GENDER, CHRISTIANITIES, AND NEO/LIBERAL HEGEMONY:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF GENDER DISCOURSE IN A UNITED
CHURCH WOMEN’S GROUP

by

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A thesis submitted to the Program in Cultural Studies
In conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(September, 2011)

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Abstract

This thesis explores the potential for ethico-politically committed cultural critique in investigating lived experiences of gender in the hegemonic global north, where the neo/liberal rhetoric of sexual equality tends to portray issues of gender as already sufficiently addressed. It argues that the ideological roots of dominant gender discourses can be productively explored through the interrelated histories of Christianities and neo/liberalisms that have powerfully shaped mainstream Canadian society. Supported by an extensive body of literature bringing religious studies, feminist, and queer theory to bear on sociological and political questions, this rhetoric is investigated by applying critical discourse analysis to transcripts of interviews conducted over a year of participant observation with the members of a local United Church women’s discussion group. Findings suggest a complex set of attachments, rejections, and ambivalent attitudes toward those elements of feminism that have entered into the social, cultural, political and economic discourses that have become dominant in Canada. The discussion of results considers the forces which produced respondents’ general complacency with the status quo of gender equality along with their hesitancy to make judgments about the validity of competing claims regarding gender ethics. Analysis concludes by examining the implication of these attitudes for the prospects of gender justice movements, especially those conceived in terms of allyship and coalition-building at the intersection of different axes of identity and practice.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I want to thank the determined and consummately supportive creators of the Cultural Studies Program for their commitment to social justice and for creating a space in which to nurture the belief that critical scholarly engagement can be meaningful to our lived realities. My sincere appreciation goes to Dr. Lynda Jessup and Dr. Susan Lord, in particular, for their caring guidance. Many thanks also to Danielle Gugler, the Cultural Studies Program Assistant, for her hard work and support as everyone involved with this program navigated its new terrain together.

To my Cultural Studies cohort and the unique people I have been lucky to call friends since moving to Kingston, and from my hometown: your inspiration makes work worthwhile. I owe special thanks to many of you for generosity in giving advice on this project along the way.

I am grateful to my supervisor Dr. Pamela Dickey Young for taking time amongst her many roles and responsibilities to give me the direction that was crucial in coalescing a mix of grand ideas into a manageable project. I am indebted to your insight, patience, and your willingness to work with someone who was out of her disciplinary element. Thanks also to my second reader Dr. Scott Morgensen for his considerate feedback and uncanny ability to translate my questions and tentative hypotheses into a picture of anthropological clarity. And to the thoughtful and kind women of Riverside United Church: your willingness to oblige my many questions allowed this work to take shape. Thank you for giving freely of your time and for welcoming me to your discussion group over the past year.

I owe everything to my mother Paula Perdue for her love, encouragement, understanding, and perseverance. Most of all, I owe eternal gratitude for the incredible gift of allowing me utter freedom of thought and expression. I would not be on this path today without your open-mindedness as my example.

Finally, I give thanks to my partner Shannon Coyle who every day convinces me that life is meaningful and, at the best of times, beautiful. You have my sincere gratitude, love, admiration, and respect.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Gender, Neo/Liberalisms, and Christianities

This is the extraordinary paradox of Western culture, which – at precisely the historical moment when, with modernity and postmodernity, it appears poised to free itself definitively from the constriction of religious and confessional bonds, through what [Réné] Girard characterizes as a “rationalist expulsion of the religious” – reveals its profoundly Christian roots.

Pierpaolo Antonello, 20101

Those roles have changed. So I don’t think that we need to keep discussing. I see an opening of the marketplace. When for instance a female wants to be a plumber, are they putting up with things? Yes they are. But when a male enters the nursing profession – there are now far more male nurses than there used to be – but they have the same abuse as females. It’s better, but there’s a need for improvement.

Trisha, 2011

Queer, then, is everywhere in the Christian tradition…‘queer’ betokens something other than political and sexual identity, it includes more than just gay or lesbian identified people. As David Halperin puts it, queer is ‘an identity without an essence….It describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.’

Gerard Loughlin, 20082

One of the ways in which to expand the ethico-politically committed work of cultural critique is by investigating lived experiences of gender in the hegemonic global north, where the neo/liberal rhetoric of sexual equality often portrays issues of gender as already sufficiently addressed. In this thesis, I attempt to contribute to this deconstructive work by examining gender in the everyday language of participants in a mainline Christian denomination situated in a mid-sized Ontario3 city. I analyze the power relations

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3 In this case, I use “mid-size” to describe a city whose population is roughly 100,000 persons. Canada has 9 cities over 500,000 people (total population 17,898,200), and 24 cities between 100,000 and 500,000 (total population
inscribed by these complex, changing, and hybrid ideologies through the gender discourse mobilized by members of a women’s discussion group in a local United Church congregation, arguing that significant strands in the ideological roots of these dominant discourses can be productively explored through the interrelated histories of Christianities and neo/liberalisms that have powerfully shaped mainstream Canadian society.

Manifestations of the discursive affirmation of sexual equality in Canadian society are apparent in a wide range of texts including everyday talk, media broadcasting, and formal political expressions like the official documents produced by the Canadian government. The basis of this discourse rests in the same notion of “universal reason” (Griffin, 2007, p. 220) out of which comes a theory of human rights barring discrimination based on characteristics seen as fundamentally personal like religion, race, and sex. In actuality, the ideal subject’s set of identifiers, including religion, race and sex, are encoded in the Canadian Constitution Act by virtue of the document’s genealogy and privileged in its application (Beaman, 2003). The same identity-based privileges are enacted in increasingly subtle ways in Canadian society through everyday language, media representations, and even through scholarship, mainstream women’s movements, and supposedly remedial policies like multiculturalism. Official and popular discourse on Canada’s national characteristics paint the country as a bastion of “cultural sensitivity toward and tolerance of others (to the core/national culture and agency)” (Bannerji, 2000, p. 550). In actuality, as Himani Bannerji (2000) argues by tracing the epistemology of Canadian diversity discourse, these “others” remain systematically juxtaposed against a generic national persona from which they are seen to diverge.

In order to access some facet of mainstream gender discourse and experience, I participated in the

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Riverside United Church evening women’s discussion group over the course of a year and conducted individual interviews with each of its five regular members as well as one woman from a daytime discussion group and the recently retired minister who had initiated both groups. What I intended to study through this context was the nature of gender discourse mobilized by those who comfortably occupy positions inside the “social mainstream.” I use "mainstream" as synonymous with "dominant" and in much the same sense as Sunera Thobani (2007) in her study of Canada’s “exalted subjects,” as a way of describing a culturally powerful majority segment of Canadian society which "is generally defined as tolerant and balanced in its approach" but that is actually "inextricably infused with the colonial tropes of white racial supremacy" and "western civilizational superiority," the latter of which is substantiated in part by holding up the achievement of having incorporated gender equity as one of its core values (p. 108). "Mainstream" as applied to culture, society, or values connotes a shifting, amorphous and contested referent as culture and values are always engaged in transformation. I use it here to describe the cultural position of the Riverside women with respect to their general sense of a "tolerant and balanced" Canada and specifically with regard to gender because they do not see themselves as engaged in countercultural struggle around gender issues. I also characterize the Riverside women's general cultural position as "mainstream" in order to describe the way these women are discursively positioned as able to speak authoritatively to the general state of social issues – like gender equality and economic opportunity – in their society.

In other words, the mainstream is that which claims the authority to pronounce what is normal and proper and which naturalizes a certain image of the world so thoroughly as to render it almost unquestionable. It has become commonplace to note that Western media routinely exoticize practices such as female circumcision, widow burning, and Sharia law as unthinkably barbaric instances of gender

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4 All names of persons and churches have been changed to protect interviewees’ anonymity.
injustice by “other cultures.” Attempting to depart from this colonizing pattern of constructing knowledge about “others” and following the many anthropologists and cultural studies scholars who suggest turning our critical gaze inward, I argue that there is great emancipatory potential at stake in interrogating what harm familiar biopower – forms of power regulating the re/production of social life (Foucault, 1976, p. 140) – might inflict when its subjects in the global North are, by turns, resistant to, consciously complicit in, uncritically complacent with, and unaware of its operation.

If we accept that the human social world is a discursively constructed space (Philips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 24), then it becomes apparent that one of the most heavily overdetermined arenas in the dominant culture of the global North is gender. In the “pluralistic culture of high-technology multinational capitalism (which some call postmodernity)” (Swatos & Christiano, 1999, p. 224), the hegemonic understanding of gender as dual and applicable to all human persons establishes a system in which almost all human expression is vulnerable to becoming gendered. And because the binary simplicity of the conceptual container must always confront the human condition of infinite complexity, those operating with the signifiers “female” and “male” find it constantly necessary to add new layers to this hardening sediment. Despite the perennially messy work of disciplining subjectivities and their expressions into discrete categories or relegating subversive behaviours into outliers that only serve to reinforce the norm, the normative expectation that gender, sex, and sexuality map straightforwardly onto one another persists. Under this expectation lies the assumption that there are metaphysical truths that human bodies and their identities reflect; namely, the biological reality of human sexual binary. If we follow the compelling arguments of contemporary post-metaphysicians, among many other thinkers, we can appreciate that no such correspondences necessarily exist: “To surpass metaphysics means, according to Rorty and Vattimo, to stop inquiring into what is real and what is not; it means recognizing that something is better understood the more one is able to say about it” (Antonello, 2010, p. 6). With this in mind, I want to
repeat the now-familiar argument that the language we use to describe gender (and sex, and sexuality) does not express metaphysical categories. Instead, it engenders social realities and persuades us to project back in an iterative loop an underlying metaphysical order. This thesis builds on the insight that two central sources of gender discourse that are all the more significant for their relationship to one another are neo/liberalisms (Manent, 1987/1996) and the Protestant Christianities inherited from the English and Scottish Enlightenment (O’Toole, 2000, p. 45). The contradictory and always changing “nervous system” (Taussig, 1992, p. 13) of gender discourses produces a “mimetic excess” (Taussig, 1993, p. 34) of performative options, which for all their multiplicity, conventionally interlock as facets of one or the other gender in a male/female system.

While the gender representations that hail us are discursive constructs, their effects are real insofar as they have social consequences. Broadly, as part of the larger heterosexual “matrix” or “hegemony” (Osborne, Segal & Butler, 1994), they constitute the privilege of cisgendered persons – that is, persons whose gender identity matches the behaviour role considered socially appropriate for their sex – as it is premised on the disenfranchisement of persons expressing non-normative gender identities. It follows that finding different ways to talk about – or perhaps better yet, past – gender, holds the potential to open up emancipatory political possibilities (Butler, 2004, p. 2) for any subjects on whom this hegemonic paradigm of gender normativity exercises its productive and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975/1995). It is the discursive space triangulated by the three terms postmodern neo/liberal world order, Canadian Protestantisms, and gender that this study critically explores.

The following sections of this chapter outline the theoretical and methodological framework of the thesis, situating this project at the disciplinary intersection of cultural studies, anthropology, religious studies, and gender studies. The theoretical grounding begins with an overview of the entwined histories of Christianity and the stellar values of individualism, secularism, as well as personal and market
freedom that predominate in the postmodern global north. I draw on a range of historical work (Manent, 1987; Beyer, 1997; & McKay, 2000; 2009) and sociological work (O’Toole, 2000 & 2006; Swatos & Christiano, 1999; Martin, 2000; Beaman, 2003) to follow this genealogy, and then make a case for ethnographic analysis of the contemporary Canadian situation. Next, I discuss the neo/liberal economy as an inherently sexed and gendered system, uniting theoretical support from Butler’s (1990) concept of the “heterosexual matrix” and Foucault’s (1976/1990) insights on the biopolitical production of sex as a social category with political economist Penny Griffin’s (2007) analysis of neoliberal discourse and the reproduction of normative heterosexuality. This account of the neo/liberal politico-economic order is nuanced by discussing its instantiation in Canada with reference to Rianne Mahon’s (2008) work on the variety of actually existing Canadian neo/liberalisms.

Having characterized hegemonic conceptions of gender in Canadian society, the field of gender theory is examined more broadly in order to highlight the benefit of further deploying feminist and queer theory in both philosophy of religion and theology. These sections are followed by a review of recent ethnographic work and methodological debates related to the present endeavour. Here, I focus on the cultural poetics of Kathleen Stewart (1996), and shared theoretical influences in Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michael Taussig. I also discuss Saba Mahmood’s (2005) investigation of religious feminists in patriarchal Cairo politics, Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1991; 2002; & 2005) analyses of gender and nationalism, and Carol B. Duncan’s (2006) exploration of race, class, and gender among Toronto Spiritual Baptists. In this section I also detail my methodological considerations in doing research “at home” and explain how I came to work with the particular group of women whom I am fortunate to call my interlocutors. Subsequently, I present a synthetic account of “critical discourse analysis” theories as a relevant framework through which to understand the ethnographic transcriptions examined in the latter two chapters of this thesis. I also provide an explanation of the “denaturalized” transcription system used.
to textually relate interviews with the Riverside women. Following a review of previous scholarship on gender and Western Protestant Christianities, these denominations and hegemonic postmodern society, as well as hegemonic society and gender, I go on to argue that there is a need to connect these three terms through ethnographic research focusing specifically on gender discourse in the Canadian “religious mainstream” (Beaman, 2003, p. 312) before concluding with a brief outline of what follows in the next two chapters.

**Canadian Neo/liberal Society and the United Church of Canada**

The decision to study a group of women in the United Church has to do with the fact that a mainline church is *not marginal* by virtue of its successful co-optation into or containment by the Canadian project of liberal rule (McKay, 2009, p. 347). Victorian Christianity profoundly shaped the character of the nation, establishing the conditions in which the United Church developed (O’Toole, 2006). The history of Canada has been shaped by “churches with strong links to powerful political, business and cultural elites” dominant among which have been the “big three”; the Roman Catholics aligned with Francophone Québec, and the United Church of Canada and the Anglicans associated with Canada’s Anglophone population (O’Toole, 2006, p. 9). The historical entwinement of these forms of church and state imported by Western European immigrants to Canada represents a productive connection for my project because I am interested in what I consider a majority segment of women who have some sense of the neo/liberalist version of sexual equality that has been entrenched in Canadian political rhetoric and because of the Christian roots of this politco-cultural logic. I recognize that choosing a mainline church for fear of not getting what I, as a researcher, “want” out of either radically revisionist or fundamentally evangelical groups would smuggle in false assumptions about very left- or right-leaning groups’ capacity for critical thought and presuppose a void of critical insight in the formation of
conservative or evangelical perspectives. Instead, my rationale lies in the specificity of an historicopolitical connection. Moreover, I imagine these and other religious practitioners as people who are already engaged in political reflection which they communicate to fellow congregants and wider communities. Rather than hubristically proposing to incite the beginnings of reflection, I instead only hope to offer solidarity and another critical perspective.

The goal for this work is not to undertake a meta-analysis of the Riverside women’s experiences in order to theorize about the general character of churches or about the theological implications for their denomination as a whole. Instead, analysis finds its boundaries in how the individual women’s secular and religious experiences of gender impact and reflect particular sociocultural ideologies – united under the logic of neo/liberalisms – both in and outside of their ecclesiastical communities. Along with a hypothesis about the way Christianities and neo/liberalisms shape discourse around gender, I bring unavoidable subconscious biases as well as certain political commitments and personal stakes in the work. The impetus for this project arose through two different but related channels. One involved many years of observing, as a non-religious person, extensive state authorization of Christianities – of the kind implied in the words of the national anthem, validated by the existence of a separate religious school board, and institutionalized in the occasions taken for national holidays – in a country supposedly committed to religious pluralism. The other source of motivation comes from experience as someone who could have comfortably inhabited a mainstream position with regard to culture, race, class, and language if not for an inclination toward gender non-conformity, which has been a catalyst for becoming radicalized in other ways. My agenda in this research is broad and was clearly expressed through the wording of my interview guide and in response to my interlocutors’ initial questions about my motivations: in the struggle to resist oppression, marginalization, and normalization, I believe that it is politically productive to question the discourses that shape the contours of the taken-for-granted world.
In his introduction to *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith* (2010), Pierpaolo Antonello writes:

The problem is that, very often, these debates [around laicism and religion] become polarized in a way that does more to encourage the spirit of disputation and journalistic simplification than it does to promote a precise and cogent articulation of the terms of the question: vociferous protagonists on both sides tend to emphasize, and not always in good faith, the “difference” between value systems and their proponents, whether laic and materialist on one hand (allegedly heirs of the Enlightenment or, rather, of an ingenuous scientism), or Christian and fideistic on the other. Their extremist tone has the paradoxical effect of reminding us that extremes tend to converge, and to sound alike. (pp. 1-2)

The present work is positioned among such debates, played out through a body of literature and public conversations that, for some time have avoided violent debate between polarized camps by asking only tightly controlled questions with a narrow agenda. Accordingly, I have chosen to track a social imaginary through interviews, participant observation, and self-reflexive praxis. Using a range of open-ended questions, I explore how the stories that my respondents tell themselves and their communities about gender imbues quotidian life and religious and civic spaces.

**Ethnography at Home and as Mirror**

By framing how my interlocutors’ particular experiences with gender as mainline Christian women impact their sociocultural behaviour in and outside of their ecclesiastical communities, my analytical scope attends to important articulations between their religious lives and wider sociocultural phenomena, including the way that popular feminisms have been both challenged and reinforced in a variety of contexts, and how ideas about gender inclusion are conceptually connected with other Canadian projects of diversity and tolerance – which often use the treatment of women as a hot-button issue, especially in public debates around multiculturalism, immigration, and foreign policy. On an even larger scale, analyzing the social situation of these Christian women offers an avenue for future research into how religious praxes around gender inflect the confluence of social paradigms that play out in cities of the global north and which, in the “War on Terror” era, are often read as a “culture clash” between
Christianity and Judaism on one hand and Islam on the other (Razack, 2005; Salutin, 2011). The Riverside women’s individual experiences with gender and religion offer a rich starting point from which to begin a conversation about the lived reality of a group of people (Canadian women who belong to mainline churches) who are underrepresented in ethnographic literature and whose mobilization of gender discourse can reveal a great deal about mainstream gender ideology in the late capitalist global north. The dearth of work about Canadian Christian women reflects the overall paucity of ethnography “at home,” since it is still the case for most ethnographers that home is in first world stratum of the global north. The work that does exist tends to be either autobiographical or theological (Smith & Whistler, 2010), neither of which genre addresses the audience or scope envisioned for the present project.

Ethnography can help to subvert disciplinary and vocational narratives by encouraging us to think in open-ended questions whose necessarily partial answers can establish a descriptive richness from which many different analyses may proceed. As Kit Dobson noted about his project in Transnational Canadas (2009), it is “important to retain a simultaneous perspective of recognizing difference while welcoming it, including it but neither reducing it to a one-dimensional human sameness” (p. 18) as, I contend, popular notions of equality in Canada often do. Dobson further discusses the political negotiation of difference in the context of Derrida’s concept of “the international,” which “looks toward…non-statist political interventions” (p. 33) but which nonetheless renounces neither capitalist imperialisms nor their a-capital alternatives (p. 37). Instead, suggests Derrida, we must “try to invent gestures, discourses, politico-institutional practices that inscribe the alliance of these two imperatives” (p. 37). In the present work, I follow this advice by offering a serious critique of dominant neo/liberal ideologies while writing from within the institutional space of the academy and honouring the self-determination of my interlocutors, who expressed satisfaction with a conception of personal choice that closely mirrored consumer choice in the capitalist marketplace. Derrida’s exhortation also reminds that
the project of gender justice, like any justice-oriented movement, is ultimately related to every other ethico-political project.

From a philosophy of religion perspective, Vattimo and Girard (2010) also call for a renewed body of ethico-political work in the style of ethnography (which they term “mimetic theory”) as an antidote to “the type of nihilism, the type of cognitive renunciation, we have today” (p. 61). In their words, “we need a much more subtle analysis of human relations,” and Vattimo and Girard believe that anthropology and psychology “can supply the tools of observation, and a level of analysis at which human conflict may become more intelligible – not any easier to resolve, of course, but comprehensible” (p. 61).

A Very Brief Genealogy of Neo/liberalisms, Christianities, and Hegemonic Culture in Canada

The theoretical backdrop of this project is the relationship between Christianity and the dominant geopolitical order of capitalist neo/liberalisms (Jameson, 1984) and how both of these phenomena discursively produce gender. In order to understand how the Christian-inflected neo/liberal paradigm maintains power relations that marginalize non-normative gender identities while simultaneously foreclosing gender as subject for critical interrogation, it is necessary to understand something of their complex and entwined histories.

This study attends to a particular – though indirect and seldom consciously directed – genealogy proceeding very broadly from the seeds of Western democratic and liberal thought as well as the early Christian cultures in which some aspects of this thought arose or developed. Following one line of pedigree, these ubiquitous ideas connect to the Protestant Reformation. Without the Reformation, the political liberal revolution of early-modern Europe (Manent, 1987/1995, p. viii) could not have become what it was (Laski, 1936). Galvanized by liberal ideologies of freedom, progress and individual
achievement, Protestant settlers from England and Scotland joined other European forces competing for colonial control of North America. These settlers imbued the emerging imperial nations with their forms of Christianity, which survive in various ways within the contemporary situation of mainline Christianities in neo/liberal Canada. Chapter 2 provides an opportunity to further develop the significance of the slash dividing “neo” and “liberalisms” by examining Canada’s warring varieties of liberal regimes. These varieties include what Rianne Mahon (2008) calls “inclusive liberalism,” “postwar social liberalism” as well as “neo-liberalism.”

Pierpaolo Antonello (2010) begins to indicate how Christianities and neo/liberalisms are historically related by noting that the latter’s principles of “democracy, the free market, civil rights, individual freedoms, and laicism” have in turn “been, if not precisely invented in the absolute sense, ‘facilitated’ in their development and expression by the Christian cultures” (p. 2). In an appeal for the importance of interrogating the conditions of possibility for Christianity’s Western hegemony, Jean-Luc Nancy (2008) similarly recognizes in Christianity the cultural processes that have led to the postmodern West, as well as to its own resistance: “freedom, the individual, reason itself” (pp. 9-10). What is more, neo/liberal ideologies and dominant strains of Christian ideologies, surviving in the philosophy of neo/liberalisms as well as in a form that presents itself as more strictly theological, are both concealed and pervasive. These twinned cultural logics are deeply invested in presenting themselves not as historically contingent ideologies, but as the logical outcome of the universal subject’s reasonable behaviour. The character of this “universal subject,” born to actualize itself through the exercise of freedom and reason, was scripted in large part by the continental social contract theorists. These seventeenth and eighteenth-century “fathers” of liberalism, including the English Thomas Hobbes and John Locke developed highly atomistic models of humanity’s “original state,” positing the individual human being as the locus of reality, rather than considering some level of community as the natural state of persons. It is this mode of
individualism that underwrites much of the Western democracies’ dominant interpretations of liberalism, democracy, and capitalism.

Certainly resistance to the hegemonic sociocultural order that has developed out of the above ideologies exists, but hegemony’s success is not predicated on eradicating opposition. Instead, it operates by securing the “spontaneous consent” of subordinate groups (Strinati, 1995, p. 165), thus actually sustaining opposition in a tense, dialectical relationship that renders subjects complicit in their own subjection. Likewise, the power of discourse – which comprises images, objects, practices, spoken and written words; all semiotic phenomena which we can read as texts – resides in being both permeating and permeable. This quality is shared with sociocultural systems in general, of which discursivity forms a part (Philips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 19). It is owing to the nature of these phenomena that the politics of other actually existing paradigms, for example, languages which find no need for gendered pronouns or lifeways and communities which provide valued social roles for gender fluid persons, remain marginal. The global pancapitalist, “state-corporate alliance” portrays these social and linguistic forms as merely sub-cultural alternatives to the authentic “markets of ideas and commodities” it controls and coercively exports (Tehranian, p. 291). Therefore, the goal of critical theory and practice cannot be to find the right ideological maneuver that will instantiate someone’s individual vision of positive totalizing change, but rather to develop a diverse complement of destabilizing tactics to be deployed situationally toward ethical ends.

It is essential for me to note that I am in no way opposing Christianities to innovative ethical and political thought or even problematizing them with relation to a secular society. Indeed, from a

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philosophical standpoint, Vattimo, Girard, Nancy, and others have argued that Christianity is the “religion of the exit from religion” (Antonello, 2010, p. 2), actually producing, rather than being antithetical to, secularization. For Pierre Manent (1987/1996) the history of liberalism is coextensive with the secular world’s emancipatory political struggle against the Church. Manent (1987/1996) argues that at the core of liberalism is this “theologico-political problem” (p. 12), which is concerned with nothing less than the proper order of human life. Yet, even as thinkers of the English and Scottish Enlightenment struggled with these questions, they and their fellow nationals who would go on to colonize Canada did not wish to reduce Christianity to “the vanishing point” (Manent, 1987/1996, p. 12).

In the Canadian context, Peter Beyer (1997) argues that Christianities and secularism have proved consonant in a specifically national way. In an article on religious vitality in Canada, Beyer (1997) outlines how the nineteenth century “churching” of the nation was actually a response to informal structural secularization in that it promoted a particular organized form of religion (ie. denominational) that “thrived precisely because it responded to an increasingly secularized socio-structural context: secularized in the sense of the differentiation of religion and state” (p. 273). Measurable forms of religious participation in Canada (ie. church attendance) may have declined since World War II as responsibility for “the social project of building Canadian society” began to fall to non-religious structures (Beyer, 1997, pp. 273-274), but despite secularization theorists’ predictions about the demise of religion in the face of Western rationalization, the various kinds of experience, institutions, and arguments associated with religion remain socially dynamic and multivalent (Swatos & Christiano, 1999).

A variety of political liberalisms took up a large part of that Canadian society-building project and now a great number of mainstream systems and organizations are structured by neo/liberal ideologies. The path that mainstream Canada has taken since its colonization by Anglo Protestant and French Catholic settlers has been characterized by a social policy regime that originated in classical liberalism, a
political and economic philosophy that held the liberty of the (land-owning European male) individual in the highest regard. This variety transformed with the rise of the working class and of positive state roles into the social liberalism of the late nineteenth century. Subsequently, liberalism shifted back toward its original classical incarnation but underwent modification through being applied to the twenty-first century context, resulting in what we know as “neoliberalism” (Mahon, 2008 p. 343-345). We can further trace the development of this political form, hegemonic into the 21st century (Buck-Morss, 2006, p. 3), through the elaboration of “liberal democratic, heteronormative hierarchies of property and propriety” (Griffin, 2007, p. 229), which have entailed declining nation-state sovereignty, political controls, state functions, as well as mechanisms regulating social and economic production and exchange. In The Essence of Neoliberalism (1998), Pierre Bourdieu attributes neoliberalism’s totalizing effects to its status as a “‘strong discourse’ – the way psychiatric discourse is in an asylum, in Erving Goffman’s analysis” (para. 4). He continues:

[Neoliberalism] is so strong and so hard to combat only because it has on its side all of the forces of a world of relations of forces, a world that it contributes to making what it is. It does this most notably by orienting the economic choices of those who dominate economic relationships...This project aims to create the conditions under which the "theory" can be realised and can function: a programme of the methodical destruction of collectives. (para. 4)

Besides supporting my hypothesis about the pervasive and hard-to-pin-down nature of neo/liberal ideology, Bourdieu’s characterization of neoliberalism and its discursive effects resonates with my findings in definitive ways. As I will later argue more fully, neo/liberalism’s propensity to orient subjects toward particular economic relationships has profoundly shaped the language and behaviour of the women with whom I spoke. Specifically, a critical discourse analysis of their responses to my questions about gender norms and ethics suggests that their interpretation of freedom and personal choice has been ordered by patterns of consumer choice which, unlike the interpersonal phenomena we discussed, are often presumed to occur in an amoral economic sphere (Prasch, 2003). This analysis demonstrates my
interlocutors’ frequent relegation of political-ethical judgments – for example, with regard to inclusive language, the media’s sexualization of women and girls, the preservation of gender roles within the church, etc. – to the domain of individual choice, conceived of as largely irreproachable due to the sanctity of the individual. A consideration of the individualistic nature of this moral relativism along with the prevalence of abstention from political-ethical judgment in this case study can elucidate why it is both so challenging to raise consciousness about increasingly subtle forms of gender discrimination (Lazar, 2005, p. 1) and so complicated to envision political solidarities, alliances, coalitions – especially without the use of identity categories like sex and gender. Exacerbating resistance to gender justice in this fractious climate is the fact that neo/liberalism is inherently sexed and gendered as well as productive of sex and gender (Griffin, 2007).

As Rianne Mahon (2008) notes, even before the biopolitical production of sex as a social category from the 1800s onward (Foucault, 1976/1990), the exemplary subject of classical liberalism was “construed as the male head of the family” (p. 343). Contemporary Canadian neo/liberalisms continue to align white, masculine heterosexuality with economic success. Says Penny Griffin in “Sexing the Economy in a Neo-liberal World Order” (2007):

Neo-liberal discourse is entirely predicated on a politics of heteronormativity that (re)produces the dominance of normative heterosexuality. The heteronormative reproduction of gender identity/identities is crucial to/in neo-liberalism because it allows for the maintenance of a particular neo-liberal vision of economic activity, one that is both masculinised and ethnocentric. Herein, heterosexuality is normalised as universal, and the constraints by which bodies are predicated to function through heterosexualised and essentialised discursive boundaries, ‘natural facts’ and gender/sex categories are rather effectively hidden from the agenda of economic discourse. (p. 221)

Griffin (2007) also observes that heteronormative neoliberalism “produces the effect of constituting sexual difference as ‘fundamental to culture’” (p. 224). From this priority position, gender norms function in the reasoning processes that condition social orders (Butler, 1990, p. 221). Predictably, such ordering principles contain a conservative impulse. Construed as both eternal and structurally necessary for an
integrated society, the operation of the norms occludes our ability to question their political utility and recognize the fact that the order they produce is, in the words of Judith Butler (1990), actually “purchased and maintained through violent means” (p. 221).

As a way to open up history to reformulation – such as to reconceptualize the eternal cultural centrality of gender – some thinkers have advocated founding history on process, “on the ongoing work of a time to come,” in the words of Derrida (as cited in Dobson, 2009, p. 12) instead of on teleology or closure. Giving up a “certain” concept of history allows us to re-politicize history in this era of globalizing capital and advancement of totalizing cultural forms (Dobson, 2009, p. 12).

Contemporary neo/liberalisms have inherited the teleological mindset of the Enlightenment, suffused with traditional Christian eschatology, which compels subjects to think in terms of origins and goals. Derrida’s emancipatory historicity suggests that if it is possible to think past these historically contingent teleologies, then it is possible to rethink the logic of how we produce ourselves as gendered beings. Dominant Western paradigms, both "religious" and "secular" have at times used tactics of pathologization, criminalization, and violence to coerce their subjects to encounter gender as, if not fixed, at least idealized in a given way. It is important, therefore, not just to reconceptualize the gender as a socially ordering principle, but also to appreciate that rethinking gender can only be accomplished as part of a larger political project of opening up history to reformulation. Interrogating gender thus becomes important not just for those who directly come into tension with its norms.

Tactics like the citation of genders not conventionally available to us – through practices like drag or identifying as genderqueer – might accomplish some manner of subverting norms, but Butler (2004) asks:

If [they do] work in the service of a radical democratic politics, how might [they] work?...When we come to deciding right and wrong courses of action in that context, it is crucial to ask: what forms of community have been created, and through what violences and exclusions have they been created?...What resources must we have in order to bring into the human community those
humans who have not been considered part of the recognizably human? (p. 225)

Much feminist and queer organizing has a long way to go in order to move from merely critiquing a laundry list of oppressive behaviours to actually refusing to reproduce them. Radical democratic theory and practice, as an antidote to the impoverished democracy that prevails under neo/liberal political-economic order, must bring subjects whose positionality excludes their access to the human under the protection of norms (used in this sense means the principles that organize individuals into communities capable of upholding ethical claims). As Jessica Yee (2011) argues in the introduction to her edited collection *Feminism For Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism*, this movement must be conceptualized as a project of responsible and mutual allyship, not simply as an exercise of inclusion directed by those already in power or privileged by their status as “recognizably human” in whatever context the alliance occurs. However, the present undertaking serves as a reminder that, while critiques of radical gender theory and practices like Butler’s and Yee’s are valid and necessary for the construction of ethically committed projects, they must be balanced by attention to the reality of a significant amount of resistance from the avowedly “diverse” and “tolerant” Canadian mainstream against the claim that even much less demanding projects of gender justice are necessary at all.

**Gender and Christianities**

There has been a strong current of gender critique from a theological perspective given that theologians are ultimately concerned with questions about the good life and because the “making of women” has roots in theology “since the way in which men and women are meant to be supposedly reflects God’s design for the universe” (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood, 2007a, p. 18). Christian feminist theologies stem from a long tradition which has flourished with the mainstreaming of feminism in its conventionally defined first, second, and third “waves” as well as with its more radical and burgeoning
new directions. Justifiably or not, feminism has also sometimes been read back into the historical practices of women mystics, ascetics, nuns, religious sisters, and lay figures. According to Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (2007a), feminist theologies are concerned with social transformation and critically aware of how theological positions “concerning issues such as the ordination of women and debates on sexuality…tend to be influential in the implementation of laws concerning abortion, contraception and marriage and divorce issues in many countries” (p. 12).

Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2007a) also problematize the central assumption necessary for the existence of feminist theology which is, of course, that there have to be women. By this they mean there needs to be a distinct, “identifiable group whose experience can be used as the starting point for the reflection” and in the context of their writing, for “theological revolution” (p. 17). There are many reasons that it remains necessary to talk about women as a strategic category, and the following chapters retain this analytical distinction for a number of reasons, chief among which is that the identity "woman" is personally meaningful to the members of the Riverside group. Another, and unfortunately enduring, reason is the fact that countless forces oppress people on the basis of their self-identification or social categorization as women – of course it is this sad fact which constitutes the analytical premise of the present work. I want to discuss the emancipatory potential in taking seriously the insights coming from many incarnations of queer and feminist theory, and envisioning a politics which may not require gender distinctions at all.

Queer theology has had a shorter career than feminist theology owing to the fact that it has been enabled by the more recent development of queer theory in general. Queer theory has its origins in the late 20th century gay liberation movements for which feminism, civil rights, and other socially emancipatory efforts set the stage. Like feminist theology, queer theology also sometimes looks to historical practices that could be re-read with a critical queer spirit. “By Queer Theology,” write Althaus-
Reid and Isherwood (2007b), “we mean a movement, and an alliance of people who question the sexual construction of theology” (p. 307) while maintaining a condition of democratic plurality. Queer theology has also sought to address the white heterosexual bias of feminist theology, offering instead a “social space for the construction of different identities, for the elaboration of various types of relationships, for the development of new cultural forms” (Halperin, 1995, p. 67). Queer theology has received support from a number of theological perspectives. Graham Ward (2004) identifies a consonance between the impulse toward radical alterity inherent in the term queer and the “identity without an essence” that some find in the transformation of the Trinitarian God into the Holy Spirit and the incarnate Christ. Indeed, to reference an earlier point, it was through the radical practices of Jesus and the new social spaces he opened up that Vattimo, Girard, and Nancy saw the “exit” from religion. Appreciating the space for continual redefinition facilitated by the term “queer,” prone to idealization as it may be, Gerald Loughlin (2001) has even suggested that “queer might be offered as a name for God” (p. 150).

According to Althaus-Reid & Isherwood (2007b) Queer Theology attempts “a political and sexual queering of theology which goes beyond the gender paradigm of thinking of the early years of feminist theology” (p. 305). This ambition can be read in a dual sense, implying that “queer” can signify in relation to a variety of concepts in addition to that of gender, and also that “queer” challenges us to evaluate the utility of gender as a concept at all. While Ward (2004) and others encounter the gendered male body of Jesus Christ as part of the profound mystery of the relation between God and human beings (p. 72), there are yet other theologians for whom the permeable and unstable nature of the divine signals the potential transcendence of gender. Loughlin (2008) looks back as far as the Christian philosopher St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–c. 395) to cite the idea that gender “is destined to pass away” (p. 146).

One prominent line of critique amongst queer and feminist theorists questions whether or not considering gender as a performance still mires us in reference to binary opposites when looking for ways
to perform (Jeffreys, 2003). Some theorists have also considered how even transgender practices might work to reinforce the ontological priority of the male/female dyad over the idea of gender as multiple and fluid (Noble, 2006; Riddell, 2006). Still undertheorized, however, is what it would mean to move past the notion of gender altogether – even plural and unfixed gender – despite scholars like Gayle Rubin having advocated from within feminist politics “for the elimination of the social system which creates sexism and gender” (p. 140) as early as 1975.

Donna Haraway’s (1991) “A Cyborg Manifesto” offers the figure of the cyborg, which “is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (p. 149) in “an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end” (p. 150). More recently, Steiner’s (2008) “A Manifesto for Genderless Feminist Critique” claims that “the rhetorical and political meaning of gender has become so obscured that the term now creates as much havoc as it solves” (p. 9).

Others, like political theorist Sheila Jeffreys, are engaged in asking “where do women go if we transform the discourse from feminism to queer” (cited in Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2007b, p. 312). Without claiming too much for queer theory, I wonder about the potential for the gender-fluid subject of “queer” to replace the female referent of “feminist” in theory and theology. This gender-fluid or genderless subject could be symbolized by transforming and transformative images like the cyborg as well as the (to some, sacred) figure of Jesus Christ. The infinite potential of these beings transcends even ideas of gender multiplicity and fluidity, leading to questions about whether emancipation can truly be found in a system of gender at all. Following Butler’s argument that even sex is a discursive construct, not a biological fact, it bears questioning whether or not it is possible to have gender presentations without reference to sexual characteristics, if one is not acting "like" a male or a female – or some
combination thereof? Could gender ever be satisfactorily divorced from its development as the contingent, social expression of sex? If it could, what content or claim to importance might it have apart from historical referentiality?

These questions do not imply that it is necessary to find a reflection of gender-fluid or even non-gendered ideas in the multiplicity of sexual biology or the gradient of gender presentations. Rather, they demonstrate that it is crucial to recognize the social importance of privileging post-gender, genderqueer, gender-non-conforming, or non-gendered ideas – examples of thinking past gender – over the supposed "facts" found in biology. If they are not the same thing – if gender is not sex, and biology is not destiny – then it is not necessary to locate arguments in biological or ethnological truths, or even in the variety of morphology and social presentations that exist. Instead, the faculties of reason, imagination, and critical thought can be used to identify the fact that there are problems spinning out of control from the locus of sex/gender/sexuality and concomitantly to learn ways to think, talk, and practice around it. Such progress would not be the result of a stunning argument about ideology and false consciousness; it will be a matter of practice, repetitive and painfully gradual.

There remains a pressing need to use the overdetermined language of “women” and “gender” instead of trying to wholly surpass it at the present moment. For now, political expression must retain these concepts in order to sufficiently expose the myriad of assumptions about them. Moreover, many people are deeply invested in their gender. If someone chooses to identify as a woman – whether queer, traditional, strong, of colour, or different ability, age, class or otherwise – then surely that individual finds this identification appealing and fulfilling. The reasons behind this appeal may be numerous even within one identity, and may range from those which are self-consciously political to those which are the result of negotiating hegemonic forces that discourage questioning received realities of gender, sex, and sexuality.
In fact, some people find the language of gender identity to be politically expedient. Strategic essentialism – deliberately buying into an identity marker for tactical reasons – offers a way of reclaiming or generating stereotypes in order to assert the positive characteristics of a group, establish some basis of collective identity, and from there, to make social and political claims based on that group’s unique interests. Thinkers like Luce Irigaray have employed this method extensively with regard to gender (*This Sex Which is Not One*, 1977). In *States of Injury* (1995), Wendy Brown suggests that one way out of gender essentialism is to replace Truth with politics. She points out that when a group’s status becomes legalized and thereby protected, then their identity as such is reified at that moment. Women, for instance, become legally enshrined as marginal and dependent upon State protection. Their rights are thenceforth as *women* and their problems become only *women’s problems*. In this way, identity politics can reproduce the modes of unfreedom it seeks to eliminate. Rejecting the impetus to politicize the “I,” Brown calls for the development of public conversations about a “We” (p. 41-41, 47-51). The more imminently plausible linguistic shift from "I am" to "I want this for us" (as opposed to eradicating gendered words from everyday speech) avoids the alienating tendencies of traditional identity politics while continuing to honour a diversity of viewpoints and preserve the cultural and spatial locatedness of individual people’s worldviews.

Regardless of the political opportunities I see in linguistic evolution, I mean to honour my interlocutors’ right to self-determination just as I mean to do with all persons. My desire is not to change women's identifications, but to show how ordinary language reveals and perpetuates specific identifications, arguing that they limit both political possibilities and the potential for self-actualization that is to be found in an infinite range of human expression.
Writing Culture With Ethnography

In early 2010, through an introduction by my supervisor, I approached a women’s discussion group in a local United Church congregation. The structure of this self-selected group imposed certain constraints among numerous attributes (age, race, sexual orientation, etc.), lending the project a certain internal logic and influencing my research questions. In addition to the nexus of mainstream-ness I found in a white, Anglophone, middle class group of Christian women in a mid-sized city in the global north, several other considerations bore on my choice of field. These included my desire to challenge an enduring academic prejudice against ethnographers working “at home,” the practical exigencies of a Master’s level project, and the sheer dearth of ethnography on Canada.

Despite an extensive body of literature elaborating religious studies (O’Toole, 2006; Martin, 2000) as well as feminist and queer theology (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood, 2007a, 2007b; Jones, 2000; Loughlin, 2008) in relation to sociological and political questions, the ethnographic exploration of gender and religion and mainstream society together in a Canadian context represents a unique conceptual framing. My research is especially appropriate for its civic context, whose history of Anglo Christian – particularly Protestant – religio-cultural dominance is mirrored throughout much of Canada and reinforced by many of the values enshrined in the Canadian constitution (Beaman, 2003).

If very little has been written on the intersection of religion, gender, ordinary language, and politics from an ethnographic basis, there exists even less on the specifics of mainline Christianities, gender discourse, and neo/liberalisms in Canada. I drew inspiration for my hypothesis from and owe a great deal of methodological insight to a number of ethnographies; each of whose strength lies in cogently treating some, but not all of the terms framing my study. The following paragraphs offer a brief review of several such works which have been most significant to this project.

Saba Mahmood’s (2005) Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject explores
how movements of moral reform help us rethink the normative liberal account of politics through an ethnographic engagement with a women's piety initiative in Cairo, Egypt. One of her central questions in this analysis is how women's participation in a project based on patriarchal norms might marginalize feminist approaches to the ethical treatment of the human subject. Mahmood shows how the orthodox practices of the moral reform movement link the political and the ethical in ways that work to transform the state. The way in which the author has linked religion, gender, and liberal politics provides a rich description of how some Muslim women struggle to live their faith in a specific national context. Most importantly for my study, it provides another context from which to solidify the argument that everyday religious practice and the ways in which it is gendered can profoundly, if subtly, affect the political landscape.

Lila Abu-Lughod's (2005) *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* and several of her earlier articles (1991; 2002) also deal with the intersection of religion, gender, and politics, focusing on the national contexts of America and Egypt. Like Mahmood, Abu-Lughod works primarily in relation to Islam, highlighting that the debate between the values of religion and secularism in the Western world has so far been articulated most stridently with regard to the Muslim population in North America (K. Pozniak, personal communication, September 18, 2008). In the service of de-otherizing long-Orientalized societies, as well as for my narrower aim “to make the familiar strange” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992, p. 6) with regard to gender in the context of hegemonic Canadian Protestantisms and neo/liberalisms, it is productive to transpose this critical attention onto other faiths long considered more familiar – and therefore unremarkable – in this hemisphere.

In the seldom-examined Canadian context, Carol B. Duncan's (2006) *This Spot of Ground: Spiritual Baptists in Toronto* considers how women’s involvement in the faith mediates their experiences of migration and everyday life. The fact that the overwhelming majority of congregants identified as
women in the church Duncan studied raises an interesting point for this study which is that women outnumber men in a great majority of Christian congregations in general (R. Darnell, personal communication, March 11, 2009). While Duncan did not specifically define her project as feminist ethnography, her subject population’s demographic composition privileged reporting on the lived experiences of women; specifically, the raced and classed experiences of socioeconomically marginalized black women who migrated from or have ties with the Caribbean. This Spot of Ground includes an investigation of gender performance in one chapter subsection entitled “Ritual as Performance and Social Commentary,” where Duncan discusses some gender bending in congregations, but focuses on overtly theatrical performance. Duncan's remains one of the few ethnographic monographs dealing with religion and women in Canada.

Though it is nearly 15 years old, Kathleen Stewart’s (1996) A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America is one of the best ethnographic accounts of everyday language and the political nature of contemporary culture. Stewart experiments with textually representing everyday life in West Virginian coal camps, towns, and hollers, by approaching the “something more” of culture through telling anecdotes in a local accent (about the men, for instance, who enjoy “foolin’ with thangs”), guided visualization (“picture this,” she frequently entreats the reader), and giving dense description of visuals as well as of mood, context, and tone. Responding to Anthropology’s late 20th century “crisis of representation” (Clifford, 1986) her non-linear exploration foregoes the search for the perfect text by organically incorporating self-reflexivity, self-positioning and dialogic exchange. Instead of explanation, Stewart exemplifies the utility of critique, imagination, desire, and the questioning of traditional understandings of culture.

Like Stewart (1996), I use interviews, participant observation, and self reflexive praxis to read the social texts of stories about what it means to be a woman in the United Church and in mainstream
Canada, and explore how this kind of talk reflects and shapes larger meaning-making activities. I have gathered data over a year of participant observation with the women’s group as well as through individual interviews conducted toward the end of that year. Alternating theoretical reflections on language, culture, and politics with continuous accounts of the Riverside women’s talk, I recognize that there exists no perfect way to convey the ethnographic experience, nor a perfect way to do fieldwork, nor a perfect language to grasp the totality of lived experience. At best, I can attempt to remain self-conscious and transparent about my use of rhetoric, metaphor, style and authorial positioning. I have striven to be aware, as far as possible, of my own position in writing a thesis about the gendered experiences of Canadian women in the religious and social mainstream. I also recognize that even as I work with contemporary theoretical discourse it is doubtless undergoing innumerable revisions through rigorous critique of the kind I cannot offer within the limited scope of this project.

Addressing the sense of futility that often follows the analytical revelation that human reality is discursively mediated, Stewart (1996) affirms that we need “more than assertions that the local has its own epistemology or that everything is culturally constructed” (p. 5). It is well worth quoting Stewart’s response to her own challenge at length. In order to meaningfully re-present the culturally constructed, including the gendered dimension of religio-cultural phenomena, we also need to:

approach the clash of epistemologies…and to use that clash to repeatedly re-open a gap in the theory of culture itself so that we can imagine culture as a process constituted in use and therefore likely to be tense, contradictory, dialectical, dialogic, texted, textured, both practical and imaginary, and in-filled with desire. That is, the theory of culture itself must be brought into the space of the gap between signifier and meaning – “the space on the side of the road” – so that we can begin to imagine it as a “thing” that is not self-identical with itself but given to digression, deflection, displacement, deferral, and difference. Culture in this “model,” if we can call it that, resides in states of latency, immanence, and excess and is literally “hard to grasp.” This, I think, is the implication of the work of theorists like Barthes, Bakhtin, and Benjamin who each in his own way pointed to this “hard-to-grasp” quality and the sense of a “something more” in culture. (Stewart, 1996, p. 5)

The theorists mentioned here by Stewart have offered many different conceptual tools for thinking about
the political potential contained in the incoherence of the subject. For Mikhail Bakhtin, what he calls a "dialogized heteroglossia" involves "the expression, juxtaposition, or negotiation of our individual and our cultural differences" as an ongoing way of determining together how we should live (as cited in Zappen, 2000, p. 9). His democratic concern with the presence of many voices gives expression to the insight that "social stratification has the power to exploit and inflect language" (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 290) and that "as such, there are no ‘neutral’ words and forms…; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents" (p. 293). While “this dialogical rhetoric follows a line of development from Socrates rather than Plato and Aristotle through Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais and Dostoevsky to contemporary African-American, feminist, and postcolonial theory,” the immediate context of Bakhtin’s thinking was actually the Orthodox tradition which “introduced him to the communal ideal of the early church” (as cited in Zappen, 2000, p. 8).

Walter Benjamin’s dialectical image of the “constellation,” which I have referenced in preceding pages, derives from his dissatisfaction with linear notions of historical "progress" toward some inevitable telos. Benjamin devised the image of the constellation “as symbol of the relationship which emerges when the historian places a number of apparently unrelated historical events in significant conjuncture” (as cited in Rollason, 2002, p. 283), thereby fashioning an alternative model of history that eschewed any uncritical acceptance of reality. Perhaps this impulse toward incoherence can also offer socially and personally transformative ways of avoiding articulation as a stable subject in a number of different contexts.

Influenced by Benjamin’s mimetic theory (1934/1978), anthropologist Michael Taussig posits that mimesis is “a human given; when it is repressed, sublimated, or taken over, the repression only creates more ‘mimetic excess’” (as cited in Durham, 1993, para. 6). In this state, images flash uncontained by meanings, creating a space of plasticity and theatricality “in which the self is but a self-diminishing point
amid others, losing its boundedness” (Taussig, 1993, p. 34). This kind of exaggeration, readily applicable to many of the countless media images we see of ideal femininity and masculinity, always hints at the moments when “contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of canceling the other out” (Schechner, 1993, p. 36).

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Including Stewart, all of these theorists’ concern with language and the discursive formation of the social leads us naturally into a discussion of critical discourse analysis [CDA]. CDA’s proponents draw heavily from these seminal theorists of language and literature as well as theorists of power, including Gramsci, Althusser, and Foucault. Foucault (1977/1980) observed that:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131)

Discourse theory is premised on the understanding elaborated above that discourse is intimately connected with power and that “in principle, all social phenomena can be analysed using discourse analytical tools” (Philips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 24). By doing discourse analysis, John Thompson argues that we can discover how ideology “operates in processes of meaning production in everyday life whereby meaning is mobilized in order to maintain relations of power” (Philips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 75).6

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6 Discourse analysis describes a variety of approaches larger than space permits me to review here and in my use it also looks very similar to certain other methodologies, namely, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA advocates an “ideographic case-study approach…suitable for a small case study of up to ten respondents,” which “enables the researcher to write up a single case or an exploration of themes shared between cases” (Fade, 2004, p. 648). In the case of CDA versus IPA, the essential difference rests on certain theoretical commitments and could be characterized as a matter of scope and point of reference: CDA seeks to understand how a person’s internal state – what they think and feel about something – connects with wider social phenomena through their use of language –
Norman Fairclough, one of the key figures in discourse analysis, suggested that analysis should focus on three levels: the linguistic features of the text, the processes relating to the production and consumption of the text (discursive practice), and the wider social practice to which the communicative event belongs (as cited in Philips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 68). Fairclough also maintains that we can make distinctions between ideological and non-ideological discourses, which some later CDA theorists like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe reject on the basis that everything is a part of discourse, making “discourse” for them basically do the work of the concept of “ideology” (as cited in Philips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 18). Again unlike Laclau and Mouffe, Fairclough distinguishes between discursive dimensions of social practices and other logics, like economic logics (as cited in Philips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 19). With Lilie Chouliaraki, Fairclough (1999) criticizes Laclau and Mouffe for ignoring how structural relationships of dependency constrain the ability of individuals and groups to engage in counter-hegemonic renegotiation and therefore proposes to separate a “structural dimension” (p. 59) where interaction is discursively constrained from a “domain of the contingent” where the network of discourses is “interactionally worked and potentially restructured through a rearticulation of resources” (p. 59). Nonetheless, Fairclough would be hard pressed to argue otherwise than that any of the phenomena he categorically separates can still only acquire social meaning through their participation in discourse.

Philips and Jorgensen (2002) characterize the role of explanatory critique as one of revealing the function of discursive practice in the production of unequal power relations. Ultimately, the intention should be to raise critical language awareness in the service of “struggle for radical social change” (Philips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 64). To understand how this analysis might function in my study, I offer the following example: if my informants use of the concept “feminism” is equated with, say, while IPA finds its focus more squarely on the internal state of the experiencing subject. In terms of method, both proceed by coding interview or other relevant data for thematic analysis.
“discrimination against men,” then I can show how this association has been established discursively and what consequences it has for women, men, and their “others” in and outside of the United Church.

**Denaturalized Transcription**

To address the mechanics of analysis further, it bears mentioning that I use a transcription style often called “denaturalism” which is easily legible because it is designed to highlight the content of a passage more so than to preserve the intricacies of speech itself, as the “naturalist” does (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005). Naturalism, most famously the version developed over many years by Gail Jefferson (see Jefferson, 2004), uses familiar writing conventions (like underlining for emphasis or using capitals to indicate volume) to convey the nuances of speech, including accent (usually this means a non-majority accent), involuntary vocalizations (pauses, false starts, stutters, etc.), response/non-response tokens (e.g., “yeah,” “mmm,” etc.), the rhythm of conversational exchange (such as overlapping talk), interview noise, mis-hearings, and other idiosyncratic features (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005, p. 4). Typically, denaturalized transcripts omit the above features, correct grammar, and fill in implied information. A good deal of ethnography and critical discourse analysis uses this approach to ensure accuracy in communicating the substance of interviews. Of course it is intriguing how the intricacies of speech can modify the meaning of respondents’ statements and questions – such as by prompting further investigation of the significance in a hesitant utterance or the intention behind a reply made less or unintelligible by laughter (Jefferson, 2004, p. 19) – but this level of detail could produce a transcript so convoluted as to defeat the purpose of “studying up” (Nader, 1972) to reveal the workings of cultural power and responsibility. Since I am neither a student of linguistics nor an ethnographer whose object of study is the distinctive set of speech patterns found among a certain group of people, I have elected to produce transcripts whose meanings and visual appearance are as clear as possible. Moreover, naturalist
transcription would prove inappropriate for my application because it imbues interview excerpts with
telling characteristics of the speakers whose anonymity I wish to protect to the fullest degree. Finally,
because my hypothesis does not involve conjectures about speech mannerisms, representing them in great
detail could appear to caricature my respondents.

Conclusion

Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (2007b) have argued that “to regulate sexuality and
gender in the name of divinities means to regulate the order of affectionate exchanges but also other
human exchanges such as the political and economic systems. Queering theology is not a rhetorical
pastime but a political duty” (p. 305). The product of the critical inquiry set out here aims likewise to be a
kind of political intervention: “a contingent articulation of elements which reproduces or challenges the
given discourses in the never-ending struggle to define the world” (Jorgensen & Philips, 2007, p. 50). But
contingency is not randomness and relativism. So throughout this thesis I attempt to validate my analyses
by continually asking: what effects do these analyses produce in the world? To what struggles do my
results contribute? Does this critical exploration of women’s gender discourse in the United Church
provide arguments that could be used to support other projects of gender justice? To what extent must the
signifier “woman” remain in use as a strategically essentialist category? How and by whom should it be
deployed? Drawing inspiration from these theological and secular insights, I set my horizon of
expectations at a distance past gender with the hope this project will be one among many to intensify
critical attention in this direction.

While I advocate for a complement of strategies that includes performatively and discursively
disrupting gender as well as attempting to think and talk around gender as a category with which to
analyze human expression, this is not the same thing as demanding the conformation of all gender
thinking to the guidelines set by a new dominant program. There are no aspirations toward establishing a new hegemony hidden in these arguments. The complement of strategies proposed here is meant to be available for incorporation by other critical initiatives and open to transformation through the integration of other strategies. Hopefully, it offers some useful material with which to construct what anthropologist Diane Nelson (1999) calls “fluidarity,” (neologizing away the stability implied by the prefix “solid”): “a practice of necessarily partial knowledge – in both the sense of taking the side of, and of being incomplete, vulnerable, and never completely fixed” which can help us to maintain vital relationships while “at the same time [questioning their] tendency toward rigidity, [their] reliance on solid, unchanging identifications, and [their] often unconscious hierarchizing” (p. 42). The present work hopes to speak to a naturalized and naturalizing mainstream of Canadian subjects in order to show how gender identity – and all identity – is mutually constitutive, rather than sui generis.

**Chapter Outline**

Two Chapters follow this preliminary section. Chapter 2 provides a brief history of the United Church of Canada before describing the Riverside women and discussing the nature of my fieldwork with their discussion group. Subsequently, it presents and analyses a number of significant themes that emerged during group meetings and individual interviews, including: feminism, queerness, Canadian policies and attitudes about religious and ethno-cultural pluralism as well as gender and sexual inclusion, "reverse" economic discrimination, the media, the evolution of colloquial language, and personal choice.

Chapter 3 takes the main patterns that surfaced in the Riverside women's discussions – a disavowal of gender distinctions; a disdain for feminism as defined in a certain way; and complacency with the status quo of gender relations – and tries to understand them in the light of dominant political and economic ideologies in Canada. This analysis considers the manner in which mainstream Canadian
subjects are encouraged to divide the personal from the political and describes how the Riverside women sometimes mirror these divisions and sometimes resist them by using religious ties to build community and do activism. This chapter delves further into the origin and nature of the unmarked Canadian "mainstream" as well as the conceptual constraints binding even radically justice-oriented thought in order to examine what these barriers mean for mobilizing socially privileged subjects in emancipatory projects. Chapter 3 concludes by turning to a consideration of limitations to the research and finishes with an appraisal of what the project accomplished along with a vision for future cultural critique of religious and political hegemony in Canada.
Chapter 2

Gender in Church and Community: Protestantism, The United Church of Canada, and the Riverside Congregation

There is no ‘being’ behind doing, acting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1887

I guess scientifically you have to accept the fact that there are differences. There just are. We’re made that way. Physiologically we’re different. And so those differences I suppose you can get studies on and statistics on and so on. But in other ways there aren’t differences and it wouldn’t matter whether you’re male or female. You just are you. And you just do whatever in that situation.

Cynthia, 2010

In order to understand the cultural and faith traditions from which contemporary Canadian Protestantisms spring, it is necessary to examine the history of the Protestant Reformation and The United Church of Canada. The United Church formed in 1925 through a series of denominational unions that included the Methodist Church of Canada, the Congregational Union of Canada, 70 per cent of the Presbyterian Church of Canada and the General Council of Union Churches (González, 1985, p. 253). This amalgamation resulted in what is, according to the United Church, currently the largest Protestant denomination in Canada. The consolidation reflected a global trend in the years after World War I of movements toward Christian unity. The United Church’s ambition as set out in “The Basis of Union” (1925) was to foster a sense of national unity among Canadians that would develop together with the new denomination’s growth into a national church. The nascent church further pursued its concern with

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7 Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, 1887, p. 29.
national cohesion by ensuring ministry to the large population in Canada’s Northwest and by developing an effective overseas mission (United Church of Canada).

The long histories of Protestant denominations in Canada reveal a great deal about the nation’s political formation and social history. In Europe, the Protestant Reformation arose through the combined influences of disparate actors in a variety of national contexts. Its beginning is usually dated to October 31, 1517 in recognition of the tremendous impact of Martin Luther nailing (the second edition of) his Ninety-Five Theses to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany (González, 1985, p. 22). Shortly afterward, the English Henry VIII repudiated Luther and distanced himself from the papacy, ultimately breaking ties with Rome in 1534 by declaring himself the supreme head of the Church of England (González, 1985, p. 73). Subsequent monarchs wavered between commitments to Catholicism and Protestantism according to the day’s political circumstance, but by the end of the reign of Protestant Elizabeth I in 1603, a variety of Protestant ideas had gained general social currency in England (González, 1985, p. 78). The exile of Scotland’s Queen Mary Stuart and the intensification of popular movements largely galvanized by the reformist preacher John Knox had entrenched Protestantism in the Scottish social fabric by the 1572 St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of Protestants in France (González, 1985, pp. 84-85). After eight major wars of religion, France remained divided between Catholicism and Protestantism, even within the personage of the King, Henry IV who converted between the two faiths five times, finally settling on a nominal Catholicism (González, 1985, p. 109).

This brief overview of Christianity in the European nations helps to characterize the types of Christianity that would evolve and become dominant in the political and social landscape of Canada as European settler colonials began to replace existing cultural forms through an ongoing colonization of the land’s first people. French settlers in Canada controlled much of the country until ceding authority to Great Britain in 1763. After the United States’ declaration of independence in 1776, many Church of
England loyalists fled the restrictive Puritanism that had been growing in the former American colonies, emigrating to Canada in hopes of practicing what they saw as an “essential” Christianity based on “natural reason” and “commonsense” morality (González, 1985, p. 240). These many interrelated histories marked the character of Canadian Christianities with acceptance toward religious pluralism, both in the name of political expediency and for theological reasons. In such a national climate, numerous denominations of Christianity and other religions achieved a coexistence that, while continually fraught, has been marred by less and less violence than Protestantism witnessed during its birth through the European religion wars.

Protestant denominations also bear the imprint of early reformers’ valorization of the humanities and human nature along with their appreciation for the separation of church and state as a means to ensure authentic, not civically legislated, communities of believers. According to Justo L. González (1985), one could describe the ethos of North American Christianities as acceptance of the church as an invisible reality that is enacted voluntarily through the organization of visible churches (p. 242). However, in Canada – unlike the United States – there is no constitutional separation of church and state. Instead, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and promises citizens “freedom of religion,” meaning freedom from state interference when engaging religious practice (Beaman, 2002, p. 135). Of course a grand proclamation about mutual respect and self-determination for “religion” in the abstract does not mean that the civic life of a nation, codified in its federal constitution and manifest in its social relations, is not still significantly based on the Western European Protestant values that permeated the founding patriarchy’s worldview.

Today the United Church of Canada is what is called a mainline church, a Protestant denomination which sees itself as an inclusive community based on liberal theologies and openness to a diversity of personal religious interpretations and spiritual paths (Wallace, 2010). In the years since its union, the
United Church has responded to developments in Canadian society’s anti-oppressive thought by establishing policies recognizing the social precarity of different groups including women, Indigenous peoples, and queer folks.

In the denominations that would make up the United Church of Canada, discussions about the merits and dangers of women in the ministry had been ongoing. The Congregational Church allowed women to become ministers but had not yet ordained any in Canada. The Methodist and Presbyterian Churches deferred decision on the matter until after Church union (Korinek, 1993). The issues at hand were many, including concerns for women’s safety should they be required to deliver pastoral care in remote locations, the scarcity of applicants for the ministry, and the nature of women’s abilities, which had been recently demonstrated by contributions to the First World War (Korinek, 1993, pp. 475-477). In addition to these topics of debate, more abstract and ideological forces weighed on the decision. These factors included the Victorian glorification of Christian manhood, the social relegation of women to the domestic space, and debate around the proper limits and meanings of religious teachings of equality (Korinek, 1993, p. 479). In 1936, Lydia Gruchy became the first female to be ordained as a minister in the United Church (Korinek, 1993, p. 473). The first ordination of a married woman did not occur until 1946. The following year saw the first ordination of a married mother (Korinek, 1993, p. 497).

The United Church gradually also reversed and replaced certain policies pertaining to the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Once complicit in the dehumanizing and assimilationist mandate of residential schools, many years later the United Church established The Healing Fund (1994) and created the portfolio of General Council Minister of Racial Justice (2002) as steps toward what the Church terms “reconciliation” with Native persons and as part of a broader campaign to establish itself as an anti-racist organization (United Church of Canada).
While certain congregations may have long accepted queer individuals, growing tensions around their participation, membership, and eligibility for the ministry was formally acknowledged by the Church's General Council beginning when it commissioned a comprehensive study of human sexuality in 1972 (Riordan, 1990). After years of discussion, debate, and lobbying both for and against what was framed as “gay and lesbian” rights in the church, the General Council passed a resolution in 1988: "A) That all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation, who profess Jesus Christ and obedience to Him, are welcome to be or become full member of the Church. B) All members of the Church are eligible to be considered for the Ordered Ministry" (United Church of Canada). Since the 1980s rewriting of “A New Creed/The United Church Creed” (originally published in 1969), gender inclusive language has become a familiar concern for many congregations (Bourgeois, denBok, MacLean, & Young, 2010).

Recognition of the importance of ensuring all worshippers can see themselves reflected in church texts comes at a time when the use of gender to divide church participation is also waning. According to my informants, the long established United Church Women’s groups (UCW) have seen significant drops in participation, in part due to a growing comfort with gender-integrated activities and in part due to an overall decline in church attendance. This trend in attendance is coextensive with an aging membership whose population is being only partially replaced with new generations. It is interesting to note that while men’s groups exist in some United Churches, the structure of their institutional presence does not compare to the distinct roles played by the United Church Women’s groups that formed through the 1962 merging of the Woman’s Association and the Woman’s Missionary Society (United Church of Canada). Rev. Lewis emphasized the fact that the UCW flows from a long history of women’s groups as important activist elements in church and society. Their vision and mission statement centres around three core themes: loving God, giving to others, and self-development in both community and solitude (United Church of Canada).
At Riverside United Church the UCW survives as one group whose members are senior women active in bible study and fundraising initiatives. Riverside’s other two women’s groups represent a new incarnation of the traditional UCW; these groups do not call themselves UCW, but they clearly participate in a collective legacy of women’s organizing. One member, Cynthia, had come from another local church that still had nine UCW groups operating. She explained how the groups worked, saying: “the different groups there at that church were based on, not age, but your interests I guess. And I was in the young mothers. There was group number one and two and three and I was just in the last group and it was all people around my age who had children.” Their mandate included helping with Sunday school and assisting in a variety of church efforts as projects came up and matched their interests. On her transition to participating in the non-UCW group at Riverside, Cynthia commented: “I mean labels are just labels (laughter) and the idea that it’s a women’s group rather than a group of any people that would come together – that decision was made already. They said ‘would you like to come to this group’ and I said ‘yes’.”

Shortly after the beginning of her ministry at Riverside, Rev. Lewis initiated a daytime women’s group and an evening women’s group whose participants divided themselves based on their working schedules. Rev. Lewis retired shortly after I met the women’s groups but prior to her retirement she participated regularly in both groups. The daytime women’s group caters to those who primarily work at home by holding their monthly meetings at members’ houses while the evening group offers an opportunity for those who work outside their home during the day to gather at the church on a weeknight once a month. The women involved with these two groups range in age from early 40s to late 60s. Their mandates differ significantly from traditional UCW groups in that they are dedicated to providing a relaxed social space for organic discussion rather than a platform for church service and social activism.
I met both of these groups at their last meetings of 2010 before they broke for the summer. During the summer months, Riverside serves its seasonally smaller congregation by sharing services with a neighbouring Anglican church, alternating locations. Over this summer I attended several services at Riverside and one held at the Anglican church. The evening women’s group met as usual at the church and the daytime group met for lunch at a local restaurant to celebrate Rev. Lewis’ retirement. Before these meetings I offered the women of each group my project summary and sample interview questions so that I could address their questions and concerns when we met. A few weeks later, the daytime group let me know that they did not wish to participate in my project but welcomed me to their meetings in a non-research capacity. One woman from this group, Susan, contacted me independently to say that she was interested in talking to me in the “one-on-one interview” format I proposed. In the course of our animated conversation, Susan explained that she was open to the challenge of discussing my questions around gender and sexuality that had discomfited the rest of her group. Susan related her interest to past experience, saying: “I really felt like when I was involved in stuff like Presbytery and Conference and stuff in the church that we were kind of on the leading edge” of what she called social “enlightenment” or the practice of “forward-thinking.” Susan told me that she had come to a point in her life where she was now seeking to return to these critical practices. Laughing, she exclaimed “And I look back on it and I think, ‘I’m not doing anything!’ And I used to be cutting edge and now I’m just kind of …on the edge!”

The whole of the evening women’s group agreed to arrange individual audio-recorded conversations and invited me to attend their meetings, during which they permitted me to take notes by hand. Understandably, they preferred not to disrupt the informal dynamic of their meetings by introducing a tape recorder. Although I was allowed to jot down what I heard, I never actually wrote my impressions during their small meetings of between 3 and 6 people. Having weighed the opportunity costs of archiving more detailed information but withdrawing from the flow of conversation versus being fully
present but relying on memory for data, I decided that the connotation of academic formality attached to note-taking would set me even farther apart as an observer instead of an active participant. I got this sense, in part, from the group themselves as it became clear that it was the structure of my project, possibly more so than the content, that posed a conflict with their informal ethos of “no agenda, no homework.” Said Cynthia:

We have full lives as I keep repeating back to you (shared laughter). We all work full time, you know, and sometimes in the evenings we just want to kick back – no matter what it is we’re doing. Because [at] a busy time of the year, kids have concerts, you drive them here and there and everywhere and you don’t have much time to yourself. The last thing we want as a group is to put something else on our plates. So we don’t. We don’t choose to do any of that. So although we’re tied to the church in that the church was our origin and the church is our meeting space, when it comes to what we talk about and do in that group, it really has very little to do with the mission of the church.

Meetings lasted an hour and a half and would proceed on the initiative of a volunteer “leader.” Generally each month someone would offer to lead the next discussion and bring tea (snacks were ruled out in the spirit of healthy eating and not pressuring anyone to bake). The leader would perhaps bring in a piece of literature with a few bookmarked passages to inspire a discussion relating to the previous week’s sermon, or she would introduce an activity for the group to do. One week we coloured mandalas as a way to engage lateral thinking during a visioning session on the future of the group. For the meeting scheduled one week before the 2011 federal election, I brought in a news article about the low number of women in Canadian politics, which we discussed before turning to other topics. Sometimes we would just talk about things that were going on in each others’ lives or in the church community.

As a newcomer, my participation largely revolved around asking questions on everything from United Church terminology, to how Sunday school was structured, to what congregants would do when they had questions about a sermon and wanted to explore a topic in greater depth. When discussions arose that were germane to my realms of interest and experience, including one about historical practices for dealing with young unwed mothers, I often contributed what came to mind. Though I offered my thoughts
just as I would in any casual conversation, I remained very aware that I might still unwittingly overstep my place; even in spite of my best efforts at behaving like the curious anti-expert I imagine myself to be. In retrospect, I might have remained truer to my stated aim of inviting an honest, critically situated coproduction if I had regularly asked the women to give me feedback on my participation and how they felt about my presence in their group throughout the months. From one view, it is conceivable that I could have appeared to the group as a confirmed outsider on account of the fact that I am neither a practicing Christian nor even someone with a background in the church. From another perspective, it seems plausible that I might have represented a natural affiliate to their group inasmuch as I am a woman living in the same community and seeking to participate in an activity based out of a congregation that welcomes people to its services, regardless of their membership status. Yet the tone of my fieldwork experience also made me sensitive to the fact that sometimes the best intentions to use practices of self-reflexivity can only go so far in negotiating insider/outsider politics in a real-life situation where it is necessary to be polite and to save face.

I attended the evening women’s group meetings from September till May. Throughout this time the group members would periodically ask how my work was going. I would respond to their interest by saying truthfully that I was mostly still reading, but planned to return in the following autumn in order to share with the group how my project took shape. In all, I interviewed seven people individually – the core and occasional members of the evening group, one member of the daytime group, and the outgoing minister. Though I spoke with the supply minister several times after services and during one or two women’s group meetings, schedules did not permit the opportunity to interview Rev. Jones. The analyses presented here incorporate the historical and general perspectives offered by Rev. Lewis from her many years of service, but are primarily reflective of the opinions expressed by the groups’ lay members.
The Riverside Women

Riverside United Church has operated since the 1950s and many of its members, including some of the women with whom I spoke, began attending shortly after its consecration. Some grew up in this particular church and others found Riverside as adults. Two had switched denominations at some point, including one who had not had any religious upbringing. All described some family history of practicing Protestantism within a variety of denominations such as Anglican, Presbyterian, and Baptist. One woman, Fran, had also adapted to her partner’s Roman Catholicism for a time, raising their children in that tradition even though, according to Fran’s description, her partner did not actively practice his faith. Though none mentioned experiences in their family history or with partners or children who identified with non-Christian religions, every conversation I had was the model of Canadian pluralism – at least the kind idealized in the rhetoric of federal party politics.\(^8\) In a conversation I had just before my university shut down for two weeks in the winter, Cynthia, who also worked on campus, talked about navigating potentially awkward conversations about what mostly used to be known as “Christmas break” in Canadian schools:

So in my work for instance if I’m chatting with [people] and the subject [of Christian faith] comes up, if they’re comfortable, then I’ll continue with it. Some of them are Christians that attend Christian churches right? So we’ve got something to discuss there and that’s fine. I’m more comfortable doing that knowing that they’re okay with it and they have got that background too. Even for those who don’t have that background – [someone] will come in and I’ll ask them “do you celebrate Christmas?” Because we’re all going on vacation, or holiday (laughter). And they’ll usually tell me. And we haven’t always had Christian people [where I work], so I like to find out, “well what do you do with your holidays?” I don’t think I make a point of it, of bringing my religious views into outside situations. I think mostly that’s because I don’t want to make people uncomfortable.

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\(^8\) Media coverage of the 2011 Federal election provided countless examples of politicians’ self-congratulatory statements about peacekeeping, generosity with foreign aid, multiculturalism and more abstract notions of diversity, tolerance, and equality to which I am referring here. Independent Canadian news website Rabble.ca offers an excellent archive of critical commentary on this coverage.
Each woman in my study was careful to affirm the right to freedom in following one’s individual path in all respects, even within a church family. Similarly, all articulated a broad understanding of religious expression and valued the United Church for its non-dogmatic attitude, which they found reasonable for the diverse circumstances of their lives and experiences of faith.

By and large, the women explained their involvement with the United Church very casually, often as a combined matter of family tradition and of appreciating membership in a community of their friends, family, peers, and neighbours. Cynthia put it succinctly: “I guess you could say that I chose [Riverside] but you could also say that that’s a tradition in my family. So the church came first really, which happens I think to a lot of people; they adopt the religion of their parents. Not always, but that’s the first thing they know, so if that makes sense then they stay with it.” She added: “We [also] have a background of United Church ministers in my family.”

The importance of religious identity to the Riverside women appeared evenly balanced with the other identities that they have adopted in their lives. Professional identity seemed similarly meaningful. While professional identity in terms of paid work was important to many of these women, some, including three women who were retired, acknowledged professional identities even though they were not practicing or bringing home a salary in those occupations. Among the women’s group participants I interviewed, two worked (or had worked before retirement) in the sciences, one in high-level management, and two in education, one of whom had also worked in healthcare at one point. All of these

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9 The Riverside women’s explanations of their religious affiliation closely matches the “Rational Choice Theory” of religious behaviour developed from the 1980s work of Rodney Stark. RCT aspires to be a model of religiosity – of how “consumers” of religion make choices in a religious “marketplace” – as well as a rational-choice theory of these consumers’ behaviour (Spickard, 1998). RCT predicts increased religious vitality in pluralistic settings based on the assumption that consumers will seek desired “goods” from competing “firms.” In many cases, this model satisfactorily accounts for social patterns. When it comes to individual actions, however, the theory lacks explanatory power. Although RCT seems to further mirror the present study with its economistic analogies, sociologist James Spickard (1998) points out that “a rational-choice model can duplicate the overall structure of a religious marketplace, but it cannot demonstrate that individual people think in market terms” (p. 110).
positions, including that of the outgoing minister, required some sort of college, professional, or university level training. Income levels ranged widely, however, from about $20,000 to over $100,000. These divergences seemed to relate to some degree with whether or not an individual was actively employed and whether or not she had a partner contributing to the household income. Five women were married to men, one was partnered with a man, and one was single. Five of the seven women had children.

Basic demographic information relating to age, socioeconomic status, relationship and family status, as well as occupation and educational background was collected through a short survey that was implemented after the first three interviews (I later filled in the missing information from the first three interviewees at a group meeting and through email). A significant amount of information also came through observation and conversation. According to the recent census, the population of the municipality where we all live is 94% white (Statistics Canada, 2006), myself included, and I read all of these women as part of that overwhelming majority. None mentioned other racial, ethnic, or cultural positions they might have identified with at any time, including during a discussion of equal opportunity or affirmative action legislation establishing quotas for what they called “minorities” in the workplace. Many aspects of social positionality can also be ambiguous, or indeed invisible, in a culture of polite conversation (Yee, 2011, p. 12). Dis/ability, in particular, can be invisibilized – especially while mental illness remains stigmatized. Acknowledging the fact that two of my interlocutors reported facing challenges related to physical dis/ability composes a more detailed picture of the group whose experiences this project attempts to illuminate. Such information is relevant to this discussion because, as countless others have argued, although awareness of one form of oppression does not necessarily produce sensitivity to other modes of oppression, the experience of running up against a social barriers does tend to be the catalyst for raising consciousness about the existence of systemic constraints in the first place.
Fran, the only respondent who took a strong stance that gender discrimination and sexual harassment are real social problems, reported a number of firsthand experiences with these issues from a young age. One formative moment involved a key role model:

When I was a teenager I guess and I went to see my aunt. She was, you know, a flower child. She showed me her peace uniform – she used to have these dresses that were really outrageous. But when her husband was bossing her around and telling her this and this and this, I asked her – I said “you used to be so outgoing and so ‘peace here, peace there,’ why do you let him boss you around like that?” And she said “maybe it’s just I haven’t found the right person.” I was really shocked at her answer but it ended up they split up. For me it was kind of like “okay well obviously then she is stronger than him because he was a complete jerk not to see that she’s a strong woman and trust and love her values and everything.” I thought “I don’t want to be with somebody like that. I’ll be like my aunt, I’ll be strong.” But looking back now I think “I know what you mean!” But I think that was the time that I felt that feminism is alive in love and life. I think that was the time that I felt that women have a say and it doesn’t matter what men say. Women have a say.

Fran’s orientation toward feminist values appeared to stem from a series of personal challenges in her own relationships and in the relationships of her kin. It should give pause that the values Fran espoused were rather conservative – as in the claim that “women have a say” – and that her consciousness about gender discrimination developed through a number of jarring personal confrontations. If anything, this example underlines the dominant culture’s resistance to critique and, by extension, suggests the degree of obstruction on the path to cultivating a disinterested objection to systemic oppression.

It may be of interest to know that I did not directly ask any respondent’s gender, sex, or sexual identity. Without prompting, each person identified themselves as a “woman” or as “female” in the course of individual discussions. Although I see the concepts of “straightness” and “gayness” as, fundamentally, products of the concept of gender, I refrained from explicitly seeking this information for a number of reasons. First, I wanted to minimize the discomfort of an already unfamiliar situation and for interviewees who, to me, appeared disconcerted by my desire to engage them in questioning gender at all. That being said, I had the privilege of talking with a thoughtful, critical, and articulate group of
people who earnestly wanted to understand the nature of my work and I acknowledge my personal limitations in translating between my own understandings, bound up in the language of my formation, and theirs. A significant part of respondents’ caution, and the (majority of the) daytime group’s preference not to participate in this project at all, is explicable with reference to the very reason behind this study: that gender as an analytic given and as binary in its usual presentation is assumed by every structuring principle of mainstream Canadian society, even if it is not explicitly addressed. The second reason I did not ask about sexual or gender identity is because I strenuously disagree with the normative assumptions that underlie the idea of having to “come out” as anything other than the default of cis-gendered and heterosexual. I did not identify myself as queer or having a female-identified partner except where such a reference came up indirectly through conversation, usually after the end of an interview in answer to the question: “so do you have any plans this weekend?”

Initial Findings: Gender in the Words of the Riverside Women

Research topics were approached through a variety of questions, some obliquely related, and some direct. I updated the interview guide after each interview based on the kinds of responses and non-verbal reactions that accompanied certain questions. The most significant revisions drew from a set of interview questions used in Christel Manning’s 1999 ethnography God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple with Feminism. (Refer to appendices 1 and 2 for my original and updated interview guides, respectively.) I found that transitioning from pre-interview pleasantries to the script became less awkward when I opened with conversational questions such as “tell me about your upbringing” as opposed to pointed questions such as “how do your religious

\[10\] I do, however, wish to affirm the empowering potential of declaring one’s sexuality and recognize the political utility of including such questions on forms like the national census and survey of households while maintaining that my survey was not the right venue for this question.
beliefs relate to your practices within your church.” These formal inquiries seemed to lack an immediate context, making them difficult to answer. For the sake of time I did not usually cover each of my possible questions exhaustively in each interview, especially when dialogue took on the rhythm of an informal exchange. Nonetheless, I always gleaned some sense of each of my broadly defined areas of interest: personal background, personal religious belief and practice, gender in language, women’s church groups, the relationship between United Church policy and Riverside’s interpretation of those policies, and gender in society.

In the first three interviews, questions implicitly referenced feminist values and the social construction of gender. All three interviewees had something to say about gender, but only my conversation with the minister included the term “feminism.” In subsequent interviews I brought up these two core concepts explicitly (by asking “what do you think of when you hear the term: “gender”? feminism?”) before I asked anything else which might have indicated my attitudes toward these issues. This switch worked to great effect. When I asked women to reflect on what the words “feminism” and “gender” brought to mind separately, “gender” invariably evoked nothing more than “male/female” while “feminism” elicited a look of consternation and a careful exposition of why feminism, as they knew it, represented an inappropriate set of propositions.

Trisha, a woman in her 50s whose enthusiasm for my topic carried our conversation past the end of the interview, candidly asked me “what do you say is [your] brand of feminism – because, say, my definition of feminism could be entirely different than your definition. So I think that’s first what I have to be clear on exactly: what do you see as feminism?” I will offer her perspective and those of the other women first. Trisha thought of feminism as “an abused term.” She said:

In this day and age, I don’t think that there is a need for it. What I mean by that is that I don’t think there should be any separation. Okay, you’re getting something because you’re a female? In fact, I think that we’re going backward if that’s the case…we should just be all equal and there shouldn’t be distinctions.
I heard a number of other definitions of feminism from the women, including:

- [Feminism] has a couple of different connotations for me. One of the things over the years I thought was really unfair in the workplace was that men were limited in a lot of ways because we have this thing [affirmative action-type quotas] that you had to have so many women in this particular day. It’s not based on ability, it’s based on gender. So I feel that there is a place for the feminist movement because, for example, my mum I would say was a feminist in her own way because she kept saying that when you’re at home you don’t pay into the Canada Pension Plan. And I didn’t start paying into it until I started teaching but she…was always on my case about it and very forward thinking in introducing [my siblings and I] to those kinds of concepts. So I think there’s a place for [feminist ideas] but it can go too far. (Susan)

- I guess when you say feminism or feminist I just think of those feminists in the radical movement. [I think feminism means] a commitment to change but maybe not always in a positive way of doing it? And I’m not sure why that first popped into my mind because I think my understanding is broader than that. (Marie)

- Feminism means to me that women have their own points of views other than men. And it’s not always looked upon as – from my own point of view of course – to men it doesn’t always look like they believe women. Or they want to push feminist women. They tend not to like what they have to say. Men tend to pull away from that, I think. So I think women are not being heard because of men’s ignorance. (Fran)

I agreed with the women’s critiques of feminism, as they defined the concept. Compared to my understanding of the term, the above definitions revealed that we were talking about wildly different ideas. In each conversation I tried to offer my interpretation of feminism to greater or lesser effect, depending on the tone and dynamic of the interaction.

So what do I think feminism means? To Trisha’s question I responded that “my benefit of the doubt best idea of what feminist critique means is just looking at relationships of power as they’re played out in society through gender. So for me, I’m just looking at gender and politics. Politics of gender – and sex and sexuality.” Amalgamating my comments from each interview where I addressed gender as a political problematic indicates that I gave my interviewees an impression of feminism that includes:
• The panoply of GLBTTQI2 etc. identities\(^1\);
• “Balancing gender representation in language;”
• “Social issues involving women like employment equity…women’s health care, maternity leave policies or issues like the legality of marriage for queer persons or gender fluidity, sexual identity [and] ideal representations of that [as well as of] femininity and masculinity;”
• Valuing “men and women as equals;”
• “Performatively disrupting [gender] binaries and ground-up critiques of how gender and sex are socially constructed”
• Plural feminist visions, one of which is “a certain type of feminism [that] has been taken up in general Canadian society and…some of [w]hose values have led to women having access to traditionally masculine arenas;”
• Awareness of the capitalist [re]construction of gender through “marketing to specific gender [roles];”
• Activism that comes in different waves driven by a variety of intersectional analyses attending to race, class, sexuality, age, ability, nationality, and religion.

**Feminism and “Reverse Discrimination”**

Why have I foregrounded feminism(s) here? I do not assume that having gender consciousness means identifying as a feminist, but as Christel Manning (1999) did in her study of women and religion, I take feminism to be a particularly loaded symbol of secular liberalism (pp. 6-7). A study of women in religion that considers how they come to terms with feminism can offer a powerful lens through which to understand what it means to live in mainstream Canadian society after the turn of the century, what that dominant society is like, and how it came to be like that. While Manning convincingly argues that both feminism and liberalism have become dirty words across many American circles (pp. 4, 6) – liberalism being associated with the “excesses” of a welfare state and feminism being one among a variety of efforts

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\(^1\) I do not mean to equate the identities represented by this acronym by using variations of it throughout my study. There is a growing body of critical literature that pays attention to the ways that the G and the L of this acronym occupy very different realms of experience. For a Scholarly examination, see: Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (Especially pp. 15, 64); For a brief commentary on the conflation of “GLB” sexual identity with “T” gender identity, see also: Love, A. (June 2011). Not a “T” Party. *Curve*, 21(5), 36-7.
aimed at solving problems of inequality, in part, through governmental action – I suspect that it would be misleading to make an analogous claim about Canada. I would suggest that in Canada, feminism is associated with the type of liberalism that seems to flow from egalitarian principles held dear in the national imaginary (McKay, 2000, p. 636), but which leads to consequences that are popularly seen as “affirmative action” policies promoting “reverse discrimination” (Kly, 1994, p. 89).

I use the term “reverse discrimination” to name a phenomenon identified by several of my interlocutors. In their view, “reverse discrimination” occurs when the responsibility for addressing systemic and ideologically rooted oppression falls to the state, which responds by introducing legislation that confers undeserved “privileges” upon certain groups. Most often, this issue surfaced during interviews and in group discussions with regard to equal opportunity hiring policies designed by the government “to obliterate the present and residual effects of discrimination” against “women and minority” employees (Kamal, 2001, Employment equity in Canada). A variety of other examples also arose. In his 1994 study “Dances with Affirmative Action,” Yussuf Kly identifies a number of North American non-discrimination policies that, in his view, have “too often been projected as a form of preferential treatment (ie. reverse discrimination)” compensating for the faults of the group[s] receiving preference (p. 89). In Canada, misunderstandings of the troubled term “affirmative action” have also spawned vociferous debates with regard to certain tax exemptions for status Indians (Government of Canada, Indian Act Section 87), and universal health care being extended to recent immigrants (Government of Canada, Immigrant health care), in addition to gender equity in labour laws. Detractors paint these special measures, rights, or reparations as a means to unfairly benefit groups that already enjoy socio-legal equality. Trisha put it this way:

Everybody applies for a position. And who gets it? It’s not necessarily the most qualified but it’s because the person is a woman. Because [employers] have to fill the quota. Well, no, that’s not right. That, to me, is not moving forward. What this is doing – and I mean right now, to be a, well, a white male at your age [24, at the time of writing], they are being discriminated against.
Trisha’s argument is located in the standpoint that workforce competitors are socially equal but differentially skilled as individuals. Her rationale echoes a national mythology that constructs Canadians as diverse champions of equality. Deconstructing this mythology, Himani Bannerji (2000) traces Canadian diversity and equality discourse to the state’s interpretation of the definitional values of political liberalism. Canadians, she says:

continue to subscribe to the discourse of diversity or liberal plurality, forgetting both its depoliticizing capacity and its ability to perform a most powerful political function … The discursive home and political cognates of diversity lie in liberal democracy, whose particular ways of constructing a self-enclosed, self-sustaining polity through the mechanism of installing a separation between state and civil society, and the reduction of equality into a formal gesture, have long been noted. This is the meaning of the concept of citizenship in liberal or bourgeois democracy, which rests on divesting the political from the social, the equality of citizenship from the inequality of class and other power relations. The so-called diverse … communities are also constructed on this model as equal to each other and to the dominant Canadian culture of Euro-Americans. Diversity relies on the postulation of an abstracted, non-social ground zero. (pp. 556-557)

Bannerji’s analysis points out that when ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971) like “diversity” and “equality” discourses are made visible, it becomes possible to name and understand the cultural and systemic oppressions that necessitate and subsequently get hidden by these discourses. Recognizing the concerted construction of these conceptual tools is also the condition of possibility for asking who controls them, how they materialize as politics and policies, and what difference those make to the lives of those encoded as “diverse” and vulnerable to inequality.

Addressing this latter question, Yussuf N. Kly (1994) makes a sound case for remedial justice in Canada (pp. 90-91). Kly advocates for the implementation of such measures as restitution, restoration, reparations, and policies of affirmative action accompanied by an appropriate emphasis on and previous education about the history of targeted groups’ disenfranchisement. Contextual information represents a crucial component of the justice process because, as the author acknowledges, measures designed to
redress historical inequities can actually intensify cultural prejudice by stimulating resentment in those excluded from such programs, doing little to touch the cultures of oppression and actual day-to-day relations in a pluralist society. Even more delicate a task is educating about these different forms of discrimination in such a way that people can see them not just as individual, unrelated examples but can rather develop an appreciation of the way they interrelate as part of a hegemonic worldview that consistently privileges certain subject positions over others. Canada’s discursive atmosphere poses a great challenge to the delivery of this supplementary education in the sense that, as Bannerji (2000) notes, diversity discourse portrays differences “as inherent, as ontological or cultural traits of the individuals of particular … communities, rather than as [prejudicial] ascriptions or stereotypes” (p. 557). This strain of individualism is readily apparent in the reasoning given by the Riverside women for why economic competitors ought to be evaluated on their own merits and in their confidence in the transformative power of state and popular equality discourses.

**Choice Feminism and Neo/liberal Individualism**

As intimated in my earlier discussion of Canadian neo/liberalism, the concept of liberalism in Canada can denote a diverse set of propositions. In the course of describing Canada as a “long liberal revolution,” Ian McKay (2009) explains that liberalism begins with accepting the ontological primacy of the individual and the ultimate value of their freedom. Starting from an identical premise, liberal thinkers have arrived at a multitude of ideologically consistent yet apparently contradictory positions. Illustrating the ways these divergent positions have played out in Canadian society, McKay (2000) highlights examples such as liberals who denounced women’s suffrage from the 1880s on, as well as workers’ and women’s rights activists, whose “political language was deeply marked by the liberalism they both implicitly and explicitly questioned” (p. 635). Rianne Mahon (2008) similarly seeks to render this
complex picture of liberal varieties, arguing that “in the contemporary period Canadian welfare reform has been characterized by warring principles for redesign. While some have sought to deepen the postwar social [liberalism] project, the main trends have been neo-liberal restructuring,” by extending the market and retracting the state, “and, more recently, policies inspired by ‘inclusive liberalism’” (p. 342) like those described by Bannerji above.

Regardless of whether or not feminism and liberalism could be called dirty words in Canada, my respondents’ suspicions about feminism exist in a mainstream setting characterized by the popularity of the current government’s neoliberal approach (as demonstrated by the 2011 federal election’s Conservative majority) and shaped by the normalizing effect of repeated cultural references forcefully exported to Canadian audiences by the US media. A marked religio-cultural difference between Manning’s religiously conservative American respondents and the mainline Canadian Protestants I spoke with reveals itself in the balanced answers the Riverside women tried to give to all of my questions that dealt with gender norms.

In her analysis of the American religious right, Manning notices an assumption among her respondents that feminism means encouraging homosexuality, abortion, and abandonment of romantic and family relationships (pp. 6, 27) even as they accept feminist values “in the secular context of work and politics” (p. 85). Among my interviewees, feminism connoted a mixed bag of liberatory potential for women to self-actualize in public life along with a dangerous impulse to institute a new kind of injustice – especially in the workplace – based on anti-democratic favouritism.

Many of the questions of individual conscience that Manning’s respondents struggled with were of little concern for my informants, who did not express an interest in debating whether or not personal morality was a matter of public concern. In some important ways, the structure of their views and choices mirrored that of the United Church as an institution: just as the United Church preserves congregational
autonomy through a principle stipulating that individual churches may interpret central UC policy as they see fit, the women I spoke with made claims indicating that everyone should enjoy the right to act in accordance with their desires so long as it harms no one else – including the right not to associate with what they personally find distasteful. For example, in response to a question about experiences with GLBTQ folks in the church, Cynthia told me:

We had a minister who had a female partner. I don’t know she labeled herself, I don’t know that she called herself queer or gay or lesbian. It was just ‘this is me and this is my partner.’ So we didn’t have a problem with that. Do you know that the United Church went through this rough time when they first ordained homosexual ministers? A lot of churches split away from the United Church and there was division and a lot of people left the church. I’ve spoken personally to people who left the church. It’s a strange reason to leave the church! Whatever. Either it’s your church or it’s not your church. Again, to each their own. You can’t know what people are going to think but maybe they were looking for an excuse to leave the church anyway (laughter).

Interviewees tended to portray historically contentious issues such as sexuality, reproductive rights, and family structure as a matter of individual preference rather than something that reflected and inflected a public morality that was in need of defense. Their orientation toward feminism, in particular, and toward politics, in general, maps closely onto what Michaele Ferguson (2011) describes as “choice feminism.” Her explanation is worth quoting at length:

First, [choice feminism] understands freedom as the capacity to make individual choices, and oppression as the inability to choose...Second, since the only criterion for evaluating women’s freedom is individual choice, we should abstain from judging the content of the choices women make. It is definitionally impossible for a woman to choose her own oppression...Finally, this view of freedom is undergirded by a particular historical narrative: it is the women’s movement in the past that has made it possible for women to make free choices in the present. In some cases, this is a way of celebrating the successes of the women’s movement. In other cases, however, this narrative supports the view that we are now post-feminist, the women’s movement achieved all that was necessary some time ago, and women today are fully liberated. (pp. 2-3)

The historical narrative supporting my interlocutors’ views of freedom includes more than an appreciation

12 In her talk “Taming the shrew: Choice feminism and the fear of politics” (May 2011), Ferguson offers an updated understanding of the term “choice feminism,” developed by Linda Hirschman in 2005.
of the gains made by women’s movements; it gives equal recognition to the contributions made by theological premises of freedom and equality. Otherwise, with relatively minor modifications, the choice feminism model offers some explanatory power for respondents’ tendency to compartmentalize the effects of personal choice. The women with whom I spoke expressed their disappointment in the fact that women continue to face cultural influences leading to what they saw as sexually degrading choices. However, respondents neither framed their disapproval in relation to those women’s individual politics, nor assessed the impact of cultural influences with reference to women’s subordinate position in fields of social power. Trisha, for instance, decried the use of sex to sell products as the fault of a media machine:

Oh, it’s sickening. Sex all over the place! Like that’s a whole different thing if we’re getting into that, but I think it’s terrible. And that has nothing to do with me being Christian or United or whatever. But I think there is such a falseness. It is such a media product and it’s just taking something that should be so special and so beautiful and it’s just made it everyday and it’s made it trashy and sleazy.

In the same breath, she affirmed the right to practice another behaviour that buys into some level of a wide-reaching culture of sexualized and appearance-based femininity, saying:

This is me and you know, I have earrings and I have makeup on and this is it. Do I do it for anybody else but me, no. I do it because I want to – I think appearance is important. But it’s just: how does it make you feel? This makes me feel good to be like this. I don’t feel comfortable being not having it. And excuse me, is it because I’ve been forced? Because I don’t think I’m going to be accepted by you without it because I’m a female? That you’re not going to look upon me as a female? I don’t look at someone, for example if you were sitting across from me, and you didn’t have any make up, I would still see you as a woman. I wouldn’t think any different. But that’s me.

As much as the Riverside women seemed content with the status quo of gendered power relations, they also recognized that there is a long way to go for anyone to be fully liberated, including women. In almost every conversation, my interlocutors invoked some variation on the theme that “we’ve come a long way but there’s still more to go” as a way of concluding their comments on gender (in)equality.
Exploring Connections Between Gendered Language and Sexist Discourse

Appreciating that I had been welcomed into an open-minded and accepting group of people whose participation in a women’s group might indicate some pre-existing basis of gender critique, I included a question aimed at gauging the women’s familiarity with terms such as queer, genderqueer, and transgender. I followed this question by interrogating the women’s experiences with gender non-conforming folks in their congregation and how they might react if such a person wished to become a member of their group. Next, I asked about the ways that practices within the church were gendered in particular ways (eg. in the gender composition of administrative boards, other discussion and activity groups) and inquired about the use of “inclusive” or gender-neutral language in sermons, texts used in worship, and in casual conversation. I will endeavour to interpret how the responses to these questions reflected my respondents’ ideas about gender in a general way. Later, I return to some issues of language in more detail.

All of the women I interviewed made the “politically correct” sorts of claims that women and men are equal under the law and equally valuable to society. Paulette’s unconcern about imbalanced gender representations in language was representative of most of the group:

I think pretty much in our congregation people feel free to change [gendered pronouns] that they want to change and you might be singing and hear different words as you’re as you’re singing. For the most part in anything that’s an official document, there’s a really good attempt made to do it so that it’s accepting of everyone. It’s never been a big issue for me. But then I come from a background where men and women were equally accepted. Meeting people where that’s not been the case, I can appreciate why they don’t want to be – or coming from a home where there’s abuse and violence coming from men, well there’s issues there that you need to try and sort out.

Once again, an issue that could substantiate a political claim to fair representation and critical attention to the role of language in the formation of social scripts is instead individualized and chalked up to the exceptional circumstances of certain people’s lives. The language of choice recurring throughout each interview not only “resonates with the liberal individualist political philosophy that is widespread” in
North American political culture, but also represents, according to Michaele Ferguson (2011), a “form of individualism, which by individualizing choices and problems, privatizes them” (p. 10). Ferguson further connects the language of choice with “nonthreatening and conventional” understandings of choice as a personal claim to freedom from undue intrusion by the state or other individuals, and to freedom of action, so long as it does not harm others (p. 11). The value of these types of positive and negative liberties, (“freedoms to” and “freedoms from”), have long been sanctioned by the discursive arrangements established in the Canadian Constitution Act (1867) and in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982).

On the question of systemic barriers, cultural stereotyping, and subtle social conditioning into gender roles Fran had this to say:

Right now with the playing field, I don’t see an imbalance whether it’s male or female. I truly don’t see that. I’m only going by my own experience and the people that I have around me. There is no difference. Labels, whether male or female, you have the same access to, say, University or College or whatever you want to go into.

I had suggested formal education, among other examples, as one of the mechanisms through which gendered subjects get routed onto distinct paths. Education was, perhaps, a less-than-ideal scenario to offer because in public schools there is now a standardized curriculum for females and males. But it was a salient example that came to mind because educational training leads directly to employment opportunities, which Trisha and I had just been talking about. In fact, one could still make the argument that the gendering of education consists not in the courses available or the degrees awarded but rather in the type of attention and the encouragement that students are likely to receive. It is also reasonable to point out that, where women – or other gender minorities – make a professional entrée into a male-dominated field, they often face “the glass ceiling” or what Alice Eagly and Linda Carli (2007) have aptly redubbed the “labyrinth” in order to better describe a contemporary corporate situation in which “some women, some of the time” will manage to find and traverse the circuitous paths toward the top (p. 6). Cynthia’s perspective was this:
I hear that you know women profs don’t get to the same positions that men do. I heard about the glass ceiling for women in business and you know CEO types. So I hear about it, I’m aware of it, but there are also female success stories that you hear about as well. But for me personally, no, I don’t seem to have a personal story where I could point to ‘oh yes, I saw this happen and it really wasn’t fair or assuming that only a man can do this job’ or ‘women have to be more men-like to get into that position.’ I hear about it in the media since you mention the media, but I don’t have a personal story about it.

Of course, as my thesis supervisor commented, if someone is white, middle class, and reasonably well educated, they could go a long time without having a consciousness-raising moment. Moreover, many studies, including Eagly & Carli’s, have demonstrated that victims of discrimination often minimize actual discrimination. James Cameron (2001), for example, finds strong evidence that, at a personal level, women in contemporary Western society tend to minimize discrimination (p. 749). In a questionnaire-based study involving over 300 participants, he observed that “modern sexism” or “neo-sexism” commonly persists in both males’ and females’ denial that women are discriminated against and in their belief that discrimination against women is a thing of the past (p. 744). While none of the women with whom I had conversations denied that gender has ever been a battleground, my impression was that the battles were largely rationalized away as exceptions to a rule of people generally treating others well. None questioned the notion that there are, for all intents and purposes, two sexes which map onto two genders. Although the women recognized variation among individuals due to personality and due to socialization, they took the conventional social and anatomical differences that bifurcate male and female identities as essentially given.

A New Set of Questions

Whereas the questions in my first interview guide assumed that my interlocutors subscribed to a basic form of gender equality, the questions with which I replaced them did not. This set of questions drew from Christel Manning’s (1999) ethnography of women in the American religious right. Manning’s
work posed questions that directly interrogated her informants’ views about the roles women should play in their society, whether respondents supported laws mandating equal rights for men and women, and if they thought gender discrimination and sexual harassment were real social problems. Many of the women Manning interviewed openly declared their belief in a cosmology ordered through a gender binary designed for heterosexual complementarity. Furthermore, they affirmed that in this system, the male element rightfully subordinated the female – except, for the most part, in the workplace (p. 106). Manning reports that almost everyone among her 81 respondents expressed feminist values about male/female gender equality in the workplace because, in some important sense, work was not “life”; a boss exerts authority over employees in an amoral economic sphere unlike a husband, who directs a wife through their shared moral universe (pp. 71-73). The women with whom I worked neither maintained a distinction between “work” and “life” domains nor agreed with the idea of strictly gendered leadership in any domain. The Riverside women’s claims, however, also used the language of neoliberal consumer choice which undergirds the American women’s claims to participation in marketplace competition on the merits of their own labour.

After hearing several very restrained responses when I asked questions that were critical of gender norms and privilege, I began to frame my questions in the style of Manning’s, which did not presume interviewees’ tolerance of gender variance. My hope was that these questions would provoke a more detailed response from interlocutors by suggesting the legitimacy of a stance opposing the basic equality they have accepted and which has become a culturally commonsense position. This revised approach confirmed that respondents valued having personal qualities like tolerance and acceptance. It also revealed how the prominence of concepts like tolerance and equality in Canada, their instantiation in public policy and the way they have been championed for profit by the private sector (eg. Coke’s Spring 2011 ad campaign featuring a rainbow cast with a social conscience, “making the world better, one drink
at a time” has led to exasperating consequences for people who see themselves as tolerating the imposition of minorities – even when they might be part of a minority themselves.

Despite the Riverside women typically reporting positive experiences, they have negotiated a systemically sexist society their whole lives. Even though hiring practices attuned to professional gender imbalances would seem to benefit them as women, many expressed frustration that less qualified job candidates are likely to get hired because of their female gender. They understood society as an even playing field in which the skewed selection of one identity profile over another had to do with individual choice and natural ability as opposed to systemic constraints. In her autoethnographic essay on class experiences in the academy, Indigenous lesbian writer Megan Lee (2011) describes this vision of equal opportunity as “the simplistic illusion of meritocracy — the idea that what we get is what we work for” (p. 88).

Paulette, for example, framed her gender concerns in terms of balance, saying that in “my workplace it was, it’s the opposite [of what you’re suggesting]; there were not enough men.” She otherwise focused on the idea of women’s tendency to discriminate against men once they reached a place of authority, confessing: “I would much prefer to work for a male principal than a female principal. That’s not right across the board, I had a female principal who was wonderful. But I often find that they’re more rigid in what they want.” In this conversation, she primarily attributed the social precarity of women to their own shortcomings in discretion, offering an anecdote about the way a new generation of parents are raising children assigned female gender: “when the little girls sit down [in a play group], their little butts show! And the little boys get laughing and giggling. And oftentimes I would see parents who were dressed very similarly.” Paulette concluded that “we haven’t come very far” but saw a vehicle for change in the ubiquity of advertising campaigns, noting that “we’re trying to come up with programs. I know Dove has lots of programs that they’ve tried to introduce to help kids have a good self image.”
What do these kinds of comments say about the mainstream construal of gender-based challenges and the status of women? I would argue that prioritizing concerns with women’s self-government and the socially transformative power of advertising can be seen as symptomatic of the commercial media’s primary role in telling people stories about themselves and of a concomitant [mis]perception about the equally distributed opportunity for free choice in areas of our lives that are, in reality, often brutally constrained. Like the simplistic illusion of meritocracy, the illusion of free individual expression breaks down in the face of questions like: to whose appetite does women’s deliberate oversexualization of themselves and their daughters cater? What would compel women to begin dressing a certain way and socialize their daughters in the same trend? How does self-exploitative behaviour fit in to a dominant moral and economic order in which women’s value is intimately tied to their commodification as objects of desire for the heterosexual male gaze?

Cognitive Dissonance and Cultural Complacency

Key trends among this study’s findings include: a disavowal of gender distinctions; a disdain for feminism – defined a certain way; and a complacency with the status quo. So how are these things compatible?

The language of choice, stemming from neoliberal market logic, unites them. When respondents drew on their Christian identities to speak to points that I raised, they consistently downplayed the specificity of their beliefs by calling them commonsense or extending them past the bounds of Christian thought, explaining how anyone might reach the same conclusions. Recall Trisha’s assurance that her condemnation of sex as an advertising tactic had nothing to do with her religious values. Marie put the matter even more abstractly, saying: “I’m not sure that I see a difference between Christian women and any women.” And in the context of a question about religious practice and community volunteer work,
Cynthia made sure to point out that: “I guess [I see my volunteer work as connected to my religious identity]. But I also recognize the fact that there are a lot of people who do an awful lot of good in the community and have no religious ties at all.” At the same time, the Riverside women affirmed the idiosyncratic nature of each individual’s beliefs with statements like Marie’s: “[The church is] a community of faith that I share beliefs with. However, everybody in that community of faith, their beliefs could be quite different than mine. Everybody has their personal beliefs.”

These statements illustrate a cognitive maneuver – simultaneous universalizing and particularizing – that is consistent with the operation of the sociocultural “backdrop” of Canada and the global north in general. Hegemonic forces consolidate power by making the effects of power seem natural, universally distributed, and necessary. The categories of people whose activities and identities must be disciplined in order for these forces to maintain their power are positioned as “other” within the forces’ field of influence; they are marked as different, but still included and therefore controlled. Dominant society has managed to incorporate and politically disarm feminist values by pointing to a variety of tokenizing (and still sorely limited) representations of gender diversity. This empty gesturing often functions to forestall further critical engagement from people concerned not just with the fact that women are represented at all, but also with how, why, where, how frequently, and in what capacity they are represented. And although there are conflicting ideas about gender in these representations and within the individual schemas of the women’s group members, a balance of “negative” and “positive” ones does not cancel their net effect; those conflicting ideas can coexist within a cognitive apparatus, colouring its beliefs and attitudes. For instance, Trisha responded to my asking “What do you think are the most important challenges facing Christian women today” by saying: “Well I don’t think it’s any different whether you’re a Christian woman or just a woman in connection with the many different challenges that each and every one of us faces. No matter what we say or do or how far we’ve come, it’s still tilted the other side” and finished her
thought with a critique of feminism. She said: “What gets me upset when feminism is mentioned, is I find that,” and paused to hedge her critique by ceding that “the feminist movement has made some changes which are definitely good.” She continued: “However, I find that we should learn by our mistakes. And I see a lot of things that the feminist movement is bringing about and it shouldn’t be. What I mean by that is that we should have learned from the mistakes that were made against us. But we’re making the same – but to me that’s even worse because we should be better than that.”

Like the choice feminism described by Ferguson (2011), Trisha’s characterization of feminism portrays the exercise of cultural critique as judgmental. Taking a moral stance on something is conflated with *being judgmental*. Thus, the expression of an opinion requires a caveat reassuring the audience that it does not really reflect on what is actually happening in the world. This form of relativism forgets the fact that making moral decisions is actually an ethical activity necessary for navigating the social world every day. A moral judgment is founded in an attempt at ethical understanding, not in a petty desire to be personally correct. Ferguson (2011) says exactly this in her analysis of choice feminism and its withdrawal from politics, which I quote here at length:

> Political judgments require “learning to make claims that take others into account and to elicit criteria in an effort to persuade them of one’s own view.” To say that feminists should make judgments is not to say that we will all from the start be capable of making good judgments – judgments that fully acknowledge others and are persuasive to them. Feminists who fail to make ‘claims that take others into account’ are not thereby being judgmental. Instead, they are practicing judgment – that is, judging without having become masters of judgment. Judging is a political skill we learn to do better by practicing it in the company of others. The criticism that feminists are judgmental, therefore, may sometimes be a misplaced criticism. What is meant may be something like: your judgment is narrow-minded and does not take my perspective into account, and I think we can do better. The disagreement, in other words, may be a political one about how we should judge – rather than a disagreement about whether we should judge in the first place. (p. 19)

Rejecting feminisms as judgmental stems from a fear of politics that renders everything personal – a kind of personal that is not political.
Furthermore, what do members of the Riverside women’s group mean when they say they don’t distinguish between men and women? In such statements they are deploying a conception of the individual whose public – and primary – identity is as an economic being. The neo/liberal language of the economic realm, the chief context of their daily workplace experiences, portrays the individual as a free agent capable of pursuing their chosen livelihood, unencumbered by any identity markers. The women also demonstrate an implied understanding of the public as a supposedly value-free arena of capitalist exchange. “Distinction,” in this use, encodes the notion of “hierarchy” and the opposite of “hierarchy,” for the Riverside women, appears to be “equality;” specifically, the legally derived equality of the workplace and market in the global north, which has itself become powerfully interconnected precisely through a globalized economy. In the women’s own analyses of their personal relationships, and in my observation of their vocabulary choices more generally, the women clearly distinguish between gender identities. Paulette validated the importance of different social and biological roles in her assessment that “we need a balance [in society]. We say ‘male’ and ‘female’ but all of us have male and female components. It takes a male and a female to create us.” Early in our interview, Susan elaborated on her thoughts around the concept of “gender” by way of an anecdote:

I square dance. [My husband and] I had been square dancing 13 years when he died. And there are so many women who won’t dance the man’s part. And there are so many women there on their own. And so I figure even though I’m little I could be useful because I can get them dancing if I can dance the man’s part. So I understand man/woman, whatever, but it’s not important to me. Although I have to admit, I’m very lonely (chuckle) so, you know. But. They’re just human beings. That throws you off, doesn’t it?

Susan’s assumption that her indifference to gender roles would be surprising leads me to suspect that she anticipated a study about gender from women’s perspectives would involve trying to parse the nature of gender differences and, perhaps, being asked to concede that women possess a variety of qualities of equal and possibly even greater value than those of men. Strategic essentialism of this kind has sometimes been used to establish the basis of female empowerment in a variety of contexts including
women’s movements, popular culture (as in the “girl power” slogan popularized by the Spice Girls), and advertising (like Secret antiperspirant’s “strong enough for a man, but made for a woman” advertisements). When conversation during the evening women’s group meetings would come round to the activities of a particular woman members knew, a member of the group was liable to point out to me how this behaviour exemplified a “feminine” quality such as efficiency at multitasking or feeling content with behind-the-scenes achievement instead of seeking glory and accolades. This type of information is what the Riverside women tended to regard as salient for my study. In fact, it was comments like Susan’s, challenging the importance of gendering individuals and social roles, that interested me most. Such reflections highlight the existence of alternative gender ontologies, which could be explored in order to imagine what a post-gender society could look like.

**The Riverside Women’s Views in Context**

One way to understand the constellation of attitudes and views on gender that I have encountered throughout this study is to see them as rooted in the way women’s economic success is actually premised on a particular type of feminism; the mid 20th century feminism which downplayed differences between men and women in order to gain similar rights. Larner (2000) locates the connection between this form of feminism and the prevailing economic construction of the subject in the “articulation between feminist claims for gender neutrality premised on the assumption that women have the right to autonomous personhood, and neo-liberal claims for possessive individualism” (p. 20). In a sense, government policies like affirmative action as well as grassroots efforts of feminist critique both point out that there is a difference that needs remediation, thus ruining the ideological camouflage that allows the genders to coexist, economically undifferentiated. The misunderstanding lodged at the heart of this discomfort is that the difference is not an innate one; it is an attitudinal one that affects the treatment of women and it owes
to a complex sociohistorical legacy of oppression. Moreover, it has far more to do with certain people’s desire to jockey for power than it has to do with women’s or any gender’s innate ability or value. Undoubtedly, however, economically successful contemporary women might see work aimed at addressing the social positionality of women as disruptive to the meritocracy in which they have worked so hard – the one that says a woman can get anywhere a man could, on her own accord. This optimistic claim can, of course, be true, but it does not erase the fact that the number of women whose circumstances render it possible for their talents to shine through, catapulting them toward some elite definition of success, is persistently skewed toward the small side.

There are other consequences of the fact that this study’s respondents are women whose formative experiences have been coloured predominantly by second-wave feminism as opposed to the third wave feminisms that most heavily inform my thinking. In some important sense, these women expected change and they got it. Their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations contended more directly with women’s suffrage, the dissolution of Victorian morality, and tumultuous postwar changes for women in Canadian society, making them, in some ways, more radicalized. I noticed that the daytime group respondent’s answers matched this conjecture. Susan even talked about grappling with her sense of existing in between these generations. Many of the women’s responses to my questions about women, society, and asymmetrical gendered power relations indicated that their mothers made sure they were raised knowing they could do anything they wanted, regardless of their gender. By and large, the women found this to be true and felt, therefore, that the quota of work was basically accomplished for their generation. I, being younger than all the women by at least two decades, have entered this world in a generation where men and women have (supposedly) been established as equal in state policy and social convention since before I was born, yet I see both a myriad of subtle ways in which these subject positions are not equal and how equality discourse overlooks the ways in which gender exceeds a male/female dichotomy.
Understanding the Riverside women’s sense of insulation from the frontline of gender activism, along with their desire to safeguard rights to individual choice, helps to explain the tepid response that I typically received to questions about gendered pronouns. I asked questions about inclusive language policies in the church, familiarity with genderless pronominal innovations such as “hir” and “ze,” as well as the women’s personal feelings about masculinist language that has traditionally pervaded church texts. Cynthia said she remembered several documents used by Riverside that had been changed through the combined efforts of individual congregants and administrative church bodies to honour the presence and contribution of women in United Church congregations. She continued:

I’m aware of it. I also mentioned at [a past group meeting where the women had compared the language of old and recent hymn books] that I don’t feel that anyone stood in my way. I guess I’m of the generation that, and perhaps people stood in my mother’s way or my aunt’s way or and, and I don’t know even younger women today call themselves feminists whatever that means – I don’t even know what that means, to call oneself a feminist – I don’t have the feeling that I was downtrodd for being a woman. No one came to me and said ‘you can’t take whatever courses at school, you can’t be what you want to be.’ Although I didn’t choose to [go into a profession] that women generally do. I don’t get the feeling that I had a hard time and so for someone like me, I don’t feel it truly important that the inclusive language be there and that I have to fight for inclusive language and that you can’t say ‘mankind’ because it’s ‘personkind’ or whatever. So I just never took up the fight. I just never felt I had to. So when it comes to the language, maybe I’m just too casual about it because I don’t feel it’s threatening in any way.

Cynthia saw the work of equality as basically accomplished and therefore felt untroubled by the way that uncritical and habitual uses of language could influence the user’s and listener’s perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs – their system of meaning – even when the user disclaims any associational, second order meaning in their usage.13 Earlier I quoted a similar statement from Paulette, in which expressed her feelings about gender neutral or gender inclusive language. Interestingly, Paulette later made an

13 Examples of one pernicious facet of this larger issue can be seen in the commonplace substitution of the general concept of “negativity” with the words “gay” or “retarded.” This problem has been recognized and taken up critically in popular culture by two American public service announcement campaigns that address the damaging connotations of these epithets. The “When you say ‘that’s so gay’ do you know what you say?” series uses queer and non-queer celebrity cameos such as Wanda Sykes and Hilary Duff, and “The R Word: Spread the Word to end the Word” series features Glee actress Lauren Potter, who has Down syndrome.
argument about connotative meaning, divorced from the context of my question about pronouns, where she argued that the nuances of language are in some ways very important. She said:

[“Oh my god”] is a phrase that really irks me. And particularly when I was teaching and I had little, little kids that were using it like, just like I would use “darn.” And it’s, from my point of view, not the equivalent of darn. Why are you using it? They don’t know what it means. They don’t know why they’re using it. And it does sort of play down the whole concept of God in my mind, when it’s thrown in that way. But yes, there’s a lot of things that have happened to language that I’d rather hadn’t happened to language!

I said I agreed. She concluded, laughing: “But nobody asked me!” I wondered aloud if she had ever asked the students to reflect on their language choices by saying something to the effect of: “‘So, you know, why are you exclaiming this as opposed to something else’ like ‘Why are you choosing these words.’” She replied: “I don’t think I ever took the time to do that. Or had the time to do that. If it was important enough to me, I would’ve taken the time and said something from my perspective – ‘well, it wasn’t God that caused that problem’.” Here, Paulette appears invested in maintaining a certain understanding of God that transcends formal or explicit discourse about the topic and applies equally to casual usage. A similar consideration of how word choice can manipulate the meaning and valuation of gender identities seems relegated, however, to the status of an optional matter meant for those who have personally tangled with blatant gender-based violence.

Perhaps the Riverside women do not consider the pronoun issue an imminent threat because of a belief that the major threats to their autonomy and livelihoods – such as achieving nominal legal equality and being able to get hired in male-dominated fields – have been neutralized. Pronominal usage is not directly affecting the material conditions of their lives; if anything, the matter seems picayune.

Reluctance to problematize word choices that fall in the realm of conventional language usage may also relate to a cultural sensibility that, in some ways, vigorously defends freedom of speech and personal expression. Buying into the notion that one’s words are one’s own can stifle an appreciation of how powerful discourse can be. At times in interviews when I suggested that the marketing of lifestyles and
images plays an active role in creating and shaping people’s desires, my interlocutors disagreed. Respondents saw advertising and other media images of femininity as sometimes deplorable and sometimes benign. They could recognize these symbols as symptomatic of male cultural dominance, but felt insulated from their effects. Free from the distorting system of identity production, the women also felt able to protect their daughters from demeaning cultural influences. The Riverside women’s sense of personal agency outstrips elite-invented discourses’ definitional power over women with an assurance that it might be a problem, but it is not a problem for them.
Chapter 3

Excavating Gender Ideology in the Political Unconscious of the National Mainstream

Cultural events are not the sum of the actions of their individual participants, each of whom imperfectly expresses a pre-existent pattern, but are the scenes where shared culture emerges from interaction.

Bruce Mannheim & Dennis Tedlock, 1995

I grew up with [male cultural dominance] but maybe it hasn’t bothered me to the same degree because I grew up in a household where I could do whatever I wanted to do. Because I was a girl didn’t mean I had to have a direct path. If I had been a boy or a girl, the path was open. I know there’s the male culture there and that’s definitely going to influence choices, but I don’t ever remember feeling I can’t do something because I’m a girl. So maybe that’s the reason gender didn’t hit me the same as somebody who definitely felt, ‘you know, I’m a girl, I’ve got to act this way, I’ve got to do certain things.’

Marie, 2011

Primarily using a “to each their own” logic in response to my questions about gendered social and religious practices, the Riverside women evoked a commitment to, tolerance for and equality among a variety of gender expressions. By referring to the social status of women in Canada (“There is a shift of men into female roles but very minimal in comparison to the shift from female to male [roles]”) and to United Church teachings on gender and sexuality (“There’s a really good attempt made to [write any official UC document] so that it’s accepting of everyone”) the women acknowledged that their attitudes flow from a constellation of experiences significantly shaped by religious belonging and by values

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15 This research is committed to recognizing gender identities that exist outside of the male/female binary. Interview guides included questions about respondents’ experiences with gender-variant persons and gender-nonconforming language. For the most part, dialogue about “gender” meant dialogue about “women” to respondents.
absorbed from mainstream society. Although my interview guide contained only questions about gender, interlocutors often broadened the discussion by comparing societal gender discrimination and state practices around remedial gender justice to the treatment of other marginal or minority groups in Canadian society (“What [workplace hiring quotas are] doing – right now, to be a white male at your age (24) they are being discriminated against”).

I do not endeavour to extrapolate the meaning of the Riverside women’s views on gender or the significance of these comparisons in order to comment on their understandings of a variety of other political problems besides the issues of gender I have raised, but I do wish to suggest that, no matter the subject of discussion, the manner of framing these perspectives does, to quote Kathleen Stewart (1996) “enact the traces of a political unconscious” (p. 11). In other words, the language one uses reflects the ideologies in which one’s formation is steeped and can therefore reveal something about the values those ideologies promote as well as how the speaker is positioned in the larger sociocultural context which is ordered by those ideologies.

The scope of ideological forces under investigation in this project have been artificially constrained in order to focus in depth on Canadian neo/liberalisms and a certain strain of mainline Anglo Protestant Christianity. Proceeding from the research objective to explore mainstream gender discourse in Canada, I identified neo/liberal and Anglo Protestant ideologies as important producers of gender roles for many subjects interpellated by the social mainstream of the global North. Since an ethnographic methodology offered the possibility to develop a body of rich discursive data, I decided to identify an appropriate field in which to conduct participant observation which could be complemented by individual interviews. The parameters set by my methodological choices and analytical framework led me to seek interlocutors who were immersed in the contemporary forms of mainstream Anglo Protestantism that shaped the neo/liberal Canadian nation-state and who have historically been construed, in many senses, by these systems as the
female "other" to the universal "man." It has been my hope that by acting as a conduit to voice these women's lived experiences of gender, the present work will illuminate perspectives that are underaccounted for in feminist-oriented work and which my findings suggest may be prominent among mainstream Canadian women. These perspectives promise to enrich current understandings of the nature of dominant gender discourse by elaborating contesting interpretations of key concepts like gender, feminism, and equality. As systematically concealed facets of hegemonic gender discourse and practice become more apparent, so too will the critical tools needed for reconfiguring them in the service of ongoing projects of gender liberation.

I have identified how gendered power relations inscribed by the concealed, changing, and hybrid ideologies upholding this logic are reciprocally produced by and productive of differently situated subjects by tracing some lineaments of Christian influence in Canada’s dominant cultural logic. These subjects are thereby predisposed to interact with social structures and with each other in specific ways. The women who allowed me to take their church discussion group as my field evoked a complex set of attachments, rejections, and ambivalent attitudes toward a variety of values that have made their way from feminisms and other anti-oppressive movements into dominant social, cultural, political and economic discourses. My analysis reveals how these naturalizing discourses promote a habitual denial of gender-based oppression in contemporary mainstream Canadian society and illustrates a tendency among my interlocutors to simultaneously naturalize their own viewpoints as commonsense and hedge their judgments about social issues by limiting them to the status of personal opinion.

From their points of view, the women described a number of reasons for their general complacency with the status quo of gender relations, some of which my hypothesis predicted and some of which I did not anticipate. One particularly salient and unforeseen factor which seemed to ameliorate the women’s interpretation of their social treatment was their perception that a great deal of improvement has taken
place since their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations, leaving them with relatively modest expectations about what is necessary to demand in the name of gender justice at the present moment.

Cynthia framed some of her assessments of gender relations in terms of generational progress:

I guess I should be very grateful for those women who came before me who got all these rights. I mean women couldn’t vote before, women couldn’t own property. I was born into a time where no one stood in my way. Not that I was aware of. No one said “you can’t do this because you’re a woman.

Marie chronicled progressive thought within her own family:

When I think to my mother working as a teacher and, you know, once you became pregnant you stopped teaching. Or not getting her driving license because there wasn’t enough time for her dad to teach her. And then her impact on her daughters, insisting that they take driver’s ed so that they could get their license. And then my impact on my daughter in terms of encouraging that you can do anything and broaden your range. I think it’s affected down the line in terms of generations.

In addition to reflecting on the forward-thinking she valued in her mother, Susan contextualized enlightenment within her own life span. In particular, she credited facing crises of conscience for the personal growth that freed her from conditioning by oppressive attitudes toward sexuality:

I think [my feeling about homosexuality] was more the religious upbringing and that was just what we had been taught, that it was wrong. When this gal, the supply minister, pulled a bunch of us into a meeting and told us that she was gay – seriously, I thought I was going to faint. I knew [she was gay], but to have it right there in the open, that made me just! But now I dance with gay people!

Overall, the Riverside women held optimistic views about women’s and other gender variants’ political fate. By their estimation, patience with the slow process of cultural change is warranted by significant changes they have witnessed in their own lives.

However, most central among the forces responsible for their ambivalent feelings about the state of gender equality appears to be the fact of these women’s positionality in social processes and outcomes which privilege their personal identifications, practices, and normative contexts. These contexts are largely defined by an Anglo Protestant-inflected paradigm of neo/liberalisms whose hegemonic
instantiation in Canada promotes a specifically construed set of values about individualism, secularism, as well as personal and market freedom.

It is therefore very interesting to note that, in a way that troubles the classification of the Riverside women as participants in the social mainstream, several of them mentioned finding it difficult to express their Christian faith in public settings because they sensed hostility toward their religious affiliation. In other words, they found themselves having to justify their place in Canada’s ethno-cultural and religiously pluralist mainstream. When I asked about the challenges facing Christian women today, Marie said:

When you say Christian women I think – I’m not thinking of necessarily my network of Christian women but Christian women on a broader range – I think there’s still a lot of inability to express belief. I think, too, there’s sometimes a challenge with balancing your certain beliefs as a Christian [with the] day to day. And I think sometimes the real world or the secular world is totally different than a Christian faith community, so sort of, kind of feeling comfortable I guess? And also by being able to express what you believe without fear of backlash.

Paulette recounted a recent exchange with her friend that illustrates one form that “backlash” can take:

I’m thinking of an example of a very dear friend of mine who I know did attend church at one point in time and when we got together over the Christmas holidays and were chatting I was quite surprised at some of her comments. This was about Catholicism, but just the vehemence that came across in some of the some of the comments. I sort of made a note to myself that I would be careful what comments I made. And I often just get a sense from people that is, maybe not antagonistic, but that I just wouldn’t be able to discuss certain topics with them. Because they’re very set in their ways and I don’t mind. It’s perfectly fine if you’ve decided that you’re not involved with the church or that you’re an atheist or agnostic, whatever – but I like to be able to discuss.

Comments like these signal that the Riverside women are aware of some of the ways Christianity has been critically challenged, and in some cases, openly accused of culpability in a number of perceived social ills.
The Personal and the Political

I heard a variety of statements from the Riverside women depicting personal choice with regard to gender and sexuality, as well as religion, as something akin to consumer choice in a privatized and value-neutral economic sphere. Cynthia described the changing demographics of the United Church as a matter of fewer and fewer busy people “continuing the traditions of [their] family” but noted that doing so is only important if “that’s what you choose to do, if it fits with you.” On the topic of changing gender roles in society, Marie said “I personally wouldn’t want to go into the military” for instance, “but that doesn’t mean it’s wrong for women to go into the military.” Although the women did not make any claims about the ethical validity of one personal attitude toward gender and sexual expression over another, it is unclear how their temperance with regard to gender issues – construed largely as private matters – might translate to other sites of political debate. It is apparent that, at least in some cases, they are aware of having specific responsibilities that flow from their socioeconomic position vis-à-vis others.

As members of what several of my interlocutors called “a church family,” they are deeply invested in the wellbeing of their religious community and they care for the welfare of their wider community through volunteerism, activism and recreational forms of civic participation. Many of the women described a strong interest in contributing to those in material need. Cynthia explained that belonging to the Riverside community of “support” and “extended family” means supporting social causes at home, like the food bank, and abroad, through the UC Mission and Service fund. She also valued being conscious of “where [our donated] money goes,” citing the importance of contributing to relief efforts such as those “in Haiti, for instance, or to people in China with the earthquake, in 2008.” Or if the congregation feels “very strongly about something that’s happened in the world, [it] can write a special cheque and through Riverside and through the United Church it will get to that very specific occurrence
that people need money for.” Cynthia also mentioned other community volunteering which she said was “not related to religious practices” but affirmed that “helping people out is.” Similarly, Trisha prided herself on being “very active in the church” through “constant giving.” Like Cynthia, she strongly believed “that you have to give back,” which Trisha said she does not only “through the church but through other organizations” in her life as well. Paulette echoed these sentiments, remarking that their supply minister “was saying that it’s the first church she’s ever been at that has this policy when we are doing a fundraising activity, 10 percent of whatever we’ve raised goes to other people. So we choose whatever. It might be a women’s centre or ‘Out of the Cold [community shelter].’ We choose some local need and help out with that. So that’s very, very important to me, that we’re reaching out, that we’re not just looking inward.”

Some of these expressions of care for those beyond their own borders and realms of experience seem to sit awkwardly with the women’s objections, mentioned in Chapter 2, to state and corporate policies aimed at redressing historical inequalities that economically disadvantage certain racialized, gendered, and dis/abled persons. Likewise, their passion for helping disenfranchised others seems in some ways incommensurable with their relinquishing political judgment on issues of gender and sexuality. These apparent contradictions, too, have to do with the way that people are made “other” through images of scale (Tsing, 2004). These women's (and many others') objection to affirmative action policies, for example, is rooted in a sense of justice that they believe should be upheld among a citizenry comprised of equals. The notion that such policies unfairly privilege those without natural ability over those who have achieved status (ie. “reverse discrimination”) is premised on a conception of unfairness on a personal level. In other words, the women relate to these "privileged people" primarily as individuals with “a fair shot" in an equal opportunity Canada because they are largely unaware of how they are situated differently from those people in the historical legacies of oppression which have led to multifarious forms
of systemic discrimination in the present day. This is not to say that state tactics for redressing discrimination are appropriate or successful; in fact, it is clear that some of them actually foster prejudice. However, it is certain that their efficacy is often confounded by a lack of critical appreciation for the inequality-producing systems to which they are meant to respond.

For the Riverside women, a variety of politico-ethical commitments exist simultaneously, some of which conflict and some of which reinforce each other. These commitments are shaped by both a neo/liberal orientation toward individualism, privatization and economic success and a religious orientation toward community responsibility on local and global scales.

**Community and the Public Sphere**

The dominant cultural sensibility in mainstream neo/liberal Canada has come to portray the navigation of social life as analogous to market choice; that is, premised on the agency of the individual naturally disposed to make decisions whose proper effect is on themselves in their personal lives rather than on the construction of a shared moral sphere governed by some kind of public consensus. A number of political philosophers have theorized the tense dialectical relationship between the individual’s personal experience, what Habermas (1962) calls “the lifeworld,” and the political and economic technologies of the state apparatus, or “the system.” As in Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” (1977) and Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony,” the lifeworld and the system constantly exert reciprocal but asymmetrical influence on one another through acts of negotiation and re/appropriation in the “public sphere.” In its ideal form, the public sphere is "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (Habermas, 1962, p. 176). But in reality, howsoever the public sphere might approach this ideal, it has been “refeudalized” for Western democracies in
Habermas’ view, by the intrusion of private interests in political operations. Douglas Kellner (2000) reviews this process with elegant concision:

The transformation [of the public sphere] involved private interests assuming direct political functions, as powerful corporations came to control and manipulate the media and state. On the other hand, the state began to play a more fundamental role in the private realm and everyday life, thus eroding the difference between state and civil society, between the public and private sphere. As the public sphere declined, citizens became consumers, dedicating themselves more to passive consumption and private concerns than to issues of the common good and democratic participation. (p. 264)

Many of the conditions in a multinational representative democracy such as Canada can obstruct practices of large-scale community, giving state and market apparatuses recourse to a national mythology built on nostalgia for invented traditions in order to conceptually unify citizens (Anderson, 1983). In some ways, the Canadian nation-state’s legal-economic regime tends to fracture political and moral communities through its sheer size and through privatizing influences that discourage its subjects from recognizing their agency in its system of rule. Citizens are encouraged by dominant ideologies and the structures that function in their service to conceive of individual choices as a private matter at the same time as they are confronted with a population of fellow nationals too large to reliably foster meaningful linkages between personal actions and wider social consequences. Yet, other forms of communities continue to thrive. Civic, religious, recreational, activistic, educational, workplace, and other forms of community exert counter-hegemonic pressure on the “privatized, limited, public sphere…reserved for the play of institutions and the monopoly of those who work them to their advantage” (Rancière, 2006, p. 57) by enacting their values and by making claims to state recognition on the basis of their shared needs. A recent article by Alan Sears and James Cairns (2011) on the post-election political climate of Canada neatly summarizes the way this complex of forces has played out in the Canadian context:

The Conservative [Party of Canada’s] campaign was rooted in 35 years of political and economic restructuring through neo-liberalism, a strategy for corporate profitability focused on pushing the market deeper into every aspect of life, leaving us with no alternative but to purchase an ever-expanding range of goods and services to meet our need and wants. This deepening of market
forces has been accomplished primarily by cutting social programs and benefits, while also undercutting worker bargaining rights over wages and conditions of work. A key goal of this restructuring process has been to depoliticize politics, to suggest that sound government is simply a technical matter of making the correct decisions to nurture economic growth. (p. 5)

In a certain sense, as a mainline religious community, my interlocutors represent a microcosm of the way these complex forces act on the nation. Their focus on the language of individual rights and responsibilities draws from the rhetoric of neo/liberalism even as they also resist its atomizing logic by continuously enacting their faith each day. Said Trisha: “I don’t see a separation” between “everyday practices” and “religious belief. Everything that I do, I try to always make sure I live my religious belief every day.” None of these social forces is compartmentalized; they are impossible to fully tease apart. But by identifying and naming the forces that produce specific subject positions, social critique at least opens the possibility for subject relations to evolve in less ideologically determined ways in light of its critical understanding.

“Diverse” Canada and the Unmarked Mainstream

Why are the lived conditions of “others” in the global North so difficult to see clearly? What are some of the ideologies underlying the Riverside women’s understanding of Canadian equality in terms of gender, racial, ethno-cultural and other forms of difference? Denial of the specificity of cultural forms, and denial of coevalness with “other” societies who “have a culture” (Fabian, 1983) represents a growing problem in a Canadian context of state-sponsored multiculturalism. In contradistinction to Canada’s white Anglo-Saxon Protestant or French Catholic norm, a select group of “model minorities” are valorized by the state (Eng, Halberstam & Munoz, 2005); women and other gender-variants gain approval by approximating the hetero-masculine qualities of the ideal economic subject (Griffin, 2007), while racial and ethnic minorities are “celebrated” through what frequently amounts to a “food and dance” version of multiculturalism. These and other systemically disenfranchised populations are incorporated in the
Canadian mosaic through what Warner (1993) calls a “minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation” (p. xxvi).

In a group discussion during a meeting which took place after the completion of individual interviews, I brought in a short Op Ed article about the lack of women in Canadian politics. The opinions voiced in response to the issue (framed in the article as a question: “does Canada need more women in power?”) generally concurred that everyone, no matter their gender, religion, culture, or race could enjoy similar opportunities for public office in Canada as well as in other workplace pursuits if they just had enough ambition and work ethic. One of the women present that night expanded the ensuing discussion by likening the news article’s problem-solving approach (it concludes by imploring us to ask ourselves “how can our political system empower women to succeed in politics?”) to the way that corporations often recruit women and other populations who constitute minorities in various sections of the workforce in order to achieve an appearance of diversity. She suggested that, in the sense that individuals matching certain identity categories might represent preferred hires, it was anti-democratic to give people opportunities over and above those which are given to others. As for the relative absence of certain groups from some spheres, she proposed that the reason behind it might have more to do with personal interest, skill level, and proportion in the overall population than to do with external barriers to those groups’ entry. In *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (2007), Sunera Thobani describes how this sort of meritocratic mindset operates in the corporate world with regard to race and culture, but her description could apply equally to gender. Thobani argues that:

> Human-service practitioners use a variety of rationales to deny, ignore, and minimize the issue of racism in their organizations, their professional values and practices, and their personal belief systems and relationships. ... Mainstream agencies continue to operate within an assimilationist monocultural model of service delivery that views the pluralism of Canadian society as being irrelevant to their mandates, policies, structures and operations. (p. 322)

Among the evening discussion group, opinions reflected the attitude described by Thobani, that corporate
hiring policies ought to stipulate only that the best-qualified candidate be selected for the job and that personal success was foremost a matter of ambition and work ethic. Their consensus was hedged, however, by the fact that some women’s analyses incorporated a degree of consideration for the ways that ambition and work ethic might be fostered differently in a variety of personal contexts.

As often as not in the public façade of political process, “representation” means enjoying the respectability that comes from appearing “inclusive” of the subaltern at the same time as maintaining its marginality. The veneer of a multicultural and gender-inclusive sensibility thereby becomes available to mainstream consumers, employers, and employees, free from the stigma that belongs to the “authentic” deviants. These facile notions of “acceptance” “tolerance” and “representation” by a rightful yet benevolent majority must be rejected, as Michael Warner (1993) argued in the context of queer politics, “in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (p. xxvi).

It is important to ground this resistance in an understanding of the fact that some abstract love of "gender inclusivity" and “multiculturalism” is not the starting point for inviting “others” into the mainstream fold. These values are not what have introduced a variety of different people into society and the workforce, putting them into economic competition with each other. Of course, women are a natural fact of the population. As Rick Salutin (2011) reminds readers in his recent article in The Toronto Star, gender equality is often touted as a mainstream value in Canada, yet “women weren't legal persons here 80 years ago. Fifty years ago there were still no women in cabinet. Thirty years ago the mere mention of abuse in Parliament led to male hilarity.” As women have gradually gained the right to self-determination, gender equality has been incorporated as a mainstream Canadian value in step with those emancipatory successes. Likewise, ethno-racial pluralism as a policy and a cultural value is the result of an existing demographic reality. Immigration to Canada has long been the norm due to “a declining birth rate, and an aging population” (Salutin, 2011) and due to a need for various forms of labour power that stretches as far
back as Canada’s settlement as a frontier society and imperial colony (Kassamali, 2011, 14).

Resisting “regimes of the normal” also depends on seeing one’s own variety of “normal” as equally specific, situated, and biased as the socio-cultural norms of anyone else. The Riverside women’s assessments of what it is like to navigate the social and economic worlds for themselves and for others point to some of the ways in which the state and culture industries actively reify a narrowly defined experiential profile as the norm. Minoritized groups are allowed, but when they are made visible, they are primarily positioned as norm-proving exceptions. One function of this ideological manipulation is to discourage mainstream Canadians from recognizing themselves as “having a culture” or perceiving that the postmodern commercial culture positioned as the “authentic” source of media and information around the globe is actually the product of a specific, though expansive, cultural context. The result is a crowding out of much of the remaining space for people to tell themselves a different story about what contemporary life means. Far from being just a personal matter, the way in which socially, economically, and politically privileged subjects negotiate and narrativize their identities makes a significant impact on the logic of Canadian socio-cultural systems. The stories told about women by those who inhabit a cultural location safely inside the margins are the ones likeliest to get repeated, becoming culturally authorized and eventually slipping into the taken-for-granted realm of common sense.

**Agape or Economics: Reinterpreting a Tradition**

When historied practices of culture and religion become sites of contention in rapidly changing pluralist societies, solutions can often be found in recasting the terms of the debate by asking new questions and reaching back to origins. Habermas (2002) suggested as much when he said:

> For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of
justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. (pp. 148-149)

Habermas implies that democratic resistance to systematized social inequalities depends on disrupting the way people take for granted a globalized neo/liberal regime and suggests that the tools of critical awakening can be found by looking to ancient religious values of love and freedom. Yet even as he points out the historically contingent origins of this dominant regime, he appears to present its underlying cultural sensibility – rooted in a Judaic sense of justice and a Christian ethos of agape – as the only one that could ever have survived. Clearly, even justice-oriented thought must grapple with the challenge of looking for emancipatory tactics at the source of problematic social formations without falling into the trap of conflating dominance with destiny.

As I have argued in previous chapters, when a system of political and economic rule appears limitless and natural – something whose sensibility and origin cannot easily be pinned down to a specific historico-cultural context – its hegemony remains defended from the threat of popular critique. The core ideologies of the Enlightenment and historical Christian thought have become so trenchantly instantiated throughout the Western world (and certainly in some other global contexts) through inexorable processes of cultural diffusion as well as deliberate campaigns of settler and economic colonization – a process obfuscated in the history lessons offered to North American youth – that the view to seeing this system as contingent and ethnospecific seems blocked from almost all sides. In a way that betokens the standardizing power of the amorphous cultural mainstream yet also speaks to a genuine desire to see the triumph of equality, the Riverside women’s narratives of their own experiences with gender downplayed the specificity of their cultural location and presumed a significant degree of uniformity among the experiences of other Canadian subjects.
Limitations to the Project

This project alone is not going to go a long way in stimulating the self-recognition and political awareness that is called for, and so considering the limitations of this research will help to identify the complementary work needed to extend its range. Certain logistical constraints limited the amount and quality of data it was possible to collect. Ideally, fieldwork would be carried out over a number of years and informant relationships would be built through the trust and familiarity that comes with day-to-day contact. It is conceivable that participants may have discussed their feelings about and responses to this project in greater depth with each other than they did with me because they are regular parts of each others’ social lives. Undoubtedly, the analytical depth of this study would benefit from intensified longitudinal involvement in the respondents’ everyday lives, but as many of the Riverside women said, busy lives do not often leave many hours unaccounted for. Although my study produced over one hundred pages of qualitatively rich interview transcripts, the style of fieldwork that was open to me in a Western urban context meant that I could not observe the Riverside women’s language and behaviour on a daily basis and in situations that might be less influenced by my presence. In this case, research needed to proceed from initiation to completion in a fixed time of two years. During this time, it was necessary to develop a research problematic, acquire knowledge of the relevant literature, obtain ethics approval to conduct the study, find an appropriate field context, conduct interviews, transcribe, analyze and write up findings. Working at the intersection of several disciplines, there exist vast bodies of knowledge suitable to inform a project such as this. Further exploration of cultural citizenship (Stevenson, 2003; Miller 2007), neo-liberal nation- and scale-making (Tsing, 2004; Ong, 2006), and critical race theory, especially to do with the construction of whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Fine, 2004; Guess 2006), would enrich such
a project. And, as is often the case with work situated in Canada, it suffers from the comparative absence of political, economic, and social theory drawn from the uniquely Canadian condition.

Certain methodological choices also constrained what it was possible to produce in the course of this study. Doing participant observation limited the opportunity for hypothesis-testing to one small group of people. Moreover, one half of the potential respondents (the daytime women’s discussion group) decided not to be interviewed due to the sensitive nature of the sample questions I provided them after we met. My reporting is also skewed toward the more detailed information that came from individual conversations because I was unable to audio record group meetings. Although I participated in the Riverside evening women’s discussion group over the course of a year, the total number of these meetings was small. Other responsibilities prevented me from attending one meeting and the women only meet from September to May, with the exception of December. My heavy reliance on interview answers might amplify the biases involved in my interpretation of tone, subtext, and body language. As I mentioned briefly in the first chapter, it could be very interesting to apply psycholinguistic analysis in order to excavate the nuanced meanings in the women’s speech patterns, but this exercise would require a great deal more space and time than what is available to me here.

In a research climate still ruled by empiricism, this kind of study does not offer the statistical power to which many readers have become accustomed. Even for social sciences and humanities scholars, the power of these findings to speak to large-scale phenomena may seem limited by the small number of interviewees involved with the project. The crux of the methodological defense to this criticism lies in the fact that qualitative research of this kind does not seek to cobble together a representative viewpoint; instead it looks to understand the meaning making systems behind a given viewpoint, even if it is only held by one person, because the conceptual evidence found there speaks to the nature of their lived reality. In this case, the objective was to explore how several women participating in a mainline church
and mainstream Canadian society narrativized their personal experiences with hegemonic social, political, economic, and religious systems and to analyze how their language reflected the discursive meanings of gender in those dominant conceptual frameworks.

Yet another difficulty of ethnographically approaching this topic of study is something that I have come to think of as “the gossipy neighbour phenomenon.” Anthropologists have often written of the challenges posed by “ethnography at home,” but, as many have themselves noted, nothing can fully prepare a researcher for the subtleties of saving face in the unique twists of real social interactions. We are all a part of the social worlds we are studying, but I suspect that if I were working “away from home” and perceived as really “other” to my informants, the informational and interpersonal dynamic would have been significantly different. Mainstream inhabitants of the global north are not usually subjects of study other than through the discipline of psychology and in related fields. White Anglo Westerners usually enjoy the privilege of being treated as an individual rather than as a representative of a culture. Had I traveled to a place – near or far – whose dominant language and ideological constructs were less familiar, I expect that I might have been treated more like a child who needed to be initiated into understanding the adult world. In a situation like that, people might have spoken to me more candidly because I would eventually go back “home” where the dissemination of my results would have minimal repercussions to them personally and where my publication might not even be translated into their language. Working here in an Ontario city, I am somebody who could be a daughter, church member, or friend. But I am not, and yet I am asking personal questions. The awkwardness of having discussions about unconventional topics seems to impact personal and community life in the same way as an unpleasant exchange with a cashier or a misunderstanding with an acquaintance; when I turn my attention from this project to another endeavour, my interlocutors and I could still be living in the same community and shopping at the same stores.
In the course of asking difficult questions, obtaining candid responses becomes further complicated by the fact that to criticize one’s own situation too sharply would be to create cognitive dissonance. Those among the Riverside women who claimed not to have often encountered discrimination or felt the silencing force of cultural norms did not seem to enjoy having an arena in which to speak critically about their gendered experiences. Instead of an affirming space responsive to their lived concerns, they found a disruptive intervention into a well-ordered existence. In some questions, especially those which inquired about whether or not gender discrimination was a real problem in society, I directed conversation toward the women’s own experiences as well as toward the significance of larger sociobehavioural patterns. When the respondents interpreted the meaning of cases like personal encounters with discrimination, affirmative action policies on the job or the comportment of other women whose behaviour they found inappropriate, their judgments were most frequently made by explaining the outcomes of situations based on the abilities, personality, and unique life history of the individuals with whom they had interacted rather than with reference to abstract historical forces or the interplay of power relations. In retrospect, I see that I found it expedient to direct conversations in this manner, while trying to maintain my stated aim of compiling some of the women’s own narratives, because they so often reported having the good fortune of evading discriminatory practices and of feeling untouched by rampant culturally-sanctioned sexism.

In general, I found it challenging to develop pointed questions and maintain the presence of mind needed to follow up with possibly productive responses during the conversation. When group and individual conversations halted when I tried to probe further how individual choices might actually reflect historical conditions and how seemingly private actions produced emergent phenomena at the social level, I often sensed my interlocutors drawing on their faculty of polite restraint to forestall contentious
dialogue. In very broad terms, these results speak forcefully to the fact that phenomena which are identifiable and explicable in macrosociological terms often break down in microsociological interactions.

Conclusion: Reflections and Questions for Future Work

A recent conference (2010) initiated by the University of Toronto Berlin dedicated itself to the question of “whether, when we speak of a post-secular, religiously pluralist society, we ignore the new cultural functions of social inequality in our societies.” Habermas applies the “controversial term” post-secular “to the affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where people's religious ties have steadily or rather quite dramatically lapsed in the post-War period” (2008, p. 17) yet which have had to “adjust…to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (2001, p. 13). It is my hope that this study sheds further light on these questions by looking into worldviews that, as I have argued, are in many ways exemplary of the mainstream of such a society. I have attempted to illuminate attitudes toward prevalent modes of gender discrimination, as well as other systemic forms of oppression, from a uniquely ethnographic perspective that is attuned to the reciprocal influence of religion, culture, and gender in a civic space that is in many ways a microcosm of the nation.

This particular study is a bid for balancing critical narratives of life in the late capitalist global North, in which women’s voices are often left out. It also marks one attempt to explore a certain world, to document some peoples’ perspectives on a topic whose significance is frequently taken for granted, and to generate rich case studies that can be used to supplement others as well as to seed new clusters of work, which, in turn, ask to be supplemented. I am both concerned with giving an account of how my informants participate in a deeply imperial cultural legacy and with engaging them in a non-instrumental way that avoids reproducing the effects of this legacy, in which my formation is also steeped. My concern
abides in linking a bottom up investigation into participants’ meaning-making with broader structural
dimensions of a society in which “the triumph of neoliberalism…and the liberal recoding of freedom as
secularization, domesticity and marriage” acts “as a prophylactic against political debate economic
redistribution and cultural dissent” (Eng, Halberstam, Munoz, 2005, p. 2).

This research both supports and complicates the existing structures and theories around gender and
dominant culture in Canada through what strives to be a feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and
alliance-based framework. Attention “to those hegemonic social structures by which certain subjects are
rendered ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ through the production of ‘pervasive’ and ‘pathological’ others” (Eng,
Halberstam, Munoz, 2005, p. 3) aims to denaturalize the conditions encouraging women in mainstream
society to feel satisfied with the limitations of their social status and the gendered boundaries of their self-
expression. If we take seriously the idea that oppression does violence not just to the oppressed but also
the oppressor – and the entire community of moral beings – then the impact of this work extends to men
as well as women and to, as Kate Bornstein (1994) said, the rest of us.

The mainstream focus of this work could have significant implications for the prospects of gender
justice movements, especially those conceived in terms of allyship and coalition-building at the
intersection of different axes of identity and practice. Understanding some of the reasons why women
might defend the status quo gives corresponding insight into how organizers might instigate
consciousness-raising experiences for even what Sunera Thobani (2007) would call “exalted subjects”
and thereby reach from radical political movements across to those who have been convinced to ignore
their stakes in social change. These hopeful projections do not flow from some glib suggestion that “we
are all the same.” I am suggesting, rather, that by recasting social questions, scientific research, as well as
quotidian humour and vernacular in terms of actions rather than identities and persons rather than “men
and women,” we might circumvent the need to argue over such things as who polices the boundaries of
gender, what constitutes the definitive differences among persons of different sexes, genders, and sexualities, and thereby mitigate the antagonisms that lead to even greater gender-based violence.

Ideologies and norms such as the hegemonic understandings of gender discussed throughout this paper are diachronically emergent, meaning that the individuals who perpetuate them are often no more responsible for the ideologies’ effects than they are imposed upon by those same effects. This work is not an exercise in targeting blame over social epiphenomena. Rather, its critical judgments should be read as the expression of lament for prevalent social conditions: for the fact that the only intelligible language with which to discuss gender tends to describe subjects with one of two signifiers; that the dominant forms of social ordering tend to be competitive and hierarchizing; and that consumer choice in a capitalist system is often the only kind of choice made conceptually available.

It is already clear that Canadian communities need better education to address the longstanding biases and systemic inequities that quietly shape new generations of thinking. Such education demands a continual reopening of history and a commitment to reconceptualize it as living through the present rather than lying finished in the past. It also requires new vehicles of dissemination – ones informed by a politics of organizing that looks to radical movements yet avoids only preaching to the choir. In the wake of the 2011 federal election, which promised to usher in a new wave of neo-liberal austerity in Canada (Sears & Cairns, 2011), anti-oppressive agendas are in even greater need of sophisticated analyses capable of turning the research lens on normative subjects who are unused to their values and practices being questioned. As human experience is increasingly conflated with participation in an economic meritocracy that links success with a return to rigidly gendered “moral values” and “family values,” it becomes ever more pressing to turn a critical gaze toward technologies of social re/production in the understudied mainstream and to acknowledge there the absence of a constitutive or original self-image that women
have generated for themselves. In this void may be the space to escape from discourses that were formulated by the majority culture.

At the outset of this work, I sketched a loose outline of what escape from hegemonic gender discourse looks like to me and I labeled it “moving past gender.” In their own ways, the Riverside women also expressed a desire to transcend gender. They described inhabiting or wishing to inhabit a pluralistic space of practice and identity. For the Riverside women, this move could take a variety of forms, including: the performance of gendered behaviours that were not socially expected of them, such as dancing the man’s part in a square dance; declining to dispute markers of gender in language by continuing to use traditional pronouns; embracing personally enjoyable aspects of conventional femininity by continuing to wear make up and jewelry; and affirming that gender designations can be dissolved in their own lives, when they choose, through the exercise of their own self-determination. I have argued that these disparate theories, embodied knowledges and practices can all be ways of imagining a “something else” in the place of powerful discourses that prescribe a binaristic ontology. It is my hope that by identifying some examples of such strategies from the mainstream and contextualizing them in Canada’s social history of Protestant and neo/liberal influences, this work offers a space for reinterpreting the meaning of everyday gendered behaviours and re/presenting them in the service of reflexive, critical modes of being and knowing.
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Appendix A
Interview Guide Version 1

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Religious belief and personal practice:
1.) How does your personal religious belief relate to your religious practices within your chosen church? Within the wider community?
2.) How does your personal religious belief relate to your everyday practices? Do you, as an individual, communicate your religious identity to others; if so, how? Do you make distinctions between practices pertaining to your religious life and practices outside of your religious life?

Gender and women’s church groups:
3.) How did your women’s group originate?
4.) How does your group communicate its religious presence/identity within the church? Within the wider community?
5.) What is this group to you and why are you a member? What is the church to you and why are you a part of this congregation? What makes you remain a part of them both?
6.) Do you consider yourself a United Church Women (UCW) group? If not, how do you prefer to describe or name your group?
7.) How do you think the current rate of participation of younger women in United Church women’s groups compares to their rate of participation in the past?
8.) Why is it important to have a group just for United Church women? How do you think your group would react to a trans or gender queer individual wanting to become part of your group?
9.) Do United Church men have a group that you would consider analogous to yours? Why do you think that they do/do not?

Gendered church practice, gendered language:
10.) Do you notice a gendered division of activity within the church? If so, what do you think about that?
11.) How would you characterize the roles of women in your church?
12.) Could you speak to the different experiences you have had with female ministry and male ministry?
13.) Since the 1980s, the United Church of Canada has had an official policy on the use of inclusive language (balancing gender representation by using both feminine and masculine pronouns, and using gender neutral terms such as “people” instead of “men” or “humankind” instead of “mankind”) in its official documents. The principle of congregational autonomy means that an individual congregation can choose whether or not to use inclusive language in its documents and worship. How does your congregation deal with inclusive language and what do you think about its approach?

14.) What does language in pre-1980s official church documents which assumes a generic “man” make you think or feel? The following is excerpted from the 1940 document called “A Statement of Faith”:

> We believe that man has used his freedom of choice for low and selfish ends, thus estranging himself from God and his brother man, and bringing upon himself the judgment and wrath of God, so that he lives in a world of confusion and distress, and is unable of himself to fulfill God's high purpose for him.

15.) What do you think or feel about inclusive versus non-inclusive language in secular documents? Do you often notice or pay attention to this element of writing?

16.) How would you rate your degree of familiarity with gender-neutral pronouns like “hir” and “ze”? What do you think about this kind of linguistic innovation?

Central United Church Policy and Congregational Autonomy with regard to non-normative gender and sexuality:

16.) How do you think central United Church policy on inclusion compares with the attitudes expressed by worshippers in its congregations? With attitudes expressed by its Ministers in their practice of leading churches? With your congregation in particular?

17.) Has your congregation had any experience being ministered to by a queer identified person? If so, could you discuss what was that like for you as an individual member of the congregation? Do you think that experience affected or revealed certain perceptions of gender and/or sexuality in the congregation?

18.) How would you rate the degree to which you were aware of the United Church’s establishment of a position on same-sex marriage when Canadian law changed to recognized same-sex marriages? Does your congregation have a policy?

19.) Do you have any experience participating in a church, including your current one, whose congregation includes LGBTTIQQ2S (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgendered, Intersexual, Queer, Questioning, 2-Spirited) individuals?
20.) What kind of a role does the theme of gender play in worship? In your minister’s sermons? In your sacred texts? In your women’s group discussions?
21.) How much do you personally think about gender issues? (For example, gender and/or sex roles in the church, home, or business world; social issues involving women such as employment equity, women’s health care, maternity leave policies; LGBT issues like queer marriage, the fluidity of gender and sexual identity, media representations of ideal femininity and masculinity)

WRITING RESPONSE QUESTIONS
Feel free to write as little or as much as you want in response to the following questions. You may submit your written discussions to me on paper or via email. I ask that you submit them within a month of receiving these questions in order to give me enough time to read them and incorporate your responses into my thesis.

1.) Please reflect on what you think and feel when I put together the following concepts: “you” and “gender”; “the United Church” and “gender.”
2.) Do you express yourself in any ways that you consider non-gendered? (Ie. That you consider to be other than “female” or “feminine”? That you consider to be gendered in a way that goes beyond a masculine/feminine binary?)
3.) What do you think about the Christian creation story of Adam and Eve which, in some interpretations, blames the archetypal woman for the fall of humankind? What has been your personal experience hearing, teaching (for example, to children), discussing, and/or thinking about this story?
Appendix B
Interview Guide Version 2

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Tell me about yourself:

• Your childhood (Place of birth? Parents and siblings? Religious upbringing?)
• Education and work experience
• Current family situation
• How does your personal religious belief relate to your religious practices within your chosen church? With your everyday practices?

To get your general impression on some of my core concepts:

• When you think of gender, what do you think of?
• What does feminism mean to you?

Tell me about your life as a United Church Christian

• What does being a good Christian mean to you?
• Are there things about which you have questions?
• What do you think are the most important issues facing Christian women today?

What roles should women play in Canadian society?

• Do you think it is a good thing when women go into traditionally male occupations like engineering or the military?
• Do you think gender discrimination/sexual harassment is a real problem?
• Do you support laws mandating equal rights for (or prohibiting gender discrimination against) men and women?
• Could you tell me about an instance where you have encountered sexism or discrimination? (Billboards using sex to sell; noticing that colleagues defer to males as authorities; supposedly harmless phrases such as “throws like a girl.”)
• Do you think that feminist values have given women access to male jobs without demanding that males similarly access female work (ie. housework, childcare)
• What do you feel are proper roles for men and women in the Christian family?
• (If applicable) Does your husband help with child-rearing/domestic tasks?
• (If applicable) how do you manage your job and kids?
• How do you feel about women’s role in the church?
• Did having your first female minister in the church change your experience of women in ministry? How do you feel about women’s changing roles in religion?

Language
• (For evening group members) At one of your group meetings you compared language in old and new hymnbooks. Why did the group initiate this exercise?
• How do you feel about gender-neutral language in church services and literature?
• How would you rate your degree of familiarity with gender-neutral pronouns like “hir” and “ze”? What do you think about this kind of linguistic innovation?

Social issues
• The feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s (second wave feminism) – did that make an impact on you? How? Where did you come across it?
• How would you assess the impact of the women’s movement on Canadian society?
• Has the women’s movement had an impact on Christianity? Your church?
• Overall, what would you say the most challenging aspects of being a Christian woman are? Which are the most rewarding?

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
Age: ____________
Occupation: _______________________________________

Relationship Status (please circle one):
• Single
• Married
• Partnered
• Divorced or separated
• Widowed

Children
• How many?
• (If applicable) age range? ______________

Education (please circle all applicable)
• High school
• Attended college
• Attended university
• Graduate or professional degree

Household Income (please circle one)
• Under $20,000
• $20,000-$39,999
• $40,000-$69,999
• $70,000-$99,999
• $100,000 plus

Were you raised in a religious denomination? If so, which one?
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Have you switched denominations at any time?
_____________________________________________________________________________________

How long have you belonged to your current church?
_____________________________________________________________________________________
June 24, 2010

Sharday Mosurinjohn
Master’s Candidate
Cultural Studies Program
Mackintosh-Corry Hall
Room B408
Queen’s University

GREB Ref #: GCUL-002-10
Title: “An Ethnographic Approach to Understanding Women’s Lived Religious Experience in the United Church of Canada Through an Analysis of Everyday Language”

Dear Sharday:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “An Ethnographic Approach to Understanding Women’s Lived Religious Experience in the United Church of Canada Through an Analysis of Everyday Language” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article Q), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html – Adverse Event Report Form). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethics/GeneralREB/forms.html - Research Ethics Change Form. These changes must be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Mrs. Irving will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

copies to: Dr. Pamela Dickey Young, Faculty Supervisor
JS/II