpetuate ignorance. (p. 176)

Because of the dialogical nature of the inquiry, notions of intersubjectivity and reflexivity were key, not simply to my conceptualization of love, but also in my methodological approach to dealing with these concerns. Critical, emancipatory research as outlined above requires this of the researcher as well. As Kirby and McKenna (1989) argue:

researching from the margins involves two interrelated processes which connect the personal and the political... research from the margins requires intersubjectivity: an authentic dialogue between all participants in the research process in which all are respected as equally knowing subjects... [and] it requires critical reflection. (p. 28; see also Eby 2000, pp. 52-3)

This need for ongoing reflexivity in regard to the issues explored above was particularly important for a researcher involved as an insider as I was (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p. 137), in the sense that as the researcher I was also a practitioner who felt love was relevant to my practice. My methodological approach involved a deep, embodied recognition of intersubjectivity, and a constant return to self-exploration and writing about what I was perceiving, feeling and thinking throughout the process.

The seventh moment:

To close this section on methodological concerns, I turn to the possibility of the “seventh moment” in qualitative research. This concept came to me through one of the dialogue participants, an indigenous researcher, educator and therapist, who stated during our conversation that she saw my inquiry existing within this framework – both in my attempt to talk with the other on their own terms and to recognize the sacred in the practice of social work. As Lincoln and Denzin (2000) describe it, the history of Western qualitative inquiry has seen movement over the past one hundred years from the traditional and “modern” through the postmodern and postexperimental periods. The turn of the 21st Century, which they term the sixth moment, they characterize as “a messy moment, full of multiple voices, experimental texts, breaks, ruptures... self critique...” (p. 1057).

However, following from the work of Gergen and Gergen (2000), they suggest that qualitative inquiry may be moving towards the “post-postmodern – an age of reconstruction” (p. 1060); they call this move forward into the future the “seventh moment”. The seventh moment, they contend, is “concerned with moral discourse, and the development of sacred textualities [and]... asks

that the social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation, freedom, and community” (p. 1048).

They contend that rather than focusing on deconstruction, seventh moment research is that which “seeks to ground itself in a sense of the sacred, to connect the ethical, respectful self dialogically to nature and the worldly environment (p. 1052). They define this way of coming to know as a “sacred epistemology [which] is political, presuming a feminist, communitarian moral ethic stressing the values of empowerment, shared governance, care, solidarity, love, community, covenant, morally involved observers, and civic transformation” (p. 1052). We are faced with a decision, they suggest, “of declaring ourselves committed to detachment or in solidarity with human community” (p. 1062). With the proviso that a “communitarian moral ethic” must begin from a grounding in the valuing of difference, I commit myself to deep engagement in “enact[ing this] sacred, existential epistemology” (p. 1055) in all of my work, including this inquiry.

Beginning from the notion of sacred epistemology, Lincoln & Denzin move on to propose method as justice:

In the seventh moment, the means (methods) of social science are developed, refined, and cherished for their contributions to communities characterized by respectful and loving difference, social justices and equal access to material, social, educational, and cultural capital. Methods vie among themselves not for experimental robustness, but for vitality and vigour in illuminating ways to achieve profound understanding of how we can create human flourishing. (p. 1062)

It is my intent to situate this inquiry, with its feminist emancipatory framework and invitation to critical reflection on practice, firmly on the path towards this reconstructive seventh moment. It is my sincere hope that this project will in fact prove to be a small step in that direction.

Method

In response and resistance to the large gaps in the critical social work literature in relation to love, I became interested in the relation of practice to theory. I wished to speak with social workers themselves, and inquire about *their* theor(ies) of practice. I was curious about the spaces in the literature, and suspected that some anti-oppressive practitioners were engaging in loving practice in ways that had not been documented. I wished to ask these practitioners what they felt and thought about love in practice.

Once a working meaning of love was co-constructed between us, I hoped to talk about how love was involved in their practice, exploring how this played itself out in their actual practice through use of examples. While I intended to ask questions to encourage participants to keep their narratives grounded in practice, I recognized that they might offer abstractions, theories, principles, stories or complicating questions. I was committed to all of these being valued in the interpretation.

Finally, I wished to offer my own working conceptualization of love, as it existed at that moment, for review of its resonance and usefulness (Lather, 1991, p. 61) for them. I believed that a semi-structured intensive, depth or in-depth interview process, in the form of modified active interviewing was the best method for inquiring into this.

I began the inquiry expecting my conceptualization of love to deepen and change based on these interactions with participants. I also recognized that my questions might change from interview to interview as my understanding deepened. Between interviews, I planned to engage in reflection and reflexive journaling. When all the interviews were complete, I would describe and interpret the conversations. In keeping with the dialogic nature of the inquiry, participants would first review the transcriptions of their interview and suggest corrections, edits, or clarifications, and might also choose to be involved in analysis of their own interview. As will be discussed later, several participants did choose to be involved in this way. I hoped that together we might produce something that could help to fill some of the spaces in the literature so that other researchers could explore love in critical practice more deeply.

If methodology refers to *how* research should be undertaken, methods refer to what actually happens; the tools or techniques applied (Esterberg, 2002, p. 19). In the section that follows, I will outline the methods by which I undertook this project. I chose to engage in an organic method that developed as the inquiry grew, in keeping with what Lincoln and Denzin (2000) call the “multimethod approach” (p. 1048), or method “by invention” (p. 1061).

I began from a belief, with Lather (1991) that “critical theory is a fundamentally dialogic and mutually-educative enterprise” (p. 63). Because of this belief in dialogue, because my feminist stance leads me to value depth interviewing as an excellent method for researching with those traditionally marginalized (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87), and because my desire was to review or test my conceptualization and construct meaning with the participants (pp. 88, 92; see also Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 17; Lather, 1991, p. 61); the cornerstone of my method was semi-structured intensive, depth or in-depth interviewing, consistent with “active interviewing” as described by Gubrium and Holstein (1995, 1997). Like the intersubjectivity inherent in my methodological stance, these dialogical *methods* felt congruent with the “love ethic” I was trying to investigate.

As I have suggested, through intersubjective dialogue, that is dialogue which begins with recognition of the full humanity and subjectivity of both participants, and in which participants co-construct meaning, I believed the active method could offer the possibility of a transformative space of conversation in which together we could come to know more than we could alone. In this, I concurred with Bakhtin, who suggests that: “Truth is not born nor is it found inside the head of an individual person; it is born between people collectively searching for the truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110, in Shotter, 1997, p. 17). To be congruent with

intersubjectivity, the conceptualization and construction of knowledge must occur cooperatively. The dialogical method I intended to employ was the only one I considered compatible with my ontological stance (love).

Active Interviewing:

As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) explain it, active interviewing is more than simply technique; it is a “theoretical stance toward data collection” (Holstein & Gubrium, p. 73). It is a stance compatible with critical and emancipatory research, involving engagement with the participant as a full subject in intersubjective dialogue and attending to the context of meaning production without losing sight of content.

In their distinctive ways, ethnomethodology, constructionism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and some versions of feminism are all interested in issues relating to subjectivity, complexity, perspective and meaning construction. As valuable as these approaches are, they tend to emphasize the *hows* of social process at the expense of the *whats* of lived experience... We want to strike a balance between these *hows* and *whats* as a way of reappropriating the significance of the substance and content. (p. 5, italics in original)

In the active view (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997), interviewing is seen as a “concerted project for producing meaning” in which the participants’ subjectivities are constructed during the interview (p. 121). The active view rejects the notion of the participant as a passive object or “vessel of answers” (pp. 116-7; see also Esterberg, 2002, p. 92) in favour of a belief that the purpose of the dialogue is to “activate, stimulate and cultivate” the participant’s interpretive capabilities. The objective is “not to dictate interpretation but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues... The production is spontaneous, yet structured – focused within the loose parameters” provided by the researcher’s agenda (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 17). The active approach they advocate is “most appropriate in those instances when the researcher is interested in subjective interpretations” (p. 73), as I was.

While Holstein and Gubrium (1997, pp. 113, 123) see interviews as a conversation, this notion is critiqued by Esterberg (2002), a feminist researcher who recognizes the imbalanced nature of the dialogue, and so sees interviewing not so much as a conversation, but rather “as a form of relationship between two individuals... [who] come together to try to create meaning about a particular topic” (pp. 84-5). My own view is closer to Esterberg’s, particularly because while I wanted the interview process to be dialogical, I also wanted to centre the participant’s voices as much as or more than my own. Nonetheless, while keeping this inherent power imbalance in mind, I will refer to my interactions with participants both as dialogues and as conversations.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) critique both traditional qualitative interview interpretations for imagining data can ‘speak for themselves’ (p. 79), and also critique purely deconstructionist methodologies for losing sight of content, for overfocusing on the ‘hows’ of the research at the

expense of the ‘whats’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, pp. 15-16; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 115). They contend that active interviewing seeks to balance the ‘what’ and ‘hows’ of participant talk in interpretation. However, for my purposes here, they do not go far enough in the direction of honouring the content of the dialogues. Furthermore, I do believe that to some extent at least, the writing up of dialogical research such as this must create space for participants’ voices to be heard in detail, rather than simply used as illustrative examples. Consequently, my interpretation will involve a point of departure from the active method.

While I engaged in the interviews in an active way, I am not prioritizing the dynamics of knowledge construction – that is *how* we constructed meaning - in my interpretation. Because of my feminist inclination towards valuing participant’s voices, and because my intent is to centre perspectives rarely found in the critical social work literature, my interpretation will be even less ‘deconstructive’ than that of active interviewing, and more valuing of the ‘whats’ – the substance and content of the dialogues. I will, to some extent, invite participants to ‘speak for themselves’ in the description and interpretation of the dialogues.

The work is dialogical in the sense that participants’ truths about love in critical practice were initially constructed using me as a foil. Subsequent to that we constructed a working definition together from the meeting places of their conceptual framework and my own initial conceptualization of love. Finally, the participants and I explored this co-constructed notion of love in relation to the actualities of their own practice.

Researcher-Participant Relationships:

As Kirby and McKenna (1989) argue, “Research from the margins is not research on people from the margins but research **by, for and with** them (p. 28, emphasis in original; see also Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p. 1050). In attempting to centre marginalized voices - both mine and others - within the critical social work literature, I made every effort to meet the other participants in respectful, intersubjective discussions; to *dialogue with* people rather than conducting research *on* them. For me, the process was ultimately what was important and I worked from a deep and embodied understanding that the means create the ends.

Before I begin a description of the process of participant selection, let me take a moment to explore the use of languaging in qualitative inquiry. As a critical feminist who recognizes the power of language to construct reality (and power dynamics in particular), I see it as essential to be vigilant about how I refer to myself, my research, and those involved in the inquiry with me. As Esterberg (2002) states, critical researchers “tend to call those whom they are studying their research participants, to emphasize their greater role in shaping the research process” (p. 88).

As a student researcher, I did not do 'field research' on 'subjects', rather I engaged in dialogue with *people* or *participants*, in *communities*; the latter in recognition of Tuhiwai-Smith's (1999) contention that "Community conveys a much more intimate, human and self-defined space, whereas 'field' assumes a space 'out there' where people may or may not be present" (p. 127). As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest, "the words by which we refer to ourselves and other... have a way of affecting our choice of those to whom we allocate a voice in research" (p. 25). While the word 'allocate' suggests a more technological approach than I am comfortable with, how I defined myself and the participants did affect who I approached to participate.

Participant Selection:

Once my methodological stance and choice of method were in place, it was time to begin finding, approaching, and inviting involvement from interested participants. This inquiry sought rich data, from participants well grounded in the topics of the inquiry – love and critical practice. Therefore, participants were approached based on a purposeful sampling method; my intent was to deepen and expand my initial conceptualization of love in critical practice, and test its "usefulness" and "resonance" (Lather, 1991, p. 61) for participants.

As Esterberg (2002) suggests, "In general, you should choose those interviewees who can give you the greatest possible insight into your topic" (p. 93). People were invited to participate with me if they self-defined with and were grounded in critical or anti-oppressive practice and structural empathy as defined in the first chapter, and if they considered "love" to be relevant to their practice.

In keeping with the valuing of diversity in critical social work, and in order to make space for multiple ways of knowing, my participant selection aimed for maximum diversity across gender, race, class background, age, and site of practice. I sought not for representativeness of views, but rather for "representation of diverse and complex experience" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 26), from a diversity of social and cultural locations. Because I was involved in dialogues with other practitioners and educators, in most cases I interviewed people of similar or higher status to myself on at least one socially constructed location continuum.

Potential participants were defined as critical social workers or practitioners. I understood 'critical' in this context to mean that their practice sought to link the personal and the political (Burke & Harrison, 1997); and in some way involved critical analysis - acknowledging social construction, and intersecting inequities and oppressions; and critical action - working towards social justice (Brechin, 2000a). In addition, I expected practitioners to meet Brechin's third criteria for critical practice – reflexivity. This was borne out as can be heard in the chapters on description and interpretation of the dialogues, where participants not only demonstrate critical reflexivity, but also

complicate this notion with the addition of a requirement for practitioners to engage in their own 'self-work'.

Once human research ethics approval was granted I began my search for participants through contacts with practitioners whose work I was familiar with, and those self-identified through informal networks, in a manner similar to snowball sampling. I followed that by asking other critical practitioners, activists and members of various communities for suggested contacts of anti-oppressive practitioners who they believed might perceive love as relevant in their practice. In total, nine people were approached with an invitation to participate over an approximately one-month period. Two refused, one because of several recent deaths in his immediate circle, and one because he did not consider himself a social worker. Participants who agreed to be involved defined their practice in various ways – Aboriginal, anti-oppressive, critical, feminist, radical – but all met my criteria for critical practice as outlined above. Participants who tentatively agreed to be involved were forwarded, or read, an official letter of invitation and informed consent that was to be signed during the interview itself.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest that from an active perspective, all introductory interactions “provide precedents for how to proceed. Starting with the very introduction of the interviewer and the study itself, the interviewer offers resources and points of reference for the conversation to come” (p. 40). The letter of invitation (See letter in Appendix A) included the research question; a project description, which made clear my anti-oppressive political stance and outlined the project and my roles as both a student researcher and a long-time critical practitioner; and a statement that participants had been selected because of their self-identification as critical practitioners who considered 'love' as relevant to their practice. Through this framing of the question and the inquiry, I attempted to “strategically convey the topic areas to be explored and the positions from which the exploration might embark”, while leaving room for the “meaning making [to be] a continually unfolding process” (p. 52), and allowing “contexts to shift throughout the interview” (p. 76).

In my initial engagement with participants, I attempted to be as clear as possible about my underlying assumptions, and I attempted to hold myself throughout the process to my own conceptualization of loving practice as outlined in the first chapter. In my discussions with participants, I situated myself as another anti-oppressive practitioner, and as a student, rather than as a researcher. I also presented myself in ways that minimized any appearance of the 'expert', and genuinely believed in and treated participants as the experts.

I do not perceive the selection process as unidirectional, that is me selecting participants, but as a rather more mutual act of choosing to be involved with each other. I imagine participants choosing to be involved not simply because they knew me, not just on the value they might have

perceived in the project itself, but also based on their trust of the people who had connected us. I imagine them asking questions before deciding - and some of them did ask me questions - such as those suggested by Tuhiwai-Smith (1999). Not only questions about the project such as: “Whose interests will it serve?” and “Who will benefit from it?”; but also questions about me as a person: “Is her spirit clear? Does [s]he have a good heart? What other baggage [is she] carrying?... Can [she] actually do anything?” (p. 10).

As Tuhiwai-Smith suggests, I understood consent to be given not so much for the research project itself, but more for myself and my credibility, and I understood that consent was contingent upon my ongoing trustworthiness as the inquiry progressed (p. 136). The consent form (See consent form in Appendix A), and my discussions with potential participants made clear that consent could be negotiated throughout the project, that involvement need only be to the person’s level of comfort, and that consent could be withdrawn at any time. Participants were given the option of using an alias, or using their own first name. In keeping with their shared focus on being and practising as and from themselves (see more on this in the descriptive and interpretive chapters), all participants chose to use their own name.

In the end, seven people chose to participate in the study. I knew three of these practitioners before the researching of this inquiry commenced; four of them I met at the time of our interview. Those involved included: two men and five women; ages ranging from thirty through fifty seven; three First Nations people, one woman of Colour, and three White women; participants were of several sexual orientations.

Geographically, participants were all currently living in large urban centres in British Columbia, Alberta, or Saskatchewan. However they came from a range of geographical and class backgrounds; several had been raised between cultures or geographical locations. All participants defined themselves as spiritual, but none as religious. Of those who specifically described or referred to their belief systems (six of the seven): three came from indigenous spiritual systems; one was Jewish culturally and a practitioner of Buddhism; and two non-Aboriginal participants (one of Colour and one White) I would describe as pagan or earth-based in their spirituality.

Sites of practice included drug and alcohol recovery; sexual abuse and trauma recovery; family therapy; individual counselling; outreach and support to street youth; work with Ministry involved families; indigenous healing work including sweat lodges; and teaching and research at the university or college level. All except one considered love relevant in their practice. This person stated that he did not feel comfortable with the use of the word ‘love’ in a professional context, but after several preliminary conversations stated that what I called ‘love’, he would describe as ‘spirituality’, and that he was willing to participate.

As a researcher-participant, my own social location is that of an institutionally educated 41 year old, White lesbian. I am Jewish (culturally more so than religiously) with a long-term practice of earth-based spirituality and non-dualist yoga. I was born in northern British Columbia, and raised and educated on the prairies; my family is bi-cultural, and my parents first and second-generation immigrants of non-Anglo-Saxon background. While I do not live a particularly 'middle class' life in a relative western sense, I do have access to middle class privilege through education and family connections, in Bai's (2001) sense of having some ability to protect or distance myself from others' using me instrumentally (p. 313). I have been involved in social work practice for the past seventeen years, primarily in the areas of trauma recovery, community activism and public education.

What I find particularly interesting is something that I did not set out to find; there were two commonalities I became aware of among participants. First, they had all struggled personally in some experiential way with pain due to oppression, accident or illness. Second, they had all lived across social locations in some way: they had been born into one culture and raised in another; raised in multiple cultural contexts; born to parents of two cultural backgrounds; or experienced multiple social locations, for example being born into one social construction of class and now living in another due to a variety of factors and circumstances.

In retrospect I perceive participants' abilities to acknowledge, value, and live from multiple perspectives; their ability to engage paradox and 'both/and' thinking; to be in part due to their embodied experience of living. That is, I perceive that they knew on some level that the binary dualities of social construction do not exist as 'either/or' because they had themselves *been both*. This ability to grapple with complexity will be evident in the chapters on description and interpretation of the dialogues.

Preparing for the Dialogues:

My attempt to act, as a research practitioner, in accordance with my own conceptualization, required me to engage deeply, and allow myself to 'not know' so that I was open to experience in the moment. The interview process, therefore, began with a period of self-preparation. For several weeks, other than a brief overview of active interviewing, I rested, read on deep listening (Levin, 1989), and practised my own spiritual disciplines – hatha yoga, prayer, and meditation. The three days previous to commencing the interviews were spent in a dialogical contemplation retreat on the nature of loving presence with twenty other meditation practitioners from various traditions.

Interviews were scheduled to take place over a two-week period, with a day between interviews for rest, reflection, and writing. In keeping with the notion of maximizing representation of multiple and complex experiences (Esterberg, 2002, p. 26), and in order not to centre mainstream

voices, interviews were scheduled to begin with a person of Colour and to alternate, where possible, across social locations of race or ethnicity.

Each dialogue was set to take place in a space of the participants' choosing. Two interviews took place in participants' homes, three were conducted in the person's office, one took place in a coffee shop on a busy inner city street, and one occurred at a First Nations healing site in the middle of windswept prairie. As I had done in my initial contacts, in each case I presented myself to participants in such a way as to minimize any appearance of power and "expertise" on my part. I dressed simply but respectfully, and carried as few "research accoutrements" with me as possible; I carried in a plain cloth shoulder bag a small tape recorder, the consent form, a plain pad of paper and a pen. I introduced myself, once again, as a student researcher. In spite of this, it was clear at some points how hopelessly elitist the process was – for example, how inappropriately academic the consent form was (See Appendix A), in spite of my attempts to simplify it (I had cut it down to two pages from the recommended template of four). I explained the intent of the form to participants, but it was clear that the form met the university's needs more than that of some participants, who gave it only the most cursory and dismissive attention before signing it.

The Dialogues:

Shotter (1997) talks about conversational, "nondisciplinary" forms of talk that allow room for dialogical openness in which the parties can open and close spaces between themselves moment by moment, and feel free to define themselves and be understood on their own terms (pp. 21-2). This leads to what he calls the "interactive moment". It is the moment, the situation that he views as important, not the individual speakers (p. 26). In such moments, communication - the development of negotiated, mutual understandings - and possibly "joint action" can take place (p. 22). It was my hope, as I embarked on the interviews, that my strategy would allow space for such interactive moments, and for the possibility of rich dialogue.

Consequently, each interview began differently, depending on my relationship to the person. Most participants asked questions of me at the beginning of the interview – about who I was, what I believed social work practice as traditionally carried out by White westerners was really about, about my relationship to the person who had referred me to them, about my supervisor (whether or not she was White), or about the timeline of the project. I answered these questions with as much transparency as possible, into both my own history and social location, and the intent of the inquiry.

I also reaffirmed to each participant that they had been asked to participate because of my perception (and/or that of the person who had referred me to them) of their expertise and my wish to insert voices such as theirs into the gaps in the critical social work literature. The consent form, which had been seen by all participants, was signed either at the beginning or the end of the dialogue.

As well, all participants were informed that they could decide, once transcription was complete, if there were any parts of the dialogue they wished to clarify, add to, or remove from the final transcript that would be used for interpretation.

Once this initial period of testing or reaffirmation of the relationship and clarification of the intent of the inquiry was complete, the interview began in earnest. In the active interviewing style, the interviewer is seen as very active, “constraining as well as provoking answers that are germane to the researcher’s interest. He or she does not tell respondents what to say, but offers them pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 39). While I engaged in the practices of “activation” and “incitement” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 1997) to some extent; broadly “suggesting the parameters of the sort of narrative being solicited” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 29); this was tempered by my desire, born from my history as a process-oriented feminist therapist, to allow people to interpret the inquiry as they saw fit, and to offer stories and examples in their own way and in their own time.

I preferred, for the most part, to engage in deep listening, beginning from a place of accepting and honouring the words and stories participants so generously shared, and then moving along a continuum of more or less questioning as intuitively felt right to me in each interview. As Morley and Ife (2002) argue: “[a] dialogue of love demands humility (Freire 1996) – a humility that denies ownership of knowledge... It is about engaging with, yet standing back and trusting in, the knowledge produced by those with whom I am in dialogue... This requires a letting go of the desire to control. It requires a surrendering to uncertainty and embracing a belief in human consciousness” (p. 75), and a “reve[ling] in the complexity and wonder of [that] consciousness” (p. 76). In most conversations I opened to not-knowing, listening a great deal and not speaking very much.

Nonetheless, I attempted to “judiciously engage [each] respondent, working interactionally to establish the discursive bases from which the respondent [might] articulate his or her relevant experiences” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 47). Where it felt right, I asked clarifying questions, asked for examples of theory in practice, encouraged reflexivity, and asked participants to explore from different “narrative” standpoints” (p. 43), for example asking some of them to revisit the questions from the standpoint of an activist rather than a practitioner. In some interviews, participants asked me questions or invited me to answer my own questions.

I believe, as Esterberg (2002) suggests, that interview guides are designed to offer a framework and focus the interview. Rather than constraining dialogue, the interview guide “lists the main topics and, typically, the wording of questions the interviewer wants to ask... the researcher does not follow the guide rigidly... Rather she or he adapts the questions during the course of the interview, changing both the phrasing and the order of the questions” (p. 94).

While I had an interview guide that listed topic areas in the form of six specific questions designed to “loosely direc[t] and constrai[n]” the interview according to my “topical agenda, objectives, and queries” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 29), and to act as “catalysts” for discussion (p. 39). This guide was used to varying extents in each dialogue based on the responses of each participant (p. 77; see also Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 68).

The exception was the one interview conducted with a First Nations elder. As Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) points out: “indigenous elders can do wonderful things with an interview. They tell stories, tease, question, think, observe... test...” (p. 136). In this interview, the participant asked me testing questions, told stories and offered observations. I did not ask any of my specific questions, except to request that he review and comment on my conceptualization of love during a break in the flow of the dialogue. In each case, regardless of which questions were asked and in what order, participants were invited to listen to, read, and critique my initial conceptualization of love in critical practice.

While leaving room for change to occur as the dialogues proceeded, the following questions served to guide the initial interviews:

1. **“In relation to your own practice, how do you imagine or define love? What constitutes love for you?” (this question allowed themes to begin emerging from participants’ own conceptual frameworks)**
2. **“Here’s how I’ve been conceptualizing love in practice (participants were read and/or shown a copy of my initial conceptualization as outlined in Chapter One)... does this fit at all with your experience and thinking?”**
3. **“How is love, as we’ve constituted it together here, relevant in how you imagine, construct and make sense of your practice? Can you give me examples from your practice?”**
4. **“How do you (imagine/perceive/understand) love’s relevance to social work practices as a whole?”**
5. **“What have been the most important elements of our discussion for you?”**
6. **“Is there anything we missed that you would like to add?”**

Each question acted as a topical area to explore through dialogue. Prompts and requests for examples from practice were used as necessary and appropriate in each discussion; care was taken to use prompts to clarify and deepen participant responses, not to move participants in any particular direction.

Given the way in which I understood the knowledge construction process, I envisioned both myself and the participants as active in meaning-making and interpretation throughout the dialogues. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) note, in the active view, participants are “constructors of

knowledge in collaboration with interviewers” (p. 4). As we engaged in intersubjective dialogue, we explored the concept of love in practice from various angles. In keeping with the active method, “Rather than suppressing the respondent’s and [my own] reflexivity, [I] encourage[d] contextual shifts and reflections” (p. 55), promoting participants’ taking on “any viewpoint that he or she consider[ed] empirically warrantable” (p. 32). What occurred was what Holstein and Gubrium predicted:

At some point, a new role and perspective may be prompted by the interview questions themselves... The vessel-of-answers approach would necessarily take this to be a matter of reactivity. For the active respondent, however, it signals alternative validities, whose distinctive narrative resources naturally (and validly) convey equally acceptable responses. (p. 34 parentheses in original)

As they argue, it is not the task of the researcher to critique the response, but to activate exploration, reflexivity and multivocality:

Treating the interview as active allows the interviewer to encourage the respondent to shift positions in the interview so as to explore alternate perspectives and stocks of knowledge. Rather than searching for the best or most authentic answer, the aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing – the possible answers – that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be. (p. 37)

In the dialogues I balanced the inclination towards participant activation without critique, with a critical, emancipatory reflective lens; moving between deep, engaged listening and asking clarifying and deepening questions. I attempted to use my practice-based background knowledge in formulating questions and offering relevant observations to promote the flow of dialogue and encourage reflexivity.

It is important to note that I attempted to do this in a way that maintained integrity and commitment to my conceptualization, rather than as a strategy or tactic. Here I differ from Holstein and Gubrium (1995), who suggest that background knowledge can be used as a “fruitful *tactic* for promoting circumstantially rich descriptions, accounts, and explanations” (p. 77, italics mine); I have the same critique of this technological use of relationship as a tool in research as I do of the use of “empathy” as a tool in liberal social work practice, and strive not to work in this technological way.

It also felt critical to me to heed Tuhiwai-Smith’s (1999) concerns about appropriation in research: “Still others collect the intangibles: the belief systems and ideas about healing, about the universe, about relationships and ways of organizing, and the practices and rituals that go alongside such beliefs” (p. 25); I chose not to ask participants to offer specific details about their spiritual belief systems. It felt important to me, in general, to ask them to speak on a conceptual level about what they believed and did in the abstract. They did not offer, and I did not require them to share specifics of their spiritual practices and philosophical systems.

A commitment to non-appropriation seemed much more important to me than the gathering of examples as validating ‘proof’ that their practice was consistent with their philosophy. I

trusted my own instincts and the feeling in my own heart and belly as we sat together; as well as the cognitive filter of critical theory through which to perceive whether their stated principles fit with how they described people and the stories they chose to tell; in order to judge their integrity and the congruence between what they said and what they did. In addition, as well as my concern about appropriation, I was frankly more interested in participants' methodologies of practice - "the theory and analysis of how [practice] should proceed" (from Harding 1987, p. 2, as cited in Esterberg, 2002, p. 19) than their methods - the specific tools or techniques they might be employing.

The dialogical nature of the interviews made room for questions and meanings to evolve and change as the conversations proceeded, and made room for participants to question me back. Throughout, I worked to remain open to new ways of perceiving and knowing. Huspek (1997), exploring this notion of researcher willingness 'not to know', echoes Gadamer (1993) on the importance of communication "where both self and other are genuinely attentive to each other's meanings and significances" (Huspek, 1997, p. 9)

This type of communication, Huspek argues, requires a dialogical approach which "entails both a recognition of one's own limits on account of being enmeshed within one's own culture and an acceptance of the idea that an understanding within the dialogue is built on the proposition that other should be engaged in other's own terms". Such dialogical communications, as he perceives them, rely on two critical hermeneutic principles: self-reflexivity and willingness to change oneself, and willingness to suspend the authority of one's own cultural meanings (Huspek, 1997, p. 9).

While coming to my practice of research grounded in my own knowing, as per Yuval-Davis (1997) as outlined in the review of literature, I remained open to not knowing, and sought to avoid having undue influence over the direction of the dialogues. In the interpretation, data that refutes my sense of themes and meanings is acknowledged (Grbich, 1999, p. 62); and I remained open to what Kvale (2002) calls "dissensus", a balancing of consensus with diversity. For example, it is this same type of openness that led to the inclusion of the participant who chose to use the word 'spirituality' rather than 'love' in relation to the practice context.

The interviews took between one hour and one hour and forty minutes. Each dialogue was taped for transcription. In addition, I made notes immediately after each interview, on both content as well on interview context and process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, pp. 78-9); to some extent on intersubjective narrative construction - noting examples of "confusion, ambiguity, and reluctance" (p. 79); and on my own reactions and reflections (see also Esterberg, 2002, pp. 107-8).

While ideally transcription is carried out by the researcher herself (Kohler-Reismann, 1993, p. 13), due to my own health and time constraints a professional transcriptionist performed transcription; tapes given to her were identified simply by order and date. Detailed verbatim

transcriptions of the whole of each interview were produced, including pauses and silences. During the first two-week period following the interviews, as she worked on transcription, I once again rested and engaged in my own spiritual and self-care practices.

Post-dialogue Process:

After that, the immersion process began. I engaged in deep listening with each tape, activating all parts of myself. I listened deeply with my heart and belly, and at times wrote free-flow notations of what seemed key in this first re-listening. When this was completed I began listening to each tape and correcting a hard copy of the transcript by hand. I sent draft transcripts to participants as soon as I received them; and during this period some of the participants chose to have contact with me – offering comments on the process as a whole, “asking back” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 122) about the process or my thoughts, and revising their raw transcripts. The third step involved re-reading transcripts as I transferred corrections from the handwritten copy to the computer version, which was to be used for the formal interpretation phase of the inquiry. These more completed transcripts were again forwarded to participants, as there had been a limited response to the raw transcripts.

As outlined previously, my key concepts when I began this inquiry were critical theory and praxis, and intersubjectivity and the relation of self to other, as conceptualized in the first chapter. My analytical method was to allow themes to emerge in my understanding of the dialogues as I listened to and re-read them repeatedly over a four-month period. Once initial themes had been noted, I compared themes to my conceptual framework as outlined in the first chapter, and invited an interweaving of the two into an analytical framework. Then I revisited the transcripts and compared participants’ comments to this tentative analytical framework. Based on my rereading, I made changes to the framework: shifting themes between categories and adding themes I had missed in previous readings.

Over the months of analysis, I realized that spirituality, which I had been addressing only implicitly, was the foreground in many participants’ discussions. Subsequent to that realization, I engaged in a second literature review on spirituality (defined as recognition of inherent interconnection) particularly as understood in Aboriginal and Buddhist approaches; this literature review was outlined at the end of the first chapter. Finally, I discussed my tentative framework with colleagues including a member of my supervisory committee and made further refinements based on those conversations.

The result of this process is the interpretive framework that I employ in the following chapters. This framework intermeshes the three key concepts of love: intersubjectivity, critical praxis, and the notion of spirituality as applied to social work from the first chapter; as well as other themes arising from my interpretation of the participant dialogues.

On the whole, I have allowed the process to unfold itself organically – sometimes I followed the data, sometimes I was in the lead. I imagined us walking together, the participants and myself, and I was not yet sure where we would end up. But I trusted the process of our walking. I spent a lot of time alone in silence. Between I listened, wrote, wrote and re-listened, listened and read, rested and walked, re-read and re-listened, trusting that the stories would make themselves heard in time. Over and over, I compared the analytical framework that was beginning to develop against another reading of the transcripts. It felt important to impose neither methodology nor method, but to work as I always do, as myself, following the lead of the people I work with and offering interpretive tools at what feels like the right time. A little thematic analysis, a little reflexivity, a little analysis of our co-construction of coming-to-know...

The work was filled with circles and cycles, a twisting and turning reminiscent of snakes.¹¹ The process was ripe with the ‘boths and ands’ of life, with the paradoxes; it felt and continues to feel critical to me that these riddles, these mysteries not be lost, not be conceptualized away. It felt very important to follow the dialogues with method, not to impose a method upon them. No one else may ever use my conceptualization of love in practice, but I feel compelled to act in accordance with it in my work.

As in the rest of my practice, as a researcher I came from a principled stance of love and openness and then used tools as needed in each situation. I trusted the voices of participants to speak to me about how they needed to be understood, and of course I continued to check in with and dialogue with the participants themselves. As Lather (1991) argues:

... some amount of dialogic encounter is required if we are to invoke the reflexivity needed to protect research from the researcher’s own enthusiasms. Debriefing sessions with participants provide an opportunity to look for exceptions to emerging generalizations. Submitting concepts and explanations to the scrutiny of all those involved sets up the possibility for theoretical exchange, the collaborative theorizing at the heart of research which both advances emancipatory theory and ‘empowers’ the researched. (p. 64)¹²

In keeping with the notions of dialogue and theoretical exchange, once my descriptions and tentative interpretations were written, they were sent to all participants either by email attachment or by priority courier depending on their preference. Several participants provided editorial feedback either of their own comments or of the work as a whole. Two of them suggested major editorial changes: one in regards to both content and presentation – the majority of these suggestions are reflected in the final draft of this work; and one primarily challenging the first draft of my revised conceptualization of love, which was revised a second time based on her feedback, and can be found in Chapter Six.

¹¹ During this period I saw many snakes, and actually found a complete snakeskin, which remains on my writing desk to this day.

¹² Italics mine – as stated in the first chapter, I do not believe in our ability to ‘empower’ others.

The whole of this journey has been one of critical reflection – on Western social work practices as a whole, on critical or anti-oppressive practice in particular, and on my own thoughts, feelings and actions as a critical practitioner. The process is a continuing one. As Lincoln and Denzin (2000) contend, we must explore many perspectives and hear numerous voices before we can “achieve deep understandings of social phenomena” (p. 1055). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) concur, suggesting that “The interpretation of questions and the meaningful content of responses is not settled once and for all... Meaning-making is a continually unfolding process” (p. 52).

I experienced, in participants’ talk, not only an affirmation of love in practice, and some suggestions of how to deepen my conceptualization of love, but the beginnings of descriptions of how they engaged in what Lincoln and Denzin (2000) describe as “enact[ing] the sacred, existential epistemology” (p. 1055) that I referred to earlier. I trust that I will understand the participants’ voices, and my own, in ever deepening ways as I grow, reflect, and return to listen to them again at different times. For the time being, my focus is on deeply hearing and honouring the content and substance of our discussions, and offering some interpretations of what I have heard.

In the following chapter on interpretation of the dialogues I will explore the balance - of accepting and honouring while reflecting and challenging - in more detail. Just as it was during the dialogues, it is my intention in the interpretation to reflect on the participants’ knowing (as I experienced it through dialogue) through the lens of critical theory, and at the same time reflect on critical practice through the lens of the participants’ knowing and my own practice experience. My primary focus, given the previously noted absence of similar voices in the critical literature, is on the latter. Before I move towards interpretation, however, let me take a moment to explore notions of neutrality, reliability, validity, and integrity and ethics in research.

Integrity & Ethics in research:

The process of this inquiry has been just what it is. Not replicable, not ‘valid’ (nor ‘invalid’), just itself, organically unfolding. This is consistent with the theoretical stance of active interviewing; in this model, bias, neutrality, validity and reliability are relative non-issues. As Holstein and Gubrium (1997) argue, bias is only a relevant notion if one takes a “narrow view of interpretive practice and meaning construction... a meaningful concept only if the subject is a preformed, purely informational commodity (pp. 125-6). In active interviewing, it is understood that “meaning construction is unavoidably collaborative”, and that all participants are “inevitably implicated in making meaning” (p. 126). Answers given on one occasion cannot be expected to be replicable in another situation they argue, recognizing the intersubjective nature of the interview process,

... because they emerge from different circumstances of production. Similarly, the validity of answers derives not from their correspondence to meanings held within the respondent but from their ability to convey situated reality in terms that are locally comprehensible. (p. 9)

This story of love in critical practice is necessarily partial, partially inarticulable, paradoxical and mysterious. What will emerge in the interpretation is my conceptualization of love in practice, constructed with the assistance of the participants in the dialogues. There have been many other definitions of love – some useful to this process, and some of which I have taken on critically - there will be many others. I offer my coming-to-know, as well as I can honour it in words, to anyone who finds value, learning, or more questions available in it.

My wish has been for a deepened understanding of my own research question, for the creation of new stories for critical social work, and for the catalytic validity and practical usefulness of the study. Those of us who spoke offered our understandings from the viewpoints of a diverse group of people living in urban areas on the western coast and prairies of North America. It is my desire that love as we are describing it might be introduced into critical praxis not as a tool, but as an intention, an option, and a possibility. I offer this conceptualizing of love in hopes that other critical social workers might find it relevant to their own practice, and take it up in their own working with people, in further dialogue with me or with their colleagues, or in further research.

The one form of validity therefore, that is applicable to this inquiry is catalytic validity, the notion of research's ability to be inspiring and energizing for further work towards emancipation. Catalytic validity was proposed by Lather (1991, pp. 61, 68), and has been taken up by other researchers (see, for example, Esterberg, 2002, pp. 148-9; Grbich, 1999, p. 62). As Lather defines it, catalytic validity "represents the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses and energizes the participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it" (p. 68). I have certainly been inspired by my contacts with the participants. It is my hope that this is true in reverse.

In the dialogues, a few participants referred to this specifically, suggesting that participation had been meaningful for them; that they had come to new ways of knowing, and indicating that they intended to speak to other practitioners about love in practice. The following are examples of participant comments near the end of interviews: "*This is deadly important. I mean, it needs to be said; this is the type of stuff that needs to be done*" (Les, p.26); "*I'll look forward to seeing what I said... This is a great honour, to be able to yak about what I think*" (Carol, p.50); "*I'm feeling quite moved right now at how important this is, and how unvalidated it is... having it named and articulat[ed]... I find that quite moving*" (Fiona, pp.34-5); "*What I'm left with is a clarity, a re-energizing, a kind of repositioning*" (Karen, p.49).

More pertinent to this study than reliability and validity have been the notions of ethics, integrity, and quality in research. Above and beyond traditional institutional ethics, anti-oppressive

research has required me to take responsibility for “issues of power, negotiation and transformation within [my] research design and interpretations” (Grbich, 1999, p. 77).

Adapting from Davis (1995), Grbich recommends the following aspects be addressed by feminist researchers: what all participants hope to achieve, and how their needs and concerns will be addressed; who will benefit from or lose by the research; what changes can be anticipated; how confidentiality and accountability will be addressed; and how decision-making and knowledge will be shared. In addition, she suggests researchers ask themselves the following reflexive questions as they proceed with the investigation: Are relationships non-hierarchical, respectful, caring and growth-oriented?; Is verbal and written language used accessible and demystifying?; What dialogues are evident between researcher and researched, and what have their outcomes been? (Grbich, 1999, p. 77).

In view of the cross-cultural nature of this inquiry, I have also considered questions posed by Tuhiwai-Smith (1999): For whom is the study worthy and relevant and who says so? What knowledge will the community gain from the study and what will the researcher gain? How can possible negative outcomes be prevented? To whom is the researcher accountable? (p. 173). I have attempted, at all stages: to be reflexive; to minimize power imbalance; to consult with and remain accountable to participants, honouring their voices, and recognizing their generous involvement; and to use plain language.

These notions of minimizing hierarchy in the interviews were important to me, and I feel participants confirmed my success in this area; several of them felt comfortable to question me, and ‘ask back’. Tom interrupts me at one point, “*I have a question to ask you*” (Tom, p.21), and goes on to ask me about my perception of EuroChristian bias in social work education. Carol refers to her role as an educator in offering comment on my initial conceptualization: “*Can you read them to me again? I’m just curious about, I think mostly, you know, my teacher’s mind always wants to see if there’s something I should be adding*” (Carol, p.19). Erika refers to my openness to be asked questions, and links this to dialogue, and to catalytic validity for herself: “*I really appreciate the feeling that I could ask you some of the questions back, cause that’s what’s been rich for me and not just hearing my own self talk and feeling you know in that classic interview mode where it’s just one way*” (Erika, p.23).

In critical feminist research, accountability to participants is central. However, the anti-oppressive researcher has responsibility not just to the individual participants, but to communities, and the ending of oppression as well. I have attempted to conduct and present this research in such a way as to not cause harm to those who receive or participate in social work services, or to movements for equality and justice, just as much as I have attempted to minimize any harm to the practitioners who participated. Ideally, above and beyond the concept of non-harming, this piece of

critical research will help to catalyze further action towards social justice; I have endeavoured to centre the balance of compassion and justice as the ultimate goal of the work, as will be seen in the chapters on interpretation.

A similar balancing occurred in my striving towards critical reflection; it was necessary to return frequently to the concept of loving practice, and the notion of compassionate critique. My commitment to ethics and integrity in the process of my work is firm, and critical reflexivity is a key component of what I consider ethical practice. However I found it difficult at times to balance reflective self-awareness without becoming self-conscious in a way that was immobilizing.

I believe that reflexivity is essential and that I must acknowledge how my own social location affects what and how I see: “We know that our texts have specific locations. We know that they represent – whether in some hidden way or openly – our baggage as individual social scientists” (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p. 1058), and that “research procedure constructs reality as much as produces descriptions of it (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 9).

However, I also concur with Eby’s (2000a) concern that “The constant use of reflection to promote self-development can lead to a sense of self-doubt and self-disapproval, since endlessly striving to improve leaves little room for a sense of personal well-being” (p. 54). I am concerned about how reflexivity and self location can be practised in critical and anti-oppressive ways that encourage the questioning of workers’ practice and social location without damaging their core sense of self, subjectivity, or self-efficacy. It is my contention that the notion of loving challenge discussed by the participants might help to mitigate difficulties in this area, and I will discuss the idea of compassionate critique in more detail in the subsequent chapter on love as critical practice.

A Note on Description and Interpretation of the Dialogues:

My intent in the following chapters is to offer the reader something of the tone or flavour of the dialogues, a sampling of participant dialogue in key theme areas, and an understanding of how participants moved and complicated my own preconceived understandings and conceptualizations. The key theme areas, which will be explored in the next three chapters, are: **love as spirituality**, **love as a mode of being in intersubjective relationship**, and **love as critical practice**. These three themes reflect the interrelationship between the initial conceptualizations outlined in the first chapter and the themes that arose from the conversations with participants.

Please note that categories of themes will be distinguished here for purposes of discussion only, and are not intended to be mutually exclusive. In order to centre participant voices, their verbatim comments will be noted in bold italics to distinguish them from the body of the text. Words that are underlined indicate vocal quality expressing emotion or emphasis.

Once the dialogues have been described and interpreted, I will move on to the final chapter in which I will complete my thesis with an interpretive section on principled practice, a concept that arose as I engaged in description of the dialogues. I will conclude by presenting a final offering of what I set out to explore: a refined and deepened conceptualization of love in critical practice.

In offering this conceptualization of love, I recognize the potential danger of this work being used in ways that decontextualize it from its grounding in a critical perspective. Given the complex nature of love itself, as well as love's complicated relation to the practice of social work, I ask the reader to keep two things in mind in reading these descriptions and interpretations. First, as I have stated previously, the participants were all long-time anti-oppressive practitioners and activists, strongly grounded in critical socio-political analysis. This anti-oppressive or critical stance is a key component of their dialogues and a crucial element in the conceptualizing of love in practice as I am discussing it here.

Second, participants were asked to address love, not as an abstract, but in relation to critical social work practice specifically. While those involved in this inquiry came from a wide range of social locations, a notable commonality arose in the dialogues – not only a loving and critical stance, but also a nondualistic and paradoxical one. The practitioners I interviewed, while strongly grounded in critical analysis, also described themselves as loving and spiritual. They spoke frequently of 'both/and', the juxtaposition of what are often considered to be dualities: of love *and* tools in practice; of self *and* other *and* no-self *and* no-"other"; of the paradox of being *and* doing; of diversity *and* unity; and of a basic belief in the goodness of all beings *while at the same time* acknowledging the reality of oppression, the "human condition", and "unskilful" behaviour.

Third, as I have argued above, love is intrinsically mysterious and in countless ways inexplicable; in many cases the interpretations offered may not provide the reader with a clear-cut practical or technological understanding of love, but rather may offer an enticement, a hint of what might be possible in practice, for the reader to explore themselves in their own life and work.

What love 'is' or 'isn't'; a note about language, love and domination:

Finally, I wish to take a moment to explore the ways language has played a part in making describing and discussing love very difficult, both in the dialogues themselves, and in this writing. It is key, in order to understand what participants might have meant by love in practice in our dialogues, to understand what they were clear that they did not mean.

While love by its nature is complex, intangible, and not ultimately fully quantifiable or definable, the dualism inherent in the English language, and its lack of specificity in words describing different kinds of love have made 'love' (in a critical sense) and related concepts particularly difficult to write about. Some of the dialogue participants referred to these frustrations as well. The most

overt example comes from my conversation with Raven, when she is trying to describe what she means by 'love in practice': "*But love to me is life force and honouring... along with it goes (pause) English is so limiting sometimes (big sigh and pause). I'll just stick with that*". I ask "So there are things that you could explain if you could explain them in Cree? That aren't explainable in English?" "Yes. Yeah... *English is so... linear. Binary*" (Raven, p.4).

Les also talked about language, and the way in which language not only describes, but constructs how we perceive: "*Language is a reflection of philosophy... it orders our thoughts before it comes out of our mouths. Now [my friend] said something very simple. He said in Blackfoot there is no such word as 'should'. That's massive in its implications as social workers... can we operate like that?*" (Les, p.14). How, I wonder, can we imagine, operate, or even discuss operating, in ways for which we have inadequate language?

One area in which language created particular difficulties was in trying to conceptualize around the juxtaposition of love and abuse. As I prepared for undertaking the dialogues, several colleagues questioned how I would conceptualize love's relation to domination and abuse. As I have argued previously, it felt important to me to disassociate love and oppression. I discussed this apparent conundrum with several participants, all of whom contended that abuse or domination and love as they were conceptualizing it, were in their understanding, incompatible.

Fiona and I talked for some time about the lack of specificity in English for trying to describe different aspects of caring that were distinct from 'love in practice' as we were trying to imagine it: "*Yeah, it's a big concept and its very intricate and I don't think we have enough words to describe it because there's so many different ways that love is played out and on so many different levels. There's romantic love and there's love between friends and there's love between siblings and there's love between parent and child*" (Fiona, p.14).

We go on to discuss, for example, how to distinguish love from abuse "*Because I do believe people (pause) have a strong emotion and attachment to somebody who they may be abusing. I don't want to undermine their feelings, I think their feelings are real, but I just wouldn't consider it love. It's something else but we don't have another word for it... I think it's more than affection and warm feelings but we don't have a word for it, so we call it love. [So we say] 'I think so and so 'loves' so and so', even though they may have hit them. But it's not the kind of love I'm talking about. But I just don't have any other word for it*" (Fiona, pp.14-15).

This lack of specificity in English terms for love leads not to clarity of conceptualizations, but to confusing conversations such as the following one with Tom, where he struggles to explain the complicated relationship between an abusive mother and her daughter. I offer it here as an example of the inadequacy of the English language in conceptualizing love. Like Fiona, Tom has

previously stated that abuse is not to be considered love (Tom, p.5). *“When you think about that [that the daughter felt safe for the very first time in the sweat lodge with him]... How her mother loved her daughter, she loved her but couldn’t raise her safely in a loving environment; and how that mother died and she [the mother] still couldn’t. She was so far removed from being able to love, eh, that she probably wouldn’t understand”* (Tom, p.6).

Raven was also convinced that love, as we were conceptualizing it, could not coexist with abuse. In the following section of dialogue, I have asked her to comment on bell hooks’ contention, cited in my first chapter, that where love is present domination cannot rule. She answers me, reconfirming the need for self-work that runs through her interview (more on this notion in a subsequent section) and citing the work of Freire: *“Well, that reminds me a little bit of the conversations she’s [bell hooks] had with Paulo Freire... I think that’s an elaboration of what he was talking about in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. He talks about oppression as the antithesis of love... As I do the work on myself and develop a loving relationship with myself I increase my capacity for love. And that translates... in my life, translates very specifically into deeper and more intimate relationships with every other human being and animal that I come into contact with actually... doing this processing work, it just cleared away so much garbage, so I was really able to hear and do much deeper work [with others]. So I didn’t create domination anymore I created love... I truly understand that, what bell hooks says, from an experiential point of view. They just, they do not, they can’t exist simultaneously”* (Raven, pp. 15-16).

By the end of the interviews, I came to see four distinct things that were being referred to as love in social work discourse:

- What is called love that participants and I believed could not honestly be called love - oppression, appropriation, othering and abuse;
- Affection and caring;
- Compassion and empathy described as tools or technologies; and
- Love as spirituality and interconnection, in the sense of love of humanity and/or all beings and the Earth.

While affection and caring were seen as relevant to the social work relationship, and while tools were used as appropriate, it is the latter connotation of love, which has been explored in Chapter One that seems the closest to what participants appeared to mean by ‘love in critical practice’ as we worked to conceptualize it together.

Conclusion

In the chapters that follow I will offer my interpretation of the dialogues, and a reconstructed conceptualization of love as an emancipatory possibility for critical social work practice. I have sought to produce a piece of work that meets some of what Lincoln and Denzin (2000) describe as the qualities of good critical writing: articulating “clearly identifiable cultural and political issues, including injustices based on the structures and meanings of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation”; and articulating a “politics of hope [which] should criticize how things are and imagine how they could be different... challeng[ing] the reader to take action in the world” (p. 1054). It is with these goals in mind, that I will move on to the description and interpretation of the dialogues on the conceptualizations of love in practice.

My interpretation, while seeking to be critical, will also attempt to make space for what one of the participants referred to as ‘mystery’ and another as ‘intangibility’. I adhere, as the spiritual approaches outlined in the first chapter do, and as we will hear participants doing in subsequent chapters, to the ontological stance that everything is connected, a “seamless whole” as Bai (2000) names it (p. 1-2).

I side with Bai, who argues that if we take seriously this notion of interconnection, then critical thinking, while a useful tool, is not a “universal tool for intellectual engagement”, nor the definition of “what it is to think or even to think at all”, nor synonymous with ‘good’ thinking, nor the “foundation... upon which all thinking builds”. Bai recommends a contemplative “repose of [all] named things” (p. 3, following Nagarjuna) as a counterbalance to critical thinking. It is repose of just this sort that can arise in what I have termed in the initial conceptualization ‘deep engagement’ and ‘not-knowing’.

hooks (1996) makes similar contentions about the necessity of contemplation as a counterpart to critical inquiry and action:

I once believed that progressive people could analyze the dualities and dissolve them through a process of dialectical critical exchange. Yet globally the resurgence of notions of (288) ethnocentric purity, white supremacy, have led marginalized groups to cling to dualisms as a means of resistance... (this) merely inverts the dualistic thinking that supports and maintains domination. (p. 289)

She argues that theory-making, and

certain forms of critical thinking are essential to a process of change. We have been led to believe that we can have change without contemplation (p. 291)... Militant resistance cannot be effective if we do not first enter silence and contemplation to discover – to have vision – of right action. (p. 292)

I share hooks’ concern that critical praxis, which I have deeply believed in and engaged in, has not proven able to end oppression and hierarchical ways of thinking and doing. It was precisely this concern that contributed to my desire to explore the role of love as praxis in this inquiry. It is my

hope that the dialogues and conceptualization of love offered in the following chapters may provide some other, more contemplative ways of looking at critical praxis than those found in the canonical literatures.

I am aware that the words on these pages will not fully be able to express the nature of love in practice, that critical thinking and theory-making cannot bring us fully to an understanding of love. I realize that the failure of language, conceptualizations and critical thinking to fully facilitate understanding of the world (hooks, 2000; Bai, 2000) has been a large part of my difficulty in articulating the embodied and direct experience of loving and spirituality of which the participants and I have tried to speak. Some of it will remain a mystery available only in the practice. I offer this thesis to the reader fully aware that it may be impossible to share such direct and embodied knowing with those who have not experienced something similar. It is my hope that the audience of this work might read not only with critical mind engaged, but also with body, heart and spirit open; that our words might plant a seed of desire in you to open to such experience for yourself. I turn first to the theme of love as spirituality.

Chapter Three: Love as Spirituality

The following chapter explores the key concept of spirituality as spoken about by the participants in the dialogues. Participants' discussion of spirituality centres the notion of love *as* spirituality, and explores interconnections and juxtapositions between different approaches to spirituality, distinguishing spirituality from oppressive imposition of religiosity.

Framing Love as Spirituality and Interconnection:

As I began the interpretive process I realized that all participants framed love at least to some degree in spiritual terms. This reframing whether overtly stated or implicit was common to all participants, although I had neither centred spirituality nor asked questions specifically about it. As described in the review of literature, participants' views of spirituality seem to fit best with Baskin's (2002) definition of spirituality as "connection to all that is in existence". The following section explores the way in which each participant conceptualized love as spirituality.

Les was the first to specifically reframe love as spirituality. I had just read him my initial conceptualization of love in critical practice, and he replied: "*I'd see all of that also as under the umbrella of spirituality. When you embrace some basic principles of spirituality, then all of these things would fall...* " [into place?] (Les, p.9). In keeping with the discussion of Aboriginal spirituality at the end of the literature review, he goes on to talk about spirituality as interconnection and a recognition of life force in all beings: "*It's not just a chunk of wood, that guitar [pointing], it's totally its own person. It's not a piece of wood that I speak through; it has its own thoughts. The plants, absolutely everything. The interconnectedness of things is tens of thousands of years old*" (Les, p.10).

Raven and Tom, other First Nations participants, concurred that love is a subset of spirituality: "*Well, when you talk about spirituality in the system, which includes love...*" (Tom, p.4), and "*The one other thing, and it just keeps popping into my mind, and I don't know if it could fit in there or if its already been there maybe kind of intrinsically in the points [of the conceptualization]... But it's the concept of (pause ~5) the spiritual...*" "*When I talk about life force coming through, it's that spirit and emotion connection that comes out, and that's spiritual...I really think there should be a section on love as spirituality 'cause that's the whole thing*" (Raven, pp.13-14). These Aboriginal participants overtly and specifically reframed love as spirituality, where the non-Aboriginal participants discussed the interrelationship between love and spirituality more implicitly.

Like Raven, Carol, a Jewish Buddhist practitioner also uses the word 'connection' in relation to the spiritual: *"It does feel like some kind of spiritual connection... I do end up having these incredibly deep connections with people"* (Carol, p.7). She later talks about being able to feel the energy of this connection: *"I'm wondering if that meeting isn't where both people are... connecting at that spirit place... there's just that incredible ease of some other reality that the room is infused with... and you feel that in the body, where the energy's just flowing"* (Carol, p.37).

Karen talks the least about her own spiritual beliefs or her practice as specifically spiritual, although she contends: *"I think it's hard to have a conversation about love without talking about spirituality. I think it can be done, but I think (pause) to me there is kind of a straight line to love, hope, faith, spirituality"* (Karen p.18). Subsequently, she agrees with my statement that: *"to me it feels... there's an element of sacredness to the work. To me it really is about reverence for beings"*, responding *"Yeah. Absolutely."* (Karen, p.23). Spirituality as a sense of sacredness and reverence for interconnection and for all beings is key to the conceptualizing of love as I am offering it here.

Erika also speaks about spirituality, again using the word 'connection'. She says: *"Connecting to Spirit [as compared to 'efficiency' and 'performing'] - what is not spoken but sensed... Love [i]s a source of inspiration, insight and direction"* (Erika, p.9). She also refers to the notion of spirituality in relation to ritual: *"So much of ceremony is the expression of love, so when we do things ceremonially, that's about being loving... that in a way is about choosing love... because sometimes I think maybe we can get at things through, we can express something if there's a ritual format for it that would be very difficult otherwise... I think of a colleague who very much embodies love in teaching... and her use of ritual as a way of drawing groups together, facilitating group process. That to me is very much about love/Spirit - inviting that which is greater than ourselves"* (Erika, p.17).

The notion of *embodying* love, of enacting it, is key. This will be explored in a subsequent discussion of love as embodied practice.

One participant, although not religious herself, uses a religious term to explain what she means by love in practice. In her discussion of love as spirituality, Fiona uses the word 'agape', which she says has *meaning* and *resonance* for her, although she is critically reflexive about its Christian connotations *"I don't know how it's interpreted in that religion, but for me how I interpret that word is that love isn't just romantic love or even friendship love... but that there's... I guess a thing or energy that flows throughout the world"* (Fiona, p.8).

She goes on to tie this notion of energy and interconnection specifically to spirituality: *"Love, the energy of love, agape love or just whatever it is we're going to call it is, it's healing and it's (pause ~4) and it's I guess in some ways it might be another way... another word for*

it might be God, or energy or Spirit” (Fiona, p.15). Other words participants use to define love as spirituality include *Energy* or *Vibration* (Fiona, p.8; Raven, pp.4, 17), *Spirit* (Carol, p.12; Erika, p.8; Raven, p.3), *Soul* (Erika, p.9), *Life force* (Raven, p.3), *Mystery/magic/wonder* (Erika, pp.6, 9), *Great Mystery* (Raven, p.6), *Creator* (Les, p.2; Raven, p.6) *God* (Fiona, p.8; Les, p.12), or *Truth* (Raven, p.3).

Some of the participants describe this spiritual aspect of love as an intention, or an availability to tap into: *“That’s [agape] a part of all of us (pause ~2) but that we’re not always in tune with or that we can’t always get in touch with. It’s like it’s there. It’s not something that we have to make up... we don’t have to make it... it’s there. It’s there for everyone to tap into... Love is always there... it’s just a given”* (Fiona, pp.8-9). *“Spirituality is everyday, constant. I don’t know why we fight against it at all”* (Les, p.11). *“I guess the first thought is that love is a way of being. It’s a conscious intention”* (Erika, p.1), and *“I guess there’s something too about the tremendous power of love, and perhaps a willingness to embrace that is another aspect”* (Raven, p.24).

Throughout the dialogues, these critical practitioners suggest that the tapping into love as spirituality is a conscious intention that underlies their practice

First Nations and Buddhist spirituality:

In several of the dialogues, First Nations spirituality is specifically drawn on to provide examples of love in practice. Les is the first to bring up the practice framework of the medicine wheel: *“If you envision a circle – a medicine wheel circle – half the world is physical, half the world is spiritual. Everything that happens in the physical world impacts on the spiritual. Everything that happens in the spiritual world impacts on the physical”* (Les, p.11). Raven and Tom both refer to the medicine wheel in relation to inherent wholeness and the need for ‘balance’: *“I sometimes struggle to think, well, I mean common sense, you know – if you’re not balanced physically, emotionally, spiritually or mentally... then what do you expect? To me it seems like common sense”* (Raven, p.14); and *“what we call the wheel: the physical, the mental, the emotional, and the spiritual”* (Tom, p.3).

Les touches on the notion of intrinsic wholeness in this comment on the medicine wheel model: *“We look at all individuals in that way, in that positive way. It’s not a deficit model... it’s not something wrong with you... you know, Elders would say that if you can’t understand something it’s only, only because your position on the wheel is preventing you from seeing everything clearly”* (Les, p.12). This concept of intrinsic wholeness will re-emerge later in discussions of acceptance and change in critical practice.

Participants also refer to the Aboriginal notion of the circle, and the need to ‘begin from the individual’. Les, for example, says: *“Now one of the first teachings that you learn is that in relationship to the self and the universe we have four circles: the inner circle is individual, the next circle is family, the next circle is community, the next circle is the world”* (Les, p.3). Erika concurs: *“This [the interrelation of love for self and other] connects to the First Nations teachings of the circle [she draws me a diagram of self, partner, family, work, community... in expanding concentric circles]”* (Erika, p.7).

An interesting convergence between the participants who draw on Aboriginal spirituality and those who draw on Buddhism is the notion of sacredness; seeing each being as a diverse expression of Spirit/Life Force/Buddha: *“This body that we live in is the house that we occupy but the spirit that’s in us is a powerful, ageless, spirit”* (Les, p.12). *“By talking about love we are talking about lifeforce, the life force is the spark in our spirit that, you know, allows us to be here and to move and think and [feel]”* (Raven, p.5). Carol, while acknowledging that Buddhism is nontheistic, also refers to this notion of reverence for each being: *“what I’m learning from Buddhism is to see each person as Buddha”* (Carol, p.11). Tom, whose deep sense of respect and reverence is evident both in how he speaks about the people he works with, and in how he warmly greets the young people who pass by the café where we are talking, summarizes it: *“I guess the bottom line for unconditional love is that the worker really needs to know, the student really needs to know, that human beings have value”* (Tom, p.18). First Nations spirituality and Buddhism, as discussed by participants, will be explored in more detail in the section on love as critical practice, particularly in discussions on non-attachment, non-interference, and seeing beyond or below social construction.

Spirituality and religion:

Several participants distinguish spirituality of the type explored above, from ‘religion’: *“I think lots of times people get it [spirituality] confused with religion”* (Raven, p.14). By ‘religion’, they seem mostly to specifically mean EuroChristianity as experienced in colonial contexts¹³.

Several participants assert that in attempting to distance themselves from a history of imposed religiosity social workers created a functional if not intentional lack of space for spirituality

¹³ Please note that I have chosen to use the term “EuroChristian” rather than the more familiar “Judeo-Christian” for three reasons: first, it was the term used by more than one participant in exploring this line of thinking; second, as a Jew, I find the latter term imprecise, in that it overlooks serious distinctions of meaning between supposedly common concepts in the two value systems (charity/justice, peace, and sin for example, which mean quite different in things in Hebrew and in English), and because it seems to suggest a ‘natural progression’ from the one to the other. Third, the term suggests a link between European and Christian cultural practices and philosophies, which may differ considerably from the practice of Christianity in other cultural contexts.

or discussions of spirituality in relation to social work. Their observation is congruent with Canda's (2002) review of social work in North America, which suggests a concurrent movement away not just from religion but also from spirituality in social work particularly during the period from the 1920's through 70's (p. 1). I perceive Canda to be arguing for 'inclusivity' and 'spiritual sensitivity' in this article, rather than beginning as I would prefer, from full recognition and valuing of diverse spiritualities; however I include the reference here as he has studied extensively in the area of spirituality and religion as related to social work and is widely considered an expert in this area.

While the distancing from spirituality in mainstream practice may have shifted somewhat during the 80's and 90's as Canda (2002) contends, it has been my experience that much of the critical practice and writing that I have encountered; rightly concerned with the frequent appropriateness of "New-Age" philosophies, and with the attempt of White people to seek refuge from dealing with race (Jeffery, 2002); has maintained a canonical stance unwelcoming to spirituality because of fear of a 'slippery slope'.

The critical practitioners I interviewed concur, seeing the distancing of social work from imposed religiosity and assumptions of EuroChristian normativeness as a positive step but cautioning that this may have inadvertently closed spaces in which spirituality as interconnection may be explored. Les, for example, says the following: *"I think the reluctance to include spirituality/religion [in] social work practice stems from some good intentions, from not wanting to impose beliefs or not wanting to change people, or having respect for people's own beliefs... which is good. But I think that's stopped us... because [spirituality] can be used if you use it in a respectful way, as defined, you know, by the people that you work with, not yourself"* (Les, p. 17). Karen concurs, saying: *"Social work as a distinct body has spent a lot of time distancing itself from its roots... the whole... you know, religious benevolence thing. I think in doing so [it's] kind of lost some of the most profoundly healing and transformative aspects of spirituality"* (Karen, p. 18).

Tom agrees, specifically critiquing EuroChristian assumptions of normativeness: *"The schools, they're not allowed to do things around the three wise men, you know... but at the same time, they're still calling it Christmas... A lot of things that have happened by the system have basic Christian beliefs attached"* (Tom, p. 21). Advocating for the inclusion of spirituality he notes: *"When you talk about spirituality, which includes love... they say 'you are trying to force your views on us'; that all spirituality is religion, which is not true. Spirituality is simply a good way of living. I do sensitization work in [town] – with school boards, mental health workers, social workers, and I have to be very clear to them that when I bring out my culture and my tradition, that it's spirituality, that it isn't religion"* (Tom, p.4).

At the same time as she critiques imposed religiosity, Karen points out that Christianity, depending upon how it is practiced, may have very anti-oppressive and critical aspects: *“I think that social work as a whole... has not made its peace with its Christian roots... cause there’s some good stuff in there. You know, Jesus was a pretty cool guy, and I’m not a believer”* (Karen, p.18). She also speaks strongly of the benefit to some people of belonging to communities of faith, including Christianity *“[Religion is] a big part of love. You know... some people are loved best in their religious communities, in their faith communities... and find that as a place of belonging, and meaning, and support... and of true love”* (Karen, p.20).

She goes on to suggest that social workers who refuse to acknowledge the spiritual or religious aspect of their clients do them a disservice. She also acknowledges the potential social justice aspect of religious belief: *“there’s that aspect, I think, of many different faith traditions around social activism and social justice”* (Karen, p.38), which she refers to as *“a very principled... and a very intentional love”* (Karen, p.41). Her words echo hooks (2000) notion of love as a verb or action, and are supported by participants’ discussion of love as a liberatory possibility in a subsequent section.

Fiona and Erika make similar connections, as they talk about love in critical practice. Fiona makes the link between love and spirituality/religion wondering: *“it’s [agape/love] something we’re... that we may always be striving for. That’s part of why we’re learning and why we’re growing and why we’re healing is to (pause ~3) you know... maybe that’s what the religions are talking about when they talk about heaven or nirvana... maybe that’s what it is? I don’t know for sure, but it’s something that... when I tap into it I just feel so different... like I’m more than just Fiona... more than just me and all my stuff and all my baggage. It’s not that the stuff doesn’t exist, it’s not that it’s not important, but somehow I become more than just that stuff... And I’m able to tap into love for this person and be just more generous and more compassionate and more real and more genuine with them”* (Fiona, pp.16-17). In relation specifically to my research into love, Erika also makes this link, saying: *“You have all the great religious and spiritual traditions of the world to back you up”* (Erika, p.25).

Maybe, suggests Erika in the last few words of her interview, it is time for critical social work to reinsert love as spirituality into the discourse: *“It’s [love’s] such a universal teaching... it’s something universal that we’ve mostly lost touch with. So [this research] is very healing work, when we talk about healing what’s been fractured... we so need love and we so need to be grounding in those traditions of what that means and to have that spoken... and when I hear the Elders talk that’s what I hear. And yet in the West we make everything so complicated... postmodernist this and ethics that and appropriateness this. And yet when I hear people talk... grassroots people... coming from spiritual traditions... [The Elders] just*

look really simply, it doesn't need to be so complicated... The main thing is that we just need to remember the important ideas we've forgotten... and to set them free again from what has become unhealthy. Maybe that's why we've gone away from love, because love became about patriarchal structures", or religiosity in a... EuroChristian way (Michele)... "Yeah, or ooey-goey romanticism" (Erika, p.26-7). "none of which is what I'm talking about", I say. "Yeah", she agrees, as we end our conversation.

Herein lies one of the paradoxes of this work. The participants and I are speaking of spirituality and not religion per se; and several of us have specifically recognized social work's troubling history of governmentality and imposition in our dialogues and are very cautious about any opening for reinsertions of imposed colonialistic religiosity into social work. Spirituality as participants discuss it is about a recognition of interconnection within a context that deeply values diverse ways of perceiving, being and doing.

At the same time, we must also recognize that a critical religiosity which values difference and multiplicity, including critical and social justice oriented Christianity, is for some, a liberatory possibility¹⁴. Nonetheless, I will continue to use the term spirituality to refer to the recognition of interconnection, rather than in a religious sense in this writing.

As we spoke and listened together to come to a working conceptualization of love in practice, participants used many words other than spirituality to describe love or elements of love, as well as ways of being that they saw as following from or acting together with love in practice. For example, in keeping with the notion of spirituality, several participants use the following words specifically to help describe what they meant by love in practice: *inspiration* or *guidance* (Fiona, p.34; Erika, p.9), and *hope*, *faith* and/or *optimism* (Les, p.4; Carol, p.27; Karen, p.4); and many connected love to *compassion*.

Compassion, as participants spoke of it was more in keeping with engaged Buddhist connotations of that term than with 'pity' in the English etymological sense, as has been discussed previously. At the same time, participants did not talk about compassion as a tool or skill, as is all too common in social work education materials, but rather as a way of *being with* self and others.

In this chapter, participants have been heard to describe love as spirituality, that is, recognition of the interconnection of all of life in all its diversity. Participants have commented specifically on First Nations and engaged Buddhist approaches to spirituality, and have discussed the difference between spirituality as recognition of interconnection and the intrinsic value of all beings, and practices of imposed religiosity or imperatives for religious normativeness. Love in the context of participants' discussion is a worldview, a way of seeing the world and all beings including oneself.

¹⁴ For example, see Amato-von Hemert's (1995) work on Niebuhr's critiques of liberal Christianity, and argument for love and justice in social work from a Christian perspective.

It is important to acknowledge that love and spirituality are not synonymous terms, but rather that there is a complex, intricate and interconnected relationship between the two. As the participants and I are discussing it, love is an intrinsically spiritual construct, rather than simply an emotion or an intellectual idea; and spirituality as participants frame it is inherently interwoven with love. If one frames spirituality as interconnection as the participants and I do, then spirituality and love are *more* synonymous in a way compatible with critical practice. But if spirituality is framed differently, as is more common in the literature, this is not necessarily so. Love as I am framing it here requires not just a spiritual recognition of interconnection, but also intersubjective engagement and a context of critical practice as defined earlier.

The participants' notion of compassion as a *way of being* that emerges from bearing the sense of interconnection and interbeing in mind brings us to the next key concept: love as a mode of being in intersubjective relationships; this will be the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter Four: Love As A Mode Of Being In Intersubjective Relationship

The following chapter explores the key concept of intersubjectivity as participants in the conversations discussed it. The practitioners I spoke to framed love as a compassionate and caring way of being in which the well-being of the other as they define it for themselves, deeply matters to the critical practitioner. Participants distinguish this loving from liking; suggest an open-hearted way of being in intersubjective relationship as a preventive to burnout; and offer intersubjectivity as an alternative to technological approaches to social work practice. Finally, they explore conceptions of mutual change in the helping relationship and complicate the notion of reflexivity with the concept of self-work.

Love as Compassion, Caring, and Mattering:

Six of seven participants specifically invoked the notion of *compassion* in their discussion of love in practice (Fiona, p.10; Tom, p.17; Les, p.8; Carol, p.4; Erika, p.6; Raven, p.7). In some cases, they speak as though love and compassion are part and parcel of one another. For example: *“I have compassion and unconditional love for human beings... I respect the basic human being”* (Tom, p.17).

On the other hand, some frame compassion as something different from love, which exists alongside it. Raven, for example, refers to love and compassion as different but co-existent in her practice: *“the ensuing release that comes from them [the person she’s working with] challenging their own belief that they carried is just amazing. And then they show compassion for themselves and a little bit more love for themselves. It’s profound”* (Raven, p.7).

Les makes the distinction overtly, differentiating the two terms in relation to the level of commitment required: *“Love is like a personal investment that compassion needn’t have”* (Les, p.8). This is an interesting observation on his part, and mirrors my own careful choice of words in framing this inquiry; I chose to use the word ‘love’ rather than caring or compassion specifically because it suggests a deep and personal connection or engagement with those with whom we work. I have chosen to conceptualize about love rather compassion because I feel that the latter, especially in its English etymology and usage (more so, I think than in the Buddhist connotation), can inadvertently encourage a sense of pity for the other rather than a recognition of inherent interconnection, and may allow a sense of detachment rather than the non-attachment of which we will hear participants speak.

In a few of the dialogues this sense of compassionate engagement or mattering is referred to in specific as an element of loving practice. Carol refers to this several times – twice at the beginning of our discussion, and again when she is taking up my conceptualization in a critical way: *“I cared about them. I still remember every one of them [the people she had worked with] you know, thirty two, thirty four years later”* (Carol, p.4)... *“it matters to me that they learn to love themselves, that they get the tools or healing that they need to become choiceful in their lives”* (Carol, p.7)... *“it matters to me how things go for this person”* (Carol, p.21).

Karen also talks about the notion of mattering: *“he used to ask me... well, ‘why do you keep showing up?’ It’s... well, ‘cause you’re important.’ I never say it’s my job, I never say that. ‘It’s because you’re important to me’ and that’s true”* (Karen, p.8). Not only is this participant deeply engaged rather than simply ‘doing her job’; from her critical stance, she also recognizes the impact her framing of her caring has on the person with whom she is working. Karen, like the other participants, is deeply engaged in her caring for the people she works with; what happens to them – while she works with them and beyond – matters deeply to her.

In general, participants’ words seemed to suggest a notion of compassion similar to the Buddhist framing of the term, and less the sense of pity as is sometimes connoted in the English word. They are all clear to frame compassion within a sense of personal responsibility for behaviour, as is seen, for example, in Raven’s quote above about challenging and releasing our own limiting beliefs.

The following example also demonstrates the way in which participants frame love and compassion within the context of personal responsibility for behaviour. Fiona observes: *“I can think about him as a human being. I can think about him as a child you know who maybe went through periods of intense fear or trauma or whatever and again not to excuse his behaviour but to just give it a context and go ‘okay what would really be helpful for this person?’ For me to rant and rave at him? ... No that’s just going to create more of this horror right. But if I can tap into that agape love for him then I, maybe I can’t forgive him, maybe I can’t, I certainly don’t want to excuse him but I can try to find compassion and understanding, and I can send him, you know, try to send him some clarity (laughing). Or some healing and that’s going to be way more useful”* (Fiona, p.10).

Fiona, like the other participants, is able to separate the person she is working with from their behaviour. This separation of ‘the person from their behaviour’ or the ‘sinner from the sin’ may appear to be common to practitioners who work from stances other than a critical sense of love in its *intent*, but these notions in practice often seem to be invoked in order to judge and “other” the person in question in a *functional* sense. The participants in this study, coming from their recognition

of the intrinsic wholeness and value of all, take the notion of compassion in a different direction, not judging but discernment and a distinguishing of the difference between loving and liking.

Loving, not Liking:

Participants see love in practice as unconditional but they are clear that love is not the same as liking or forgiving. Tom suggests this throughout his interview; in the deeply respectful way he discusses, for example, the perpetrators and murderers he has worked with. He makes the distinction overt while talking about counsel he has offered to someone whose partner has cheated; taking the stand that we must offer people unconditional love, but not necessarily forgiveness or forgetting: *“you don’t have to like or accept what they do, but you need to love them anyway”* (Tom, p.4). He contends that we think we hate the partner, but really we hate the behaviour. He goes on to say: *“tell your partner you love them. Tell them you don’t like what they’re doing... that partner has to come back and say what they’re going to do”* (Tom, p.5)... *“I don’t talk about forgiveness; that’s your choice”* (Tom, p.10).

Fiona also talks about the difference between loving and liking: *“I tap into that agape love and I just, I love everyone... even people I don’t know or don’t care about or don’t like... when I think about people in the abstract, I can really hate them... but I meet them where they’re at... They need to be responsible for their actions of course, but I can put that aside... I definitely don’t forget it. I don’t even know if I forgive it... or excuse it or anything like that. I know it exists – it’s like a ‘both/and’ thing. I know it exists and I can still love you and I can still give a damn about you...”* (Fiona, pp.9-10).

While they also call for unconditional loving in practice, other participants do acknowledge that it may be easier to love when you like or have affection for the person/ group. Erika describes an encounter with a student who was neglecting her responsibilities as a research assistant: *“I could have just been in a very disciplinary role, but in that case it was easy to tell her I loved her, because I do really feel love/affection for this student, so it wasn’t something I had to consciously commit to”* (Erika, p.16).

In a similar vein, Carol suggests that it is easier to love deeply when you are closer to the other in terms of social location or more similar in viewpoint or worldview: *“There was enough lack of social distance... so there was that connection”* (Carol, p.25). She questions: *“So how do you love those parents [fundamentalist and punitive adoptive parents]? And even you could have compassion for them, but probably you’re not going to get to this deep engaged place with them if they’re full of you know, [fundamentalist religious] stuff that doesn’t go down with you”* (Carol, p.35).

Still, some participants suggest, in keeping with the notion of ‘love of humanity’ explored in the first chapter, that loving is possible even across social construction and distance. Here is a piece of conversation in which Karen and I are discussing a client she did not like, and whose values she found abhorrent: *“You didn’t like her, you didn’t like what she said?”* (Michele) *“No.”* *“You didn’t like her values but you stayed in connection with her. You didn’t ‘other’ her... you didn’t kick her out?”* (Michele) *“No.”* *“You just, you stayed.”* (Michele) *“I had to work really hard.”* *“Right, but you stayed.”* (Michele) *“Yes I did, yeah.”* *“And you made the same kind of loving challenge that you would make with somebody that you did like?”* (Michele) *“That’s true.”* (Karen, p.35). This stance of love as staying in deep engagement, or ‘hanging in’ with ourselves and others will be explored in more detail in the chapter on love as critical practice.

Erika also speaks about loving as a choice, even when there isn’t liking or affection: *“I think often love is most easy for me to connect with when there is affection... The times where I’ve chosen love... it would probably be best to look at the times where it’s been a difficult choice (pause ~10)... I know there’s been times where I’ve made a conscious decision to be kind and warm to people who have been hard, harsh towards me, so I guess that’s been love... continuing to engage with them as if there was good energy between us, even when difficult things had been said – that might be an example”* (Erika, p.16). What I hear in and underneath her words, and what I have experienced in observing her in situations of conflict and contention is not pretence, not a denial of difference and difficulty, an acting as though everything were fine. Rather I hear an acknowledgement of her own suffering, and a recognition of the humanness of the other: a concomitant commitment to speak her own truth and in remaining open and loving, to open to the possibility of reconciliation.

The practitioners I spoke with proffer the possibility that I have cited earlier in this paper: that of expanding our willingness to care about and see the humanness of those beyond our immediate circle; and even beyond those in our outer circle with whom we have a sense of comfort, familiarity and similarity; to those we do not agree with, feel comfortable with or like. As these pieces of dialogue demonstrate, while they may experience it as easier to love who and what they like and feel affection for, even in circumstances that presented deep challenges, the participants I interviewed strove to remain loving in their relation to the other, and found this possible even in relation to who and what they did not like. They do not tell us *how* this is achieved in a practical sense, but their words invite us to explore this possibility in our own lives and work.

Open heartedness:

So, how might a spiritual commitment to unconditional loving and compassion manifest itself in critical practice? One way of being that I observed over and over was what Carol, a Buddhist, talked about extensively as ‘open-heartedness’: *“I am in charge of a method, but the rest of it’s all being open-hearted in the moment”* (Carol, p.13). It is a stance that was common to all participants, whether they referred to it specifically or not; that is, I experienced each of the participants as living expressions of open heart. Participants clearly felt deeply – about their work, about those they worked with, about society, and about the planet.

As I engaged in the interviews themselves and later during interpretation, I came to see in all participants what I began to describe as a willingness to be mindfully present with the pain and difficulty of the human condition and still perceive or remain connected to beauty, hope, joy, and trust/faith in the unfolding of life. While all participants seemed to me to exhibit this open-hearted stance, Carol spoke extensively and most specifically about it: *“There’s something about the love... that will not die, this tender heart, the Boddhicitta¹⁵ basically of open heart no matter how painful it is”* (Carol, p.23)... *“we have to be willing to hold all those, points on a compass (pause) and keep an open heart in the middle of it... we weren’t taught this stuff in social work school... the heart grows back bigger and bigger... maturing is the heart breaking over and over again”* (Carol, p.27).

As we move to close our discussion, she talks about the *“energetic circle of healing”* that is possible *“if we do social work like this [with love] we become more and more open hearted. If we could keep our heart open instead of doing it by closing tight”* (Carol, p.44). She acknowledges that practising with an open heart is painful *“We try to open more and more and yes, it’s painful”* (Carol, p.44), but feels it leads to the most healing for those we work with, for ourselves, and for the world.

Tom and I, as another example, had a conversation about how the social system treats people, and how social workers replace openheartedness with mistrust, guardedness and a sense of who is ‘deserving’. He offered this example of the need for openheartedness, generosity and unconditional giving: *“See, this year the Christmas Bureau in [town] refused to give people, refused to give them their (pause) boxes of food if they did not have original ID. Eighty percent of people on welfare just don’t have it... cause someone’s stolen it or they’ve lost it or left it behind on one of their moves. It’s just heart-breaking. And the social workers did not get on it. Did not phone and say ‘this really is such and such, give them their hamper’... it’s funny, because there’s patience and open practice by social workers, but it doesn’t usually*

¹⁵ Boddhicitta connotes the Buddhist notion of awakened or enlightened heart; the supreme wisdom arising in a person.

happen. Because they think if you leave yourself open people could take advantage of you. I say so what!" (Tom, pp.14-15). We go on to agree that those 'using' the system may actually be less harmful to society than the conditionality of those who are able to give and do not.

Like Carol and Tom, the other people I spoke with were deeply discerning and socially conscious, firmly grounded in anti-oppressive and liberatory stances. What I found most fascinating in their narratives were the juxtapositions - a willingness to face the pain of the human condition, to engage and deal with "*fear, hatred, greed, delusion*" (Carol, p.26); and in their practices of activism to actively resist oppressive relations alone or in solidarity with others; and at the same time, to remain engaged with love, hope and beauty.

Love as an Antidote to 'Compassion Fatigue':

I find the participant's open-heartedness and willingness to face and feel pain as described above particularly interesting in light of the relatively common references to the concept of 'compassion fatigue' in social work literature, as outlined previously. As mentioned in the first chapter, the notion of burnout was addressed specifically in one of the dialogues and was an implicit topic in others.

I understand and do not intend to minimize the experience of burnout and the need for institutional supports for social worker self-care, but I remain unconvinced that the experience of burnout arises from too much 'compassion'. Rather, I suspect it may arise from the type of 'closing tight' that Carol and Tom refer to in the section above. I would suggest that love and compassion as described here do not lead to burnout, but rather may offer an antidote to the stress of human service work, increasing the sustainability of caring.

Several participants offer support for this view, claiming that a loving stance may actually insulate social workers from exhaustion and burnout. Karen says that practising from love she has a "*never-ending, inexhaustible list of resources*" available (Karen, p.6). She wonders if other social workers, who don't practice from love and who may therefore not experience the conflicts created by the social construction of practice as consciously, are more likely to suffer from burnout "*it just may be disguised, or comes out as stress leave... or something*" (Karen, p.13). Raven also describes love in practice as a sustaining source for engaging deeply; stating that her commitment and energy for engaging deeply with those she works with is "*limitless, because I'm constantly nurtured by life, the life force. I'm constantly nurtured by love*" (Raven, p.6).

Erika concurs, stating that because love as a practice framework calls for deep engagement, for being open and "*real*", it is potentially a "*powerful antidote to burnout - caused often by loss of a sense of magic, wonder, human connection, and personal congruence*" (Erika, p.6). She refers to this again later, in reference to activism: "*I think that love is probably essential to sustain activism, 'cause there's so many people who feel burnt out by activism because of the*

lack of love that's there... love [i]s a sustaining ingredient for any kind of practice – not a short road to burnout from caring too much, but a way to sustain caring” (Erika, p.18).

Harkening back to Hart (1999), love is seen by participants to nurture not only the ‘helped’ but also the ‘helper’.

Near the end of the final interview I conducted, I offered my tentative interpretation of openheartedness - of the convergent way of being of all the participants that allows them to be deeply engaged with the pain and difficulties of the ‘human condition’ and still remain loving – as a key element in practice. I was particularly interested in what this participant would say about my tentative interpretation, because while all the participants considered themselves anti-oppressive and clearly had strong critical analysis, she is the one who most easily labels herself a “critical” practitioner. She replies: *“you may have just summed it up with that, you know, that that’s what it’s about” (Karen, p.33).*

In fact, rather than feeling fatigued or burned out, the practitioners involved in the dialogues were passionate about the world, about the work they did and the people they worked with. More than one spoke of how fortunate they felt to do the work they did. Here are a few examples of their feelings about their work: *“I’m so lucky to get to do this... I just have had the best job in the whole world” (Carol, p.45).* Les says something similar. He has been talking about his past work as a guitar player and how much he loved it, and how social work has been similar for him: *“I would have done it for nothing and they paid me to do it! Everybody should be so lucky”... “to do what they love?” (Michele)... “Yeah. And then I thought ‘how would I ever find this [again?]. That’s what I thought. But social work has been like that. It’s just great, and not because it sets myself up as some sort of expert, but because you can do good work with human beings with it, and that’s what’s important” (Les, p.5).*

These critical practitioners are deeply passionate about their work. But they are not simply passionate; they are also loving and compassionate. This combination of qualities appears generative, protective and sustaining of their ability to care deeply.

Relationships with Self and Others:

a. Love as Embodied Intersubjectivity, Connection and Relationship:

So how might this interconnected, compassionate and critical way of being manifest itself? If love/spirituality is not about imposition, appropriation, “religious proselytization [and] moral judgementalism” (Canda, 2002, p. 1), and is not about Enlightenment essentialism, how might love make itself apparent in critical practice? Linked to openheartedness, to what Les describes above as “doing good work with human beings”, and to Baskin’s (2002) notion of spiritual engagement as the

purpose of life, is the commitment and willingness of participants to deeply engage in intersubjective relationship with those they serve and work with.

A few of the participants address the concept of intersubjectivity directly, either in their work, or in our conversation. Les, for example, describes a *“natural flow of reciprocal communication”* and goes on to describe the value of this relation as: *“our concern once again with being human, and the interconnectedness between humans”* (Les, pp.14-15).

Erika refers to the process she and I have undertaken in conceptualizing together during our interview: *“What’s been most important?... finding our truths together, and being stronger by sharing our most authentic selves. I mean that’s what it really is all about. That when I come with my authentic self and you come with yours then we reach... more deep and complex insights than we would on our own... and that hopefully happens whether it’s social work or education too”* (Erika, p.23).

This interconnected engagement is embodied in several ways¹⁶. Some participants describe their own embodied practice and refer to the energy that is felt in practice settings where love is practiced in an embodied way: *“I know when I’m speaking my truth because I feel it. It resonates in my body and it comes from my solar plexus. And so when I talk about life force that’s why I do that motion [she has been lifting her hands up and outward in front of her ribs as though something were arising] because that’s exactly what happens whether it’s you know on a personal level within me or I experience it in the presence of someone else and you know see their energy coming up”* (Raven, p.4).

Carol also talks about feeling energy arising in her work when love is present: *“you know how [that] place [of energy arising in body-focused counselling] can be from your own body experience. So there’s a resonance I think, a body, vibrational resonance when I’m working with somebody”* (Carol, p.5); *“you feel that in the body that, where the energy’s just flowing. So I don’t know how any of that informs my work but that is my work or... it’s everything. It’s in everything”* (Carol, p.37). *“What I’ve noticed with this is how actually deep engagement is... meditation, because I stop thinking about everything else in my life and I’m just focused on this moment and this picture. And if I’m totally in the zone you’re, as you know you’re almost given what to do next right... you don’t have to think ‘oh what am I going to do next?’ like a new social worker does... You’re just given exactly the piece”* (Carol, p.28).

Karen refers to being in ‘the zone’ as well, and like Carol makes a link to meditation and a sense of clarity about how to proceed: *“it feels seamless so I get to access my self from across a*

¹⁶ I mean to use the word embodied in the manner suggested by Bai & Dhammika Mirisse (2000), who describe “embodying, rather than just dispensing lovingkindness” as occurring only in a deep sense of “absorption marked by desire for other beings’ well-being and happiness” (12).

wide range of my internal landscape or my internal being, from my heart as well as my mind; and that there's a synthesis or a catalyst that happens. You know when you, I don't know if you do sports you know, you get that, you hit the zone. You get that real sweet spot thing happening where you just hit it all right... It happens in yoga. It happens in meditation... Where there's just, there's a convergence that happens... And a clarity that happens simul, almost simultaneously, and an opening. So that's when I can tell that it's happening" (Karen, p.6).

These participants seem to be suggesting that their critically informed and embodied sense of love/spirituality guide them in how to be with and care about self and other without objectification. This is in keeping Thich Nhat Hanh's (1993) earlier cited notion of compassion as a guide for mindful action (p. 45), and with my own experiences of being in a loving stance in practice, and in so being having a deep sense of knowing about what to say and how to proceed that moves me beyond theories and skills and into deep intersubjective relation.

In a manner similar to Buddhist ways of being and doing love¹⁷, participants connect loving practice not only to meditation, but specifically to mindfulness, presence, and embodied engagement (not just presence in a voyeuristic sense). Fiona, for example, picking up this notion of loving as being in the zone says: "*when I'm there I am so present... I'm so present I don't have to practice mindfulness, I am mindfulness*" (Fiona, p.33).

Carol agrees: "*Presence, like full presence... maybe that's what love is*" (Carol, p.9). She goes on to talk not only about being present herself, but attempting to share this skill with those she works with: "*I think the gift I am bringing to my work now is, part of the way that I love or care about people is the gift of teaching about presence, about being present right now*" (Carol, p.12).

Participants link presence and engagement specifically with listening and respect, not as tools, but as ways of being in relation. For example: "*I believe that [deep attention]... is kind of like a direct connection to the Great Mystery... If I'm sitting with someone and my intention is pure, purely to listen to them and support where they're at and to help them to find out exactly where they're at, the beauty of that is profound*" (Raven, p.6); or "*when I give somebody my attention, it's there all the way*" (Les, p.7).

In this, participants echo Bai's (2001) work on intersubjectivity and the practice of "attentional work" in which she speaks of attention as a "mode of activity" rather than a type of activity (p. 7). The participants take up the notion of love in practice, not as a technology or tool, but as a way of being from which doing arises. Karen, for example suggests that when she's working at

¹⁷ For example, see Bai, 2001; Bai and Dhammika Mirisse, 2000; Thich Nhat Hanh, 1993 & 1998.

her best, she is just being, and then the doings arise from that; that there is some way of being that not only underlies all of the doing (Karen, pp.12-13), but which also *“makes it impossible to do certain things”* (Karen, p.13).

We move on to discuss how compassion and empathy are often describes as ‘tools’ in social work literature and she distinguishes being from application of technologies, critiquing using love as a means to an end. She notes: *“Which is kind of repulsive really... I don’t think I want people running around, you know, being compassionate as a means to an end”* (Karen, p.18).

Later, as we are discussing social work ‘skills’ she again distinguishes love as a mode of practice from compassion as a technology: *“Love, it’s a very complex activity. It’s not just, it’s not like active listening, or you know, it’s not like any of those things [social work skills]”* (Karen, p.39). In his interview, Les agrees that we are talking about spirituality/love as a way of making human contact – not applying tools or techniques of social work, but simply being with people on a human level (Les, p.5).

Fiona and Carol also distinguish love from tools or technologies, both suggesting that love - a loving, intersubjective way of being - underlies everything they do. Carol, for example, says: *“I just channel love... and get out of the way... but the channel, the instrument, the flute so to speak, is made up of experience and tools and practice wisdom... I mean when you have the combination of all that plus the love, it’s powerful. Powerful!”* (Carol, pp.31-2); *“I think it [love] informs everything I do”* (Carol, p.34).

Fiona also argues that love is the ground that informs all practice. She does not denigrate practice skills, but contextualizes them in a loving stance: *“I do use the tool of empathy, I do use the tool of respect, I do use the tool of client-centeredness or compassion, but I’m able to use, to tap into that because of the overall or underlying thing of love... [the] context”* (Fiona, p.12). She returns to this theme later when we are discussing how she began her practice in a youth shelter before she had any formal training, stating that: *“Love informs everything I do... all the tools and all the techniques I’ve learned since are great. I use them all the time. They’re amazing but for me it couldn’t have worked the other way around. It [love] informs everything I do”* (Fiona, p.32). Similarly to Carol, she describes herself as a tool: *“I am a tool myself, and I work best if this tool is grounded in love, just like all the other tools”* (Fiona, p.34).

Participants are clear throughout the interviews that love as spirituality and recognition of interconnection is the ground or context in which all their ways of being and doing, both as people and as practitioners, arises. They are not technicians applying tools or protocols, but human beings in embodied, intersubjective relationship with other beings.

b. Mutual Change:

Participants' understanding of the intersubjective relation in practice also led them to recognize mutual change in the social work relationship. They appreciated that it was not just the 'client' changing but that they as a worker were changing too. This change was seen as mutual but not as symmetrical. That is, the practitioner was not expecting something in return from the person receiving help, and especially was not expecting love in return.

For example, Karen contends: "*It hasn't been, you know, no one needs to care-take me, and they know that*" (Karen, p.32) and "*It's not, you know, it's not about needing them or wanting them to love me back... I don't know how they feel about me*" (Karen, p. 38).

Similarly, Fiona says: "*when I'm [working] with somebody, it's not about my work and my healing although that is going to happen, but the focus is on the other person*" (Fiona, p.24).

Carol concurs, distinguishing the helping relationship from 'friendship' in the sense that the professional relationship is not reciprocal in the same way (Carol, p.10). She states that while the worker is also healed in the helping relationship, that is not her primary intent, and while the other person might love back or not, she cares and engages deeply regardless (Carol, p. 35).

At the same time, these social workers recognized that they were in intersubjective relationship, and that they benefited and grew from the relationship also; that not only the person being 'helped', but they as workers grew, learned and were changed, moved, and healed in what Carol (p.7) referred to as the "*energetic circle*" of healing (Fiona, p.24; Tom, p.19; Carol, pp.4, 7, 45). This is in keeping with Hart's (1999) earlier cited notion of the mutuality and necessary reciprocity of the healing relationship.

This notion of mutuality without symmetry surfaces another issue on which I have been challenged over the course of this inquiry: I have been asked several times by non-participant colleagues whether it is only the person with socially constructed power that has the ability to be loving in a relation across difference? While a critical perspective might suggest that one in a position of power or privilege has a greater responsibility to be and enact loving, while oppression can be seen to delimit our access to choices, and while it may be much more difficult to maintain a loving stance from a position of socially constructed subordination, I think it is equally critical that we not inadvertently suggest that those in marginalized social locations lose their ability to be an ethical agent capable of loving, to enact at least to some extent the agency of a choiceful subjectivity or intersubjectivity. To make this assumption, I contend, may be to unintentionally reproduce the very same social constructions of power that the question at first appears to challenge. It is not only my belief but also my personal experience that while difficult, it is possible to manifest a loving mode of being from a position lacking socially constructed power.

c. Relationship with Self:

Intersubjectivity as participants speak of it not only requires a loving relationship with the other, but with the self as well. Throughout the dialogues, participants suggest that genuineness or 'being themselves' (however multiple or complex), and authenticity or congruency are both needed in order to be helpful in their work (Fiona, p.26; Les, pp.6, 7, 10; Erika, p. 4; Raven, p.24; Karen, pp.6, 10, 11, 31). This idea reflects notions commonly found in social work literatures, both mainstream and critical. What is different is that participants suggest that in order to be genuine and congruent, not only must one be reflexive, as called for by critical practice but that one must also engage in personal or 'self work' (Fiona, pp.17, 19, 28; Les, p.18; Erika, p.8; Carol, p.36), - an addition or complication not typically dealt with in the critical literature.

Les for example, drawing on the First Nations notion that the circle of healing begins with the individual, talks about how he engaged in his own healing process as he began working with others: *"I worked with other folks and in the same breath doing heavy duty working on my stuff... if I'm going to help anybody, if I'm going to do anything for anybody else, I must first work massively on myself"* (Les, pp.2-3). Carol also speaks to the notion of social workers engaging actively in their own healing: *"In the process [of training in a particular model] we had to do our own work, cause most people don't do that, most therapists. We had to do our own hundred hours of therapy"* (Carol, p.5).

Erika, similarly, makes links between doing her own healing and being able to help others. She says: *"Love's as much about personal emancipation as being a part of other people's emancipation and liberation... in order to deepen how I practice love, that's required me to do my own work"* (Erika, p.7). Raven concurs: *"The more healthy my relationship is with myself, the better it is with other people; the more capacity I have to love other people. So I'm basically developing my own capacities for love. And for me how that works is working on all of the stuff that I carry around: the myths, and harmful thoughts, and self-destructive thinking patterns and ways of speaking that have limited me in my relationship with myself"* (Raven, pp.6-7). I find the centring of the notion of self-work fascinating in the sense that engaging in ongoing psychospiritual work is a key aspect of my own life practice, but I would not have understood it as an element of the loving practice of critical social work had it not been reflected in this way by participants.

Erika articulates what other participants seem to suggest - a dialectic between love for other, or helping the other to love themselves, and love for oneself: *"Love is about a relationship to our self and how that connects with how we relate to others. That idea that we can't go with others beyond where we are with ourselves... the two being dialectically connected is what sort of fits best. Then the other question is can we love ourselves without loving other"*

people? That if we really genuinely love ourselves does that not necessitate loving others?" (Erika, pp.12-13). In this she hearkens back to love's recognition of interconnection as explored in the discussions on love as spirituality.

As they deepened the notion of love with the concept of spirituality in the last chapter, in this chapter participants have complicated the concept of intersubjectivity, and have suggested love as a mode or way of being in intersubjective relationship. They seem to suggest, and I concur, that this loving mode of being is not only an alternative to technological 'skills-based' practice, but preventive of burnout as well.

In addition, participants have complicated the critical requirement for reflexive practice with the necessity for physical, emotional, mental and spiritual self-work. Only once engaged in our own work and willing to change ourselves, participants suggest, may we be able to offer support for others, or for the society in general, to change. This notion of change based in interconnection brings the discussion back to the key concept of critical practice, which will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Five: Love as Critical Practice

Having explored how participants conceptualized love in practice as spirituality, and as a loving or compassionate mode or way of being, in the following section I will move to describe how participants discussed love as critical theory and practice. I will begin from the participants' contention that love was a necessary part of critical practice, and move on to explore various ways in which participants referred to its manifestation in ways of perceiving, being and doing.

The people who speak in this chapter discuss what they call the "*human condition*". They describe love as liberating and necessary to critical practice in view of this condition, in spite of and perhaps particularly in view of, individual and institutional resistance and barriers to loving ways of being. In these discussions, participants suggest that it is possible to see, experience and interact with the intrinsically valuable "other" beyond or below social constructions, and that this is key to loving critical practice¹⁸.

Three other sub-themes are particularly noteworthy in the discussions relating to social/community and individual change: first, participants described acceptance and non-judging as the necessary starting point for practice; second, opening to change and speaking your own truth without trying to *make* change were seen as key to sustainable practice; and third, participants suggest the necessity for deep engagement with self and others in critical practice – what one participant calls "*staying in the game*" (Raven, p.10).

The 'Human Condition':

a. Seeing humanity beyond or below social construction:

In most of the conversations, participants talked about energetic connection – about being a deeper, "essential", or true Self, or seeing a deeper or true Self in the other that existed below the ego and behaviour, and beyond or below social construction (Fiona, pp. 16, 17, 21, 27; Tom, pp.9, 14; Les, pp.16-19; Carol, pp.40-41; Erika, p.24; Karen, pp. 8-9, 34, 41). It is crucial to note that participants are not being essentialist in this framing because they do not begin from an assumption of sameness, but rather from a sense of an active and engaged self, and from a deep valuing of diversity. They seem to side in this with Morley and Ife (2002) who assert that "love of humanity works towards a position where no assumptions need to be made about human experience except that our humanity connects us" (p. 76); and Bending (2002) who offers the possibility of love existing in moments when

¹⁸ I mean below in the sense that I perceive our constructions as an overlay either attempting or functioning to cover our humanity and obscure both our intrinsic value as beings and our interconnection with one another.

we perceive others in their full humanity rather than simply as their position in hierarchies of social location.

All participants were anti-oppressive practitioners and activists, had long work histories and had seen a great deal of pain and struggle in their own lives and in the lives of those they served; all were marginalized themselves in some way in relation to the mainstream. They were neither liberal nor naïve. They clearly recognized and referred to social construction, oppression and power imbalances in relation both to social work and to society; at the same time, and this is what may seem contrary on the surface, almost all of them talk about “*humanity*” and the “*human condition*” (Fiona, pp.10, 31; Tom, pp.8, 14,17, 18; Les, pp.5, 6, 12, 15, 16, 17, 24; Carol, pp.11, 15, 16, 25, 37, 42; Erika, pp.2, 5, 20; Raven, pp.15, 18).

They seem to perceive that while we are all separate and express diverse forms and subjectivities we are also all manifestations of the same Life force, and all therefore intrinsically deserving of love, value and freedom. Tom, for example, says: “*I guess the bottom line for unconditional love is... that human beings have value*” (Tom, p.18). Raven concurs that love is an intrinsic aspect of our existence as human: “*love is such a critical aspect of our humanity*” (Raven, p.18); and Erika connects love to a commitment to “*practising our politics and the values of human emancipation*” (Erika, p.5).

Les speaks about this intrinsic value as a spiritual aspect of human beings, which he describes as follows: “*So, what individuals are is that we all have within us a pure flame, or a pure something that is ageless, timeless, sexless, raceless (pause) This body that we live in is the house that we occupy, but the spirit that’s in us is a powerful ageless spirit. And this spirit has gifts and strengths that need to be shared with the world*” (Les, p.12). Participants seem to allude not to essentialism, but rather to recognition of Self or Spirit in its manifestations as diverse selves and subjectivities. I will refer, here, to Bai’s (2001) definition of subjectivity as “the fact of having an ‘inner’ world of thoughts, feelings, values, and attitudes, as opposed to the ‘outer’ world of physiological processes of the body and matter in motion” (p. 3).

More than one participant suggests that in some ways the human condition hasn’t changed that much among societies across time. Carol’s words exemplify the flavour of their comments: “*We’re just human, which means we’re on this wheel together... And the human condition is that we’re wired to get caught up in greed, hatred and delusion*” (Carol, pp.14-15). They assert that we are all struggling, all human, all connected; that fear, hatred, greed, delusion affect us all.

Bringing not only critical analysis but also love, participants are able to perceive that we are all in different locations but at the same time all human. Carol for example, in discussing how she brings critical analysis into her counselling work, notes that she strives towards: “*... recognizing that our particular human condition [affects our individual and collective challenges]. I do*

comment a lot on our culture... I talk about that a lot [but] this is life. This is the human condition. This is where – what planet we happen to live on” (Carol, p.15). In this way, they implicitly critique the notion of social construction as the *only* factor leading to human experience.

Participants are able, without essentialism, to acknowledge social construction and its impact on people’s lives, *and* work with others towards different constructions, *while* at the same time engaging with both self and other below or beyond social construction. The following are a few examples of their comments. Note that they are all talking about working with perpetrators. “[Love] sees beyond the violence of that person, sees it and sees the rest as well... *when we’re in touch with our anger and not our agape love we just see, ‘wow, that person is really bad’... as opposed to ‘okay, what that person did is really bad. It should never have happened. It should not happen again. And, there’s more to this person than just that’... So [love] sees the truth, the whole truth of the whole person; that the violence isn’t their true essence”* (Fiona, p.16).

“ I work with people who are referred by the [Ministry] and I sit down and I listen to their stories. They are wonderful. Meanwhile [the Ministry worker has cut off their child tax and their shelter allowance] and won’t give them enough money to go for counselling. The worker really doesn’t get it; they think they’re ‘helping’. But if you just talk to people as a human being, eh... ” (Tom, p.14).

Karen talks about how a loving stance that sees the humanity and deep Self of the other allows healing to occur: *“I think that it makes it possible for people to see themselves differently in the context of a society or a culture that may see them as other than what I see them as... the message [I give clients] is that you’re not those things, you’re not those labels... you [may] do some things, but you are not those things, you are not of those things”* (Karen, p.9).

It is clear that all participants frame their notion of human connection within a critical social analysis and a strongly held valuing of diversity. And yet they call for recognition of the connections that underlie diversity. Les, for example says: *“I think that if we look for bridge building and go on central assumptions that as human beings we are more similar than different, if we have those central assumptions, then we’ll find all kinds of bridges”* (Les, p.17). A few pages later, he will discuss convergences between First Nations approaches, “Eastern religion” and “hippies” or “New-Agers” (Les, p.20).

Their words call to mind a quote by hooks, a critical Buddhist, feminist and race analyst who writes of the necessity of love in practice:

Asked to define myself, I wouldn’t start with race; I wouldn’t start with blackness; I wouldn’t start with gender, with feminism. I would start by stripping down to what fundamentally informs my life, being a

seeker on the path. Feminist and antiracist struggles are part of this journey. I stand spiritually, steadfastly, on the path of love – that’s the ground of my being. (hooks, 1996, p. 287)

Recognition of the spiritual interconnection and intrinsic value of beings is clearly possible without falling into essentialism. Perhaps, participants seem to suggest, as Morley and Ife (2002) contend in the following quote, the argument between essentialism and social construction are not the main point:

Attempts to articulate humanity often begin with questions pertaining to either our essential human nature or the construction of our nature, but the idea of love of humanity suggests that whether our humanity is essential or constructed is not important; what is important is that we are human and that this lived experience is valued above all else. (Morley & Ife, 2002, p. 70)

b. Resistance and Barriers to Love as Praxis:

One might wonder, if love in social work is both possible and valuable for worker and client (whether community or individual), why it is not commonly found in the theoretical and practice discourse? Those involved in the dialogues described here perceived love and spirituality as interconnection as an alternative to status quo social work - both mainstream *and* critical, a radical stance that contests the current institutional construction of practice. Throughout the dialogues, participants offered critiques of the oppressive organization of society; of mainstream social work practice and canonical critical practice; and of the lack of love and spirituality in social work education.

Several participants comment on the lack of love in social work practice, suggesting both personal resistances and social barriers to love. For example, Fiona contends: *“When I can get out of my judgement seat I know it’s because you know all of our fears and angers and resentments hold us back from... touching... getting in touch with that love”* (Fiona, p.32).

Other participants also take up this notion of fear as the basis of resistance to love and spirituality. Les says: *“Because they’re [people in general] afraid, you know. Can we look deep, deep, deep within? And maybe people are afraid to find that there’s nothing substantial there”* (Les, p.23). Raven also points to this resistance and offers some possible explanations: *“Nothing in my socialization prepared me for this, this kind of work based on love”... Why, [what’s in the way of discussing love]? What I sense: denial, fear and a lack of self-love”* (Raven, pp.18-20).

Participants go on to describe barriers and often censure being experienced if love or spirituality is discussed in practice settings: *“If you go to school and you talk about emotions or you talk about spirituality, then you’re in a lot of trouble... The state would tell us we need to work only in the physical and the mental; that the emotional and the spiritual are ‘private*

home things’... When you talk about unconditional love and how we need to get people back into practising unconditional love, they think that you’re way out of line” (Tom, pp.2-4)... “The system is so far away from good help for someone in need. There isn’t enough room for spirituality... It’s [judgement] from a system that’s gotten arrogant. Arrogant.” (Tom, p.12).

Karen also speaks to the barriers to love in how the system is constructed: *“You know, I find most workplaces are very (pause), for those individuals who have really steadfastly maintained a strongly held belief in people’s basic goodness, that it is hard to find those places. That they are often the minority not the majority in that they’re often met with a flood of scepticism and charges of idealism and naivety” (Karen, p.42).* Fiona also speaks to the censure faced by those who do practice from love: *“we think we’ll be named wing nuts or (laughing) you know these weird airy-fairy people, or that we’re crossing boundaries” (Fiona, p.31).*

Three participants are clear that they specifically do not mean loving in a “nice” or undiscerning way. During our interview, for example, Carol is referring to several critical Buddhist authors, and how she experiences them as *“understanding what we are talking about”* because of their own experiences of trauma or marginalization. I ask her *“So, it’s not people who don’t understand about pain?... it’s not coming out of love like ‘lovey-nicey?’” (Michele)* and she agrees that this is not how she perceives them or the work she is describing (Carol, p.42) as she goes on to list progressive Buddhist authors she has been influenced by, most of them radical women of Colour.

Fiona and Erika take up these critiques of loving practice more overtly. Fiona and I are discussing acceptance and seeing the ‘person under the construction’. I check to make sure she doesn’t mean *“non-judgemental in the sense ‘oh, everything is fine”* (Michele). She replies: *“No, it’s not airy-fairy, it’s not skipping along in the tulips, it’s not rose coloured glasses... It [love] absolutely sees truth” (Fiona, p.15).* I take her to mean love is discerning, that it has the insight to be able to distinguish ‘skilful’ behaviour that diminishes suffering from ‘unskilful’ behaviour based in non-understanding, as the Buddhists describe it; or in the sense mentioned by a First Nations participant, of harmful actions that arise when we are unbalanced on the medicine wheel.

Erika says something very similar in a subsequent interview, and she specifically uses the word discernment: *“Discernment! Love is not some wishy-washy, hippie-dippy, starry-eyed romanticism, idealism or fantasy; but a conscious commitment to practising our politics and the values of human emancipation, which requires analysis, judgement and discernment about the world and about people. Love as a practice framework is intensely grounded in the real” (Erika, p.5).* As stated earlier, in my experience of this participant, she is not only loving, she is also able to engage in social analysis and challenge, and is deeply committed to justice oriented

political action and critical pedagogy. Erika and other participants see love and challenge based on critical discernment as co-existent. This will be explored further in a subsequent section on compassionate challenge as a key and necessary aspect of loving critical practice.

Critical practice is discerning – reflexive and analytical - but do these practitioners experience critical practice as more loving than mainstream practice? None of them refer to this specifically, nor at any point do I hear any of them making this distinction implicitly. Karen, by contrast, is clear that critical practice is not more open to love than mainstream practice in her opinion. I have said to her that many people see my work as critiquing mainstream practice, and that their comments seem to suggest that critical practice is more loving. She bursts out laughing: “*(Laughing hard)... that’s funny!*” I go on to explain that I see myself as critiquing mainstream and critical practice equally, if in different ways. Here is her response: “*It isn’t, I mean there’s nothing that’s inherent in critical, you know anti-oppressive or critical practice that is about love, no... I have to say that nowhere once have I read anything about faith, spirituality, love, caring... maybe I have seen caring somewhere along the way, but... not necessarily as the primary piece*” (Karen, p.17).

One participant describes spirituality as much more common in Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal practice “*I see it a lot in the Native community. I see it a lot less outside however*” (Les, p. 16). He is provisionally hopeful about its inclusion in mainstream practice: “*I think it’s an area that’s in its infancy right now and I look forward to its development... I think it’s not as openly sneered at as it used to be*” (Les, pp.16-17); but he worries that the kind of change towards loving or spiritual practice that we were talking about is unlikely to happen in the non-Aboriginal practice in any substantial or extensive way.

He suggests that this is due to the alienating nature of popular culture, which he describes as colonization: “*It would be nice. I also think it’s highly unlikely. I don’t know if human beings will do that. I think we could... I just don’t know that we will, because, you’re familiar with colonization, okay? Colonization is best redefined as popular culture. The popular culture that we’re living in now is not conducive to what I’m describing*” (Les, p.20). Raven concurs, after describing the commitment a loving stance requires she states: “*Lots of people would prefer to watch TV. I’ve seen it*” (Raven, p.24). These participants seem to echo the earlier cited work of Morley and Ife (2002) regarding the social and institutional resistance to and regulation of emotions, especially in so-called ‘professional’ contexts.

In a few of the dialogues however, people did suggest that social work, if not society, is becoming somewhat less resistant to love. Carol refers to the shift she observed in practice over the period between the 70’s and 90’s: “*What we were doing was a little bit more compassionate*

[than previous biomedical and behavioural models], because we saw everyone was hooked into their system [of social relations] and it was hard to get out of it” (Carol, p.4).

Fiona acknowledges that spirituality is still a more comfortable word for many than love: *“I’m reading more and more about how people are bringing spirituality, spiritual practice into their work. The word love isn’t being used because people are so scared of that word... But definitely I’m hearing more of the word compassion and more and more people are, you know, I’m starting hearing about Buddhist psychology for example... so I think that we’re moving more and more towards realizing that what we’re really talking about is love, the energy of love, but we’re trying to, you know, word it in ways that are acceptable by people or by society” (Fiona, p.18).*

Erika offers an interesting perspective, commenting on the risks associated not only with being loving in critical practice, but also those associated with not being loving: *“It’s so essential. And hard, really hard. It’s much easier to follow the pattern of dominant social work practice models. But there’s a huge cost to pay for following the pattern. There’s a huge cost to pay for trying to redefine it [practice] and I guess everyone has to decide which cost they’re more comfortable with. Yeah, it’s [love’s] essential for humanity and for ourselves” (Erika, p.22).*

Similarly, other participants see love as essential to practice, and the risk to be loving and open-hearted seems one that they are willing to take. For example, Karen notes that for her: *“the loving part is easy, the not loving part is harder” (Karen, p.1).*

c. Love as Necessary:

It was clear that participants felt love/spirituality¹⁹ was an integral part of their own practice, but I wondered if they felt their practice offered anything to practice in general. Near the end of several interviews, I asked participants how they thought love was relevant not just to their own practice, but also to social work as a whole. While they were careful not to suggest that their way of working was the way everyone ‘should’ practice, regardless of their social location and background and regardless of the particular words they use to describe it, participants suggested that love/spirituality - as they were describing it - was a vital and necessary component in all parts of practice. This theme is implicit in the dialogues with male participants; the women speak to it more overtly.

Fiona makes this point most clearly. In her dialogue, she refers to the employment of tools and techniques without love, contending that not only is there *“something missing”* (Fiona, p.27)

¹⁹ As I have stated, I do not consider these two words to be interchangeable necessarily; but one participant, while supporting the elements of my conceptualization of love, preferred to frame his comments in terms of spirituality rather than love.

in the practice without love, but also a potential for harm: *“when you said that you weren’t in touch with your love, but you could still use all the tools and be striving to be genuine and do adequate work. I think that’s the best-case scenario for people who aren’t in touch with love. What about the worst case scenario?... How many times have we heard stories of clients who received really awful work from their [social workers], or even worse they’ve been abused... or trampled upon in some way... and these are [social workers] who theoretically learned the same stuff... so I think it’s imperative, [love’s] totally needed in all of our work”* (Fiona, pp.28-9).

Erika illustrates with a personal example talking about a counsellor she saw: *“she probably had okay techniques, but I didn’t feel any love from her, and I didn’t feel any sense of caring, which I knew I missed. It didn’t feel that great. But I’m sure if someone was to listen to her tapes of our sessions they wouldn’t find anything problematic with what she said”* (Erika, p.15). Later she says: *“[love’s] so essential for the practitioner as well as the people that we work with, because so much of this life is loveless... to have love in social work means to bring that much more vibrancy into everybody’s life, which is to be nourishing for all, all life on this planet”* (Erika, p.22).

Carol seems to agree: *“if you can’t bring love to the work, then you really shouldn’t be doing it”* (Carol, p.48). Raven not only agrees that love is *“absolutely essential”* in social work, but that love as we are describing it, with its sense of interconnection and valuing of diversity, is at the *“forefront of contemporary theories that are used in social work”* (Raven, p.18). In fact, she goes on to suggest that love is not only necessary but a duty: *“this is what our humanity demands”* (Raven, p.19).

Other participants seem to turn notions of professional duty, which may carry a sense of self-righteousness and ‘helping’ the ‘unfortunate other’, on its head. While not appearing to suggest any sense of guilt or “should”, nor any sense of being nobly called to help the ‘less fortunate’, other participants support Raven in this contention that love demands of us, framing love as a freely chosen obligation or service to life. They seem to mean, as Fiona says specifically, duty in the way that the Buddhists talk about dharma: *“I think it’s your duty to do those things [the elements of the initial conceptualization]... I think of it as dharma”* (Fiona, p.20).

Karen, as another example, says: *“I want to say duty, or service... love and service go together”* (Karen, pp.36-7). She goes on to discuss the work of meditation teacher Ram Das, and what *“love demands of us – truth, integrity, accountability, responsibility”* (Karen, p.39). The participants frame these key social work tenets not as protocols or externally imposed modes of conduct, but rather as an internal calling towards integrity in intersubjective relationship.

Erika also speaks of love as duty, picking up on the idea of integrity. Here is her discussion of activism arising from love: *“I don’t know if rage or outrage has necessarily fuelled my activism. It’s been a sense of commitment to put my body where my politics are. So it’s been about what I perceive to be integrity. That if I believe in this, then I need to take action... It’s almost been more of a moral duty – love as embodied action”* (Erika, p.20).

While ‘love as necessary’ was implicit in the dialogues I had with the two male participants, they take up the notion of love as service or obligation more overtly. Referring to the earlier cited example of the Christmas Bureau who refused people assistance if they didn’t have ‘proper identification’ and the social workers who refused to vouch for their clients, Tom says: *“I think that they had a moral obligation to help them. The social workers could make copies of their ID. It’s just a matter of signing a form”* (Tom, p.16). Les refers to social work as service. He is talking about self-work, and his commitment to the Creator to help others and himself *“in the same breath”*. He says he promised that: *“I would spend my time in the service of others, so that’s how I ended up in social work at all”* (Les, p.2).

The people I spoke with seemed to describe a commitment to being of service to life or the world; a deep sense of duty that arose not from guilt or obligation, not from a fear of God, nor a desire for reciprocity, but rather from a deep sense of community and an embodied understanding of interconnection. In this articulation of service, the participants side with Baskin (2002) who argues that this spiritual duty is the purpose of our existence:

As important as [spirituality as an inward journey] is to an individual’s source of peace, well being and strength, each of us has a responsibility to use our spirituality in creating a better world. How I value my life, value others and through this create a life in which I can be valuable to my community and the world is the connection that explains my existence. (p. 14)

In spite of resistance and barriers, participants frame their practice as loving or spiritual. They appear to be suggesting an ontological understanding of love in the sense that their fundamental assumptions about reality stem from a belief in the inherent interconnection of all beings and that they attempt to draw themselves back again and again to an interconnected and compassionate way of perceiving and being with self and other.

Affecting Change:

While critical practice literature, as explored in the first chapter, seem to suggest that processes of change happen as a result of action and challenge, participants seem to engage the notion of change differently. They frame change within a loving stance as liberation; and suggest that acceptance, non-attachment (with a concomitant trust in the unfolding of life) and non-interference, combined with speaking one’s own truth in compassionate challenge, are the tools which open a space for change to occur. I will begin by describing participants’ comments on love as radical practice.

a. Love as Liberation:

Not only do participants describe love as necessary in practice; while they acknowledge barriers to love, in several of the dialogues they suggest that love as they are describing it is *radical, healing, transformational, emancipatory, and revolutionary*.

Karen, for example, speaks about the possibility of love in social work in spite of institutional barriers, and frames love as radical. Note in this quote that we can also hear her critical analysis coming through: *“I think that the possibility of love is what distinguishes social work from other disciplines... but social work as a whole has been so (pause)... so invested in divesting itself from its roots, and rightly being critical of some of those practices. It’s lost, or... has yet to embrace I guess, the potential of that [to] really radically transform. I think love is a very radical act”* (Karen, p.40).

In some sense addressing Les and Raven’s earlier cited concern that colonization makes love unlikely, Erika talks about love as a decolonizing process. She describes: *“Love as subverting hierarchies imposed by capitalist, patriarchal structures – [it’s] emancipatory. Love [is a] subversive practice... a profound challenge to text book social work methodologies based on modernist notions of neutrality, control, scientificity and rationality. Therefore love as a practice framework is compatible with ideas about indigenizing and decolonizing social work practice”* (Erika, p.2). She later cites Freire’s notion that: *“there can be no revolution without love”* (Erika, p.20).

Raven also refers to Freire in her discussion of love as anti-oppressive and liberatory: *“Paulo Freire talks about oppression as the antithesis of life. It’s the antithesis of love, it’s (pause), it’s morbid... He called it necrophiliac. And so when we do the opposite, when we seek liberation - our own and other people’s, which can be liberation of the self, the spirit, the mind, the physical body; liberation of groups of people, ethnic groups; then we are creating a space for empowerment and liberation of life force to unfold, and that is love”* (Raven p.3).

If love is about interconnection and life force as this participant and others suggest, then its absence in the practice of social work may indeed lead to practices that are ‘morbid’ rather than life-affirming, oppressive rather than liberating, governing rather than facilitating the empowerment of communities and individuals. The participants not only suggest that love is necessary to critical social work, they frame love *as* liberation and a movement against oppression. This framing brings me to explore what they mean by change, and the ways in which they perceive social and individual change or transformation as occurring.

b. Acceptance, non-attachment and non-interference as change:

The participants' ways of relating intersubjectively both stem from and have implications for the way they conceptualize social change. They describe their engagement in relations with self and other as beginning from an assumption of inherent goodness, wholeness, perfection or value as opposed to a deficit model, a medical model or a model based on deservingness or worthiness. This notion of acceptance, with its ties to spiritual ways of perceiving the world, was something participants added to my understanding of love in critical practice, and will be reflected in the revised conceptualization offered in the fourth chapter.

Similarly to Hart's (1999) exploration of humans' inherent worthiness as "being-in-becoming" and insistence on recognizing harmful attributes while focusing attention towards the good, participants suggest that beginning from these fundamental assumptions is reflected in how we relate to people and how we conceptualize aspects of our work including change.

Like Hart and the Aboriginal approaches he outlines, they frame acceptance as beginning in a belief in "*basic goodness... [a] fundamental belief in people's goodness*" (Karen, p.23); and distinguish it from problem-focused or deficit models: "*not meaning they're deficient because there's something wrong with them but because they're missing what we call the wheel: the physical, mental, the emotional, the spiritual*" (Tom, p.3). Several specifically state that they mean we are all inherently good. And they go on to describe how this belief makes a difference in practice.

For example, Erika is discussing the difference between professors who she felt were loving in their practice and others who she did not feel loved by: "*when I think of who taught with love, it was the people who really saw me as a whole person and valued that*" (Erika, p.3).

Raven and Karen also refer to the difference the loving stance manifested as an assumption of wholeness makes in practice. Raven says: "*People are whole just the way they are... that doesn't translate into wrong or broken... if the premise is love then that is so crucial because we communicate everything... so if we go into something with the assumption that someone is broken and needs to be fixed at some level, they're going to hear that and see that*" (Raven, p.10). She goes on to describe the importance of "*the recognition of that wholeness and perfection, as it is. That what is, is. I guess that's where the acceptance comes in, doesn't it*", which we agree does not mean that one cannot critique or "*make choices to do something about [current conditions]*" (Raven, p.12). These statements can be seen to converge with the Buddhist notions of acceptance and critical engagement as co-existent.

While Raven suggests that a non-accepting stance is communicated to those we work with, negatively impacting on our ability to work with them, Karen contends that coming from loving and acceptance makes it more likely that we can be effective in our critical practice: "*if people are*

confident in your care for them, in your love, in your absolute, unequivocal acceptance, it is way easier to [say] 'I'm calling bullshit on that', or... 'I'm wondering if it would be okay, if I could just challenge you a bit on something you just said'" (Karen, p.26). I will return to this notion of compassionate challenge in a moment.

Along with acceptance, several people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, spoke of a concomitant necessity for non-judgement and non-interference in social work. Tom, for example, says: *"Well, you can't judge people. You're not there... and how can you judge somebody when you're not behind their eyes. You can say that someone is very bad or someone is a very irresponsible person, but we don't know what the pressures are"* (Tom, p.18).

Carol, talking about not being attached to any particular outcome for those she works with, gives several examples from practice in which she juxtaposes caring very deeply for people's ability to live well, and at the same time acknowledging she doesn't know *how* their process should unfold *"I don't know if they're going to leave their husband or not and I have no idea, you know, whether they should"* (Carol, p.13). Statements such as these describing non-attachment and non-judging harken back to the notion from the initial conceptualization of 'not-knowing'.

Les says something similar. He has been talking about non-interference and the fact that we cannot know other people's truths: *"it's deadly important for us not to lapse into judging anybody including perpetrators. I mean they have their stories too [they've] had their heart broken... to me that's the spiritual component"*. He contends that if we remember that we cannot know another's story, that *"we can't know anybody's heart... [then] it's easy to respect people and it would follow that there would be no judgement"* (Les, p.12). As participants frame it, not-knowing is intricately linked to acceptance, non-interference and respect. So how do these conceptualizations relate to notions of social and individual change, a key concept in social work practice? In an apparent paradox, participants seem to frame acceptance and non-interference within a critical analysis, *as* change. Carol, for example, drawing on her Buddhist practice, says: *"I just don't think you can create change without [love]. And I don't even want to say create change – we're not. We have to create an acceptance, in a sense... which is the ground for change. It's the ground for any kind of choicefulness. We have to start with accepting where things are. Our whole open heart thing and the being fully present thing and opening to whatever is – that acceptance place – is I think the fertile ground for whatever's going to grow"* (Carol, p.6).

As Erika and I discuss action for social justice, we explore this tension of acceptance on the one hand, and desire for social change in the direction of emancipation and justice on the other. We are talking about how to love those we do not agree with and those who behave very differently than we would choose. Tying the acceptance of others back to acceptance of self, she says: *"It's pretty*

easy for me to focus on all the ways that I want to change. What's hard for me to do is accept myself as is. If I'm not accepting myself as is, there's going to be a part of me that's not accepting other people as is, and is going to be communicating to them that they need to change. Which isn't loving. Like if that's the only way they can be acceptable" (Erika, p.11).

In a clear example of the nondualistic stance that participants take throughout the interviews, she goes on to wonder about the paradox of acceptance and change. Erika suggests the Buddhist and yogic notions of non-attachment are *"so valuable for social work"* as we talk about the racist politician we were involved in protesting the day before. She asks how we might *"love him without any attachment to him changing? Do we? Can we?"* (Erika, p.11). *"How do we reclaim our own power and have our sense of grounding in ourselves separate from the changes that we'd like to see in the external world? There's something about love in there too, I think. And it's a paradox always. It's not one-sided, love as detachment or as passionate engagement"* (Erika, p.12).

While taking an anti-oppressive and critically analytical stance, participants appear to favour attending, supporting, and offering tools over attempting to 'change' people or things. Les, for example, wonders what might happen if social work, rather than focusing on what's wrong, focused on support and sharing as it does in Aboriginal approaches: *"Social work and psychology are concerned with change in the individual, what we define as something wrong... if you're an alcoholic or if you're an abuser well that is wrong, but social work and psychology measures success by changing so that the behaviour goes down or disappears or something. In Native social work practice we don't look at change because nobody can change anybody. We look at support, we look at education, we look at connection"* (Les, pp.13-14). Carol and Tom also refer to this enacting of love in practice as sharing – including sharing support, education, tools and ways of perceiving (Tom, pp. 3, 7; Carol, p.13).

Les goes on to refer to the absence of a word for 'should' in the Blackfoot language, and states: *"That's massive in its implications as social workers, as therapists – 'you should do this', 'you shouldn't do that'. Can we operate like that? If you do, what would it look like? That's interesting."* (Les, p.15). It is an interesting question indeed. Can critical social work practice function with this sense of acceptance, non-judgement and non-interference, without a sense of 'should'? And if so, how might that look and sound in practice? How might we reconcile the apparent paradox of critical analysis and change *with* 'as-is' acceptance and non-interference?

c. Compassionate challenge:

Like Erika and Les, participants do not suggest that acceptance, non-attachment and non-interference are passive states. In fact, truth-telling and challenging was a consistent theme category, and one of the largest. Participants agree that we shouldn't try to change people- and we can't - but that we do have an obligation to tell our own truth(s) in practice.

Inextricably linked to their notions of inherent goodness and acceptance of 'what is', as it is, is the notion of compassionate challenge. As hooks and Chodron argue, it may be possible to talk about discernment, truth-telling and accountability without blame; to work to "de-escalate suffering" and move toward accountability without dehumanizing or othering ourselves or others (Chodron & hooks, 1999, pp. 4-5). While adopting a non-judging stance, participants seem to "*reframe dissent as a positive force*" (Karen, p.28) for just such anti-oppressive purpose.

Les, for example has spoken about the importance of "*working with people in a completely honest and straightforward and respectful manner*" (Les, p.5). Later, as an example, he says: "*I tell students along the lines of 'it's none of my business who you or your parents vote for politically; you should vote however you want'. However, we also need to know the interconnectedness between things. There's a darn good reason why teachers are overloaded in Alberta, why people working in the human or social services are leaving the province in droves - why doctors and social workers are vastly underpaid - why Alberta has the lowest minimum wage in the entire country. It's because its attention is focused elsewhere and not on human being issues*" (Les, p.24).

Fiona, Tom, Carol, Erika, Raven and Karen also refer to compassionate challenge - discernment and speaking truth as they see it: "*Look at the phenomenon of incest and sexual abuse. We need to start talking about it being wrong, and why it's wrong, not keeping it under the table... empowering the people to stand up for themselves*" (Tom, p.11). Fiona refers to truth-telling in relation to abuse as well: "*Let's say they disclose to me an act of perpetration (pause) I'm very clear with them how I feel about that or what I think about that... 'you're responsible for that act and you're also this, this and this [indicating other positive attributes] person' that has established a relationship with me*" (Fiona, p.21)... "*I can be challenging if needed be*" (Fiona, p.22).

Carol and Karen also talk about truth-telling without trying to convince or change. Carol, for example says: "*In our process we've looked at the feminist analysis you know, 'let's look at both sides'... we've been everywhere [explored all angles] many times, but I'm just not indicating the 'right' way. I've said [how] I feel... I'm not sitting here thinking 'oh, god, why doesn't she leave him already'. I really don't know... with all my feminist analysis many years ago I might have been pushing her to get the hell out of there*" (Carol, p.14).

Connecting compassionate challenge to the concept of not-knowing, later Carol says again that she can speak from her own heart and analysis, but knows she cannot know what is right for another person: *“I really worried about it and I, in my personal heart of hearts I thought, you know, this really isn’t good (laughing). You know I loved her and I didn’t, I was really concerned about what it was doing to her to be living this lie. And I would say that sometimes, I would say my truth about it. But you know, I knew she’d have to find her own way”* (Carol, p.38). Karen refers also to speaking truth without thinking she knows ‘the’ answer: *“I don’t have to dismantle, even though I want to, his particular orientation in the world, but he knows a little bit more about mine”* (Karen, p.36).

Similarly, Erika talks about telling her truth without trying to shame, dehumanize, ‘other’, or make wrong. She is talking about a student who dropped out of sight and did not complete her agreed upon work, leading to increased work for other students: *“So, when she finally came to see me she was feeling lots of shame... she was feeling badly about how things had gone, I guess. And we were able to have a long conversation in which I was able to say ‘this is the impact on our project’; and talk about where it was that she was coming from. In that conversation I remember saying to her ‘you know, I love you as you are and just because. That this has happened in the context of this project doesn’t mean that I still don’t care about you and want to still have a connection with you’... I think there was a danger that if I hadn’t sent that message very clearly she would have slunk out of my office... I don’t know if she would be in my class again if that hadn’t been spoken”* (Erika, p.5).

Echoing Carol’s earlier metaphor of acceptance as the ground in which change can grow, Raven adds to the discussion of truth telling in a way that moves towards the notion of change as a process of life-force arising. I have asked her to give me more examples that *“particularly come to mind in relation to practice, of love in practice”*. In this passage, she uses the words *truth*, *life force* and *love* interchangeably. It is interesting to note that she does not seem to be simply offering an example, but rather is embodying what she is talking about in that moment; that is, I think/feel (both at the time and as I review the transcript) that she is talking not hypothetically, but *to and about* me: *“(long pause ~8 and breathing) a willingness to speak my truth... so you know, if I run into someone and I sense unhappiness or sadness, speaking my truth – engaging that life force and acting out of that life force – truth/life force/love – for me is speaking that... I think some of the most profound moments I’ve had is when I’ve just disregarded that socialization [not to bring up unpleasant things] and spoken my truth and said ‘you know, I’m really aware of a sadness around you, what’s that about? What’s happening for you?’ It’s also taking those risks with myself”* (Raven, pp.17-18). I do not feel that she is trying to change me, but simply offering her truth as an opening in which change might arise.

The participants discuss compassionate challenge based in acceptance and recognition of intrinsic goodness in a way that addresses critique of both self and others. Their framing of challenge grounded in love as interconnection helps to address my earlier concerns about the possibility that reflexivity without love may lead to a sense of self-doubt, self-disapproval and lack of personal well-being (Eby, 2000). The same, I suggest, holds true for the ways in which we challenge others – as participants suggest above, and in keeping with my own practice experience, acceptance is the ground within which change can arise.

The voices of participants echo back to the notions of both grounding *and* shifting as necessary to the process of transversal politics as outlined in Yuval-Davis (1997). Earlier, I wondered how one might find a balance between grounding in one's own sense of self and knowing, and a critical stance of 'not-knowing', without damage to or loss of a sense of oneself as an active subject? How one might be in intersubjective relation that dehumanizes neither party? Between them, the literature and the participants in this study offer us an alternative to a dualism between certainty and uncertainty: compassionate challenge - the practice of rooting and shifting based on listening and truth-telling in a loving context such as the one outlined by the voices heard here.

d. Trust in the organic process of change as life force unfolding:

Echoing Hart's (1999) conceptualization of change as an ongoing process of transition, balance and connection (p. 102), in the descriptions of their work, some participants referred specifically to their trust in the process, their trust in the person's own self direction and unfolding, and their trust in the unfolding of life (Tom, p.10; Les, p.7; Carol, pp.5, 9, 29, 32, 37, 39).

As another example, Erika says that love is antithetical to control, and requires this level of trust in life's unfolding, and in the other's process. Love, she says is: "*the ultimate expression of respect for another's autonomy and process*" (Erika, p.23). Here again, we find links to the notion from the conversation with the literature of love as spirituality, trusting in an interconnection between all things and beings, even when we cannot know how those interconnections will unfold.

e. Staying in the game:

As the participants in this inquiry saw it and offered examples of it, their work as critical practitioners involved loving; not as changing people or society, but rather as compassionate challenge, and sharing tools and supports. It also involved what a few participants specifically described as 'hanging in', or 'staying in the game', which Raven refers to as "*a commitment to participate regardless*" (Raven, p.10). Carol also talks to this unconditionality of staying engaged and present: "*I just, you*

know, hung in with her... there was all this pain and I would feel that pain, and I really felt for her... down the road it all worked out, like I never would have believed it could have" (Carol, p.38).

Karen describes loving as "*feeling responsible to, not for, no matter what*". She goes on to contend: "*I personally think love is extremely anti-oppressive. I think that it, I mean I don't believe that love changes everything or love cures everything but I think you can get, you can go a long way just on loving someone*" (Karen p.8).

All the practitioners I engaged in dialogues with exhibited great willingness to 'stay in the game', as well as a deep passion and energy for doing so. It has been a profound honour to participate in these conversations with them. The people I interviewed have framed loving critical practice as has been demonstrated in this and the previous two chapters, as a spiritual and interconnected way of perceiving and being. In this chapter, they have spoken about *living* or doing love as critical practice. They have addressed the importance and possibility of emancipatory social and individual change, and have located this change within an accepting, non-judging and non-interfering stance, while also advocating strongly for speaking one's own truth in the context of loving, critical and intersubjective practice.

They demonstrate an observable commitment not only to loving, but also to reflexivity and to self-work, as well as a strong personal and collective commitment to living an engaged life according to their deeply held principles. It is to this notion of principles that I will turn in the first section of the final interpretive chapter.

Chapter Six: (Re)Conceptualizing Love In Critical Practice

The ways of perceiving, being and doing described in the three preceding chapters on love as spirituality, love as a mode of being in intersubjective relationship, and love as critical practice led me to articulate the notion of ‘principled critical practice’. In an attempt to stay clear of notions of ‘morality’ or legalistic practice protocols, as I engaged in the interpretations of our conversations, I came to describe participants’ spiritual-critical ways of being as their *principles* of critical practice.

The “*worldview*” (Carol, p. 42) of love as interconnection, and the ways of being and doing love that participants described includes: a belief in everything as interconnected; a belief in wholeness, inherent perfection, and intrinsic value; a commitment to acceptance and non-judgement linked with truth telling; and a commitment to self-work. They perceived these principles as underlying, informing or framing their lives and work.

In this chapter I will introduce the emergent notion of *spiritually-informed critical practice*, and describe the ways in which the people I spoke to complicated my initial conceptualization of love in critical practice as offered in the first chapter. Finally, I will conclude by offering a revised multi-element conceptualization of love as emancipatory praxis.

Love as principled critical practice:

While many participants alluded to their principles of practice, one participant referred to these principles specifically as the ‘values’ or ‘ethics’ of practice. She states: “*If you start looking at values and ethics - what people in the field report is that their own particular, peculiar set of values determines their practice, far over and above what you teach someone, how you tell someone to practice. Whatever constraints you put on their practice, they will always default to their values*” (Karen, p.16).

Earlier in the interview she had stated that while she was aware of the “general disdain” for theory in the practice of social work, she did feel theory was important, but that love and intersubjectivity were the primary basis of her practice, not theory: “*[the] factors that make a difference are the nature of the interaction you have with someone, not what you know*” (Karen, p.3).

Fiona agreed that love (as a value or principle), not theory, was the foundation of her practice, stating that: “*I’m coming from a place of, well, love... I’ve learned so much from books, it’s very important, it informs my practice, but that’s not the basis. That’s not what it’s grounded in – other people’s theories*” (Fiona, p.24).

The idea of social work practice based on values is not a new one, but participants expand on the common conception. The participants suggest that it might not even be possible to adhere to traditional ethics if “[we] don’t love humanity or love people” (Raven, p.19); and that love might “*actually be a higher level of ethic[s]*” than those typically taught as social work values or required by codes of conduct (Erika, p.5).

Participants critiqued the notion of a professional role (Fiona, p.31; Erika, p.2; Raven, p. 3; Karen, p.11), suggesting that they were simply being their authentic selves (Fiona, p.26; Les, p.6; Carol, p.39; Erika, p.4), and that they either didn’t know any other way to practice, or that they did know another way and chose not to practice that way (Karen, pp.10-11).

As an alternative to the ‘professional’ model of practice by protocol, participants talked about genuineness and ‘being themselves’, suggesting that loving practice is an extension of ourselves, of who we are or perceive ourselves to be. Les described this as “*finding [our] secret heart*”; finding the “*eternal spirit [which] lives within us for the purpose of giving and sharing with the rest of the world*” and spoke of the call to live in a way that manifests that gift (Les, p.16).

While challenging the notion of practice by protocol and the technological application of social work skills such as building rapport, or empathy, and boundaries or ethics as imposed rules; as noted previously, some participants referred to *themselves* as an instrument or tool through which loving practice was being manifested into the world (Fiona, p.34; Carol, p.31).

As we have heard in the descriptions of the dialogues in the preceding chapters, love was described by participants as the context, ground or guide of all practice, including activism, and the ground of use of social work tools. Participants suggested that simply by being in the loving mode in intersubjective relationship within a spiritual-critical frame they knew how and what to be and do as practitioners.

Ultimately, I think and feel that they are describing love as ontology. That these critically-informed practitioners are living examples of loving as a mode of being, perceiving, and doing; as the way in which they perceive, and attempt to be and do in the world. Harkening back to Baskin’s notion of spirituality as the purpose of existence, participants talk about loving practice as what a spiritual stance requires of us: “*This [love as ethics] is what our humanity demands*”, contends Raven (p.19).

Karen refers to what love requires of her: “*Loving... without any kind of reservation; it’s demanding... it demands something of me... it demands truthfulness, it demands an integrity, it demands responsibility, accountability*” (Karen, p.39).

None of the participants claimed to be always able to act according to their principles, but they stated that this is how they were attempting to engage. They asserted that they referred to their principles again and again, attempting to allow their behaviour to follow as closely as possible from

their principles at all times. For the participants, a sense of congruency, consistency (Fiona, pp.22-23) or “*internal validity*” (Les, p.23) between how one claimed to practice and what one actually did was crucial. Throughout their interviews, participants referred to being true to themselves, their work and their communities.

I cannot ‘know’ for certain that participants were true to their principles, nor how they are in their practice. I can say that as I experienced and observed them and the loving and vibrant energy that arose in several of the interviews, and as I watched and listened to some of them interact with their students, colleagues, and community members, they certainly appeared to embody this congruence, and a loving intentionality to which they returned again and again.

In the first chapter, we heard Brechin refer to critical practice as existing in the interjective space between the three spheres of practice – action, analysis and reflexivity. Similarly, over the course of this inquiry, I have come to realize that ‘love as emancipatory praxis’ exists not as critical analysis alone, nor a loving stance alone, nor principled practice alone; but rather as the intersection of these three ways of knowing, being and doing.

Love as spiritually-informed critical practice:

When I began my inquiry, I described the participants as critical practitioners. As I have delved more deeply into love as emancipatory praxis, and especially as participants continued to centre love in spiritual terms, I have come to imagine that a more accurate description of identity location for all the participants, might be ‘spiritually-informed critical practitioners’, or perhaps even ‘critically-informed spiritual practitioners’, as I have come to redefine myself.

This stance of loving and a commitment to emancipation is based in critical analysis *and* a deep belief in the interconnection of all beings; in recognition of social construction and its impacts *and* a belief in a deeper Self; and in an understanding of unity and diversity as coexistent. Like Munroe’s gentle Holocaust resisters, whose only common characteristic was recognition of an underlying connection and ‘essence’ among human beings, and a belief in human rights (in Chinnery & Bai, 2000, p. 92), practitioners adopting this loving stance begin from a recognition and valuing of diversity, and also perceive a common humanity, as well as an interconnection between all beings.

I will end this interpretive discussion with a final participant quote, which speaks to love and spirituality as notions of interconnection, and to convergence across diverse locations and experiences. In this piece of conversation, Erika echoes Les’ earlier cited comments on “*bridge-building*” (Les, p.17), making connections between diverse spiritualities: “*we hear the same from the Elders here in Aboriginal traditions as from Eastern traditions, that ‘we’re all connected, and we’re all one and all part of the same web’.* But what you said about ‘everything needs

loving', the Earth - and again, I think that's important. That love extends not just to other human beings but to all of Creation - it's a way of being totally" (Erika, p.14).

Participants seem to understand diversity, which they clearly value, as interwoven with a deeper interbeing as discussed in section on spirituality in the first chapter. Their voices resonate with my own practice and personal experience.

(Re)conceptualizing love in critical practice:

The purpose of this inquiry, as well as engaging in dialogue with other loving and critical practitioners, was to offer a conceptualization of love in practice. Having listened deeply to participants' communications, and having reflected on my own practice experience, I have developed a revised conceptualization of love in critical practice.

Beginning from a loving stance as I have described it here; from a grounding in critical practice – Brechin's(2000a) spheres of action, analysis and reflexivity (p. 35); and with a spiritual acknowledgement of the interconnection of life in all its diversity, I have attempted to develop a conceptualization of 'love as emancipatory praxis' that might be take up and explored further by other practitioners.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will explore how practitioners adopting a spiritual-critical stance accepted, questioned, and complicated my initial conceptualization of love in practice, and I will offer my revised conceptualization of love as emancipatory praxis. I will begin by outlining the comments participants made regarding my initial conceptualization of love in critical practice which I presented to them part way through each dialogue.

The initial conceptualization, developed from my own practice experience, review of relevant literatures, and preliminary conversations with colleagues, is outlined in the first chapter. It is reviewed here for ease of comparison; and included:

- **Recognition of, and respect and reverence for one's own and others' inherent humanity, dignity, and basic human rights**
- **Deep presence (seeing, hearing, perceiving, caring, experiencing deeply) and engagement**
- **Willingness to not know or understand (Brechin, 2000a, pp. 31-3; Davis, 2002)**
- **Willingness to know; openness to others' experience and definition of self**
- **Commitment and willingness to shift, self-transcend, change, and be changed (Yuval-Davis, 1997)**
- **Willingness to allow the other room to shift, self-transcend, change and be changed.**

While all participants indicated that they agreed with this initial conceptualization, and that it was complementary with their own ways of practising, several had questions or comments that helped to deepen my understanding. The result of this process of co-construction of meaning has led me to develop a revised conceptualization of love in critical practice, which will be offered in the final section of this chapter. I will move now to a description and discussion of participants' responses to my initial conceptualization.

Participant response to the initial conceptualization:

I read and/or showed each participant my initial conceptualization of love only after they had had the opportunity to conceptualize love in critical practice for themselves; all participants stated their connection to, or acceptance of, the conceptualization I offered.

Responses ranged from: *"That's pretty good"* (Karen, p. 16) and *"Yeah, it's good"* (Tom, p. 19) through *"These are good! Very good"* (Carol, p. 18), and *"I agree with this (pointing at conceptualization)... I like that love paradigm"* (Raven, pp.12 & 13) to *"Very thorough and very beautiful"* (Erika, p. 10), and *"Absolutely, ditto. That's exactly what I do!"* (Fiona, p.20).

Even Les, who was not comfortable with the use of the word love in a professional context *"That word [love] never comes up because I have a funny relationship with it..."* (Les, p.2), and who was the first to specifically reframe love as spirituality, responded to my initial conceptualization of love in practice positively: *"Does that – so you're nodding – does that fit?"* (Michele). *"Oh yeah"* (Les, p. 9). *"So if this is what I'm meaning by love, does this fit with how you see your practice?"* (Michele) *"Yeah sure!"* (Les, p.9).

Ways participants challenged or complicated the conceptualization:

Although all participants accepted the conceptualization I offered of love in critical practice, several also sought to question and complicate it. They commented specifically on the first, third, and fifth points of the initial conceptualization as outlined in the first chapter. The following section looks more closely at their critiques.

While some participants agreed that respect and reverence for one's own and other's inherent humanity, dignity and human rights was a necessary starting point for intersubjective practice, one took it up in a critical way: *"I'm kind of resistant to this description because it sounds like the Code of Ethics, I mean it's not like I don't like the Code of Ethics... it's just one of the boxes"* (Raven, p.11), and went on to argue that operating from an assumption of *"wholeness"* and *"perfection"* are much more important (Raven, p.12). Later, she returned to this issue again, wondering if ethics were truly possible without love: *"you know, the Code of Ethics"*

says to respect the inherent right to dignity in every human being. I don't know if I can do that if I don't love humanity or love people" (Raven, p.19).

Two participants took up the element of 'willingness to not-know', but in two different ways. Tom saw not-knowing differently than I meant it, and sought to include the idea, not only of 'not-knowing' as an open and inquiring stance, but also in the sense of willingness to know what is none of our business as helpers: *"that brings up another area that was not covered yet. As a worker I don't need to know who you sleep with" ... "So a willingness to know what's none of your business?"* (Michele) *"Yeab!"* (Tom, p.20).

Raven added complexity to the notion of 'not-knowing' in yet another sense, the willingness to not need to be 'right'. She seems to allude to the notion of willingness 'to know' as well: *"In terms of the willingness part, I would add... a willingness to not be right (pause ~9). A commitment to participate regardless"* (Raven, p.10). I have attempted to address the concerns voiced above in my rewriting of the conceptualization, which will be outlined in the next section.

Two participants also questioned the sixth element of the initial conceptualization. One was concerned about the possible dualistic implications of the term 'transcend': *"What do you mean by the term self-transcend? That's the only piece I didn't understand very well... [I explain my meaning in the sense of Yuval-Davis' (1997) willingness to shift]... what it associates for me is, sort of the more [religious] framework that we need to transcend the body... those traditions of just kind of being only in the space of spirit and not being embodied and not being in the world... instead of seeing those as both being possible"* (Erika, pp.10-11).

While I hear her concerns, I mean to use the term self-transcend very intentionally. I do not mean it at all in the sense of transcendence of the body, but in the sense of shifting or movement beyond the selfishness and sense of separateness of our small or ego self, and towards an understanding of the needs of others as equally important as our own.

As Bai (2001) so clearly articulates in her previously cited work on attending to the other:

Call it self-transcendence, 'not-self', decentering, engrossment, motivational displacement, or by any other name known in various fields of scholarship. The phenomenon describes a fundamental shift in the axes of the psyche, from egocentrism and subjectivity to intersubjectivity, wherein a subject-to-subject, not subject-to-object, relationship emerges. (p. 316)

As Bai and Yuval-Davis do, I see this movement, this self-transcendence, as vital to intersubjectivity and the loving relation I am recommending for critical practice; consequently, I have continued to use the term in the revised conceptualization.

The other participant who questioned the fifth element of the initial conceptualization wanted to rework the statement about change to make it more actively choiceful, rather than suggesting that one was 'changed' by external forces. She says: *"I will rarely use a verb with an ED*

on the end because that implies something is happening to me, or that this force outside of myself is changing me... so the choice of language that I would use there is a willingness to embrace change” (Raven, p.11). While I disagree on one level, believing that Spirit can in fact change us, I like her phrasing about ‘willingness to embrace change’, and this will be reflected in my revised conceptualization.

In addition to their comments on existing elements of the initial conceptualization as outlined above, participants also added to my preliminary understanding the notions of: acceptance and the assumption of wholeness as a starting place for practice; and of self-work as an adjunct to reflexivity. Again, their understandings and comments have informed my reworking of the initial conceptualization. In the section that follows, I will offer a revised conceptualization of love in critical practice.

Revised Conceptualization of Love as Emancipatory Praxis:

The following is a revised conceptualization of love in critical practice that takes into account participant comments on the initial conceptualization offered in Chapter One. Over the course of the inquiry, I have begun to more fully understand that it is not the individual elements, but rather the constellation of elements taken together that constitutes the embodied practice of love in a critical or emancipatory sense.

Love as emancipatory praxis, as discussed by participants, and as I am conceptualizing it here may be experienced to exist in the interjective space between the following elements:

- **Recognition of the intrinsic interconnection of all beings;**
- **Recognition of, and respect and reverence for one’s own and others’ intrinsic wholeness, sacredness, and value as an expression of the diversity of this interconnection;**
- **Recognition of, and respect and reverence for one’s own and others’ inherent humanity, dignity, and claim to universal human rights based in a valuing of difference;**
- **Deep presence (seeing, hearing, perceiving, experiencing and caring deeply), mindfulness and compassion/lovingkindness;**
- **Deep embodied engagement, critical analysis and truth-telling within an atmosphere of acceptance, non-judgement and non-interference;**
- **Commitment to participation and engagement in life, community and relationships;**
- **Willingness to not know or understand, willingness to not be ‘right’;**

- **Willingness to know, deep openness to others' experience and definition of self as they offer it;**
- **Commitment and willingness to shift or self-transcend and embrace changing and being changed, commitment to self-work;**
- **Willingness to support, recognize, acknowledge, or accept others' shifting, self-transcending, and changing in their own way.**

The participants in these dialogues did not wish to suggest that their ways of practising were the 'right' ways or that they should become the new protocol for practice, nor do I. It is my hope, rather, that the description and discussion of our conversations, and the conceptualization presented above might (re)insert the notion of love into the discourse of critical theory and practice; might plant a seed of radical and liberatory possibility. This conceptualization of love as emancipatory praxis is not offered as a prescription, but instead in the hope that it might present an invitation for others to explore and perhaps experience the generative and transformational possibilities of love in practice for themselves.

Love as Emancipatory Praxis: Conclusion

The key contributions of the critical practice of social work include the challenge to essentialism, the recognition and valuing of diversity, and the recognition of and movement towards ending intersecting hierarchical oppressions. Notions of universality must not render diverse ways of knowing, being and doing indistinct. I believe strongly that we must continue, and even expand, our valuing of difference.

At the same time, I consider it crucial to movements for social justice and community and individual healing such as critical social work, that notions of difference do not erase interbeing. In order for our work facilitating change to be loving, and I would argue sustainable in the long-term, we must also reconnect with a sense of the interconnection of all the diverse manifestations and representations of Life.

The political and institutional regulation of social work too often leads not towards justice and healing but rather towards practices of governing, oppression and appropriation. In such constructions, emotion and connection are erased. For some critical practitioners however this is not and cannot be the case. In spite of denial, resistance, barriers and censure, love still emerges to challenge the hegemony of dualism and hierarchy. This thesis explores the interrelation between love, intersubjectivity, critical practice and spirituality. It contests the hegemonic construction of social work practices, and offers a conceptualization of love as a radical possibility for emancipatory praxis in academic, professional, community, and activist contexts.

The inquiry has drawn on a seventh-moment, reconstructive research paradigm (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000) to invite the sacred, the loving, and the intersubjective into the research process. The inquiry involved extensive review of relevant literatures in critical social work, critical theory, and engaged spirituality, particularly from Aboriginal and Buddhist perspectives; and depth or active interviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, 1997) in the form of dialogues with a group of practitioners - diverse across gender, race, age, sexuality - who intend to practice in a critical, loving and spiritual way.

Co-Conceptualizing Love in Critical Practice:

Central to the participant discussions have been notions of spirituality as interconnection, and intersubjectivity grounded in critical analysis. Those involved felt that love or spirituality as interconnection was not only the context of their practice, but was in fact essential to all their ways of perceiving, being and doing. The people involved in these conversations (re)inserted the notion of spirituality into my inquiry, suggesting love and spirituality have a complex, intricate and intermeshed

relationship, *if* spirituality is framed as recognition of interconnection and recognition of the intrinsic value of all beings. Love as we have defined it here is a deeply spiritual construct: a way of perceiving, being and doing, rather than simply an emotion or theoretical ideal. The practitioners' descriptions of their practice dismantle the false dichotomy between 'love as an emotion' versus 'doing practice as a technology'; loving as a way of perceiving and being and love as a way of doing are interwoven in their work.

My interactions with participants also led me to the notion of openheartedness, a choice to remain open and loving in spite of contact with pain and oppression that was common to all those with whom I spoke. Through their commitment to engage deeply, participants were able to face the human condition of fear, greed, hatred, delusion and oppression head-on, and yet remain deeply connected to love, hope and the beauty of the diversity of life.

The participants in this study are firmly grounded in critical practice: in reflexivity; in analysis of the social construction of 'reality' and its impact in delimiting people's lives and choices; and in critical action, both alone and in coalition with others to shift those constructions and the oppressive material realities of the lives of humans and other beings. They centre the practice of compassionate challenge in their work, suggesting that acceptance, non-judgement and non-interference coupled with support and truth-telling by the worker create the ground in which change can flourish. Their practice is not only loving, but critical and deeply principled as well. They seem to echo hooks' argument that love in its deepest sense is impossible without a context of social justice (hooks, 2000); and Dyson's (2000) earlier cited contention that "justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public" (in Alpert, 2000, p.4).

From our dialogical discussions, a critical, emancipatory and multi-element conceptualization of love emerged – located in the space of the possible. This conceptualization begins from an assumption of critical social justice-oriented practice; and has been presented in the previous chapter. Love, as I have conceptualized it here may be understood as a potentiality existing in the space between this constellation of elements, including deep presence and engagement; the recognition of intrinsic value, sacredness and interconnection; openheartedness; compassionate challenge; and a willingness to not know, that bring us towards or into intersubjective and open relationship with each and every being we meet, including the Earth.

My Learning:

I have been deeply honoured to be involved with the participants over the course of this research, and I have learned a great deal. My initial conceptualization of love, based in my own practice experience and a review of pertinent literatures, captured some but clearly not all of what might be considered love in critical practice. The revised conceptualization presented in the previous chapter

feels deeper, richer and more honouring of the potentiality that exists in the practice of those who engaged with me in dialogue.

I have also changed a great deal through involvement in these conversations. The inquiry has been expanding and growth inducing, both theoretically and practically, as well as validating my own practice and decreasing my sense of isolation. I have a much clearer conceptual sense of what I mean, not only by love, but also by spirituality; and my own acknowledgement of the spiritual element in my life and practice has flourished. I feel a renewed awareness of the interconnection of the diversity of life, and a renewed energy arising for my practice on all levels.

As well as acting as a catalyst for such an increase in energy, this inquiry is intended to fill some of the space in the critical social work literature, to address the absence of love in our discourses of theory and practice. It suggests numerous potential avenues for further exploration. The key questions that remain with me at this time include: What is the relation of values to professional education? In what ways might we best model or teach an anti-oppressive enacting of love in practice? Is the notion of love as emancipatory praxis relevant to social workers such as Ministry workers who are employed in rigidified government institutions? Is there a match in perception between practitioners intending to practice in a loving and critical way and the experience of the clients with whom they work?

The Methodology:

Involvement in this emancipatory, organic, and dialogic methodological approach has been both rewarding and challenging. The deepest strength of this process – the dialogical aspect – has also been, not its limitation so much as its greatest test. I have attempted throughout the inquiry to maintain ethics and integrity, most especially by living and enacting the role of researcher in accordance with my conceptualization of love in practice.

My commitment to dialogue has allowed for the collection of very rich theoretical and practice knowledge to be filtered through me and my ways of knowing, while attempting to create as many opportunities as possible for the voices of participants to be heard themselves. While not all participants chose to become involved in the daunting and time-consuming task of offering feedback on my tentative interpretations, for the most part feedback from participants has supported my sense of success in manifesting the intention that this process be honouring; and the participant who initially expressed concern about the notion of love in practice has described the interpretation as “wonderfully sensitive”.

At the same time, as we heard participants suggest earlier, this research, conducted in a loving way, has demanded of me. It has required a willingness to meet participants on their own terms; a deep desire to learn while remaining willing to not-know, understand or be right; and a

willingness to be challenged and to change. This was true at many stages of the process: in the initial phase of the research in terms of my complicated and challenging interrelations with the academy; in the description and interpretation phase when I sat on my floor crying, surrounded by 1000 slips of paper trying to make sense of themes; and particularly so in the interpretation phase when one participant offered a sharp challenge to my tentative interpretation of the conversations, which she experienced as missing key elements. Over a month long period of critique, an attempt at negotiation, and then silence, I was able to transform the conceptualization in a way she perceived as “capture[ing] the essence of participants’ words”; which felt better to me, and which did in fact do more justice to the substance of the conversations. A loving stance in relation to this work has demanded a commitment to remaining engaged in the process even when it was extremely difficult, confusing and painful; and a deep, loving and mindful presence throughout.

An Invitation:

The participants in these dialogues do not conceive social work as a practice to be approached technologically. While not denigrating practice skills, participants contextualize the use of these skills in a loving stance. We do not offer a how-to manual. What this group of spiritually-informed critical practitioners do offer is a possibility for love to be imagined as an emancipatory alternative to current canonical constructions of practice. The liberatory love participants bring to practice is not theoretical, but lived; our principles underlie, inform and frame our lives and work.

Our practices dismantle the binary dualities of social construction, recognizing and honouring what Thich Nhat Hanh (1993) refers to as interbeing - the “interpenetration” of unity and diversity; a recognition he argues is necessary for the sustainability of work towards social and ecological justice. In keeping with his words, their parallel in Baskin’s (2002) sense of spirituality as interconnection, and Bai’s (2001) call for intersubjectivity as a path to democracy; our voices suggest that it is the presence-in-interconnection, the not-knowing, the openheartedness, the compassionate challenge, the willingness to engage fully and be transformed, that *are* the coming-into-being of the practice of loving and liberatory critical social work. We offer the possibility of imagining love as a way of perceiving, being and doing which has the potential to transform both our own lives and the world. I invite you to join us in envisioning and exploring this for yourself.

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²⁰ In keeping with the dialogical nature of this inquiry, and my on-going attempt to centre conversation and multivocality, I have chosen to include here all works that deepened my understandings of various aspects of the concepts explored, rather than simply present a list of references cited.

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Appendix A

Letter Of Invitation And Informed Consent

[Date]

Dear _____ :

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled “Love as Emancipatory Praxis: an exploration of practitioners’ conceptualizations of love in critical social work practice” that is being conducted by Michele Butot, a graduate student in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria. You may contact me if you have further questions by telephone at 250)480-0601 or at mbutot@telus.net. This research is being conducted as part of the requirements for a Master’s degree in Social Work under the supervision of Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha. You may contact her at 250)721-8041 or by email at mehmoona@uvic.ca.

As my practice has developed over the past fifteen years, within a critical framework and over a wide range of practice settings, I have become more and more interested in, and intellectually curious about, the transformational role of love in the liberation of human society, communities, individuals, and the planet. My research seeks to facilitate dialogue among critical social workers, inform and deepen my own understandings of my embodied experience as a practitioner, and to add to the critical social work discourse, exploring the place of a potentially emancipatory notion of love in our praxis.

Through my observations in different settings and systems of practice, and through dialogue with clients and colleagues, I have come to question whether radical, long-term transformation is possible if it is not grounded in a loving stance toward those considered “other” from ourselves. I am curious about the possibility of conceptualizing love, not only as an emotion, but as a stance, approach or way of being; a choice to move in the direction of a loving way of seeing, hearing and experiencing the “other”. My inquiry has emerged out of my practice observations, and has been refined during the course of the past year, as I have surveyed the literature and engaged in discussion with colleagues. I have been struck by the disjuncture between the lack of articulation of love in the critical social work literature on the one hand, and individual social workers’ passion about and willingness to engage in theorizing about, love in social work practice on the other. It is through these observations and initial explorations that the research question: “How do critical social work practitioners conceptualize love?” has arisen.

I am conducting field research in which I am offering a small, diverse, and purposeful sample of critical social workers the opportunity to discuss, question and theorize about their own experiences of love related to practice. I am curious about how these social workers imagine love, and how their conceptualization is informed by their vision of critical practice, and the means or

methods of their work. My research seeks to explore the possibilities for social justice, reconciliation, and transformation that love may offer social work, at societal and individual levels.

My hope is that this piece of research might not only further understanding of love in social work practice, but also have “catalytic validity” - focusing and re-energizing all participants, myself included, for continued anti-oppressive practice and activism, and opening the way for further research explorations.

You are being invited to participate in this study as a self-identified critical or anti-oppressive social worker who considers love to be relevant to your practice. If you agree to participate, I will travel to a location specified by you, at a time convenient to you, for a one to two hour loosely structured interview; my hope is to complete interviews by the end of June 2003. Additionally, you would be invited to review transcripts and to offer feedback on initial data analysis, and would have access to the completed thesis.

While there are not known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research, participation may cause some inconvenience, including the time required for the interview, a possible follow-up half hour interview by phone, and time reviewing transcripts and initial data analysis. Your participation at each of these stages is entirely voluntary; additional participation would likely require two to four hours at most, over and above the initial interview, for a total of no more than six hours.

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 explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be handled according to your wishes. You will have the option of allowing me to maintain the relevant material and using it in the final analysis, of receiving all taped or transcribed interview material pertaining to you, or of having me destroy this material. In order to assure myself that you are continuing to give your consent to participate in this research if follow-up interviews are required, I will ask you again about your desire to continue involvement or not. You can choose the extent to which you participate in transcription and data analysis review. You will also have the option of having research findings or thesis mailed out to you, and will be made aware of the date of my thesis defence, which you are welcomed to attend.

Because this research asks questions of a type regularly expected in daily practice and self-reflection, and because you are not being asked to divulge confidential personal information, you will have the option of using your actual name in the interview or of using an alias. Geographic location of individual participants will not be included in the thesis report. In order to protect your anonymity and the confidentiality of the data, all personal and research information including taped and transcribed interviews will be maintained by me in a secure location. Only myself, the professional transcriptionist and my thesis committee will have access to the information. Material will be kept in

a locked file when it is not in active use, and will be destroyed two years after the University of Victoria has accepted my thesis.

I will analyze and code the data from our conversations using qualitative methods, and the results of the analysis will be presented in the research section of my thesis; direct participant quotations will be used to illustrate themes. Data will be shared with you after transcription, and again after preliminary analysis. It is anticipated that the results of this study might be shared with others in thesis or class presentations, presentations at scholarly meetings, published articles, or possibly a book in the future.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and 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).

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

Consent For Participation

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

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