The Shifting Terrain of Feminist Theory and Activism: University-Based Women's Centres and Third Wave Feminism

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Abstract

This thesis, based on the results of an organizational ethnography of a university-based feminist organization in Southern Ontario (the Centre), traces how third wave feminism is being constituted in the goals, initiatives, mandate, organizational structure, and overall culture of university-based feminist organizations. I argue that, from its inception, the meanings and goals of the Centre have been contested through internal critique, reflection, and discussion inspired by significant shifts in feminist theory that challenge the fundamental principles of second wave feminism.

I identify a major shift in the development and direction of the Centre that occurs in two distinct phases. The first phase of the shift occurs with the emergence of an anti-oppression framework, which broadens the Centre’s mandate beyond gender and sexism to consider multiple axes of identity and oppression that affect women’s lives. The second phase of this shift is characterized by a focus on (trans) inclusion and accessibility and has involved changing the Centre’s name so that it is no longer identified as a women’s centre in order to reflect more accurately its focus on multiple axes of identity and oppression.

Along with identifying two phases of a major shift in the direction of the Centre, I trace two discourses about its development. The dominant discourse of the Centre’s development is one of progress and evolution. The dominant discourse characterizes the Centre as a dynamic feminist organization that consistently strives to be more inclusive and diverse. The reverse discourse undermines the dominant discourse by emphasizing that, despite the Centre’s official attempts to be inclusive and to build diversity, little has actually changed, leaving women of colour marginalized in the Centre’s dominant culture of whiteness.

This research reveals that, while many of their strategies have unintended (negative) consequences, members of the Centre are working to build an inclusive politics of resistance that avoids the mistakes of earlier feminist movements and organizations. These members, along with other activists, actively constitute third wave feminism in a process that is challenging, contradictory, and often painful. A critical analysis of this process and the strategies it involves provides an opportunity for activists to reflect on their experiences and develop new strategies in an effort to further struggles for social justice and equity.
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Introduction
Mapping the Terrain

In 2005 I attended an open house at a university-based women’s centre. This event was an opportunity for members of the university and local community to learn about the organization and to see its new location. While I was sitting on one of the couches drinking a cup of tea and flipping through a zine I began a conversation with a middle-aged woman who lived nearby. In the course of our brief exchange I asked this woman if she identified as a feminist. It took her a moment to respond but she finally said, “Well, I used to, but I don’t really know what it means to be a feminist anymore.” Perhaps this open house confused her; was it not what she had expected? Or, perhaps she had come seeking answers. I never had the opportunity to finish this conversation, but her words stuck with me. For me being involved in the women’s centre on campus had been an important part of being a feminist; it was the very place that I first became a feminist. A ‘feminist’ identity, like all others, is neither singular nor fixed. What it means to be a ‘feminist’ changes over time and place and among individuals, just as feminist politics and theory change. Given this woman’s confusion about what it meant to be a feminist I could not help but wonder: What does it mean to be a feminist in campus women’s centres and has this really changed over time?

Feminist historians have identified three distinct phases or generations of the Western feminist movement. The first phase was the nineteenth-century women’s movement, which is commonly referred to as first wave feminism. It reached its peak at the turn of the twentieth century with the woman’s suffrage movement. First wave feminism challenged women’s
exclusion from public, political, social and economic life and sought to “extend the social contract so that it included political citizenship for women” (Gillis et al., 2007: xxi).

The second phase of Western feminist movement developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. Second wave feminism was a self-defined and self-identified feminist movement that was not satisfied with merely including women in the formal political sphere. Instead, second wave feminists sought to achieve broader social change by attacking the ‘roots’ of women’s oppression. In particular, they focused on issues such as reproduction, gendered violence, sexual expression, and domestic labour, which had a direct impact on women’s lived experiences (ibid.). Much of this work was done through feminist organizations such as rape crisis centres, domestic violence shelters, health care collectives, advocacy groups, and resource centres. These second wave feminist groups and organizations functioned not only to provide services to women but also to build the feminist movement by empowering and politicizing women through education and consciousness raising.

Many women’s organizations were formed by radical second wave feminists throughout North America in the 1970s and 1980s, according to the belief that women share a common oppression in patriarchal culture and must together challenge that culture in order to improve the conditions of all women’s lives. If women had a space of their own, free of male dominance, these second wave feminists argued, women could work together to understand better their common oppression and to develop the tools necessary to challenge and overcome it. However, this attempt to unify women around the identity of “Woman” by appealing to notions of ‘sisterhood’ has been sharply criticized. Anti-racist feminists, for instance, argue that notions of ‘sisterhood’ and a ‘common oppression’ obscure significant differences that exist among women, which in turn function to maintain racist and classist oppression (Henry, 2005; hooks, 1984,
Poststructural queer theorists are also sceptical about building a feminist social movement around the identity “Woman” because that process re-inscribes a gender binary that regulates, excludes and oppresses individuals and groups (Butler, 1990). By re-inscribing this gender binary (women/men), poststructural queer theorists argue, feminism has closed down instead of opened up possibilities for gendered subjects. Indeed, poststructuralists argue that, rather than re-invoke this binary thinking, “the only way to break out of this structure, and in fact to subvert the structure itself, is to assert total difference, to be that which cannot be pinned down or subjugated within a dichotomous hierarchy” (Alcoff, 1988: 417). Clearly, such a position has considerable implications for feminist politics.

The most current phase of the feminist movement - third wave feminism - emerged in response to internal critiques of and challenges to some of the fundamental principles of second wave feminism (Gillis et al., 2007: xxi). Along with anti-racist feminist critiques, poststructural interpretations of gender and sexuality are central to third wave feminist theory. Third wave feminists have been highly critical of the notion that women are a group with common characteristics and interests. Instead of organizing around a common identity or experience of oppression, third wavers have sought to build a feminist politics that recognizes difference and multiplicity and aims to address multiple, intersecting identities and social injustices such as those based on gender, race, class, sexuality, age and ability.

University-based women’s centres in Ontario can be understood as part of the legacy of the second wave of the Canadian women’s movement. Most university-based women’s centres were founded during a period of feminist culture building in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and functioned according to the same beliefs as other second wave feminist organizations. However, feminist theory and activism has, since the 1990s, entered into the third wave of the feminist
movement. The purpose of my research is to investigate how and to what extent these university-based feminist organizations have been affected by, responded to, and, ultimately, helped constitute this shift from second wave to third wave feminism.

Feminist scholars have identified specific dimensions for comparing feminist and non-feminist organizations, which can also be used for deriving and analyzing different types of feminist organizations (Martin, 1990). These dimensions include feminist ideology, feminist values, feminist goals, feminist outcomes, founding circumstances, structure, practice, members and membership, scope and scale, and external relations (Martin, 1990). They have also written extensively on the development of second wave feminist organizations, noting the relationship between an organizations’ theoretical perspective and its goals, mandate, structure, and initiatives (Boles, 1991; Martin, 1990; Thomas, 1999). Along with identifying important advances and successful initiatives undertaken in second wave feminist organizations, feminist researchers have also identified significant challenges these organizations have faced, including those related to building a diverse membership and maintaining a collective and non-hierarchical management structure (Acker, 1995; Lotz, 2003; Miles, 1995; Staggenborg, 1995). Feminist scholars have also attended to the development of third wave feminism.

These writers have traced the emergence of the third wave, and have argued that third wave feminism developed largely in response to internal critiques of second wave feminism, particularly those of anti-racist feminists (Henry, 2005; Steenbergen, 2001). The key characteristics of third wave feminism have also been the subject of much feminist literature, with most scholars identifying third wave feminism as a movement concerned with multiple sites of power and resistance that embraces multiple agendas and contradictions (Henry, 2005; Lotz, 2003; Pinterics, 2001). Much of the writing on third wave feminism, however, has focused on
how this feminism has been practiced by individuals, and has not addressed the relationship between third wave feminism and feminist organizations. Indeed, while feminist scholars have produced a significant amount of research on both second wave feminist organizations and the development of third wave feminism, the question of how this shift from second wave to third wave feminism has been constituted in feminist organizations has been relatively unexplored. Many questions remain about how third wave feminist organizations differ from second wave feminist organizations and to what extent second wave feminist organizations have shifted their politics to be more third wave. My objective in this thesis is to understand how this shift in feminist theory and politics has materialized in feminist organizations, particularly in university-based women's centres. In particular I examine how the goals, initiatives, mandate, and overall culture of a university-based women's centre in Ontario has been affected by the shift in feminist theory from a broadly second wave emphasis on 'sisterhood' and women's commonality to a third wave framework that emphasizes difference and aims to address multiple, intersecting identities and social injustices.

This theoretical shift may have influenced any number of feminist organizations. But I am interested in university-based women's centres, because of my experience as a volunteer, a collective member, and a staff member in this sort of organization in different locations over several years. Moreover, I find university-based feminist organizations particularly interesting because their relationship and access to academic feminist theory is so great. Indeed, because most people who work in these organizations are university students who spend their time reading, thinking, talking, and writing about these ideas, they are more likely to be familiar with significant developments, critiques, and debates in feminist theory than feminist activists organizing in other locations. For this reason a university-based feminist organization is an ideal
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site to investigate how recent shifts in feminist theory might affect feminist activism and organizations. However, choosing this kind of site also limits this study.

University-based women's centres are funded primarily through student fees and do not answer to a board of directors or external funding agencies as many other feminist organizations do. In the centre that is the focus of this study, most participants note that while students fund the Centre, many do not even realize it exists. This ignorance partnered with the fact that the Centre is a resource centre and not a service provider, like rape crisis centres and women's shelters are, means that the Centre can change policies, goals, values, and initiatives more freely than other groups and organizations. As a result, many of my findings will not pertain to other feminist organizations and service providers that operate in very different contexts, with different organizational mandates, and different funding and management structures. In this thesis I do not attempt to provide a universal answer to the question of how feminist organizations should respond to a shift from second to third wave feminism. Instead, I provide an in-depth look at how one particular organization has negotiated this shift in order to understand the possibilities and limitations of third wave feminist praxis and collective action for challenging women's oppression and working towards social justice and equity.

Because third wave feminism challenges the homogenizing ideal of community and 'sisterhood,' and is largely focused on embodied politics or deeply personal and individual acts of day-to-day resistance, it has often been criticized by second wave feminists as being individualistic and lacking the organization needed for social movements to succeed (Pinterics, 2001). However, I argue that university-based feminist organizations, such as the Centre highlighted in this study, represent a space where third wave feminism potentially can be practiced collectively as part of an organized movement.
This project can be described best as a type of "passionate scholarship" or "engaged research" (Hawthorne, 2002: 42), the starting point of which is my own personal experience in university-based women's centres. It is inspired by a desire for social change and a belief in collective action and resistance. It examines feminist praxis, and investigates how feminist theory is realized and negotiated in feminist practice and activism. I hope this thesis contributes to scholarly literature about current feminist activism, and illuminates some of the complex ways that the shift from second wave to third wave has occurred and been maintained in feminist organizations. Moreover, I hope, with my research participants, that this study is useful for feminist activists and organizations by providing a detailed account of the feminist praxis occurring in one particular organization and documenting how that praxis has changed or shifted in response to shifts in feminist theory. This case study may inspire and provide a space for critical reflections and dialogue about feminist praxis that will benefit individuals, groups, and organizations struggling to address these issues.

This thesis is also a Social Justice and Equity Studies project, and as such will be of interest to readers concerned with the role of recognition-based politics to social justice movements. Identity categories have long been used to enforce and justify oppression. Difference has been constructed as deviant and inferior, and those marked as different have been excluded from participation in the public sphere, constrained by status subordination. Identity-based political movements have emerged to challenge these negative constructions of difference and to demand positive recognition, which resists oppression and domination, and promotes oppressed groups' full participation in civic life. Nancy Fraser (1995: 68) argues that marginalized groups' struggles for recognition are in fact the "chief medium of political mobilization" in the post-socialist age. Recognition-based politics function according to an
understanding that social justice is a project that cannot be pursued solely at the state level, but must also be an intimate and personal project that involves individual reflection and a commitment to change. Legislated equality has failed fully to achieve social justice. In the Western world many people experience oppression being enacted largely through cultural meaning and habits (Young, 1990). Recognition-based politics and social movements emphasize the significance of cultural meanings, social institutions, and social processes that function to produce and maintain injustice.

This research is significant to Social Justice and Equity Studies, particularly given the importance of the politics of recognition to struggles for social justice in the post-socialist age. The Centre foregrounded here provides a rich example of recognition-based politics at work. Its members strive for social and cultural change primarily through education and awareness raising. I detail not only how the organization has worked towards social and cultural change in dominant culture, but also how its members struggle to achieve equity within the organizational culture itself. I consider the limitations, possibilities, and complexities of recognition-based politics, and also explore the complex relationship between theory and practice, which is of interest to all social justice theorists and activists.

My project takes the form of an intensive case study of one feminist identified university-based women's centre in Southern Ontario. I consider the founding circumstances of the organization in order to investigate how it has changed over time in terms of both its function and its theoretical foundation. The research methodology I use in this case study is organizational ethnography, which incorporates an analysis of the organization's policies, documents, history and promotional material, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with members of the organization. I trace how influential critiques of second wave
feminist organizing and significant shifts in feminist theory become manifest in the goals, initiatives, mandate, organizational structure, and overall culture of university-based feminist organizations.

The particular site of this study is a single feminist resource centre that is located at a university in southern Ontario. Because I am committed to maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of the organization and its members, I will not disclose the name of the organization or the university that houses it. Instead, I refer to the organization as “the Centre,” which is more accurately understood as a feminist resource centre than a women’s centre. While the Centre was originally founded in 1983 as a women’s centre, it no longer identifies itself as such, and has recently gone through the process of officially changing its name. The reasons for this change will be considered at length in Chapter Five. Currently, the Centre identifies itself as a volunteer-driven, not-for-profit, collective-based resource centre, where members work on anti-oppression issues within a feminist framework (Centre Home Page, 2007). One of my research participants, Paige, describes the Centre as “a volunteer driven space that works within a feminist framework and works on feminist issues...We do a lot of workshops and events and a big part of the services we provide has to do with our resource library and also... informal crisis support ...as a beginning.”

I argue that recent shifts in feminist theory do have considerable implications for feminist organizing and movements. In my analytic chapters I identify a significant shift in the development and direction of the Centre that occurs in two distinct phases, both of which involve changes in policy, goals, practice, and guiding values and principles. As I explore both phases of this shift towards a third wave focus on difference and multiplicity, I argue that they mirror shifts in feminist theory. I will argue that the Centre has attempted to correct or avoid the mistakes of
many second wave feminist organizations, particularly in regards to the erasure of difference, and thus, like third wave feminism, has developed largely in response to critiques of second wave feminism.

The first phase of the shift towards a focus on multiplicity, difference, and contradiction was the emergence of an anti-oppression framework, which was officially adopted into policy in 2001. The anti-oppression framework broadened the Centre’s mandate beyond gender and sexism to consider multiple axes of identity and oppression that affect women’s lives. My analysis of the Centre’s documents and my interview transcripts suggests that the anti-oppression framework emerged largely in response to critiques of second wave feminism, particularly those made by women of colour theorists. My analysis also suggests that the Centre, working in an anti-oppression framework, recognizes and demonstrates in practice a model of power theorized by poststructuralists. The second phase of this shift also broadens the Centre’s mandate by focusing on issues related to trans(gender) inclusion and accessibility. It is in this second phase that the Centre undertakes the process of changing its name in order to reflect more accurately its focus on multiple axes of identity and oppression. I argue that in this phase the Centre attempts to respond to critiques of second wave feminism, and incorporates aspects of poststructural feminism, queer theory and trans theory and activism into its mandate, goals, policies, and guiding values.

Along with identifying two phases of a major shift in the development of the Centre, I trace two discourses about its evolution that run throughout interview and focus group transcripts and, to a lesser extent, the Centre’s documents. The dominant discourse of the Centre’s development is one of progress and evolution. According to this discourse, which was most apparent in interviews with new volunteers and the Centre’s main decision-making body (the
Collective), the Centre is a dynamic feminist organization that consistently strives to be more inclusive and diverse. The Centre’s goals, mandate, and values have broadened over time as its members - individually and collectively - have been involved in self-critique and interrogation, with the goal of building an inclusive and effective politics of resistance. This discourse emphasizes the Centre’s commitment to change in order to avoid and overcome the exclusion and homogenization that is characteristic of much second wave feminist organizing and theory.

The second discourse is best understood as a “reverse discourse” (Foucault, 1990), because it challenges the dominant discourse of the Centre’s history and development; it is a critique that speaks back to dominant relations of power at the Centre. This discourse was exercised by far fewer participants, who painted a strikingly different picture of the Centre than did the dominant narrative. As Michel Foucault (1990: 100) notes, “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.” This reverse discourse undermines the dominant discourse and relations of power at the Centre by exposing the dominant discourse as racist and imperialist. This discourse emphasizes that, despite the Centre’s official attempts to be inclusive and to build diversity, little has actually changed, leaving women of colour marginalized in the Centre’s dominant culture of whiteness. While the dominant discourse is exercised in interviews with the Collective and new volunteers, those most centrally located within the Centre, the reverse discourse is exercised from the margins of the Centre, primarily from the Woman of Colour Collective (WOCG), an autonomous group within the Centre that has less access to resources and decision making processes than the Centre’s Collective.

My aim is not to judge which discourse is ‘truer’. Rather, I understand both as socially constructed from particular locations and experiences within the Centre. I detail both narratives
because each provides significant insights into the possibilities and limitations of translating feminist theory into practice and of developing and incorporating third wave feminist activism and praxis within feminist organizations. However, I understand the reverse discourse to be, in some senses, more ‘accurate’ as subjugated knowledge that the dominant discourse ignores and silences. As Donna Haraway (1988: 584) notes, “‘Subjugated’ standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world.” However, “the standpoints of the subjugated are not ‘innocent’ positions” and, therefore, “are not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation” (Haraway, 1988: 584). So while this thesis does privilege the reverse discourse as being a more accurate description of the Centre’s operation, it provides a critical examination and reading of both discourses.

This thesis unfolds in six chapters. In Chapter One I have two main goals. First, I explore the academic literature on feminist organizations in order to understand how the overall culture of an organization (including its policies, mandate, goals, initiatives, and practice) is established and negotiated over time and what the relationship between theory and practice is in feminist organizations. Second, I describe the theoretical and political shift from second wave feminism to third wave feminism. Examining developments in queer theory, anti-racist feminism, trans theory, and poststructural theory, I outline critiques of second wave feminism from these perspectives to trace the emergence and character of the third wave. My goal in this chapter is to situate this research in the academic literature on feminist organizations and feminist theory to provide contextual background and to identify significant gaps in the literature that this study addresses.
In Chapter Two, I develop my research problem and questions, as well as my methodology, in more detail. I consider the strengths and limitations of the specific methods I used to collect my data, and discuss some of the challenges involved in recruiting research participants. Moreover, I explain in more detail why I chose this particular Centre as my research site, and reflect on my own social location in the research process.

Chapter Three is the first of three analytical chapters. In it I consider the founding circumstances of the Centre, paying particular attention to its original goals, values, and mandate. I argue that, from its inception, the meanings and goals of the Centre have been contested through internal critique, reflection, and discussion inspired by significant shifts in feminist theory that challenged fundamental principles of second wave feminism. Ultimately, this chapter explores how the Centre emerged out of second wave feminism and yet, from the beginning, has had a critical awareness of its limitations and faults. This critical awareness leads to a shift in the development and direction of the Centre, which is discussed in detail in Chapter Four and Five.

In Chapter Four, I analyze the anti-oppression framework of the Centre, considering the processes through which it was adopted and maintained. I examine how this framework is manifest in the Centre’s policy, as well as in its mandate, goals, membership, and staffing structure. I argue that this framework is largely influenced by both anti-racist and poststructural feminist theory, and emerges out of critiques of second wave feminism. The anti-oppression framework broadens the mandate of the Centre to address and challenge not only sexism, but also racism, homophobia, poverty, ableism, and other oppressions that impact women’s lives. It was formally adopted in the Centre’s Vision and Basis of Unity policy, which outlined the Centre’s mandate and values in 2001. The anti-oppression framework, as expressed in this
document, requires all members to interrogate continually their own role in oppression by examining and resisting the ways that they exercise power and privilege. This chapter explores these aspects of the anti-oppression framework, as I consider both dominant and reverse discourses at the Centre, and explore how adopting this framework mirrors shifts in feminist theory.

In the final of three analytical chapters I explore how adopting an anti-oppression framework led the Centre in new directions in the most recent phase of its development. This phase has involved engaging with new theoretical perspectives, as well as changing initiatives, policies, mandates, resources, membership, and training at the Centre. This most recent phase has also involved changing the Centre’s name so that it no longer identifies as a women’s centre. In this chapter, I consider the rationale, process, and reactions to the Centre’s name change, along with some of the challenges and contradictions that have been involved in this shift in direction. As I analyze participants’ comments and the Centre’s documents, I show that it no longer understands itself as a women’s organization or a women-only space and yet continues to support identity politics through coalition building. Ultimately, in this chapter I argue that the Centre has responded to the shift in feminist theory from second wave to third wave by attempting to distance itself from second wave feminism and actively taking up the theoretical perspectives, goals, and strategies of third wave feminism.

In the conclusion, I provide an overview of how the goals, initiatives, mandate, and overall culture of the Centre have been affected by the theoretical shift from second wave to third wave feminism. The Centre continues to negotiate this shift; I consider some of the underlying tensions that result from this shift in principles and practices. I argue that members of the Centre will need to address these tensions as the Centre continues to develop. I have written this thesis
to create a space for critical reflection and dialogue about feminist praxis in the Centre, and the politics of recognition more broadly. My research illuminates many of the possibilities, limitations, challenges, and tensions of organizing across difference and in inclusive ways. However, this work serves only as an opening; there are many more questions that still need to be asked and in this chapter I outline some potential projects that could continue this inquiry. The question of how best to organize for social change is not a simple one, but this is the question that is being addressed in feminist organizations like the Centre. How these organizations change and adapt over time is of utmost significance to social justice theory. In what follows I will share what members of the Centre, myself included, have learned from being involved because I believe this will contribute to knowledge about feminist political and cultural projects and also to the relationship between social justice theory and practice.
Chapter One

Waves and Branches: Feminist Theory and Practice

Understanding how a shift from second to third wave has materialized in feminist organizations is important to both theorists and activists, as it allows us to consider the limitations and possibilities of third wave feminism and to explore the new directions feminist politics are taking now that many of the founding principles of second wave feminism are being contested. Before I explore how this shift is constituted in university-based feminist organizations, I will first outline the development of third wave feminism and feminist organizations more broadly. I begin by introducing second wave feminist theoretical perspectives and activist practices, and then outline third wave critiques and theoretical repositionings. Exploring the complex distinctions and diversity of second wave feminism is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I present a broad schematic of the second wave in order to address common characteristics and critiques that are identified in academic and activist literature on the subject. It is important however, to remember that second wave feminism was a heterogeneous movement and that many of the critiques I will address were actually made by second wave feminists themselves and contributed significantly to the development of the third wave. After considering some common characteristics and critiques of the second wave, I review academic literature on feminist organizations, paying particular attention to scholarship that considers the relationship between theory and practice in feminist organizations, and how an organization’s culture is negotiated and subject to change over time. Ultimately, I argue that shifts in feminist theory and activism from second to third wave have important implications for feminist organizational practice, particularly for those organizations, like university-based women’s centers, that were founded on second wave feminist principles.
Second wave feminism has as its foundation a belief that women are a common group who share a common oppression and, therefore, have common interests. This focus on commonality, however, is highly problematic when differences among women are not considered relevant. It has been criticized for homogenizing women and being concerned almost exclusively with the perspectives and experiences of white, straight, middle-class women. Indeed, many theorists and activists have argued that second wave feminism is guilty of organizing a movement around a universal notion of ‘Woman’ that actually functions as an exclusionary ideal. This universalizing notion of ‘Woman’ defines women as peaceful, nurturing, and cooperative, and understands women as innocent victims of sexist oppression and patriarchy (Fraser, 1996; Pierson, 1993). Far from being universal, this notion of ‘Woman’ is based on “culturally specific stereotypical idealizations of middle-class, heterosexual, white-European femininity” (Fraser, 1996: 65). Second wave feminism’s focus on the universal ‘Woman’ excludes women who do not identify with and cannot embody this form of femininity. It also functions to perpetuate racist, classist, and heterosexist oppression by ignoring the significant impact that discourses of race, class, and sexuality have on women’s lives and identities. The exclusion of women who do not identify with this dominant femininity is difficult to address. The thought that women can be victimizers or oppressors of others simply does not fit this ideal of ‘Woman’ as peaceful and nurturing (Pierson, 1993). While this homogenizing process has been difficult to address in feminist organizational practice, it has been thoroughly critiqued using anti-racist and poststructuralist feminist theory.

Iris Marion Young (1990: 301) has argued that “a desire for community in feminist groups...helps reproduce their homogeneity.” Other poststructuralist feminists have also argued that feminist groups often produced subjects - ‘women’ and ‘feminists’ - by providing
participants with a forum where they could “create their own way of seeing” and “discover an identity distinct from that of the oppressor” (Rowbothan as quoted in Armstrong, 2006: 174). As Armstrong (2006: 174) explains, these second wave “feminist theories have assumed that ‘Woman’ could be defined as the subject of feminism, that an essential truth or commonality exists for all women, and this ‘truth’ forms the basis for advocating the rights and emancipation of the female subject.” Feminist organizations often produce and re-inscribe this ‘subject of feminism,’ and in so doing fail to address differences among women. As Armstrong (2006: 177) explains, many second wave organizations have “reinforced homogeneity rather than difference, creating new systems of dominance and exclusion through their theorizing.” This homogenizing ideal of community actually limits the political effectiveness of feminist organizations, as it ultimately reinforces and re-inscribes oppression through its exclusion of working-class, queer, and racialized women who do not embody this “universal” gender identity and experience. One of the key ways that homogeneity is produced in second wave feminist organizations is through the notion of ‘sisterhood.’

The notion of ‘sisterhood’ is based on the assumption that “all women share a common ‘gender identity’ as women” (Fraser, 1996: 63). Audre Lorde (1984: 114) argues that “[t]here is a pretence to homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist.” Focusing on women’s commonality and promoting sisterhood allowed feminists to ignore differences among women and also allowed feminists to ignore the oppression that existed within feminism itself. bell hooks (1984: 44) has been highly critical of this tendency, arguing that, “The idea of ‘common oppression’ was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality.” hooks (1984: 44) notes that, far from sharing a common oppression, “[w]omen are divided by sexist attitudes,
racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices.” However, due to the focus on commonality as well as ongoing attempts to create and maintain sisterhood, issues of privilege, prejudice, and oppression among women and within feminist communities and organizations were rarely acknowledged or addressed. As Lorde (1984: 130) explains, “There was usually little attempt to articulate the genuine differences between women, such as those of race, color, age, class, and sexual identity. There was no apparent need at that time to examine the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor.”

For many white, middle-class feminists who dominated the second wave, this erasure of difference was rarely acknowledged. As Ruth Roach Pierson (1993: 188) explains, “for those of us whose race, class, sexuality, age and able-bodiedness positioned us close to the dominant norm, only ‘gender’ was immediately experienced as problematic...And we thought that one could isolate gender from other dimensions of our social location.” Astrid Henry (2005: 86) notes that “in its best intentions, the feminist argument that women are sisters in a common struggle was an attempt to look beyond divisions among women toward a definition of sisterhood - and feminism - that included all women.” However, “the rhetoric of universal sisterhood was often not accompanied by a careful analysis of differences between women” (Henry, 2005: 86). As a result, for many second wave feminist organizations, issues of privilege, racism, ableism, and homophobia were seldom considered significant ‘women’s issues,’ if they were considered at all.

Ultimately, despite good intentions, second wave feminism’s focus on gender oppression, ‘sisterhood,’ and notions of the universal ‘Woman’ operate to exclude and silence women who do not ‘fit’ or identify with ideal constructions of femininity. As Pierson (1993: 1988) explains, the privileging of gender over other social categories and axes of identity effectively, if
inadvertently, functioned to “obscure other systems of oppression and to silence women whose oppression was not exclusively a matter of gender.” Third wave feminism, on the other hand, has aimed to avoid this tendency.

Referring to the ways that third wave differs from second wave feminism, Amanda D. Lotz (2003: 6) notes that, “where second-wave... approaches sought to unify diverse women by appealing to a universal ‘sisterhood,’ third wave activists recognize the racist, heterosexist, classist and other implications of the erasure of difference.” For third wavers, there is no singular feminist subject (‘Woman’) and no singular feminist agenda. Indeed, third wave feminists are suspect of the notion that women are a group with common experiences and interests. Instead, they emphasize “need for greater acceptance of complexities, ambiguities, and multiple locations” (Pinterics, 2001: 16). As one member of the third wave feminist group Wench Radio Collective (2001: 72) notes, “The breaking down of the unified subject “woman,” of which earlier movements were based on, has brought feminism to a place of multiple... agendas.” It seems, then, that third wave feminists have learned from the critiques of earlier feminists and have broadened their focus beyond gender to consider differences that exist among women.

Critiques of second wave feminism raised by women of colour theorists from inside the second wave are very much part of the foundation of the third wave (Henry, 2005; Pinterics, 2001). Some theorists argue that the third wave actually “began in the 1990s with a new wave of anti-racist feminists who thoroughly deconstructed white mainstream feminism’s maintenance of racist and classist oppression” (Pinterics, 2001: 15). As Henry (2005: 87) notes, “for many third wavers feminism can never be separated from its internal critiques.” That the origins of third wave feminism can actually be located in critiques of second wave feminism is extremely
significant to the character and development of this feminist politics. As Henry (2005: 87) argues, because this internal critique is so central to the third wave, “many young feminists enter into feminism with the assumption that... there can never be a singular feminist subject presumed to speak for all women, that feminism is, by definition, made up of diverse interests and constituencies.” Internal critique and reflection are significant to third wave feminism, and demonstrate awareness that feminists must continually consider, question, and reflect upon how they are exercising power and privilege, and reinforcing oppression.

This ‘newer’ feminism has expanded its analysis and praxis to consider issues beyond sexism. Indeed, for third wave feminists, social categories of race, class, sexuality, and ability are understood to be inextricably linked in that they articulate with each other or bring each other into being (Lotz, 2003; Wench, 2001). This type of intersectional analysis holds that individuals become multiply constituted subjects as they exercise discourses of gender, class, race, and sexuality, and that each of these discourses, as classificatory systems of power and difference, invoke the others. In practical terms this means that one’s experience and identity as a “woman” is directly influenced by her location in social relations of race, class, ability, and so on. In terms of praxis, feminists cannot attend to gender and gender-based oppression without also engaging racism, colonialism, poverty, and heteronormativity.

So, while the second wave was concerned primarily with gender oppression and sought to unite women through the bonds of sisterhood, the third wave, while still concerned with building solidarity among women in order to engage in collective acts of resistance, challenges the notion of sisterhood and emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing multiple, intersecting identities and oppressions. This shift from second wave to third wave feminism can be seen not
only on the ground amongst feminist activists but also, although to a lesser extent, in the
academy, particularly in the field of Women’s Studies.

Women’s Studies, as an academic discipline, was founded on second wave feminist
principles. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Agatha Beins (2005: 4) note that, although
feminists of colour raised issues about racism in Women’s Studies from the beginning, “It is
certainly true that all Women’s Studies programs in the early 1970s were based on an
understanding that women share a common experience of oppression/discrimination that needs
to be studied in order to eliminate it.” While Women’s Studies scholars were working to
eliminate sexism and patriarchy, they were also inadvertently perpetuating racism and classism
by failing to consider how these forms of oppression operated in many women’s lives and in
feminism itself. The tendency to erase difference in Women’s Studies, however, did not go
unrecognized or unchallenged. In the 1980s three landmark books challenged the notion of
common oppression and called for intersectional analysis of gender, race, and class: Angela
Davis’ *Women, Race and Class*, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called my
Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, and bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and
Feminism*. These books “changed the shape of feminist scholarship, making it intellectually
irresponsible to talk about “woman” as an undifferentiated universal category” (Lapovsky
Kennedy and Beins, 2005: 4). This new emphasis on intersectionality signalled a shift in
feminist theory in the academy away from a focus on women’s commonality. However, while
these works “complicated understandings of identity, they did not necessarily challenge the
concept of identity itself” (ibid).

Poststructuralist feminists, rather than anti-racist feminists, began to challenge the
concept of identity by arguing that the notion of a unitary and coherent self or identity is
misguided. Instead of having a 'true' or fixed identity or inner core within themselves, poststructuralist theory holds that an individual's identity is a temporary, shifting, and multiple construction. Each identity, such as 'Woman,' is not a stable concept across time and space and has no final, agreed upon meaning. Instead, it is subject to a continuous process of re-definition as its meaning changes with time and context. For example, the woman I discuss in the introduction identified as a 'Feminist' when she was younger, but no longer feels comfortable claiming such an identity because its meaning has changed. Identity is complex and multiple: we are not only gendered subjects, but also raced, classed, and sexualized. Women's Studies and second wave feminists more generally sought to study the conditions of women's lives in order to work to improve those conditions. Poststructuralists would argue that these feminist theorists and activists were actually involved in processes of domination that produced 'Woman' as the subject of feminism. Organizing a social movement around the singular identity "Woman" is impossible because the category is unstable, and does not take into account other, possibly conflicting, aspects of identity.

Poststructuralist feminists were responsible for "a move away from the analysis of the individual subject to an analysis of the constitution of the subject" (Mills, 2003: 104). For poststructuralists the subject and its identity is constituted in multiple ways, through articulating discourses of gender, race, class, and sexuality. The multiply constituted subject is a conflicted subject, who often experiences oppression and privilege simultaneously. For example, as a white, university-educated, feminist, I have experienced gender oppression, but also have class and racial privilege. This analysis of identity is radically different from earlier understandings of identity based on "the model of ruler and subject" (Young, 1990: 31).
Third wave feminism also draws on the poststructural notion of power as decentered and omnipresent; it is “exercised through a net-like organization” (Foucault, 1980: 98). It recognizes that power is exercised, rather than held by any particular groups, in multiple sites of power, looking beyond the state to include the cultural and the personal as a significant location and aspect of the struggle for social justice. Fixmer and Wood (2005: 236) argue that “power is imposed, resisted and negotiated in ‘tiny, everyday’ practices that persist despite changes at the structural level.” This notion of power has significant implications for feminist theory and practice as it could be argued that this notion of power makes the feminist goal of coordinated, strategic opposition problematic. If there is no single location of power and oppression, then it could be argued that it is impossible to devise strategies for change and resistance. However, third wave feminism suggests that not having a single site for action is not the same as having no project whatsoever. In many ways multiple and fluid projects characterize third wave feminism. One way that third wave feminism has taken up a poststructural notion of power is through the practice of what Fixmer and Wood (2005) call embodied politics.

According to Fixmer and Wood (2005), embodied politics can be defined as “personal, often physical, bodily action that aims to provoke change by exercising and resisting power in everyday life” (2005: 237). They identify three different forms of embodied politics that are central to third wave feminist activism. The first, as mentioned above, is “redefining identity by engaging the complexities of differences, ambiguities, and multiplicities in and between women” (2005: 237). Instead of seeking simply to accommodate difference while emphasizing commonality, as some second wave feminists did, third wave feminists understand difference, multiplicity, and contradiction to be the starting point of their politics.
Second, third wave feminist activists engage in embodied politics by “building and working with coalitions to forge an inclusive solidarity” (ibid.). Coalition building is significant for third wave feminism, with its acceptance of multiple and even contradicting identities and agendas, because it allows “women to identify simultaneously with multiple identities that have sometimes been regarded as separate and even divisive” and also because it “helps third wavers resist tendencies to ignore or devalue people who belong to groups other than their own” (Fixmer and Wood, 2005: 240).

The third form of embodied politics Fixmer and Wood identify is “engaging in personal acts of resistance in local sites where injustices occur” (Ibid). For some third wave feminists this may involve speaking out about injustices occurring in their own communities. This also involves an understanding of individuals as sites of power and resistance. As Fixmer and Wood (2005: 242) explain, “many third wavers locate the beginnings of their struggle in themselves and in politicizing their bodies and voices.” Third wave feminists recognize the need to examine how they have internalized oppression and may exercise power and privilege in ways that support the status quo. This focus on how individuals exercise power in local and even bodily ways reflects an understanding that, “racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and ableism...have not disappeared...but have gone underground, dwelling in everyday habits and cultural meanings of which people are for the most part unaware”(Young, 1990: 124).

Third wave feminists’ emphasis on multiple identities and agendas, along with their commitment to building coalitions, has allowed them to develop connections and solidarity with groups that were previously understood to be outside of and even threatening to the second wave feminist agenda. Because commonality is no longer a prerequisite for solidarity, groups that are not organized around the identity ‘Woman’ have become an increasingly important part of third
wave feminist agendas. One example of this is the new connections being forged between third wave feminists and transgender theorists and activists.

For the most part, second wave feminists “have typically excluded trans people from organizations, groups and discussion tables” (Darke and Cope, 2002: 8), largely due to their construction of the universal ‘Woman.’ Indeed, many second wave feminists have argued that, because trans women are not born females and are not socialized as women in a patriarchal culture, they cannot understand what it means to be a woman (Jeffreys, 2003; Raymond, 1979).

Third wave feminism, however, assumes that multiplicity, contradiction, and a proliferation of identities must be recognized and celebrated in feminist politics. Furthermore, because third wave feminists ascribe to the notion that “gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core” (Butler, 1991: 28), they more easily accommodate people whose gender performance does not necessarily correlate with their biological sex. For third wave feminism, there is no singular feminist subject or agenda, so the same drive to exclude trans women does not necessarily exist. Some second wave feminists, on the other hand, believe that trans people pose a significant danger to feminism itself.

Trans men are considered a threat because, according to second wavers, they suffer from false consciousness and internalized oppression to such an extent that they began to identify with their oppressor, becoming both victim and servant of patriarchy. Trans women, on the other hand, mock and undermine women’s struggles “by perpetuating what was thought to be conventional femininity” (Darke and Cope, 2002: 8). An example of both of these attitudes can be seen in Janice Raymond’s infamous anti-trans book *The Transsexual Empire* (1979: xxvi-xxv), in which she argues that “female-to-constructed-male transsexuals are the “final solution” of women perpetrated by the transsexual empire. Male-to-female-constructed transsexuals
attempt to neutralize women by making the biological woman unnecessary – by invading both the feminine and feminist fronts.” The transphobia and trans-exclusion that animates much second wave feminism, however, has been challenged by third wave feminist activism and theory.

The centrality of poststructural feminist theory and queer theory to third wave feminism is visible as trans issues are included in the feminist agenda, and questions are raised about the possibilities and limitations of organizing around the identity of ‘Woman.’ Indeed, third wave feminism rethorizes experience, identity, and power in ways that reject sisterhood, common oppression, and shared gender identity as prerequisites for feminist political action and solidarity. Third wave feminism calls for new strategies of resistance and solidarity-building in feminist organizations. This major shift in feminist theory has the potential to significantly impact the culture, mandate, goals, and practice of university-based women’s centres. Scholarly research on feminist organizations suggests that, while there are many contradictions between an organization’s philosophy and what they are actually able to accomplish, there is a link between the ideology espoused by an organization and that organization’s focus and structure (Boles, 1991; Martin, 1990; Thomas, 1999).

My interest in the relationship between this shift in feminist theory and practice in university-based women’s centers is part of a larger inquiry into the relationship between theory and practice in feminist organizations and activism. Literature on feminist organizations consistently identifies two types of second wave feminist organizations that are commonly referred to as ‘older branch’ and ‘younger branch’ organizations (Freeman, 1979; Martin, 1990). Both types are second wave because they are part of the contemporary feminist movement that
emerged in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. They can be distinguished from each other by their different ideologies, goals, mandates, and management structures.

The term ‘older branch’ refers to liberal feminist women’s rights groups that work towards equality by pursuing legislative and judicial reforms. This branch of feminist organization focuses primarily on working to ensure that women are granted all the “rights and privileges of citizenship on an equal basis with men” (Boles, 1991: 39). Older branch organizations are often national in scope and have hierarchical management structures. As Martin (1991: 187) explains, they are “large, national, bureaucratic, externally oriented feminist organizations.”

The term younger branch, on the other hand, refers to radical feminist women’s liberation groups that understand the root causes of women’s oppression to be patriarchal gender relations that reach beyond legislative or judicial systems (Boles, 1991; Martin, 1990). As such, younger branch organizations find legislative and judicial reform to be insufficient goals of feminist politics, and focus more on social and cultural change to rid society of male supremacy. Younger branch organizations are “small, localized, collectivist, internally oriented feminist organizations” (Martin, 1991: 187). Membership in these younger branch groups is based on a shared consciousness of women’s oppression. Because these groups are “committed to a radical vision of a new society and to nonhierarchical, egalitarian organizations” (Boles, 1991: 39), they usually function as collectives run by consensus decision-making. Younger branch organizations generally are more concerned with feminist process - creating egalitarian management structures and decision-making processes - than older branch organizations, which are generally more outcome oriented, focusing primarily on policy agendas. Because of this dedication to feminist process, younger branch organizations or groups that are structured in a non-hierarchical manner
have often been considered more feminist than older branch organizations. Indeed, within younger branch groups, a non-hierarchical and collective management structure is considered not only to be an essentially feminist process but also a very female process (Thomas, 1999). These younger branch groups are organized around the universal notion of 'Woman,' which I have discussed at length above. This culturally specific form of identity assumes that 'Woman' is peaceful, cooperative, and nurturing and therefore best suited to working in a collectivist and non-hierarchical organization. In Jan Thomas' (1999: 116) study of 14 feminist service organizations, one member of a collectivist organization described the organization by saying, "it's a place where female process, however you define that, or however it translates itself out, is pre-eminent." The structure and decision-making processes of these organizations clearly follows their ideological foundation.

Scholarly literature on older and younger branch feminist organizations establishes a link between an organization's theoretical or ideological perspective and that organization's mandate, goals, management structure, and overall culture. Older branch and younger branch organizations are distinguished by their ideological positions (liberal feminism and radical feminism respectively), which lead them to pursue different goals, initiatives, management structures, and decision-making processes. This literature, however, does not identify how or to what extent these types of second wave feminist groups and organizations have responded to recent shifts in feminist theory, nor does it specifically refer to or attempt to classify university-based women's centres.

My research questions how university-based feminist organizations have been influenced by a major shift in feminist theory and politics. This line of inquiry emerges from an understanding that the founding of university-based women's centers, among many other
feminist organizations, is part of the legacy of second wave feminism. Although there has been relatively little academic work on university-based women’s centers, what little has been written certainly supports this understanding.

The limited amount of research published on university-based feminist organizations focuses primarily on factors that influence the success or effectiveness of feminist organizations on university campuses. For example, Barbara Kasper (2004) conducted a quantitative study in 1999-2000 of 75 campus-based women’s centres in the United States in which she asked questions about the organizations’ operational structure, programming, and outreach efforts. The study attempted to identify best practices and perceived barriers to success such as funding, negative attitudes toward feminism, and general apathy among students. Although Kasper notes that the centres vary in their degree of identification with feminist politics and ideology, they are all focused on providing campus-affiliated women with support, information, and resources related to traditional second wave feminist issues such as violence against women. Kasper concludes that most of the women’s centres she examined emerged out of, and continue to be shaped by, second wave feminism and the women’s liberation movement.

Kasper’s survey respondents identify student apathy as one of the most difficult challenges that campus-based women’s centres face. However, Kasper suggests that this apathy is being misinterpreted. Indeed, she suggests that centres need to move beyond the “tried-and-true programming” that is part of the legacy of the second wave in order to address the concerns of a new generation of young women (2004: 197). While Kasper does not identify these concerns, she does argue that women’s centres need to devote their resources to investigating what matters most to students. Kasper’s conclusions suggest that the success of a women’s centre may depend, in part, on its willingness to change in order to accommodate new concerns,
issues, agendas, and members. There is clearly a need to explore these questions further, not only to determine what the significant issues are to young feminists, but also to determine how campus-based women’s centres have attempted to adjust their mandate, initiatives, and outreach in order to accommodate newer concerns and agendas. My research illuminates these issues by providing an in-depth look at the organizational culture of a campus-based women’s centre, and considering how it has changed over time. I explore the relationship between the individual and the collective by considering to what extent members produce the organizational culture of the Centre, and to what extent they are produced by that culture.

Kasper also finds that “most centers have close affiliation with their institutions’ women’s studies program” (2004: 185). Unfortunately, Kasper does not explore the relationship between the campus-based women’s centers she studied and feminist theory in the academy. This line of inquiry was perhaps beyond the scope of Kasper’s questionnaire-based research. There is a need for more in-depth investigation of the shifting terrain and concerns of these organizations that would be best achieved through organizational ethnography, which I have utilized in my own research.

A shift in feminist theory and activism from second to third wave feminism has had important implications for practice in university-based women’s centres. Third wave feminism emerges out of critiques of second wave feminism, and contests many of the foundational principles of second wave feminism (and second wave feminist organizations). Organizing around the identity ‘Woman’ is problematized by third wave feminists, not just because this category homogenizes women and ignores the role that race, class, and sexuality play in women’s oppression, but also because it involves a process that ties the individual to a single identity in constraining ways and re-inscribes a constraining gender binary. Instead of focusing
on women's commonality, third wave feminism focuses on difference and multiplicity in and among women. Poststructural notions of power and identity are central to third wave ideology and have substantial implications for feminist practice. Indeed, Fixmer and Wood (2005) have argued that third wave feminist praxis is best characterized by the practice of embodied politics, which addresses multiple, local sites of power and focuses on building coalitions made of fluid, disparate, and diverse interests. Literature on the development of third wave feminism has been used here to illuminate how this shift from second to third wave has happened in theory and in the field of Women's Studies. However, it has not addressed how this shift has materialized in feminist organizations. The literature on feminist organizations, while clearly establishing a relationship between ideology and organizational mandate, goals, initiatives, and management structure, also does not address how this shift has been taken up in feminist organizations. Kasper's study concludes that women's centres did emerge as part of second wave feminism and also suggests that their success in the future depends on changing to address new concerns, agendas, and members, and yet she does not identify how. The question of how a shift from second wave to third wave feminism has materialized in feminist organizations needs to be explored further. I take up this question in chapters Three, Four and Five. In the meantime, however, I develop this question further as I introduce my research site, methodology, and data collection methods.
Chapter Two

Making Meaning in Feminist Organizations

Susan Hawthorne (2004: 14) notes that, "the creation of knowledge is a matter of means and ends, and if the ends are not achieved in a way that is consistent with the cultural framework, then the knowledge is not worth having." It is not possible, or desirable, to work towards social justice by employing research methodologies that create hierarchical power structures and objectify research participants. Throughout this research process I endeavoured to treat all research participants in a non-exploitative manner, and aimed to develop relations based on respect, openness, and clarity of communication (Reinharz, 1992: 267). This has necessarily involved a commitment to producing research with and for women (DeVault, 1999: 46), which means that I have invited participants to take part in the co-construction of meaning.

My goal in this research is to understand the development of feminist politics in women's centres and the experiences of members of these organizations from the perspective of the participants themselves. I have chosen to do qualitative research because this goal is not well served by quantitative research methodologies. The qualitative research methodology I use has allowed me to develop a deeper understanding and richer descriptions of the development and shifting culture of university-based feminist organizations using the perspectives and language of the participants (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006; Reinharz, 1992; Wilkinson, 2004).

As a researcher, I believe there is no universal or objective truth or reality that can be uncovered through dispassionate investigation. Instead, meaning emerges from subjective interpretations of the world; social reality is relational, and socially constructed. I approach this research with an understanding that "we can only think about and experience material objects and the world as a whole through discourses and the structures it imposes on our thinking."
Mills, 2003: 56). My aim is not to determine the objective reality of the development and current state of these feminist organizations, but to understand the social constructions and shared meanings that are negotiated within these organizations and that structure the ways in which members understand these organizations and their experiences in them.

This research is based on an interpretive epistemology, which focuses on “the interpretation of interactions and the social meaning that people assign to their actions” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 14). This approach recognizes that “different social actors may in fact understand social reality differently, producing different meanings and analyses” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 15). My aim is to analyse and trace the different meanings my participants attach to their acts and the acts of others so I can understand the Centre from the participants’ point of view. This research explores both what is happening in the Centre (What are people doing (differently)? What does it mean to them?), and how these meanings are constructed and negotiated (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006).

This research project does not claim to be “detached,” “objective,” or “value neutral” as positivist research does (Reinharz, 1992: 260). Instead, this research, as “passionate scholarship” or “engaged research” (Hawthorne, 2002: 42), practices a ‘transformative agenda’ “in order to denaturalize and transform oppressive power-knowledge relations with the intent of creating a more just world” (Hesse-Biber, Nagy, Leavy, 2004: 18). I have designed and conducted this research around this agenda. I understand myself, along with the research participants, as active producers of knowledge. Accordingly, throughout this research process, not only did I pay attention to how relations of power produced meaning among participants and within the Centre, but I also practiced reflexivity by questioning my own place in relations of power, trying to be aware of how my social location and assumptions intervene in the research process (Hesse-Biber
and Leavy, 2006). I have aimed to create equitable power relations and to treat all participants in a respectful and ethical manner through every stage of this research. This involved encouraging participants to take ownership over this research. I achieved this in four ways by: (1) explaining the research to them and addressing their concerns to obtain informed consent; (2) encouraging them to raise questions or issues they would like to discuss in the interviews themselves; (3) reminding them of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty; (4) providing participants with copies of their transcripts so they could edit their own comments as they saw fit, and (5) presenting research results to participants and allowing them to respond to my analysis. Despite these attempts to achieve a non-exploitative research situation, this research did pose risks to participants.

This research did not pose physical risks to participants. However, my participants are members of the Centre, actively involved in struggles for social justice and equity, which often requires them to address their own experiences of oppression and their own role in perpetuating oppression and social injustices. Any discussion of their experiences at the Centre, including those experiences that initially brought them to the Centre, could be emotionally stressful. But because these participants live with this stress in their everyday lives, discussing these issues in an individual interview or focus group was not likely to be any more stressful than it is in their daily efforts to address oppression and social injustice. As it turns out, despite discussing extremely personal and emotional issues, none of the participants became especially agitated or upset during the course of interviews.

Because I employed focus group interviews in which participants discussed their experiences at the Centre and its goals and social justice activities, this research posed social risks in way of a loss of reputation. As Kruger (1994: 11) notes, "the intent of the focus group is
to promote self-disclosure among participants.” Such self-disclosure poses social risks, particularly in this case where the participants know each other and will, presumably, continue to work together after the focus group is over. However, all members of the Centre are required to take anti-racism/anti-oppression, consensus decision-making, and conflict resolution training that prepares them collectively to run the Centre and to communicate effectively. As part of the Centre’s commitment to anti-oppression, members are expected to “be committed to doing personal work at breaking down their oppressive attitudes” and to “confront, challenge and interrogate one another” (Policy and Procedures, 2006). The social risks participants face in discussing their experiences, understandings, and opinions of the Centre in focus group interviews are no greater than they would face in their daily involvement in the Centre. However, I did take steps to minimize this risk.

In order to minimize social risks to participants, all participants were notified prior to focus group interviews that they could schedule an individual follow-up interview with me in which they could discuss any thoughts, experiences, and feelings they did not feel comfortable sharing with the group. This allowed participants to manage social risks and helped to ensure that participants could contribute to the research without feeling any pressure or obligation to share all of their thoughts and experiences in a public context. One focus group participant did take the opportunity to schedule a follow-up interview, in which she discussed some of her thoughts on the Centre that did not fit into the dominant narrative that emerged in the group interview.

Despite these minimal risks, this research did not infringe on the rights of my participants. All participants were informed (in writing and verbally) that they had the right to refuse to participate or to terminate their participation in the research project at any time and
during any stage without negative implications. None of the participants chose to withdraw from the study, but many did choose to edit their transcripts. Some participants chose to remove the comments they felt could easily be misinterpreted or did not clearly express what they were trying to say. But, in most cases, participants were more concerned with ensuring that they could not be identified by their comments. Of course, issues of anonymity and confidentiality, which are key aspects of ethical social research, are quite complicated in the case of group interviews.

Participants in focus groups could not be anonymous to each other, but their names do not appear anywhere in this thesis. Where necessary (e.g., in the use of direct quotations) pseudonyms chosen or approved by participants are used in place of participants' names. Direct quotations have been scrutinized to ensure that participants cannot be identified. Furthermore, as an added guarantee of anonymity, all participants were given a copy of their interview transcript in order to ensure that their comments do not reveal their identity. While participants' particular role in the Centre is often attached to their comments in order to provide context, other personal identifiers do not appear in this thesis. While it is certainly true that this may threaten confidentiality, participants were fully informed of this in the consent process and were also instructed that this information would be removed upon their request. To address the issue of confidentiality between research participants, all participants in group interviews signed a confidentiality agreement in which they promise not to reveal information that is discussed in the interview outside the group, as part of the informed consent process. Group interview participants also verbally agreed to this at the beginning of interviews.

Throughout this project I have been driven by a belief shared by all feminist researchers that “women’s lives are important and worthy of study” (Reinharz, 1992: 241). Shulamit Reinharz (1992) notes that, because “male academic sociologists rarely undertook case studies of
women's organizations or communities...we do not have adequate historical records of the organizations in which women have been involved” (Reinharz, 1992: 166). My research, with its focus on a particular form of women's organizations, is a step towards remedying this problem. This thesis provides a detailed record of a university-based feminist organization as it currently exists and also documents how this organization has changed over time. In this way, I contribute to knowledge about women's political and cultural projects, and, more specifically, generate theory about the development, processes, and achievements of feminist organizations. As Reinharz (1992: 174) explains, “the case study is a tool of feminist research that is used to document history and generate theory.” I have chosen this particular research methodology because I am interested not only in revealing and recording women’s political and cultural projects, but also in engaging in a theoretical analysis of the development, processes, and achievements of feminist organizing.

This case study takes the form of an organizational ethnography. I have chosen not to refer to this research project as an institutional ethnography, because of that methodology's focus on dominant institutions and ruling relations (DeVault, 1994; Smith, 1987). Traditionally, institutional ethnography is interested in particular organizations only “as a point of entry...into larger social and economic processes” (Smith, 1987: 157). As Dorothy Smith (1987: 160) explains, “'institution' does not identify a determinate form of social organization, but rather the intersection and coordination of more than one relational mode of ruling apparatus.” Institutional ethnography is informed by Marxist tools of analysis including historical materialism, which “considers how the settings of interest have emerged from a specific history” (DeVault, 1999: 48). Although an institutional ethnography of a university-based (and funded) feminist organization would be a useful study, I am not concerned here about how they are
shaped by and emerge out of particular social and economic processes and dominant ruling apparatus. Instead, my aim is to investigate how university-based feminist organizations are shaped by and emerge out of the history and development of feminist theory and activism. My research attempts to trace how one specific centre has emerged from the specific history of feminist theory and action and, in particular, from recent historical developments in the shifting terrain of critical feminist theory. So, while this project uses some of the same methods employed in institutional ethnography, it is not actually an institutional ethnography, but rather an organizational ethnography.

This research uses data triangulation to enhance the trustworthiness of research results. The research methods employed in this organizational ethnography are individual semi-structured interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and participant observation. While it was not the primary source of data, informal participant observation was a useful method for this research because it allowed me to develop familiarity and build trust with my participants. The Centre’s documents and texts, including its web site, newsletters, reports, publications, policies, and histories, were also valuable sources of data. These ethnographic methods have allowed me to determine the theoretical foundation of the Centre, the “work activities” that are performed there, and the social relations that are involved (Grahame, 2004: 185). This investigation, however, also required that I have more in-depth engagement with various members of the organization to ensure that their perspectives are included and respected in the research.

In-depth engagement with members of the organization has been achieved through semi-structured individual and group interviews, which allow me to understand both the personal and collective narratives about the Centre. I chose to use individual and group interviews because, as Reinharz (1992: 19) explains, “interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts
and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher.” Because this research is interested not only in what is happening in the Centre but also in what meanings are being negotiated and attached to what is happening in the Centre, it is important that participants’ perspectives, and the language they use to express those perspectives remain central. I sought to ensure that both group and individual interviews were conversational, with participants acting as co-producers of meaning. In this way, I aimed to make the interviews “interviewee-guided,” “which means focusing less on getting one’s questions answered and more on understanding the interviewee” (Reinharz, 1992: 24). This does not mean that there were not specific questions I sought to address, but these did not determine the flow of the interview. Allowing participants to lead helped to ensure that interviews were non-exploitative and that the concerns, understandings, and perspectives of participants were central.

Focus group interviews are particularly suited to this inquiry because they allow participants to construct a collective narrative. Such collective narratives are valuable to understanding how and why change occurs in a collectivist feminist organization. Furthermore, I used focus groups because they “inevitably reduce the researcher’s power and control” (Wilkinson, 2004: 279). Indeed, as Krueger (1994: 36) notes, “the researcher has less control in the group interview as opposed to the individual interview.” Although he identifies this as a limitation of focus group interviewing, I understand this to be an advantage. Focus groups allow participants to take some control of the research process by identifying what they think are the significant issues, themes, experiences, and concerns. Wilkinson (2004: 281) argues that, “as the aim of a focus group is to provide opportunities for a relatively free-flowing and interactive exchange of views...focus groups can allow participants much greater opportunity to set the research agenda.” In this way, focus groups allowed me not only to observe how members of the
Centre interact as a collective and to identify collective narratives, but also to maintain equitable power relations in the research process. This was particularly true of my focus group with the WOCG, which I will discuss in more towards the end of this chapter.

Krueger (1994: 4) notes that “A focus group is typically composed of 6-10 participants who are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group.” In my case participants were selected according to the role or position they hold at the Centre. One focus group consisted of members of the Collective - the main decision making body at the Centre -, and the other consisted of members of the Women of Colour Group (WOCG), an autonomous working group at the Centre. Both of these focus groups were relatively small in size, particularly the focus group with the WOCG, which had only three participants. The smaller size of these focus groups, however, was well suited to this particular project as “smaller groups are preferable when the participants have a great deal to share about the topic or have had intense or lengthy experiences with the topic of discussion” (Krueger, 1994: 79). Participants from both focus groups have had intense and lengthy experiences at the Centre and with each other. The positions they hold at the Centre, on the Collective and the WOCG, require sizeable time commitments and a high level of involvement in the organization. Focus group participants have been members of the Centre anywhere from four months to four years, with the average length being just over two years. Considering that all participants are undergraduate students, this is a major commitment, which meant they could make use of a smaller than average focus group to talk in-depth about their experiences and perceptions of the Centre.

The main research questions that drove data collection and analysis for this project include:

1) What are the goals, initiatives, histories, mandates, structure, and culture of this women’s centre?
2) Have these factors changed over time? How? Why?
3) Is there a relationship between these changes in the organization and shifts in feminist theory?
4) How has this relationship between theory and practice developed?
5) Which shifts in practice have been difficult or problematic?
6) Have these changes been maintained? How?
7) What is the relationship between individual members and feminist theory?
8) How has feminist theory affected who is involved in the women’s centre and who is involved in management decisions?
9) What are the learnings now emerging from practice at the centre? Are the Centre’s practices generating new theoretical challenges which third wave feminism should attend to?

As I mention briefly in the introduction, the site I chose for this study is a feminist resource centre located at a university in southern Ontario. There are a few reasons why I chose this particular Centre. First, given that my research problem identifies my goals as understanding how university-based women’s centres have been affected by shifts in feminist theory and politics, it may seem a poor choice to select an organization that is not currently identified as a women’s centre. However, I chose this organization explicitly because it recently changed its name so that it is no longer identifies as a women’s centre.

Second, I was a volunteer at this Centre and a member of their Women’s Radio Collective from 2002 – 2003. This experience assisted me, not only in gaining access to the Centre, but also in identifying and exploring changes that have occurred over time. The fact that I had not only spent a great deal of time in the space, but also contributed to running and maintaining the Centre in the past positioned me as a sort of insider.

My past involvement with the Centre aided me in developing trust and rapport with participants, because they knew I had volunteered there and was both familiar with and supportive of their values and goals. As participants shared their experiences with me, they were not just talking to a researcher, but also to a previous member with a genuine and personal interest in what had happened in the organization. During both group and individual interviews,
many participants asked me about my own experience at the Centre and what the Centre was like when I was involved. One particular participant, a new volunteer, even asked me to explain her aspects of the Centre’s management structure that she did not understand, such as how the role of a Collective member differed from that of a volunteer. My knowledge of the Centre allowed me to develop not only trust and rapport with participants, but also reciprocity. However, as much as I was positioned as an insider in this research, I was also (usefully) an outsider.

I am not a current member of the Centre, I did not know any of the participants prior to this research, and I have not been involved in the Centre in the most current phase of its development. This distance allowed me to identify aspects of the Centre that had changed over time and also meant that I was less likely to miss these details or take them for granted. Because I am not a current member of the Centre, participants did not assume that I already knew the details of what was going on at the Centre and therefore shared information in a way that they may not have if I had been a current member. Overall, my insider/outsider position allowed me to develop trust and rapport with participants because they knew I was once involved in the Centre, and yet I was also distanced from the Centre enough to make them comfortable discussing their experiences at the Centre critically.

As a white woman, I was also positioned as an outsider in my exchanges with the WOCG. The practice of reflexivity allowed me to remain aware of my position as an outsider, and throughout the research I have attempted accurately to represent the perspectives of research participants. Conducting a focus group with the WOCG instead of individual interviews also helped to limit the extent to which my own social location and assumptions affected the research. Focus groups allow participants to have greater control over the research process than individual
interviews. I will discuss the benefits of focus group interviewing in more depth below, but first, I will describe my sample.

Participants in this study include people who are currently members of the Centre and part of its management structure. Although I was able to locate two former members (one who worked as a coordinator in the 1980s and one who volunteered with me in 2001-2003) who both agreed to participate in the study, all of my attempts to arrange an interview with them were unsuccessful. However, one current member of the Centre was also active in the late 1980s as a volunteer. Her perspective, along with my own memories and an analysis of the Centre’s documents, provide sufficient data to analyse the founding circumstances of the Centre, as well as the changes that have occurred over time. My interview with Sue serves as a primary source of data about the organizational culture of the Centre when it was founded and in the early phases of its development.

I focused on recruiting participants who were part of the decision-making process at the Centre. While friends and clients of the Centre are likely to have valuable insights about the organization, I only involved individuals who are currently part of the management structure. Participants include paid staff, volunteers, members of the Collective, and members of the Women of Colour Group. I chose to focus on these individuals because they have the most access to the decision-making process, and are required to have a close familiarity with the goals, initiatives, mandate, history, and culture of the Centre.

I had originally intended to focus primarily on group interviews and only conduct individual interviews if participants requested a follow-up interview. I did conduct two group interviews, one with the Centre’s Collective (this included five current collective members, one former collective member and current volunteer, and one current volunteer who was considering
joining the collective) and one with the Women of Colour Group (this included three members of the WOCG). However, I was unable to organize a third group interview for volunteers and staff, so I conducted a total of five individual interviews instead. In total I interviewed 14 members of the Centre who had a wide range of experiences. Below is a chart that lists the key characteristics of each participant. These details were recorded in a registration form, which each participant completed prior to the interview. Providing this information was optional, and some participants chose not to fill in the entire registration form. Where participants did not provide information, I have indicated this by writing “blank” in the corresponding box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Length of Involvement</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education (Major/Minor)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.5 Years</td>
<td>WOCG</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Vietnamese/Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 Months</td>
<td>WOCG: Communications</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>History/Women's Studies (double major)</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Philosophy / Women's Studies (double major)</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>4 Months</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>Women's Studies/ Social Psychology</td>
<td>Blank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>Collective: Accessibility Agent</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Environmental Geography/ Women's Studies</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5 Months</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Int'l Development/ Spanish</td>
<td>Lebanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>Collective: Resource Library Coordinator</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 Years, 3 Months</td>
<td>WOCG</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Women's Studies</td>
<td>Black Bermudian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3 Months</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Women's Studies/ Biology</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spotty Since 1988</td>
<td>Staff: Outreach/ Admin coordinator</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>High school, Union Schools</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>5 Months</td>
<td>Collective: Staff Liaison</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>International Development: Gender &amp; Development</td>
<td>Canadian White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>Collective: Trans Inclusion Facilitator</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Women's Studies/ Sociology (double major)</td>
<td>Blank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13 Months</td>
<td>Collective: Treasurer</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Molecular Biology/ Psychology</td>
<td>Canadian / Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Past Collective Member/ Staff</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Women's Studies/</td>
<td>Blank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data collection for this project began in the summer of 2007 with the collection and analysis of some of the Centre’s documents, including the Vision and Basis of Unity policy, pamphlets and promotional material, publications, and training materials. Locating the documents that would be most valuable for this project as sources of data required that I spend time in the Centre digging through book cases and reading numerous policies, reports, and publications. This allowed me not only to develop familiarity with the history, mandate, policies, goals, and initiatives of the Centre at various stages in time, but also to develop familiarity with members of the Centre, at least those who were present in the summer months, and ultimately to develop accountability with the Centre before I began in-depth, semi-structured individual and group interviews in the fall and early winter.

Where possible, interviews were conducted at the Centre. However, the focus group with the Collective could not be conducted there because another community group was using the space. Instead, the interview was conducted in a sitting area in the same building. Because this interview was conducted shortly after seven o’clock pm, there was very little traffic and we were able to engage in discussion with few disruptions. One participant who requested an individual follow-up interview actually requested that the interview be conducted outside of the Centre. I suspect she wanted to speak candidly about her experiences and thoughts on the Centre and would not feel comfortable doing this in the Centre’s space. In this case the interview took place at a coffee shop on campus. All of the other individual interviews were conducted in the Centre’s designated ‘private space,’ a small room with a couch and a window and a door in the corner of the Centre. The focus group with the WOCG was conducted in the main space of the Centre outside of operating hours.
Only I and the participants were present for the interviews with the exception of the focus group conducted with the WOCG. On the morning I was to interview the WOCG there was a power outage on campus, and all of the coffee shops and cafeterias were closed. One member of the WOCG requested that her boyfriend be present at the interview because he had nowhere else to wait for her for the next 90 minutes. Although I had serious concerns about having a non-participant present during the interview, particularly a man who is neither a member of the Centre or the WOCG, I left this decision up to the participants as a way to be participant guided. All of the participants agreed that although he would not participate in the interview in any way, he was welcome to stay. I explained that he was not to disrupt or participate in the interview and that he must agree to respect the confidentiality of all participants and not repeat anything he had heard in the course of the interview. He agreed to this and his presence throughout the interview was surprisingly undisruptive and almost unnoticeable.

All of the individual interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Each participant was given an electronic copy of their interview transcript and invited to clarify, add, or remove any portion of it. My data analysis involved coding the data, which began by reading through these transcripts, along with the Centre’s documents and my field notes, and making brief notes on what seemed especially important, interesting, and significant. I then read through the data again making notes in the margins and identifying key themes and words. At this point I reviewed the codes, narrowed them, and identified the most common themes. Once the common themes had been identified, I cut up the transcripts and organized them according to these themes. At this point it was already clear that there were two different stories being told about the Centre, that of the dominant discourse and that of the reverse discourse. I began identifying how the different discourses addressed these themes by
comparing and contrasting the different chunks of transcripts in each theme category. My analysis of the dominant and reverse discourses explored what each discourse is doing, how it operates, and how it is constructed.

Analysis of the Centre’s documents and policies such as the Vision and Basis of Unity also required me to compare and contrast the different versions or drafts of these policies as I charted how they had changed over time. In my analysis of the Centre’s documents I also considered how official policies, histories, and promotional materials are structured by the dominant discourse. My analysis of the Centre’s documents reveals three distinct phases of the Centre’s development: the founding phase, the adoption of the anti-oppression framework, and most current phase which is characterized by a focus on trans-inclusion and accessibility. These three phases serve as the typology that structures my analytic chapters. My analysis of transcripts provides rich detail about each phase of the Centre’s development, paying particular attention to the different meanings in the dominant and reverse discourses and considering how different aspects of the organizational culture have emerged and been maintained over time.

Before I conclude this discussion of my research methodology, I would like to describe some of the challenges I faced in this research process and the strategies I developed to address these challenges. The biggest challenge I faced in this research process was access. This research required that I not only gain access to the Centre as a whole, but also that I gain access to individual members. Gaining access at both of these levels was a long and rather frustrating process. This procedure began by attempting to gain access to the Centre as a whole. I first contacted the Centre by e-mail. I introduced myself and the project and also provided a copy of my research proposal. I did not receive any response from the Centre, so I began to call during operating hours, in order to introduce myself to whichever member answered the phone and to
arrange a meeting where I could discuss the project with interested members. After weeks of e-mails and telephone messages, I was able to arrange a meeting with the Centre’s Collective, the main decision-making body, where I discussed the research project with them and answered their questions. After this meeting the Centre agreed to be involved in the project and I provided them with both electronic and hard copies of a letter of invitation to distribute to potential participants. At this point, the Centre also agreed to provide me with a letter of approval, which I would need for my Research Ethics Board application. However, it took almost a month for the Centre to provide this letter of approval, stalling REB approval and participant recruitment. I did eventually receive the letter of approval, which stated that the Centre had approved of this project and were willing support the project by providing me with a space to conduct interviews, where possible, as well as access to a computer and organizational documents and resources. Even after the Collective endorsed this project and I received an official letter of approval from the Centre, I continued to experience challenges in gaining access to participants.

There are two main factors that contributed to my difficulty in gaining access to participants. First, members of the Centre are mostly full time students who are juggling school, work, and involvement in the Centre. Even though members may have been interested in this research, and most members did express interest in being involved in the project, actually finding the time to participate seemed to be a major challenge. Second, because the Centre is a collective organization, there was no one contact person with whom to coordinate recruitment strategies. The strategies I devised to address the first factor were often complicated by this second factor.

In order to address the challenge of working with research participants who are already juggling many responsibilities, I attempted to schedule group interviews following meetings at
the Centre so that members who wanted to be participants would already be present at the Centre. However, this strategy had limited success as many volunteers had not received notification that I would be coming and few were even present at the volunteer meeting I attended. Indeed, it seems that much of the information I had sent to the Collective (such as my research proposal, a letter of invitation, and even a podcast from an event where I presented my research proposal) and which they had agreed to forward to other members of the Centre, had never been forwarded to volunteers or the Women of Colour Group. I did leave hard copies of my research proposal and letters of invitation around the Centre, hoping that volunteers might read them and contact me themselves. This strategy was somewhat successful and I did recruit one participant this way. Ultimately, I had to revise my strategies to fit this specific research context and the challenges it presented. I did this by spending more time in the Centre and recruiting volunteers for interviews as they came to the Centre instead of arranging a time in advance to meet them. As a result I was only able to do individual interviews with volunteers instead of focus groups as I had originally planned.

While I was in the Centre recruiting and conducting individual interviews I also met Eva, a member of the WOCG, and worked with her to arrange a group interview with the WOCG. It was at this time that I became aware that members of the WOCG had not been receiving information about the project. I assumed that the WOCG would be forwarded the information that I sent to the Centre and so I never attempted to make contact with members of the WOCG (or any other volunteers) and provide this information to them myself. This was a mistake, which threatened to marginalize women of colour in the research process and also threatened my access to the WOCG. From the early stages of this project I understood the WOCG to be an important part of the Centre and I had planned to conduct a focus group with only members of
the WOCG as participants. When I became aware that members of the WOCG had not received information about this project, I immediately sent an apology to the WOCG along with all of the information about the project. I was obviously not off to a good start with the WOCG but members still expressed interest in being involved as participants.

When I met with Eva, she asked me about the project and was particularly interested in my research methodology and how I would ensure that members of the WOCG would not be exploited in the research process. This was a welcome conversation as she was the only participant who asked me about my methodology. Our discussion focused mainly on the research methods I chose. I explained to Eva what I understand to be the benefits of focus group interviews, which would be interviewee guided and would allow members of the WOCG to have greater control over the research process than individual interviews might. The WOCG was also interested in being interviewed as a group and even held a meeting prior to our focus group where they discussed whether or not they should be involved and what they should reveal in the interview. The WOCG did decide to participate in a focus group and also decided to be very candid in the interview about their experiences at the Centre. It seems to me that the WOCG understood participating in a focus group to be a way to have their voices heard at the Centre. They discussed in detail their experiences of marginalization within the Centre so that I may include this information in my thesis. In this way the WOCG used this research as a way to pursue their own goal of making the Centre an accessible and safe(r) space for women of colour. A focus group interview, in my opinion, is well suited to this goal. Indeed, the value of focus group interviewing is perhaps the greatest methodological insight I have gained in this research, particularly when it comes to interviewing participants from marginalized groups.
Members of the WOCG are marginalized not only within Canadian society but also within the Centre. Being interviewed together as a group allowed members of the WOCG to guide the interview, raising the issues they thought I needed to know and ensuring that their experiences of marginalization were not ignored. Having other members present to validate their feelings of marginalization created a safe and supportive environment, which allowed them to be candid about their experiences at the Centre and also served to ensure that the gravity of these issues was recognized. The focus group with the WOCG was the last interview I conducted and up until this point I heard predominantly positive feedback about the Centre. Indeed, the dominant discourse about the Centre stresses the Centre’s dedication to being inclusive and anti-oppressive. However, the reverse discourse that emerged from the focus group with the WOCG painted an entirely different picture of the Centre, and I’m not sure that would have come through as strongly if I had conducted individual interviews with members of the WOCG.

Ultimately, this research process and its challenges have taught me many things. First, although it is important to begin a research project with carefully chosen research methods and methodology, it is also necessary to be willing to revise and adjust your methodology to suit the research context. Second, when conducting research about an organization, it is particularly important to search out marginalized voices and to understand that multiple perspectives and understandings likely exist. If a researcher is being told the same story in every interview it is important to analyze not only what it being said but what also to consider what is not being said or what is being excluded. Third, focus groups are a particularly effective, non-exploitative, and potentially reciprocal method through which to access these excluded and marginalized voices and perspectives. In what follows I have done my best to represent both the dominant and marginalized perspectives at the Centre. Of course, I feel that I have a particular responsibility to
ensure that the marginalized voices are heard in my analysis. I am glad that the WOCG recognized this research as an opportunity to challenge their marginalization and to pursue their goals. I began this research with the hope that this thesis would be a valuable resource to other groups and organizations that are negotiating the shift from second wave to third wave feminism. While I still understand this to be an important contribution that this research makes, I am even more hopeful that this research will contribute to change within the Centre itself, and will encourage all members to consider how exclusion and marginalization operate within the organization.
Chapter Three

Laying the Groundwork

To explore how the Centre has changed over time and how the shift from second wave to third wave feminism has materialized at the Centre, it is first necessary to understand the Centre at the time of its founding. In this chapter I examine the original goals, mandate, structure, and culture of the Centre, and consider how they were negotiated and redefined in the early stages of the Centre's development. I begin by describing some of the key characteristics of the Centre, including its founding circumstances, mandate, desired outcomes, membership, funding, and management and staffing structure. I provide an analysis of one of the most important documents and policies at the Centre, the Vision and Basis of Unity. My analysis of this document, along with participants' recollections of the early phases of the Centre and other recorded histories, argues that the Centre emerged in 1983 as a part of second wave feminism and has demonstrated since its inception a critical awareness of the critiques and limitations of second wave organizing. I conclude this chapter by considering how, as meanings are negotiated at the Centre, organizational change occurs (Freid, 1994).

The university-based feminist organization that is the focus of this study was founded as a women's centre in the summer of 1983 at a small, primarily undergraduate university in southern Ontario. During the early 1980s many feminist organizations, particularly rape crisis centres and domestic violence shelters, were created and developed in this region. However, unlike more service-oriented feminist organizations such as women's health clinics and rape crisis centres, this women's centre was focused more on providing information and resources on women's issues to the university community, as well as the community at large.
The Centre houses a large resource library, which includes feminist and alternative magazines, books, c.d.s., movies, and pamphlets. The Centre also organizes numerous educational workshops and events that address a wide range of issues. The Centre holds core workshops every semester on topics such as anti-oppression, consensus decision making, and crisis intervention. However, they have also organized self-defence, silk-screening, reusable pad making, and bicycle maintenance and repair workshops, which are usually held on the weekends outside of the Centre’s operating hours. Events are held throughout the year, and include guest speakers, movie screenings, discussion nights, and the annual December 6th vigil (for Canada’s national day of remembrance and action on violence against women) and celebrations for international women’s day. Along with providing library resources, workshops, and events, the Centre undertakes public education campaigns to raise awareness about issues such as date rape and gender discrimination. Members of the Centre, most of who are undergraduate students at the university, also regularly contribute to the university newspaper and community radio station as a way both to promote the Centre and pursue its goals.

Although the Centre was founded as a women’s centre that provided resources on women’s issues and was run and maintained by women, the Centre was not identified as a women-only space. Indeed, the Centre understood itself to be “first and foremost a Resource Centre through which any individual can access information on topics surrounding women and gender” (Original Basis of Unity, emphasis added). Designated women-only space was not officially established until the Centre moved locations in 1986. A small room, which includes a couch and a window, is used by women who want some time to themselves, perhaps to think, to cry, to read, or even to nap between classes or on lunch break. The remainder of the Centre continued to be open to all members of the university and broader community, except when
events such as discussion groups or workshops were classified as women-only and open to any person who self-identified as a woman.

Since its founding, the Centre has been volunteer driven and funded primarily through the ancillary tuition fees of undergraduate students. The majority of volunteers at the Centre are undergraduate students. Although faculty and community members may attend some of the Centre’s events or access their resources, it is uncommon for them to become actual members of the Centre. Although many of the Centre’s members and clients are Women’s Studies students, there has never been an official relationship between the Centre and the university’s Women’s Studies program.

The main decision-making body at the Centre is the Collective, which makes decisions regarding administration, finances, programming, and long term goals and direction. The Collective also functions as the official employer at the Centre. Positions on the Collective are not paid; they are volunteer positions and require a considerable time commitment. Collective members must have volunteered at the Centre for at least a semester before they can apply to the collective, must make a commitment to attend bi-weekly meetings, and must spend at least two hours a week volunteering at the Centre. Collective members must be willing to remain in their position for at least two semesters. Although the Collective is the main decision-making body, volunteers also play a significant role in the management and day-to-day running of the Centre.

Volunteers take on projects such as bookkeeping, event organizing, fundraising, outreach, and organizing and checking out resources, along with staffing the Centre. Volunteers are required to attend training workshops, and must commit to staffing the Centre for at least one hour a week. Volunteer meetings also occur bi-weekly, when members provide updates on projects they are working on, volunteer to take on different tasks or projects, and form sub-
committees to address such issues as hiring, book buying, grant proposal writing, and event planning. They also form working groups to address specific issues such as women’s health, queer equality, and racism in feminist movements. Although the WOCG in its current state was not present when the Centre was founded, over the years there have been numerous working groups composed of women of colour dedicated to addressing racism. Many of these groups functioned as consciousness raising groups or support groups. Currently, the WOCG is best understood as an organizing committee made up of a small group of women of colour volunteers who work to organize events such as film screenings, discussion groups, poetry readings, and guest speakers. While the Centre is run primarily by volunteers, there are paid staff positions.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Centre employed various coordinators on a part-time basis. However, as funding to the Centre has changed over time, so has the staff structure. In 2000 and again in 2005, student referendums were passed, which increased the funding the Centre received from ancillary tuition fees. This money allowed the Centre to develop a more sustainable staff structure, which involved hiring a fulltime coordinator, with a second full time coordinator position being added after the 2005 referendum. The effects of this changing staff structure on the goals, initiatives, and direction of the Centre will be discussed in further chapters. At this point, however, it’s noteworthy that each time student funding was increased, the Centre made significant changes to their policy and mandate the following year. For instance, in 2001, following a successful referendum that increased the Centre’s funding in 2000, the Centre officially adopted an anti-oppression framework. In 2006, following the 2005 referendum, the Centre officially changed its name. My analysis suggests that these changes reflect new understandings of the aims, goals, and responsibilities of feminist politics that were circulating long before the Centre actually incorporated them into official policies. In other
words, new directions were being taken in practice at the Centre that were not officially recognized in policy until this increase in student funding. The resulting changes to the staff structure, enabled by increased funding, allowed the Centre to focus on revising policy so that it more accurately reflected the direction the Centre was already taking in terms of underlying values, initiatives, and practice.

A Vision of Unity

To become involved in the Centre as a volunteer, as a member or coordinator of a working group, as a collective member, or as a staff person, it is mandatory that one agree with and make a commitment to abide by the Centre’s Vision and Basis of Unity. The Vision and Basis of Unity is essentially the Centre’s mission statement and mandate. As Sue explains,

the Vision and Basis of Unity are what guide us in our work and what we check in with when we are doing projects... just to make sure that we’re not on a tangent or, but also staying within the mandate that the whole of the group has given us as individuals. Although people have individual projects, or we work individually on things, we agree to the vision that was developed by a group of people.

The Vision and Basis of Unity was officially adopted in 1983, but was rewritten in 2001 and revised again in 2006. These documents represent the official values and principles that guide the Centre, and as such are an important source of data about shifts in the goals, values, and mandate of the Centre.

The original Basis of Unity was drafted when the Centre was founded in 1983. It represents the founding vision of the Centre, and provides an official record of what the Centre originally understood to be its values, goals, and mandate. It states that

The [Women’s Centre] is first and foremost a Resource Centre through which any individual can access information on topics surrounding women and gender. It is our mandate to promote awareness and education where
issues such as sexism, health, sexual harassment and discrimination are concerned. In supporting actions that make it possible for women to live and study safely on campus, we are promoting women’s independence and autonomy. The [Women’s Centre] plays an important role in facilitating networking between and among women and women’s groups, both on campus and in the community. Improving the conditions of women’s lives is our common goal, and the [Women’s Centre] works to offer a welcoming and tolerant environment. The [Women’s Centre] is an inclusive and non-competitive collective. It supports personal growth, self-actualization and empowerment for its members who are united in a basic desire to respect each other’s differences and pursue the goals of the [Women’s Centre]. Members contribute to decision-making by consensus and are committed to conflict resolution.

When the first Basis of Unity is examined, the Centre’s relationship to second wave feminism and its similarities to many second wave feminist organizations becomes clear, in particular, its outline of the Centre’s structure and decision-making procedures, and its focus on women and gender. But, while the Centre clearly emerged out of second wave feminism, from the beginning members have demonstrated through this document an awareness of the critiques of second wave feminism and have aimed to avoid the erasure of difference that occurred in much second wave feminism. There are two main ways in which we can see the Centre, at the time of its founding, as a second wave feminist organization. Firstly, the Centre can be seen as a younger branch feminist organization in its commitment to consensus decision-making and a non-hierarchical structure. Secondly, the Centre’s goals, mandate, and initiatives also align the Centre with younger branch second wave feminist organizations.

Since its founding the Centre has been understood as a collective organization and run through consensus decision-making. As the Basis of Unity states, “The [Centre] is an inclusive, non-competitive collective” in which “members contribute to decision-making through consensus.” Consensus is a group decision-making process where all members of the group are
given the opportunity to have their voices heard and where any resolution must be agreed upon or supported by all members of the group. Consensus decision-making is thought to equalize power relations by ensuring that all members of an organization have equal access to decision-making, so that minority opinions are not ignored as they might be in decision-making processes based on voting. At the Centre, decisions are made at two levels, by volunteers at consensus-run volunteer meetings and by the Centre’s Collective at consensus-run Collective meetings.

Meetings typically begin with all members forming a circle and one member being chosen to act as a facilitator, one as a minute taker, and one as a time keeper. Meetings follow an agenda, which is usually established in advance, but is modified at the beginning of the meeting. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to add topics to the agenda and to keep a speakers list so that members speak only when they are called. Although there is a facilitator at each meeting, members are expected to practice self-facilitation, which involves taking responsibility for their own participation in the meeting by staying on topic, not interrupting anyone, and being aware of how much time and space they take up in comparison to other members.

Meetings begin with a “check-in” where each member shares details with the group about how they are feeling that day, the time constraints they have, and any other details that might affect their participation in the meeting. Once everyone has checked-in, the facilitator will begin with the first issues on the agenda, which is usually an update on projects and issues discussed at the previous meeting. The group then proceeds through the remainder of the agenda. The facilitator raises the topic on the agenda and then calls on the member who is responsible for or most knowledgeable about that topic to share significant details with the group and to define the issue or question that is being discussed. Once everyone understands the question or issue at
hand, the facilitator asks members to share ideas on a possible answer or solution as to how the Centre should proceed, which is usually recorded on chart paper or a white board.

Instead of being followed by a debate about the best solution, this brainstorming stage is followed by a “go-around” where each member of the circle speaks about the issue without interruption or debate. The go-around allows all of the members to understand each others’ positions on the topic of discussion. An agreement may be reached after the go-around, or more discussion may be required. It is the facilitator’s responsibility to organize and re-focus the discussion to avoid revisiting points that have already been agreed on and to identify specific points that still need discussion. The facilitator often asks for a show of thumbs to determine if consensus has been reached. Giving a thumbs-up indicates that one supports the proposed solution or initiative. Giving a thumbs-sideways indicates that one neither supports nor blocks the initiative or solution. This response often occurs if a member does not know enough about the issue to make an informed decision but does not wish to hold up the decision-making process. Finally, a thumbs-down indicates that one does not support the initiative or solution and is not willing to be involved in the group if this solution is adopted.

If consensus cannot be reached, the group usually postpones the discussion until the next meeting, giving members time to reflect further after reading the minutes and informally discussing the issue. This often involves one or more members of the group volunteering to gather more information on the issue to present at the next meeting. Once consensus is reached, one or more members of the group will volunteer to forward this information to the remainder of the organization, to organize a sub-committee to pursue the initiative, or to undertake the required work themselves.
Consensus decision-making, combined with non-hierarchical, collective management structure, was common for many second wave feminist groups and organizations, particularly among those classified as “younger branch” (Boles, 1991; Freeman, 1979; Martin, 1990). As I discuss in Chapter One, the term “younger branch” refers to radical and locally based women’s liberation groups, which played a significant role in second wave feminist organizing (Boles, 1991; Martin, 1990). As Martin (1991: 187) explains, these younger branch radical women’s liberation groups were “small, localized, collectivist, internally oriented feminist organizations.” Like the Centre, these groups functioned as collectives run by consensus decision-making because of their dedication to feminist process. Consensus decision-making is understood to be a feminist process, because it allows all members of an organization to take part in the decision-making process and equalizes power relations. Consensus was emphasized in younger branch organizations, because these groups were often formed by radical feminists who believed that social change requires a re-structuring of society in a non-hierarchical and egalitarian model, and that methods for achieving social change must match these goals and values.

I argue that the Centre is influenced by these younger branch women’s liberation groups, and in many ways could be classified as a younger branch organization. Not only does the Centre share with younger branch organizations the use of a collective management structure and consensus decision-making, the Centre was also formed as a small, locally based feminist group. Paige, a member of the Collective, discusses the history of the Centre noting that, “[the Centre] started as a women’s group... and then became a club and then became its own centre.” Before the Centre was established on campus as a Women’s Centre, it was an informal group of feminists who joined together to discuss women’s issues and organize for local change. Even after this small group became the Centre, an official organization on the university campus, it
remained committed to consensus decision-making and organizing around local issues. Unlike older branch organizations, which have a hierarchical structure, pursue legislative and judicial change, and are national in scope, the Centre works locally to challenge sexism and to change the culture of the university and local community. The Centre’s management structure and commitment to consensus decision-making, along with its scope and goals, suggest that the Centre is better understood as a younger branch second wave feminist organization than an older branch organization. A further investigation of the Centre’s goals and desired outcomes reinforces my argument that the Centre, when it was founded, was part of second wave feminism.

The extent to which the Centre emerged as part of second wave feminism can be clearly seen in the goals of the Centre as expressed in the Basis of Unity. It establishes that the Centre was primarily focused on women’s issues, and aimed to increase awareness about women’s issues by providing information and education about them, with the ultimate aim of “improving the conditions of women’s lives.” In many ways the Centre functioned as the feminist voice on campus. The original Basis of Unity suggests that the Centre was very much dedicated to changing the culture of the campus and broader community through education in order to challenge sexism and discrimination and to make campus and the broader community safer for women. I have already argued that, like many younger branch feminist organizations, the Centre was largely concerned with feminist process. However, it is also clear that the Centre was equally concerned with feminist outcomes primarily related to raising awareness about “women’s issues” in order to challenge sexism, sexual harassment, and discrimination and to “promote women’s independence and autonomy.”
Defining Women’s Issues

At the time of its founding, “women’s issues” referred to sexist discrimination, harassment, and violence related to women’s physical, mental, and sexual health. Sue, a member of the Centre who was a volunteer in the late 1980s, describes the goals and initiatives of the Centre at that time: “Stuff around sexual assaults on campus was really important to the Centre and sexism... There was also a lot of talk about... sexuality and choice; it has always been a pro-choice organization. So, just access to information about sexual health and mental health.” This primary focus on issues related to gender oppression, and sexism in particular, is common for second wave feminist theory and activism.

As I note in Chapter Two, much second wave feminism focused primarily on gender oppression and paid little attention to other axes of identity and oppression that equally impact women’s lives. Audre Lorde (1984: 114) comments in Sister Outsider that, by and large, “white women focus upon their oppression as women, and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age.” Indeed, second wave feminism was concerned primarily with women as victims of gender oppression and paid little attention to women’s roles as oppressors. Lorde argues that gender oppression became the main focus of much second wave feminist theory and politics because white women, who were privileged by race and class, dominated feminist groups and organizations. This tendency to focus on woman as victim of sexist oppression can be seen in the original Basis of Unity, with its focus on women’s safety and empowerment. The Basis of Unity clearly privileges gender over other axes of identity and is concerned almost exclusively with women as victims or survivors of gender oppression, suggesting that the Centre at the time it was founded was also dominated by white women. However, despite the fact that the Centre
was focused on addressing sexism and women’s experiences of gender oppression, the Basis of Unity avoids referring to common oppression and sisterhood.

The Centre’s attempts to avoid appealing to the notion of sisterhood is grounded in a Basis of Unity that does not represent members of the Centre as united by commonality. Instead, it states that members are “united in a basic desire to respect each other’s differences and pursue the goals of the [Women’s Centre].” Of course, the goals of the Centre at this time do not include fighting racism, classism, homophobia, or colonialism, at least officially. However, this section of the original Basis of Unity is significant because it suggests that, although the Centre was primarily focused on fighting sexism and addressing women’s experiences of gender oppression, it was also aware of the need to acknowledge differences that exist among women. Ultimately, it reveals that from the beginning the Centre was aware of some of the limitations and criticisms of second wave feminism and that the Centre actively strove to avoid the erasure of difference that happened in much second wave feminist theory, groups and organizations.

Like many second wave feminist organizations, the Centre did not originally understand issues of privilege, racism, ableism, and homophobia to be ‘women’s issues’. These issues were not officially incorporated into the goals or mandate of the Centre. However, there is evidence that many of these issues were being discussed and considered by the Centre’s members. Indeed, a critical awareness of racism and a drive to be inclusive has always been present in the culture of the Centre. We see some evidence of this in the Basis of Unity, but more in the dominant practices at the Centre in the late 1980s. Sue recalls that “when I first started there was definitely talk about how the women’s movement was racist and excluded women of colour and women of colour’s experiences, and that it was lesbophobic...So, I think that umm, yeah I think that the drive to be inclusive is part of the culture, so it’s a normal thing to do.” According to
Sue, even in the earliest days members of the Centre were discussing critiques of second wave feminism and making conscious attempts to avoid making these mistakes. This critical awareness of second wave exclusions, homogenizations, racism, and homophobia had a major influence on the development and direction of the Centre.

As a second wave feminist organization that was dedicated to raising awareness about “women’s issues,” the Centre focused primarily on sexism and women’s experiences of gender oppression. However, as this critical awareness of exclusion and homogenization in feminist movements continued to develop at the Centre, the Centre began to question what counts as a women’s issue. As the Centre’s Volunteer Orientation Package states,

Over the years the Centre has struggled through many questions about what the nature of a ‘women’s centre’ is and what constitutes a ‘women’s issue’. Throughout this time the Centre has come to recognize that issues related to racism, poverty, colonialism, ablism, queerphobia, transphobia, work, education, health care, immigration, housing (to name a few) are all ‘women’s issues.’ (4).

Among members of the Centre, the meaning of the term “women’s issues” was not fixed; it was negotiated and therefore subject to re-definition. As Amy Freid (1994: 563) concludes from her study of a rape crisis centre, within organizations, “meanings and goals are negotiated...not established once and for all” and, as a result, “organizations continue to develop characteristics over time.” The original Basis of Unity reveals that, at the time it was founded, the Centre, like most second wave feminist organizations, was primarily concerned with raising awareness about and challenging sexism in order to improve the conditions of women’s lives. However, as members of the Centre continued to discuss the limitations and mistakes of earlier feminist groups and movements, they were simultaneously negotiating the mandate, goals, and values of the Centre itself. In discussing the homogenization, racism, and homophobia of much second
wave feminism, the Centre came to realize that they must redefine and broaden their understanding of what qualifies as a women's issue. It is in this realization that a major shift in the direction of Centre, a shift away from focusing solely on sexism towards the use of an anti-oppression framework, occurred.
Chapter Four

Building a Politics of Resistance

I clearly remember the first time I went to the Centre in 2001. I had signed up to be a volunteer there during the student groups’ volunteer fair held at the university. I wasn’t familiar with the Centre and, because I had stopped on my way to class, I didn’t have a chance to talk to the Centre’s representatives at the fair for very long. But, as a Women’s Studies major, I was excited about the prospect of being part of a feminist community. A few weeks later I nervously made my way to the Centre to meet the coordinator who would take me through a volunteer orientation session. When I entered the Centre I was asked to make myself at home while the coordinator finished some task. This hiatus gave me a chance to take in my surroundings. I made my way to the massive bookshelves that housed the Centre’s resource library. After I had skimmed the titles in the collection, making mental notes of sources that would be useful for a paper I was working on for my women’s history course, I began to take in the rest of the space.

The walls, where they were not covered by the bookshelves and filing cabinets, were decorated with pictures and feminist posters. One poster in particular caught my eye. It was a hand-made poster on a large piece of yellow poster board that read: “What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her heel print upon another woman’s face. — Audre Lorde.” I cannot count how many times I read the words on this poster during my time in the Centre. However, as I pondered this quote for the first time, I had no idea how much it would come to reflect what I would learn at the Centre. Reflecting on this experience years later as a researcher, I realise that these words express an understanding that is central to the second phase of the Centre’s development.
In the previous chapter I outlined how the Centre at its founding was dedicated to providing information and resources related to women’s issues, which were officially defined as issues related to sexism. But, this definition of “women’s issues” was by no means given or fixed. Indeed, the question of what qualifies as a women’s issue and what it means to be a women’s centre was debated and negotiated by members early in the Centre’s life. This discussion resulted in a new definition of women’s issues, which included racism, homophobia, poverty, and colonialism, along with sexism and gender oppression. This redefinition signals a major shift in the goals, mandate, policy, and initiatives at the Centre, marked by the official adoption of an ‘anti-oppression framework.’

In this chapter I analyze the emergence and operation of an anti-oppression framework at the Centre. I begin by identifying the key principles of the framework, exploring their theoretical base and implications for practice in feminist organizations. I argue that the Centre’s anti-oppression framework emerged out of critiques of second wave feminism, and is informed by both anti-racist feminist and poststructural feminist theory. I analyse the meanings attached to the anti-oppression framework by both the dominant discourse, which emphasizes progress and inclusivity in the Centre’s development, and the reverse discourse, which emphasizes the marginalization and exclusion that has occurred in the Centre’s development. Ultimately I argue that the shift from second to third wave feminism was realised through the Centre through the adoption of this anti-oppression framework.

In March 2001 a new Vision and Basis of Unity policy was adopted by the Centre, which formally implemented an anti-oppression framework at the Centre. This new policy is important for numerous reasons, particularly because it reveals an official shift in the direction of the Centre in terms of its goals, purpose, and guiding principles. It marks the moment when new
approaches to feminist politics, which were developing as the definition of women’s issues was being contested and re-defined, actually became instituted as official policy.

As I briefly mention in the previous chapter, a student referendum was passed in 2000 that increased funding to the Centre. The Centre received $0.66 from each undergraduate student in the 1999-2000 academic year, which increased to $1.50 after the student referendum was passed. It is likely that this increase in funding is partly responsible for major shifts that occurred in the Centre during this time period, because it allowed the Centre to develop a more sustainable staff structure that included a full time coordinator position. Prior to this funding increase, the Centre employed various staff in part-time positions funded by grants such as Human Resource Development Canada summer work positions. New resources resulted in a full-time coordinator who was responsible for administration, outreach, volunteer coordination, and the day-to-day running of the Centre throughout the year. This full-time coordinator position provided greater consistency and stability in the management of the Centre. The new staff structure allowed the Centre to focus on updating or adopting new policies that reflected the current discussions and practices of feminist politics at the Centre. While these changes do not explain why an anti-oppression framework was adopted, it does explain, at least in part, why this new framework became officially instituted when it did.

A New Vision

The new Basis of Unity (2001) states that the Centre’s purpose is:

- To promote awareness and education on issues of power structured relations, such as racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, queerphobia, able-ism and classism.
- To support actions that make it possible for all women to live and study safely on a campus free from discrimination and harassment.
• To network and build alliances with other women’s groups and services off campus.
• To encourage all those oppressed under patriarchy to help each other grow politically, socially, and emotionally.
• To work towards a respectful, accepting, and welcoming environment where all women feel safe and secure.
• To outreach to the university campus and [surrounding] community via workshops, speakers, film festivals, events, etc.
• To understand that the creation of an anti-oppressive environment is an ongoing process and to make a commitment to continually interrogate and change ourselves to understand our identity and agency in social relations of power and oppression.
• To facilitate commitment to a politics of resistance, which includes a holistic approach when looking at intersecting social relations of power between gender and race, class, ability, sexuality, etc. It is important to acknowledge that women of colour and aboriginal women have done much of the work in this area. This includes interrogation of white privilege and white domination within feminism and society as a whole.

This version of the Basis of Unity contains more overtly political language than the original. Earlier key words include “information,” “awareness,” “education,” “independence,” “personal growth,” and “empowerment.” While the revised version still includes words like “information,” “education,” and “awareness,” it also refers to “power,” “patriarchy,” “oppression,” “interrogation,” “resistance,” “privilege,” and “domination.” This language reflects a shift in the mandate, goals, and values of the Centre.

The 2001 version proclaims a commitment to “promote awareness and education on issues of power structured relations, such as racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, queerphobia, able-ism and classism” instead of promoting “awareness and education of issues such as sexism, health, sexual harassment and discrimination.” Although the Centre still understands itself to be a resource centre, it is no longer satisfied merely to raise awareness about gender oppression and issues related to sexism. It has now broadened its focus to include resources about all power structured relations. Here we can see a significant shift from the original Basis of Unity, which focused solely on challenging sexism and gender oppression. However, the Centre is still understood as
a women’s organization at this time, and women’s issues, although more broadly defined, remain
the central focus. The primary focus is on women’s safety, women’s experiences of oppression,
and connecting with other women’s groups. In other words, other axes of identity and
oppression beyond gender are considered only in so far as they affect women or function to
support gender oppression.

The new Basis of Unity proclaims a commitment not only to raise awareness about power
structured relations, but also to build a “politics of resistance” that addresses all of these issues.
This politics of resistance is based on an anti-oppression framework, which calls on members of
the Centre to recognize difference and multiplicity and to challenge oppression in all its forms.
Sue explains what it means for members of the Centre to work in an anti-oppression framework:

We have a feminist mandate but we take an anti-oppressive [approach]…we
recognize that struggles are linked and that feminism is not something we can
work on right now and then next week we can work on ableism, and the week
after that we will work on racism…[t]hey are all linked and those privileges come
into play at different times and we may have those privileges and when we do we
need to be responsible and try to make the changes that we can and make space
for people that are not privileged.

She identifies four principles of the anti-oppression framework, which are also mentioned in
other interviews and the Centre’s official documents and policies: all struggles for social justice
and recognition are linked; all forms of oppression are linked; privilege and power are relational
and fluid; feminists must examine their own privilege and location in relations of power. In what
follows I will consider each of these principles and argue that they reflect the impact of anti-
racist feminism and poststructuralist feminism on the third wave feminist politics being
developed at the Centre. I also understand them as attempts to learn from and respond to internal
critiques of second wave feminism.
The first two principles of the anti-oppression framework - that all struggles for social justice must be linked because all forms of oppression are linked - reflects members’ new understanding that it is no longer sufficient to respect differences among women. The Centre’s goal is to incorporate these differences at every point of analysis and action, and to challenge every form of oppression. When I asked participants about the underlying values and principles that guide practice at the Centre, most of them identified the anti-oppression framework as being most significant. Bettie, for example, commented that “the anti-oppression thing is probably the biggest, just cause like, we are an organization that is fighting oppression in whatever form.” Paige also thinks that “anti-oppression and anti-oppressive frameworks and stuff, that’s a really, really broad statement and so...some of the things we focus on is issues of racism, classism, ableism, transphobia, queerphobia, homophobia all of those.” The Centre is committed to fighting all of these forms of oppression because the Centre understands all forms of oppression to be interconnected. This understanding is clearly stated in the Centre’s “Anti-Oppression Commitment,” a policy that was drafted along with the new Vision and Basis of Unity.

The Anti-Oppression Commitment (2001) claims that “there are interlocking systems of domination and oppression in this society and within ourselves which we have to dismantle in order to bring about social equality for all people. Patriarchy and misogyny cannot be separated from racism, classism, ableism, homophobia and all other forms of oppression.” This understanding of interlocking systems of oppression echoes arguments made by anti-racist feminists in the 1980s. In 1984 (35) bell hooks argued that, as “all forms of oppression are linked in our society because they are supported by similar institutional and social structures, one system cannot be eradicated while the others remain intact.” The Centre’s anti-oppression framework is based on this understanding that racism, sexism, homophobia, and colonialism
(among other forms of oppression) are intimately linked and cannot be adequately understood or challenged in isolation. Indeed, the politics of resistance that is being developed at the Centre functions according to the notion that “issues related to racism, poverty, colonialism, ableism, queerphobia, transphobia, work, education, health care, immigration, housing (to name a few) are all ‘women’s issues’” (Volunteer Orientation package, 4), not only because all of the issues affect many women, but also because these forms of oppression function to reinforce and maintain gender oppression itself. As hooks (1989: 22) notes, “[w]e must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological function with racism and other forms of group oppression, that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact.”

The Centre has taken up this understanding, making a commitment to eradicate all forms of oppression. But it continues to make women and gender oppression its central focus. The new Basis of Unity emphasizes the need to make connections with other women’s organizations and does not officially recognize other types of organizations such as aboriginal groups or queer student organizations as potential allies. Ultimately, while the new Basis of Unity complicates understandings of gender and gender oppression by focusing on how gender intersects with other axes of identity and oppression, it still identifies women and women’s issues as the Centre’s key focus.

The Centre’s anti-oppression framework challenges the second wave feminist notion that gender oppression is a primary oppression that can be analysed and challenged in isolation. While the Centre at this phase of its development is a women’s centre that is primarily concerned with addressing women’s issues, members of the Centre are committed to building a movement and a politics that resists and challenges all forms of oppression simultaneously because they understand all forms of oppression to be interconnected and mutually supportive. The beliefs
that all forms of oppression are linked and that all struggles for social justice or recognition must also be linked are key principles of the anti-oppression framework, and suggest that anti-racist feminism has significantly influenced the Centre’s direction. The belief that oppressions are interconnected and mutually supportive also signals new understandings of power and privilege as fluid and relational.

The third principle of the anti-oppression framework recognizes that power and privilege are not ‘things’ held by some and not others. Rather, they are relations. This is the same model of power theorized by poststructuralists who understand power not as emanating from one central point and being manifest solely as ‘power over,’ but instead as coming from everywhere, including within ourselves and in all human relations. Poststructural theory understands individuals to be the place where power is enacted, exercised, and resisted. This understanding of power is a central principle of the anti-oppression framework at the Centre, and is particularly significant because it calls on members to examine their own multiple locations in relations of power.

Second wave feminism employed a dyadic understanding of power based on the model of ruler and subject, which understood men as the oppressor and women as the oppressed. This notion of power allowed second wave feminism to ignore the ways in which women exercise power and privilege. The poststructuralist notion of power employed in the Centre’s anti-oppression framework, however, demands that members examine the ways that they exercise power in their daily lives and especially in the Centre. This notion of power makes it necessary for feminists to examine the ways in which they are both privileged and oppressed. Indeed, women can no longer be understood merely as victims of patriarchy; they must also acknowledge and challenge their own roles as oppressors.
The need for feminists to recognize that women function, often unknowingly, as oppressors is perhaps the most emphasized aspect of the anti-oppression framework and is central to the dominant discourse at the Centre. Indeed, in interviews with the Collective and with volunteers, participants proclaim an awareness that “women can and do participate in politics of domination, as perpetrators as well as victims - that we dominate, that we are dominated” (hooks, 1989: 20). This awareness is mandated by the Centre through the Basis of Unity (2001), which states that all members of the Centre “must make a commitment to continually interrogate and change ourselves to understand our identity and agency in social relations of power and oppression.” The practice of self interrogation was emphasized in interviews with volunteers and the Centre’s main Collective. For instance, Tracy notes that

In our workshops, umm like anti-oppression workshop and anti-ableism, it’s about also looking at yourself and possibly the privileges that you carry, right? And so, looking at that and seeing the kind of perspective that you might have from those privileges and in some cases from disadvantages and oppressions that might come with certain events and such. And so I think it’s about learning about oppression and privilege and then targeting that and that sort of thing.

Similarly, Yasmine, a new volunteer, emphasizes that the anti-oppression is not just about challenging oppression as it exists in society, but also as it operates in the Centre and in our own behaviours and beliefs:

Anti-oppression framework would mean to me a Centre that is conscious of all the different forms of oppression that could be taking place implicitly or explicitly within all different realms of society, within institutions or within policy, within our own behaviour, how we act towards people and so it’s a centre that is conscious of all these different forms and how they materialize and where they are apparent and how to avoid them within this space. It’s a safe space centre where we are constantly striving to abolish all those forms of oppression at least within this space. It [involves a lot of personal work] especially where personal behaviour is concerned and how to be as inclusive and accepting and tolerant and open minded as possible and how to not exhibit oppressive behaviour and language, and learning what is and what isn’t and how to embody it.
Here, Yasmine expresses the Centre’s commitment to challenging not only overt oppression, but also oppression that has been internalized and operates covertly without our knowledge. Her comments suggest that fighting oppression is a matter of targeting institutions and policy, and perhaps more importantly, interrogating underlying meanings and behaviours. Following the dominant discourse at the Centre, she represents the first step in fighting oppression as becoming conscious of the multiple forms it can take and how it operates at various levels. The importance of developing this awareness is also emphasized by Jessica, another new volunteer. She feels “like I’m more aware [of oppression] and it definitely gives you perspective, it’s just very eye opening because then you notice things that you’ve never noticed before and noticing is half the battle with a lot of oppression because, like, a lot of the reason I think oppression still happens is because nobody is aware of it.” Her comments remind us that those who exercise privilege are often completely unaware of how it operates. Working in the anti-oppression framework at the Centre has taught Jessica how to notice oppression. She, like many other members, is developing an awareness of the intricate ways in which power and privilege operate.

Developing an awareness of how we act as oppressors is a vital aspect of anti-oppression work at the Centre. As bell hooks (1989: 25) notes, “if we do not change our consciousness, we cannot change our actions or demand changes from others.” Changing one’s consciousness is a necessary part of working for social change, which has been addressed by numerous feminist theorists including Iris Marion Young. In Justice and the Politics of Difference (1990), Young draws on Anthony Giddens’ three levels of consciousness to explain how oppression becomes internalized. According to Giddens, “discursive consciousness” exists when thoughts are verbalized; “practical consciousness” is expressed in actions that require coordination but not at the level of discursive consciousness (i.e. walking or driving); and the “basic security system”
includes unconscious experience and motivation (Young, 1990: 130-132). Young (1990: 132) argues that oppressions such as “racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism... have receded from the level that Giddens refers to as discursive consciousness.” She notes that while overt domination and objectification have receded from discursive consciousness with the emergence of a discursive commitment to equality, “racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and ableism...have not disappeared...but have gone underground, dwelling in everyday habits and cultural meanings of which people are for the most part unaware” (Young, 1990: 124). Despite the widely accepted notion of formal equality of all citizens under the law in Western countries, oppression and domination continue and are enacted “to a large degree through feelings and reactions” (Young, 1990:124). However, these oppressive behaviours and reactions may be difficult to recognize (at least for those who are expressing such reactions and behaviours) due to our commitment to equality at the level of discursive consciousness.

Young argues that one of the key reasons individuals fail to notice these reactions at the level discursive consciousness is because “the liberal imperative that difference should make no difference puts a sanction of silence on those things which at the level of practical consciousness people ‘know’ about the significance of group difference” (Young, 1990: 134). This process also occurs in the women’s movement, where a commitment to “sisterhood” and a “universal” gender identity and experience leads feminists to exclude and deny difference, and ultimately perpetuate oppression. Refusing to acknowledge difference makes oppressive behaviours, attitudes, and reactions difficult to address both within ourselves and in the world. As Foucault (1990: 101) notes, “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions.” Indeed, Centre members have come to realize that if they are going to work effectively toward social justice by challenging oppression, then they must begin to “bring to discursive consciousness behaviour
and reactions occurring at the level of practical consciousness” (Young, 1990: 134). This is precisely why members are encouraged to interrogate themselves in order to become aware of the ways they exercise power and privilege. Sophie explains that when you become a member of the Centre, “you’re able to, in a safe community, attempt to change your old ideas or old behaviours and mannerisms, and also to help you recognize some of the kind of negative or oppressive ideas that you were maybe raised with.” Sophie’s comments suggest that the feminist adage “the personal is political” is being taken up in radical new ways at the Centre as members are encouraged to interrogate deep-seated ways of thinking and behaving that are structured by privilege and power. The dominant discourse at the Centre emphasizes that feminism is not just about changing social structures, but also changing our own behaviours and thoughts as an essential aspect of working towards social change. Members do not necessarily join the Centre intending to interrogate themselves in order to change their own thoughts and practices. Self-interrogation and anti-oppressive practice, which are mandated by the Vision and Basis of Unity, are learned at the Centre.

Learning Anti-Oppression

Just as the Centre has shifted towards an anti-oppression framework that strives to recognize difference and multiplicity, many individual members described experiencing a similar shift in their understanding of feminism and their own role in struggles for social justice. For Betty,

coming into the Centre I was really focused on feminism and what I thought of feminism at the time, which was very much kind of women oriented. But, I think as you go through and you become more involved in the Centre you realize that there are so many issues out there that I believe are feminist and that I probably never thought of. A lot that I had thought of as well, but, I mean you just start seeing things around you - just little
things that you wouldn’t have thought about - after going through all the workshops and after meeting people who have, who are pissed off about different things, or are concerned with different things. You just start seeing, seeing more than just that really simple view of feminism and just male/female, sexism, which is not simple either. But, it just becomes more complex and you just start seeing these power dynamics everywhere and realizing that that’s really messed up and that something needs to be done about that.

Betty’s comments are echoed by many participants, particularly members of the Collective and new volunteers, who emphasized how much they learned through their participation and training at the Centre about feminism, power, oppression, and their own role in perpetuating social inequity. Being involved in the Centre, according to the dominant discourse, allows members to develop a deeper awareness of how power and oppression operate in the world and how they exercise power and privilege.

As I mention above, members do not necessarily join the Centre with a previous understanding of an anti-oppression framework or how to enact anti-oppressive practice. Instead, this framework is learned through volunteer orientation, core workshops, and observation of other members in the space. Yasmine explains that, for her, learning occurred primarily through observing how people who have been here for awhile, umm, carry themselves and how they act and how they speak and etc. But definitely the workshops...those were definitely helpful because they brought to light explicitly, and you know because in the workshops they use exact examples of things that you do in your everyday life that are actually oppressive or are ethnocentric or are ableist or etc. You know? Or discrete examples of homophobia, etc. that you wouldn’t have, that I wouldn’t have thought of before they were made that explicit and so that helped a lot, definitely, the workshops, yeah.

Jessica also said workshops were her main source of learning about anti-oppressive practices.

She describes what is taught in the anti-oppression workshop, which is a mandatory core workshop offered every semester. She recalls that
In the workshop we started with deconstructing certain words like: what does racism actually mean; what does power mean; what does oppression mean; and privilege, what does that mean? And, I guess, what does it mean that we function on the basis of anti-oppression values, it’s just that we (a) have an awareness of what all, like, the existence of privilege, oppression, racism and power, and that we do our, seriously do our best not to participate in that.

For most participants, not participating in oppression and privilege focuses primarily on the use of anti-oppressive practices, particularly language. For instance, Yasmine explains that being involved in the Centre and attending training sessions has taught her how to act and speak in anti-oppressive ways. Reflecting on her experiences, she states, “I think I’ve learned definitely how to use, employ a more inclusive and tolerant behaviour and language, not that before I was an oppressive person, but little behaviours that you don’t realize can possibly be oppressive unless it’s brought to your attention by training like that which we have here...By changing those habits, it’s changing my thinking as well about things.” Yasmine suggests that the training she has undergone at the Centre has taught her not only to act and speak differently, but to think differently as well. It seems that the training provided at the Centre has allowed her to bring to discursive consciousness those behaviours and language that are oppressive, so that she can change her language and behaviour accordingly.

Many participants emphasized the need to recognize and interrogate how members exercise power and privilege within the Centre and how this is influenced by their specific social location. However, few of these participants recognized that this mandated self-interrogation and anti-oppressive practice is itself a form of power. The customs that are followed, the language that is used, and the practices that are considered appropriate in the Centre all involve the exercise of power. As Leona English (2006: 87) explains, “traditional forms of power such as sovereign leaders (kings, queens, bosses) have been replaced by seemingly innocuous
practices such as using the circle, consensus, and voice, but they exercise power nonetheless.” English is relying on a poststructural model of power, which understands power as productive, as “giving rise to new forms of behaviour rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behaviour” (Mills, 2003: 33). English (2006) argues that learning initiatives, such as training workshops and discussion groups, are particularly important to understanding how power is exercised in feminist organizations because they create certain rules or laws that result in self-surveillance and self-discipline. The culture of an organization (its norms, values, practices and language) is established, negotiated, and maintained through learning initiatives. The anti-oppression framework is one of the key aspects of the Centre’s culture. It is learned both through training initiatives and observation. Working in the anti-oppression framework involves following particular norms and values, exhibiting specific behaviours, and using certain language. As English’s argument suggests, the anti-oppression framework is produced by power and, as I will show, it is established and maintained through members’ self-surveillance and self-discipline.

When members become involved in the Centre, they are required to attend a volunteer orientation session where they are immediately introduced to the Centre’s Vision and Basis of Unity. They must make a public commitment to interrogate themselves about their location in relations of power. As their involvement continues and they begin to attend workshops (such as the anti-oppression workshop), they are reminded to recognize their specificity and interrogate their privilege and role as oppressor. In these workshops participants are expected to examine their own behaviour and develop a critical awareness of oppressive language. Many participants described the deep impact this training has had on their own thought and behaviour, particularly in terms of language. Power is exercised at the Centre in acts of self-surveillance and
interrogation through which members learn to think, behave, and speak in non-oppressive ways. Self-surveillance is addressed in Yasmine’s comments when she explains that, “when you’re in here it’s very important to be extremely conscious of the language you use and the behaviour you use and how you greet people and how you react to things etc. And so, by practicing that type of behaviour in here, it becomes more of a habit that you can bring with you into other spaces and to all other parts of your life...it sort of works its way in”. Isadora has also noticed this self-surveillance: “It seems like people at the Centre are very careful about the things they say and they’re very careful with their language, so, it’s just always an atmosphere of respect and I think you feel it when you enter and I guess that’s what people are learning, even if they don’t realize they’re learning it at the Centre.” Both members claim they learn to be “extremely conscious” of their behaviour and “very careful” with the language they use there. They agree that this self-surveillance has positive consequences by creating an “atmosphere of respect.” Moreover, both participants suggest that self-surveillance in the Centre is internalized to such an extent that anti-oppressive behaviour and language become a habitual practice that is carried outside the Centre, often without conscious intention. According to these accounts, the oppressive actions, behaviours, and reactions Young discusses as having receded to the level of practical consciousness have been brought to the level of discursive consciousness, where they are addressed and interrogated. Moreover, these oppressive attitudes and reactions have been replaced at the level of practical consciousness by anti-oppressive actions, behaviours, and reactions.

The dominant discourse at the Centre, which emphasizes its drive to be inclusive, suggests that the anti-oppression framework constitutes a new understanding of feminism that attends to multiple forms of oppression and multiple axes of identity. The Collective and new volunteers
describe the impact it has had not only on the way they understand feminism, but also on the way they view the world and themselves. They feel charged to challenge the erasure of difference and the whiteness of second wave feminism, and ultimately to address social injustices by embracing difference, multiplicity, and diversity. However, a very different narrative about the anti-oppression framework is told by the Women of Colour Group (WOCG).

Anti-Oppression: The Reverse Discourse

Research on community-based social service organizations suggests that attempts to implement anti-oppression frameworks in these agencies are often challenged or resisted by members (Barnoff and Moffatt, 2007). In particular, anti-racist feminists working in feminist service organizations often object to a focus on anti-oppression because they find that “the move from anti-racism to anti-oppression has meant that anti-racism work has disappeared from view” (Barnoff and Moffatt, 2007: 63). They understand “the move towards anti-oppression as a direct form of resistance to anti-racist work” (ibid.) While the WOCG does have major concerns with how the anti-oppression framework has been enacted at the Centre and the specific forms anti-oppressive practice take there, unlike these social service workers, the WOCG does not object to the anti-oppression framework itself. Indeed, what originally attracted the WOCG to the Centre and keeps them involved is the anti-oppression framework.

The WOCG began as a Woman of Colour Support Group that ran out of counselling services at the university. They often used the Centre’s space for meetings. Christina explains the founding circumstances of the WOCG:

It used to be the Women of Colour Support Group, but we weren’t really happy with the direction, and there was a facilitator that was running that group; we weren’t really happy with the direction of it and we didn’t really like the name – Women of Colour Support Group – because we felt like it
was victimizing of women of colour... So, we formed an organizing committee for the support group but then we felt like our ideas and what we were after, like our requests, were not really being listened too, ... We wanted it to be very anti-oppressive and there were certain elements that were missing there that, even when they were brought to the facilitator’s attention, she still did not take into account our issues. So...we had the organizing committee and then once we decided to forgo the whole support group and just be like a working group. So, we are a working group but we’re kind of more than a working group because we are more active than usually working groups are, and it’s not like a one-off project. It’s more like a club, but we are a club under, with [the Centre’s] support, so we get to use the space, the staff here will help us, and finances.

According to Christina, members wanted a group that emphasized women of colour’s empowerment and functioned under an anti-oppression framework. They were already familiar with the guiding values of the Centre, including its anti-oppression framework, so decided it was the best organization out of which to organize the WOCG. Eva and Lauren describe why the WOCG continues its affiliation with the Centre:

Eva: I also think another reason that the space works for us is because we are a feminist group, and this is a feminist organization so it makes sense that we would come here, right.
Lauren: And when you think of the other options, I mean you talked about the [students of colour organization] but at least in this space it is declared anti-oppressive and therefore anti-homophobic and everything like that. [The students of colour organization], while it operates with students of colour, does not necessarily operate in an anti-oppressive framework. So, in terms of just the simple use of the space and the topics we can talk about here, because its queer positive etc. etc. etc., makes this space by far more preferable than the other options, in my opinion.
Eva: Me too.

They understand the WOCG as a feminist group that, like the Centre, is committed to working within an anti-oppression framework, although they are focused primarily on how it affects women of colour. While the WOCG shares with the Centre a commitment to anti-oppression, they are less sanguine about its success. They chose to operate out of the Centre, but they do not experience it as an anti-oppressive space. Rather, they say that white women and their
experiences and issues dominate the space, just as they have done historically in most feminist organizations.

The WOCG seems frustrated working with the Centre. Members consistently complain about not receiving adequate support and feeling marginalized. They focus their work on educational events, such as discussion groups and film screenings that address issues like homophobia in the black community or the exoticization of women of colour. According to the anti-oppression framework at the Centre, these issues should not be the concern of women of colour alone; they are important to all feminists because racism, sexism, and homophobia cannot be understood in isolation. However, the WOCG is not convinced that this is the case:

Eva: We would organize really good events and we felt like the Centre wasn’t supporting us enough, the Collective, sorry, wasn’t supporting; they would never come out to our events, which was frustrating because we would put so much work into them and they were relevant to the Centre.

Christina: It was really frustrating that we were putting on a panel discussion, we had film screenings, we did a few different things and even though we tried too, like we communicated that events were going on and asked people to come, they said the were too busy or people just weren’t showing up and we just felt like they had more resources, like even in terms of volunteers coming or just spreading the word, and it didn’t seem to be having an effect on our audience members coming.

They suggest that members of the Centre do not consider WOCG events as a priority, despite the fact that they support the goals and purpose of the Centre. Eva and Christina emphasize that their work is rarely recognized or supported by the Centre’s Collective, which they interpret as a sign of their marginalization.

Inequitable access to the Centre’s resources is a key aspect of the WOCG’s marginalization from the dominant concerns and experiences of white feminists. Eva and Christina discuss this in detail:
Eva: Another problem that we had with them was, basically they were in control of our finances the year before and the finance collective member was not very organized with these finances and so when we went to apply for a grant, because she hadn’t recorded all the ins and the outs of the money, we couldn’t, we didn’t get as much as we should have... what happened was then we had to borrow money from the Centre and then we had to pay them back. So, while we were running all of these events and while the Centre has so much money, we were baking and doing bake sales to pay the Centre back. When really, if we are a working group of the Centre and we are the only people who are bringing any people of colour into the Centre, which is one of their goals at the moment, they should have just alleviated that whole thing because, one it was their fault, and two, we were doing work that they weren’t doing; you know what I mean? So that was really frustrating for us as well.

Christina: And they did after that meeting, but not until we actually brought it up. So we had to ask for it and...we basically presented that it was historically how women’s centres have been white dominated and how women of colour have been systematically oppressed, and we...basically pointed out that that was happening again in this situation, and after that they agreed with us and apologized and wrote us a letter of apology and absolved us of our debt.

The WOCG is doing relevant anti-oppression work and is pursuing the goals of the Centre, yet they are not being supported. An inequitable access to resources at the Centre is another site of marginalization for women of colour.

The Centre’s main Collective, which is made up almost entirely of white women, decides how the Centre’s budget will be used. The WOCG, on the other hand, has limited control over funding because they are not assigned their own budget. Instead, the WOCG has to request funding from the Collective, and if that funding is not forthcoming, the WOCG must focus their energy on paying back the Collective rather than pursuing new initiatives. This arrangement marginalizes women of colour at the Centre and functions, inadvertently, to maintain the Centre as a white dominated space.
The Collective is not purposefully marginalizing women of colour by withholding funds. Indeed, it is uncommon for working groups to have their own budget, which explains why the WOCG initially had none. However, the WOCG is more active than the average working group, and it addresses relevant issues that the Centre has given limited attention. Ultimately, the marginalization of the WOCG is an unintended consequence of the Centre's failure to recognize or adequately interrogate how power and privilege are exercised in the organization. Privilege remains invisible to those exercising it, and the responsibility of interrogation rests with those who do not have the same access to privilege.

The Centre did make changes to address this problem by providing the WOCG with a budget and issuing a formal apology. However, these steps were not taken until the WOCG complained:

Christina: Nothing is talked about until it's brought up and I think that's kind of the problem, that, and especially in relation to Women of Colour Group, I felt that, given the history that there should have been some steps proactively (echoed by Eva and Lauren)...
Eva: It's frustrating that we're always the ones that have to take the first initial step, why are we the ones that have to do that, you know? It's not our work that needs to be done; it's their work that needs to be done. That's the most frustrating part of all is that we are always the ones that take all of this stuff on; why are we taking on their racism, that's what they need to deal with, you know.

Even though all Centre members are compelled to "interrogate white privilege and white domination within feminism and society as a whole," the WOCG claims they are the only people doing this work. The Centre continues to be a white dominated space, and issues of marginalization are rarely addressed if the WOCG does not raise them.

According to the WOCG, the anti-oppression framework has not been successful in ensuring that racism and white privilege are actually addressed by the Centre. The most recent scholarly work on anti-oppression practice in feminist organizations suggests that the WOCG is
not the only group to feel this way. Lisa Barnoff and Ken Moffatt (2007) explain this as a “contradictory tension” that arises in most models of anti-oppressive practice in feminist service organizations. After conducting focus groups and interviews with social service providers who work in feminist organizations that have recently implemented an anti-oppression model, Barnoff and Moffatt (2007: 56) conclude that while “feminists imagine anti-oppression as a model of practice that deals with all structures of oppression,” “feminist members of marginalized communities perceive that their particular form of oppression is not attended to in the model.” The Centre has made an official commitment to address racism and white privilege, but has taken limited actions to support this commitment. Moreover, the anti-oppressive and anti-racist strategies the Centre has developed are, for the WOCG, largely unsuccessful and even counterproductive.

The dominant discourse of the Centre’s development tells a story of progress and of a constant drive to be more inclusive. The anti-oppression framework’s focus on self-interrogation was emphasized in interviews with the Collective and with new volunteers who understood this practice to be effective in challenging privilege and oppression within the Centre. Participants’ accounts suggest that these processes of learning, self-reflection, and self-interrogation, which are initially learned in core workshops, are continuous. When I asked the WOCG about the interrogation of power and privilege, however, they claimed that the practice is not ongoing or effective in creating an equitable exercise of power in the Centre:

Lindsay: It says in the Centre’s Vision that part of being involved in the Centre is constantly checking yourself...
Lauren: Oh God!
Lindsay: ... and your values and constant interrogation...
Lauren: No. No. I’m sorry, no, and this is part of the discussion we had two weeks ago, but this whole continuous interrogation business is completely a farce to me; it’s completely ridiculous; it doesn’t happen and people feel,
and again this whole culture of not wanting to tell somebody that they’re wrong or evading this issue and constantly trying to be polite...
Christina: or not wanting to be told that you’re wrong.
Lauren: It’s totally, it’s just for namesake’s purpose; it’s a nice dream but I have yet to see it be carried out. Interrogation my foot!

As the WOCG sees it, interrogation does not occur, and consequently white privilege in the Centre is rarely recognized or addressed. Eva and Lauren stress that, although white people might be unaware of it, most aspects of the university - including the Centre itself - are infused with whiteness.

Eva: You know. It’s just that white culture is so dominant in this space and white people just don’t get it.
Lauren: But, it’s not even...you can’t just focus on this space. It’s this school, this whole school itself is just so exclusive of anybody of colour...I always complain about this, but, even the way our courses are structured, you have Canadian literature, European literature in the centre and then you might be lucky to take that negro course somewhere down the line, if you’re lucky, and it’s an elective...
Eva: And it’s taught by a white person (laughter)
Lauren: It’s taught by a white person, and they make racist comments while they’re teaching it. So, yeah you can’t even credit it just to this space. It’s the space in general.

As Lauren and Eva suggest, racist social relations in the university community are being reproduced in the Centre, despite commitments to do otherwise.

The WOCG suggests that white members of the Centre remain unaware of the various ways in which white culture is dominant at the Centre. The invisibility of whiteness is one of its key characteristic. According to Ruth Frankenberg (1993:1) along with being a “standpoint” and a “location of structural advantage”, ‘whiteness’ “refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.” The “seeming normativity” and “structured invisibility” (Frankenberg, 1993: 6) of whiteness is certainly apparent at the Centre, at least to the WOCG. They claim that not only are white members of the Centre unaware of how whiteness operates in the organization, but the strategies developed by the Centre to make it an inclusive and anti-
oppressive space actually perpetuate the dominance of whiteness. What the dominant discourse represents as respectful and inclusive behaviour, the reverse discourse characterizes as white domination.

My analysis of the dominant discourse at the Centre shows that, through the exercise of disciplinary power that includes self-surveillance and interrogation, the Centre is ultimately producing feminist subjects who are committed to building an anti-oppressive social justice movement based on recognition and respect for multiplicity and diversity. However, the reverse discourse, which I have traced through the WOCG’s focus group transcript, challenges the dominant discourse’s emphasis on respect and inclusivity by suggesting that the feminist subjects produced at the Centre are marked by culturally specific forms of white femininity. The reverse discourse highlights how those members who do not identify with this white femininity are marginalized and excluded in the Centre. Eva explains her feelings of discomfort at volunteer meetings where anti-oppressive behaviours, styles of communication, and language are employed:

There’s just something about their volunteer meetings that make me uncomfortable and I’ve spoken to other women of colour, the very few women of colour who have ever been to a volunteer meeting, and they aren’t comfortable either. It’s so...it’s like there are these feminist women, supposedly they are feminist women, but they have no, like, strength, the way they talk it’s like, honestly, they don’t have any attitude, the way they speak is very uncertain all the time, and there’s this politeness, this quiet, white cultured politeness in them and it’s very uncomfortable for people, at least it’s very uncomfortable for me ‘cause that’s not how I talk. I don’t want to, like, try to guess at what you’re saying; I don’t want to be the one to do the work because you’re too scared to say you disagree with me, you know what I mean. There’s this really passive way of doing things here and that makes me uncomfortable.

The WOCG understands this passive politeness as white middle-class femininity operating in the Centre. Certainly, the Centre’s anti-oppressive style of communication, behaviour, and language
are similar to second wave feminist constructions of “Woman” as peaceful, cooperative, and nurturing. As the Centre teaches its members to exercise respect, and use inclusive behaviour and language, they inadvertently re-inscribe whiteness and the marginalization of those who do not identify with this culturally specific style of communication. Because these practices are framed as respect for diversity and inclusion, they are difficult to address.

Eva’s comments demonstrate fundamental differences in understanding the efficacy of anti-oppression practice and training at the Centre. Volunteers and collective members claim the anti-oppression framework and training give them a better sense of how power and privilege operate, more awareness of their privilege, and a more respectful, inclusive, and reflexive attitude. The WOCG, on the other hand, suggests that, despite the training, “white people just don’t get it”. The anti-oppressive behaviour and language learned at the Centre does not in itself create an anti-oppressive space. Rather, it functions to obscure and reproduce racist power relations.

**Resisting Whiteness**

The WOCG constructs their own ways of communicating and organizing in opposition to the dominant forms at the Centre. In contrast to the passive, polite way of interacting and communicating characteristic of white middle-class femininity, the WOCG use what they understand as a more confident and empowered way of communicating called “straight talk.” Unlike the Centre, the WOCG understand their style of communication to be culturally specific. Lauren explains it as “a cultural thing. Eva and I happen to be from the same country and I think that, umm, there are distinct culture differences, and I hate to sound essentialist here, but, it comes down to the fact that when we speak to each other it is in very direct terms.” As this
discussion continues, Eva and Lauren stop referring to this style of communication as specific to the culture of their country and begin representing it as common among women of colour:

Lauren: from my own experience, and from [Eva’s] experience as well, there is a different way that we talk to each other and there is a different way that we relate to each other and because we are all women of colour we are not so barred by the whole politically correct atmosphere that they attempt to...Like I think in some cases they are afraid to say the work “black” and that would not happen at women of colour meetings (laughter), you know what I mean? So, it’s little things like that that really make a difference in our comfort levels.

Eva: Yeah, I agree with you. I think maybe even within their group they’re uncomfortable. No, it’s true ‘cause I think that they are attempting to be politically correct all the time without really understanding what’s behind political correctness. For us, we’re not trying to be politically correct, it’s just like, this system sucks and this is the way we talk about it, you know what I mean. And, I think because we are so open with each other and because we are so direct, there’s more comfort within our group. You know that if I’m mad at you, you will know it and vice versa. So, it allows for more open communication.

For Eva and Lauren, this style of direct communication is comfortable in a common group of women of colour.

The WOCG’s analysis of dominant forms of communication in the Centre paints white members of the Centre as pre-occupied with sounding politically correct and appearing to be anti-oppressive. This reverse discourse challenges the dominant one by suggesting that, rather than being anti-oppressive, members of the Centre simply perform politically correct behaviour and language to convince themselves of their progressiveness, which in turn makes efforts as deeper self-evaluation unnecessary. In other words, a preoccupation with accommodating difference through supposedly anti-oppressive language, behaviour, and styles of communication is actually symptomatic of a discomfort with difference. Moreover, this focus on individualistic, politically correct practice shifts attention away from the structural and systemic changes that are needed at the Centre.
The tendency of community groups and facilitators to focus anti-oppression training and education on individual attitudes and feelings has been well documented by Sarita Srivastava and Margot Francis (2006; 276), who argue that "workshops aimed at reducing individual prejudice often function as a substitute for more sustained organizational attention to the ways that whiteness and heteronormativity are inscribed in everyday institutional systems from hiring practices to curriculum." These same dynamics at the Centre mean that the multiple ways that power and privilege operate there, particularly in terms of policies, systems, and structures, are not addressed. Members of the Collective can identify as anti-oppressive because they have commitment to self-interrogation and the use of anti-oppressive language and behaviours without ever having to address the absence of women of colour on the Collective, the marginalization of the WOCG, or the failure of the Centre to make an official commitment to building coalitions with organizations other than women's groups. Focusing on individual attitudes, feelings, and behaviours may bring oppressive feelings and behaviours to the level of discursive consciousness where they can be interrogated. But this focus may also function to divert attention away from systemic and structural issues within the organization.

The dominant forms of communication and rules of conduct at the Centre embody a discomfort with difference. The WOCG has been able to avoid their own discomfort with difference because membership in the group is based on one's identification as a woman of colour. As Eva and Lauren's comments indicate, there certainly is an assumption of commonality in the WOCG's membership. Because all members are women of colour who have experienced both sexism and racism, they spend little time interrogating the ways they exercise power and privilege. Indeed, the WOCG relies on the same logic of commonality characteristic of second wave feminism. This focus on commonality, however, emerges within the context of
white domination at the Centre. The WOCG’s way of organizing and communicating is constructed in opposition to those of the Centre, which functions to reveal the specificity of dominant ways of communicating, speaking, and behaving. In this way the WOCG is able both to reveal and resist whiteness in the Centre. But, this resistance to white domination at the Centre may actually function to reproduce homogeneity within the WOCG and an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy.

Participants in the WOCG focus group refer to the Centre as “they” and “them” in opposition to the WOCG “us” and “we.” I asked about this language:

Lindsay: You say “they” when you talk about the Centre, which is interesting. You don’t say we or us, so it does seem that there is some sort of divide.
Lauren: There’s a distinct divide in my opinion, and you can see it clearly when we have Women of Colour Group and the [Centre’s] collective meetings; it’s very distinct.
Eva: Yeah.
Christina: It was really funny for me because...I was on the [Centre’s] Collective over the summer ... so it was kind of weird for me to make that switch, because as soon as I was done I came back to the Women of Colour Group and it was like “okay, us and them”...Umm, yeah, there is a separation there for sure.

Even though members of the WOCG are actively involved in the Centre as members of the Collective and as paid staff, they do not express any sort of ownership over the Centre. This is a conscious strategy of resistance:

Eva: Yeah there is. I guess when we say “they” and “them”... we don’t even consider this our space in a way and it kind of emphasizes that...there is kind of a comfort within that divide.
Lauren: I like it...to me it’s not a bitter or bad divide; I think it an empowering divide to a certain extent.
Eva: Yeah, I feel empowered by it.
Christina: Yeah.
Lauren: Yeah, I like it; I wouldn’t have it any other way, to tell you the truth.
Eva: I know.

The WOCG acknowledge and resist white domination by employing the language of “us” versus “them.” Members take pleasure in this divide, finding it empowering as they resist assimilation into the dominant white culture of the Centre and develop an organizational culture of their own.

The WOCG employs these oppositional strategies of resistance, not to create a divide within the Centre, but to make visible a divide that already exists, but is often ignored. Members of the WOCG explain:

Eva: It just seems really divided in terms of race here. Like, why is it that only white people can access these resources?
Christina: Or feel comfortable.
Eva: Or feel comfortable and then access the resources, and that’s basically how it is and it’s consistently...like they can never keep a woman of colour on their collective, like every woman of colour that has ever been on that collective has quit after a year because they can’t stand it, you know what I mean. And, so, I don’t know, this is us sort of saying, we deserve to use those resources, this is our centre just as much as yours, and you’re going to have to deal with it and we’re gonna do what we want to do here basically.
Christina: Why should we just allow it to be a white dominated space, and like, we’re basically claiming the space as our own and making other people of colour feel comfortable and hopefully bringing other people of colour into the Centre.

Despite adopting an anti-oppression framework and having members commit to self-interrogation, white culture and privilege continue to dominate at the Centre. However, whiteness remains largely unacknowledged in the dominant discourse about the Centre, which implies that it is achieving inclusivity. Instead of assimilating into the white culture of the Centre, the WOCG constructs their own oppositional culture. In this way the WOCG is able to reveal the operation of whiteness at the Centre, to resist the marginalization of women of colour, and ultimately to reclaim the Centre.
Conclusion

My aim in this chapter was to analyze how the anti-oppression framework emerged and has been maintained at the Centre. I have argued that it emerged as the Centre, taking critiques of second wave feminism seriously, made a commitment to building a more diverse and inclusive organization that challenges oppression in all its forms. The key principles of the anti-oppression framework address these critiques as they engage with anti-racist and poststructuralist feminist theory. I have argued that these principles signal a major shift from the founding values and principles of the Centre, which were largely second wave.

The anti-oppression framework at the Centre challenges the second wave notion that gender is a primary oppression by asserting that gender oppression cannot be fully understood or challenged without also attending simultaneously to race, class, and sexuality. The politics of resistance the Centre fosters in this phase of its development calls for an intersectional analysis that is central to third wave feminism. The anti-oppression framework rejects the dyadic model of power, employed replacing it with poststructural conceptions of power and identity that posit women as multiply constituted subjects who are simultaneously oppressed and oppressive. The anti-oppression framework is most strongly committed to interrogating how Centre members exercise power and privilege and how they act as oppressors. Adopting the anti-oppression framework is one significant way in which a shift from second wave to third wave feminism has materialized in the Centre. But, the anti-oppression framework has been experienced differently by different groups within the Centre.

The dominant discourse about the development of the Centre emphasizes its drive to be more inclusive and accountable to those who are marginalized by second wave feminism. The reverse discourse, however, critiques the dominant discourse as racist by highlighting the
continued oppression and marginalization of women of colour. While the framework was understood as a tool for recognizing difference and fighting all forms of oppression, the anti-oppressive language and behaviour training undertaken at the Centre functions in practice to further marginalize women of colour. Members of the Centre employ this language and behaviour to be inclusive and respectful, but the WOCG interprets them as a sign of discomfort with difference and a way to obscure the exercise of power and privilege in the Centre. Despite these different understandings, all participants agree that the anti-oppression framework is important and believe its key principles.

The official adoption of the anti-oppression framework through the 2001 Vision and Basis of Unity policy marks a major shift in the development and direction of the Centre, away from a focus on sexism, and towards an emphasis on difference, diversity, and multiplicity. This shift occurs over two phases. In this chapter, I have considered the first phase of this shift, which has emphasized the importance of recognizing and interrogating the differences that exist among women. In the second phase, which I discuss in the next chapter, the key principles of the anti-oppression framework lead members to broaden the Centre’s mandate and goals, again, as they continue to focus on issues of difference and inclusion.
Chapter Five

Feminist (Trans)Formations

When I was involved in the Centre as a volunteer in 2002-2003, I attended numerous volunteer and Collective meetings. I am also well acquainted with consensus decision-making, so when the Collective invited me to attend a Collective meeting as part of this organizational ethnography I thought I knew what to expect. However, the process of the meeting was not what I remembered. It began as usual, with a go-around where members check-in. But this time, instead of simply sharing how we felt and what time constraints we had, each person was also asked to identify which gender pronoun we should use when addressing them. “I’m Lindsay, the graduate student that’s doing research on the Centre. I’m really excited that you have invited me to attend your Collective meeting today. I don’t have any time constraints. Female pronouns please.” This change in the check-in process suggested that substantial changes had occurred in the Centre since I left four years ago. This chapter explores those changes.

The first phase of a major shift in the direction of the Centre, which I outlined in the last chapter, involved adopting an anti-oppression framework that emphasized power and privilege as relations, as well as the need to acknowledge and interrogate how power and privilege are exercised. This chapter considers how the key principles of the anti-oppression framework have continued to influence the direction of the Centre. I argue that the anti-oppression framework, with its focus on multiple axes of identity/oppression and self-interrogation, has opened the way for challenges to women-only space at the Centre, making trans-inclusion and accessibility a key goal in the most recent phase of the Centre’s development.

As in the previous phase of the Centre’s development, a commitment to anti-oppression principles in the current phase is expressed largely through the use of anti-oppressive language.
This chapter begins by considering how the re-wording of the Vision and Basis of Unity policy, which may seem minor, reflects a considerable shift in the goals, mandate, and theoretical foundations of the Centre. I continue to examine anti-oppressive language as I explore the process and rationale for the Centre’s name change. A name change that no longer identifies the Centre as a women’s centre is the most momentous and controversial change the Centre has undertaken since it was founded in 1983. I argue that this name change reflects members’ attempts to distance themselves from associations with second wave feminism, and to represent accurately the new goals, mandate, principles, and theoretical perspective being developed at the Centre that challenge many aspects of second wave feminism.

In this phase of its development, the Centre no longer exists as a women’s space or a women’s organization; this does not mean that women’s issues are no longer important to the Centre or that the Centre has rejected identity politics. The Centre, practicing third wave feminist politics, now understands itself to be a broad-based resource Centre that functions like a coalition, addressing multiple perspectives, issues, and agendas. Being a coalition-based organization, however, is challenging and contradictory. Working with groups that are not trans-inclusive and do not understand trans issues to be feminist issues is particularly difficult. While the WOCG supports the goal of trans-inclusion and accessibility within the Centre more broadly, it does not support trans-inclusion within the WOCG itself. The reverse discourse of the WOCG addresses trans-inclusion only by claiming that it has done nothing to address the marginalization of women of colour in the Centre. I examine this narrative to understand why, considering the new focus on trans-inclusion and accessibility in the Centre, the WOCG continues to function as a women-only group. The second challenge lies in dealings with local feminist organizations. These challenges need to be addressed before the Centre can realise its expanded anti-oppression
framework. I conclude the chapter by considering the university administration’s reaction to the name change, which included threats to withdraw the Centre’s funding. I argue that, in establishing relationships with second wave feminist organizations and community groups that are not trans-inclusive, the Centre needs to interrogate the privilege that comes with being affiliated with a university and funded by students.

(Re)Visions of Unity

Recently, the Centre has been preoccupied with being inclusive and accessible to all members of the university and local community who have experienced some form of gender oppression (and other articulating forms of oppression) and are committed to building a politics of resistance. Consequently, the Centre has shifted its focus from “women’s issues” to “feminist issues.” As I have shown, women’s issues were originally understood to relate to sexism. However, as the goals of the Centre changed, women’s issues were broadened to include racism, poverty, sexuality, and citizenship. The Centre understands transgender issues to be feminist issues as all forms of oppression are interconnected, but also because transphobia functions to reinforce sexism (Darke and Cope, 2002; Stryker, 2007). As a result, they now employ gender neutral language in their policies and organizational name, and no longer identify as a women’s centre. Instead, members describe it as a feminist resource centre that focuses on feminist issues.

Like the shift to the anti-oppression framework, this phase of development involves changes to the Vision and Basis of Unity policy, which was revised in 2006. Relatively minor changes in the document’s language were made, such as replacing “woman’s issues” with “feminist issues.” Where the 2001 Basis of Unity stated that it was part of the Centre’s purpose to “work towards a respectful, accepting, and welcoming environment where all women feel safe
and secure”, the revised document (2006, emphasis added) refers to working “towards a respectful, accepting, and welcoming environment where all people who experience gender oppression feel safe and secure.” Gender oppression, this document suggests, is not only experienced by women, so the Centre must not only be accessible to women. These changes to the Vision and Basis of Unity reflect a major shift in the Centre’s identity away from a women’s organization toward a feminist organization concerned with a broad range of gender issues.

This shift mirrors similar shifts occurring in the broader academic field of Women’s Studies (Lapovsky Kennedy and Beins, 2005). As Jessica points out, “this winter Women’s Studies is coming up for observation and there will probably be a name change also similarly, to be gender studies or women and gender and sexuality or something, and it definitely changes the nature of what it is a little bit, but I think that’s okay. I think, at least for Women’s Studies, I think it’s time, because it’s practically that anyway.” Like the Centre, Women’s Studies at the university has broadened its focus. This Women’s Studies department is not alone in this regard. As I discuss in Chapter One, poststructural theory has had a broad impact on the discipline, which now mainly studies gender relations as opposed to women and goes by the name of ‘Gender Studies’ or ‘Gender and Sexuality Studies’ (Lapovsky Kennedy and Beins, 2005). As the Centre takes a new direction, it has also its changed name so as to not be identified as a women-only space.

The process of changing the Centre’s name was long and complicated; it involved much reflection and discussion about the mandate, principles, and goals of the Centre. Members considered changing the name for several years before the Name Change Committee was formed and the process was officially started. Bettie states,

It was very, very long. I started here in 2004 and it had already been talked about for a few years, but it was coming up more casually at volunteer
visioning sessions...and it was a really scary topic. People were like: “well maybe we want to change it but what would we change it to?” “I don’t know, let’s just put it off.” So, it was happening for a few years and then finally...we decided that yes we were going to change it, everybody think about what we should change it to. So, for a little while longer it was like, “does anybody have any ideas?” “That’s too scary, let’s just not talk about it for a while.” And then we came to realize that we couldn’t put it off any more because we weren’t accurately representing ourselves with the name we had. And then it was a long process of getting together and looking at our policy, and what we would change if we changed the name, and asking volunteers and collective members for suggestions and then, thinking of suggestions, and then making a list of suggestions and sending that off to all the volunteers, and short listing that list. And then eventually coming up with a top three and we voted on it at a volunteer meeting and that was it.

According to Bettie, members were hesitant, even fearful to make this major change. I return to this below. At this point I want to stress, according to participants’ recollections, that the name change did not cause a change in the direction of the Centre. Rather, the name of the Centre was changed in response to other changes that were already occurring. Participants explain that the name change was necessary if the Centre wanted accurately to reflect its goals and mandate.

Because women’s centres emerged out of second wave feminism, being identified as a women’s centre necessarily associated the Centre with second wave feminism. However, as I have shown, the mandate and theoretical foundations of the Centre do not follow second wave principles. Moreover, many of the Centre’s characteristics developed in response to critiques of second wave feminism. Instead of focusing on common oppression, the Centre has taken difference, multiplicity, and contradiction as the starting point of its politics and has, at least discursively, attempted to be inclusive of groups often excluded from second wave feminist organizing. As Paige explains, this is the main reason the Centre changed its name:

One of the sort of basic and main reasons that the name was changed was to reflect where the Centre was already going and what the Centre was already focusing on that we didn’t feel was reflected in the name...We did want to sort of move away from some of the associations with women’s centres: being second wave, being really white dominated, those sorts of issues.
Umm, but also because we were already working to counter that sort of stuff and, and trying within our resources and our goals...to do more work about that and to have more diverse things we were doing. Umm, and I think we wanted to really sort of change the direction of the Centre, or allow the change that was already happening maybe would be a better way to put it. And, to have more room to grow, umm, based on the goals we already had and based on the goals that we thought were upcoming and have now become goals, and that sort of stuff.

Being associated with second wave feminism and identified as a women’s organization was constraining for the Centre, especially as it embraced the third wave’s acceptance of multiplicity and contradiction, and its goals of pushing boundaries and challenging dualisms. The Centre’s name was changed to distance it from second wave feminism and more accurately to reflect the new directions it was taking.

Although not all members refer to the feminism being developed and practiced at the Centre as third wave, they do agree that the Centre is developing a ‘new’ feminism, which requires them to move in new directions and to let go of the past. Sue explains that one of the most important things she has learned in this phase of the Centre’s development is that “We need to know when to let go of things...and not just hold on to them because you’ve always had them.” Letting go, however, is not always easy, and some participants experience the name change as “scary.” As Paige explains,

Even though we wanted to move away from white-dominated spaces and the strong associations with second wave stuff...it’s also a really scary thing to distance yourself from that because there has been so much work that has been done in women’s centres and we certainly wouldn’t be where we are or the kind of centre we are if that history hadn’t existed and, umm, and if it wasn’t still going on. I think a lot of the hesitation also came with: Okay so, maybe it would be more reflective but are we really ready to make that step and to actually say, “that’s not what we are, we’re something new, we come out of that but, but we’re now something separate.” And, I think that is a really scary thing to think of, because all sorts of issues come up about what is lost in that process and is that something we’re prepared to do and to let go and to rethink and reimagine.
Although the Centre emerged from second wave feminism, they have redefined and reimagined a new and separate feminist politics.

The complicated relationship between second and third wave feminism, often described through the metaphor of a mother/daughter relationship (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Henry, 2004), is nicely captured in Paige’s comments. The daughters of second wave feminism look on that feminism with some sense of gratitude and are hesitant to ‘leave the nest’ and venture out on their own. Yet, they see their mothers’ ways as outdated, and are looking to create a space where they can spread their wings (Henry, 2004). Although Centre members have been critical of second wave feminism, they also give credit and thanks to second wave feminists, recognizing that without their work the Centre would not be where it is today. Indeed, many participants described being involved in the Centre as a way to continue past feminist struggles, taking them in new directions. Sophie, for instance, thinks “it is [about] recognizing and embracing change and difference and basically, I think we have an understanding of what has happened in past feminist movements and not letting it die, and coming up with different issues that weren’t recognized in other feminist movements, and making them recognized now.” Members understand the Centre to be continuing the work of second wave feminists, not by following the same principles or the same perspective, but by moving in new directions. The question arises: what is lost in this process?

One of the most obvious and perhaps controversial aspects of second wave feminist organizations that is lost in the name change process and larger shift towards third wave feminism is the existence of the Centre as a women’s organization and as women’s space. Second wave activists, for the most part, believe that in order to fight patriarchy, women need “a place from which to speak and to formulate a new understanding of both patriarchal and
heterosexist oppression and the oppositional tactics needed to combat that oppression” (Whittle, 2006: 195). In 2003, a Centre member published an article in the university newspaper making a similar argument. This article was written in response to a letter the Centre received from a male university student, who complained that the Centre was sexist because it was not inclusive to men. In response, the article argued that “to confront the white, male dominated system that most of the university functions under, it is necessary for women to be able to step outside of that framework and create one of their own...it is important for women to have a place and a voice that is created by them.” I should clarify that, when this article was written, women-only space at the Centre was actually women-identified-only space, meaning that membership was based on gender identification, as opposed to sex as the term ‘women-only’ suggests. Moreover, while certain events, meetings, and positions in the Centre were women-identified-only, the Centre itself was never classified as women-only space; their resource library has always been open to all members of the university and the local community. I want to stress that this article opposed anti-feminist sentiment, not trans-inclusion, but the Centre, in its current phase of development, would not endorse its contents.

While the Centre no longer identifies as a women’s organization or a women’s space, it still operates as a ‘safer space’ on campus where all people who experience gender oppression can develop a politics of resistance and learn to challenge multiple relations of power and privilege and to confront oppression in the university and society more broadly. Jessica doesn’t think

the Centre has lost anything in the name change. I don’t think the Centre has become an unsafe space because it’s no longer a women’s centre. I’m trying to think of what the concerns would be of making it not a women’s centre other than there won’t be space for women anymore, right? That, then it’s not so much about women, I don’t know, I think that’s okay but not everyone does though. It’s just another way to do it.
The Centre still strives to provide a safer space for those who need a refuge from the white, male dominated culture of the university and larger community. The Centre’s goal to provide anti-oppressive space has not changed, just expanded beyond women. Jessica explains that the name change was important “because it’s supposed to be an anti-oppressive space and inclusive and all that, and it was called a women’s centre and it kind of implies that it’s just for women and that’s kind of exclusive, thus the name change.” According to Jessica, maintaining the Centre as a women’s centre would actually threaten some its main goals and principles, including the commitment to be inclusive.

**Anti-Oppression and the Logic of Trans-Exclusion**

Members of the Centre, instead of being united by a shared gender identity or common oppression as women, are now united by a shared commitment to challenging various forms of oppression and to examining power relations in their own lives. The anti-oppression framework opened the way for this expanded focus on inclusion and accessibility, particularly trans-inclusion (the inclusion of transgender, transsexual, intersexed, and genderqueer individuals in feminist politics and organizations), in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, by recognizing that various forms of oppression support and reinforce each other, the anti-oppression framework put transphobia and (trans) gender oppression on the feminist agenda. Second, by emphasizing that women are perpetrators as well as victims of oppression, the main rationale used by second wave feminists to exclude trans men and women from feminist groups and organizations was effectively debunked.

As I outline in the last chapter, a key principle of the anti-oppression framework is that all forms of oppression are interlocking and cannot be understood in isolation. Transphobia and
trans-exclusion are linked to and experienced alongside other forms of gendered and racialized oppression. Arguing for the importance of trans-feminism, "a feminism that focuses on marginalized gender expressions as well as normative ones," Susan Stryker (2007: 60, 65) suggests that the "measure of an issue's potential is not how many people directly identify with it but, rather, how many other issues it can be linked with in a productive fashion." Stryker (2007: 66) identifies multiple issues that she "can personally articulate through transgender" including, "misogyny, homophobia, racism, looksism, disability, medical colonization, coercive psychiatrization, undocumented labour, border control, state surveillance, population profiling..." She (2007: 66) argues that "If these are your issues as well, then transgender needs to be part of your intellectual and political agenda. It is one of your issues." Transgender issues can be linked to the various forms of oppression the Centre is committed to challenging. So, in order to foster a politics of resistance and develop an anti-oppressive atmosphere, the Centre needed to include transgender as part of its agenda.

The anti-oppression framework at the Centre outlines that all forms of oppression are linked not only because they are often experienced simultaneously, but also because they function to support and reinforce each other. Sexism and transphobia are particularly intertwined and mutually supportive. As Julie Darke and Allison Cope, authors of the Trans-inclusion Policy Manual (2002: 16), note, "transphobia may be one of sexism's most powerful tools. The oppression of women is grounded in the presumption of two distinct genders; the clearer the distinctions the better." Individuals are expected to perform their gender identity in intelligible ways and to adhere to gender norms. Transphobia is aimed not only at transgendered individuals, but also against women (and men) who do not adequately perform their gender.
Anti-feminist backlash often rests on claims that feminists are not “real” women and that the feminist movement threatens the existence of womanhood itself. Feminists have been accused of trying to be men, and threatening the social fabric by rejecting women’s traditional roles. Because it is through gender that one becomes a recognizable subject (one is declared a boy or a girl, a him or a her, a he or a she from the moment of their birth and often earlier), the threat of losing gender status functions as a highly significant and effective mechanism of control (Butler, 2004; Stryker, 2007). As Stryker (2007: 61) argues, “stripping away gender, and misattributing gender, are practices of social domination, regulation and control that threaten social abjection; they operate by attaching transgender stigma to various unruly bodies and subject positions, not just to ‘transgender’ ones.” In this way, transphobia is often used to discredit feminists, secure hegemonic gender norms, and ultimately perpetuate sexism. In order to challenge the oppression and control that is inherent in hegemonic gender norms, it is necessary to challenge the gender binary along with transphobia. The anti-oppression framework at the Centre makes it necessary to take up transgender issues because “social justice for women will not be realized until all forms of discrimination are eliminated, including transphobia” (Darke and Cope, 2002: 16).

Because second wave feminism was largely founded on the principle that women share a common oppression and gender identity that serves as the basis for sisterhood and collective action, “[f]or decades women-only space has played a crucial role in feminist activism” (Sweeney, 2004: 81). Second wave feminists have actively excluded trans man and trans women from their events, groups, and organizations because they believe that trans people threaten the safety of women-only spaces. As Emi Koyoma (2006: 700) notes,

Feminist objections to the inclusion of transsexual women in the women-only space are, on the surface, rationalized on the basis that transsexual women are
fundamentally different from all other women due to the fact that they were raised with male privilege. Because of their past as boys or men, they are viewed as a liability for the physical and emotional safety of other women.

The anti-oppression framework, however, challenges this logic by recognizing the fluid nature of power and privilege. Because the anti-oppression framework acknowledges that women may act as oppressors as well as victims by virtue of their whiteness, heterosexuality, and class privilege, trans men’s and women’s access to ‘male’ privilege is no longer an adequate rationale for trans-exclusion. The failure to consider the differences that exist among women justifies the exclusion of trans women and men from feminist organizations. For this reason, Koyoma (2006: 702) argues that “most if not all rationales for excluding trans women are not only transphobic, but also racist.”

All members of the Centre make a commitment to interrogate their own role in relations of power. If white members of the Centre can interrogate and resist the ways in which they can exercise white privilege, and straight members can recognize how they may benefit from heteronormativity, trans members can also examine how they exercise male privilege. As Paige notes,

its not only the fact that we want to be more trans-inclusive or inclusive of people who don’t identify with a gender at all, those sort of things which are a good part of it. But, it’s also - anyone who comes into our space and anyone who becomes involved with us we encourage to examine their own privilege and their position within hierarchies and within power and all those sorts of things. So, we don’t want to assume that because someone is not female-identified, they can’t go through that same process, so that’s also a big part of it.

Paige expresses the same argument made by Darke and Cope (2005: 15): “Feminism is deeply invested in people’s ability to change and there is no reason that trans or intersex women are limited in this regard” (Darke and Cope, 2002: 15). Employing the principles of the anti-
oppression framework, the Centre and its members have rejected second wave feminism’s logic of trans-exclusion and have attempted to distance themselves from second wave feminism. However, this transition has been complicated and is still in progress.

Identity Politics and Coalition Building

Despite a name change, the Centre has not completely relinquished the idea of being a women’s organization. As with the shift towards an anti-oppression framework, recent changes to policy and praxis, in many cases, have been slow to catch up to changes in goals and theoretical foundations of the Centre. For example, rules about who can staff the Centre and who can be a member of the Collective have been slow to change. When these policies are tackled, members realise that concerns about maintaining the Centre as a safer space for women are largely unresolved. Although the Centre has made trans-inclusion one of its main goals and has rejected the second wave feminist rationale for trans-exclusion, it continues to exclude trans individuals from certain positions at the Centre, particularly the paid staff position of volunteer/programming coordinator. Paige describes this coordinator:

Right now, our volunteering/programming coordinator position is only open to female-identified people, although there are some concerns with that. The reason for that is because one of their big projects is the peer in crisis support program and...the person who had the position before expressed some concerns, saying that a lot of people who did come in for crisis support requested specifically to be able to talk to a female. So, we do have that in our hiring policy for this specific position to ensure that there is some presence there. I think that as that program becomes developed more there is going to have to be a lot more discussion about that, but right now...there’s always going to be more than one person staffing that program but at least one female-identified person has to be there at all times.

The Centre is clearly in a difficult position. It wants to be inclusive but it also wants to be a safer space and support for women (and others) in crisis. Although the Centre’s move towards trans-
inclusion and accessibility has apparently not threatened the safety of the space for women, this hiring policy reveals that this may not actually be the case for all women. As the Centre moves away from identity politics in terms of its mandate, it has not rejected them altogether.

Although the Centre is no longer an organization run by and for women, members recognize that organizing with other members of their social and identity groups (single mothers, women of colour, Muslim women) is an important source of support and empowerment. When I asked Sue about the need for women-only spaces and organizations, she responded,

There are sure...And, I think that’s where rape crisis centres and...centres that work people who have experienced domestic violence...Like, when people are healing, I think there is this, like, desire for sameness, like someone who has experienced something similar to you, whether that is experiencing racism or sexual assault or ableism or queerphobia...Like there is that desire to connect with people...that would understand your experiences. Umm, so yes I think that there are times and places where people will want to connect with that community from the experiences that they have felt. But, I think that when you have a broad resource centre like we are trying to create, then you need to be open to more experiences and to offer support to people...who have wider experiences.

So, while the Centre recognizes the need for people who share similar experiences to organize together, the Centre also aims to be a broad-based resource centre that addresses multiple experiences and identities. In addressing a broad range of social issues and identity groups, the Centre engages in embodied politics, by existing as a coalition-based organization.

As I discuss in Chapter Two, one way third wave activists engage in embodied politics is by “building and working with coalitions to forge an inclusive solidarity” (Fixmer and Wood, 2005: 237). Building an inclusive solidarity is one of the Centre’s key goals, particularly in this most recent phase of its development. In order to achieve this goal the Centre changed its name and its mandate to be inclusive of those who do not identify as women or who do not identify with gender at all. Membership in the Centre itself does not require membership in any
particular identity category. The Centre has been influenced by queer theory and activism, which, Butler (2004: 7) notes, “acquired political salience by insisting that anti-homophobic activism can be engaged in by anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, and that identity markers are not pre-requisites for political participation.” Members of the Centre, including Sue, believe that “people who have privilege to change things need to be involved” in the Centre. In other words, feminism will be a stronger movement if it includes those who suffer from gender oppression as well as those who are privileged by it. The same thing is true of racism; people of colour alone will not end racism, white people must also be engaged in this struggle. While the Centre is not an identity-based organization, it continues to support identity based activism by offering space and resources to identity based groups. The most noteworthy example of this is the Woman of Colour Collective.

The WOCG is an identity-based group. In order to be a member of the WOCG one must self-identify as a woman of colour. Eva explains that membership is open to “anybody who considers themselves a women of colour. And, like we’ve had people who look white who are women of colour...We’ve never really had discussions about trans stuff but I think, at least I’ve been working under the assumption that anyone who identifies as a woman of colour can come, including trans folks who identify as women.” Evidently, the WOCG has not been as focused on being trans-inclusive as the Centre. Although Eva’s comments reveal that the WOCG would likely be inclusive of trans women, as the discussion continues, it becomes clear that trans men and any other men would not be welcome on the WOCG. Eva continues:

I think that anyone who identifies as a woman can be on the collective because I still think that trans men can be quite intimidating and...if they are going to a Woman of Colour Collective thing, they would have to out themselves and I think that is [problematic]...I still think there needs to be a women’s-only space, generally, that’s how I feel about it because people who look like men can be intimidating, you know what I mean? That’s how
I feel about it and I know I’m subject to change and I’m sure my opinion on that could change, I’m still not sure.

Currently, the WOCG is not willing to accept non-woman-identified individuals as members because having trans men or any other men in their group would apparently threaten the safety of its current members. The WOCG is resorting to the logic of trans-exclusion of second wave feminism. Interestingly, however, it is not trans men’s access to privilege that makes their exclusion necessary, but their *appearance* as men. Because “men can be intimidating,” they are not welcome on the WOCG.

For the WOCG, there is still a need for women-identified-only space. Members of the WOCG support trans-inclusion within the Centre and have been vocal on this issue. However, they still want a space that is specifically for women of colour. As an identity-based group, solidarity in the WOCG is built on shared experiences and ‘common oppression.’ I asked the WOCG why women-only space remained important them. They responded:

Eva: Well, I guess its just the whole intersection of oppressions, like, not only do we deal with racism but we deal with sexism on top of that, whether it be from people in our own communities, like ethnic or racial communities, or whether its mainstream culture, we just think it’s important, also because we are feminist group...we’re way more concerned with women’s issues and what it means to be a woman of colour.

Lauren: And I think having a man on the collective would obviously change the dynamic to such a degree. I think that women, especially in second wave feminism, were more concerned about it being a woman dominated space that women are in charge of, and to remove ourselves from an environment where everything else seems to be generally male dominated. So, I think it’s important to have a group of women who are committed to women’s issues specifically, and who know what they are and cannot only sympathize but empathize...I just think when we all start out at common ground and we don’t have to take the time out to explain “well this is why that view is sexist”; that’s so counterproductive. We have to move forward, not just keep explaining feminism 101 to other people.
The WOCG is clearly less influenced by developments in poststructural feminism than the Centre is. Interestingly, members of the WOCG, some of whom classify second wave feminism as a racist movement at other points in the discussion, seem to identify with the founding principles of second wave feminism in ways that the Centre does not. The WOCG continues to believe that it is important for women of colour to organize together because they have the same experiences and share common oppression due to both their race and gender. Ultimately, according to the WOCG it is more effective to organize a movement on the basis of commonality.

As I discuss in the previous chapter, the reverse discourse challenges the dominant discourse by emphasizing that the experiences, perspectives, and concerns of women of colour continue to be marginalized by the Centre. It is important for members of the WOCG to organize with other women of colour because this ensures that the dominant discourse is called out as racist and that women of colour will be comfortable accessing the Centre’s resources and contributing to the Centre’s politics of resistance. The WOCG’s reluctance to address trans-inclusion is, I believe, symptomatic of their efforts to challenge racism within the Centre by keeping the concerns and experiences of women of colour central. This position is supported by Barnoff and Moffatt (2007), who argue that feminists from marginalized groups often object to anti-oppression practice models for two reasons. First, they feel that the oppression they are most concerned with is neglected by the model. Second, they feel that other forms of oppression are given disproportionate attention. This is precisely how members of the WOCG feel. The reverse discourse stresses that the focus on trans-inclusion has not helped the Centre address how it marginalizes women of colour and has functioned to direct attention away from unresolved racial tensions. My analysis suggests that, for the WOCG, taking up trans-inclusion as a key
goal of the group would only serve to support the dominant discourse and further marginalize women of colour.

Despite fundamental differences in their politics, the WOCG and the Centre understand themselves to be working toward the same end. They are both committed to promoting education and awareness of social justice issues and working to further the goals of anti-oppression. That they obviously have different understandings of how best to achieve this does not appear to be problematic for either the Centre or the WOCG. This acceptance of multiple agendas and contradiction is one way the Centre is taking up third wave feminism. Now that I have discussed the process involved in changing the Centre’s name in all its complexity and contradiction, I will briefly discuss some of the structural changes that have occurred in this phase of the Centre’s development, along with some of the challenges it faces as it moves forward in new directions.

Along with changing its name, members made structural changes in the Centre to pursue effectively its new direction. The Centre has expanded its list of core workshops, which all volunteers, staff, and collective members are required to attend. Previously, core workshops included Anti-Oppression/Anti-Racism 101, Crisis Intervention, Conflict Resolution, and Consensus-Based Decision-Making. These workshops remain on the list of core workshops and two additional workshops have been added: Anti-Ableism and Trans/Gender 101. The addition of these workshops suggests that, while the Centre changed its name in order to represent more accurately the new direction it was taking, in order to live up to its new name, it is also necessary to make further changes. Bettie explains that

we’ve had to remind ourselves a lot that we have to change with the name... If we are going to commit to being a centre about diversity and about being more broad then we need to show it. I think that we have been doing that. I think we added more workshops, which is one thing. Like the anti-ableism
one and the Trans 101, weren't part of our core workshops before and I think that that was an important step.

The addition of these workshops provides members with training on a broad range of feminist issues, and particularly those ignored in earlier feminist organizations and movements. The Centre has also taken other steps to ensure that a diverse range of issues are actually being addressed.

In order to ensure that a diversity of issues is being addressed, the Collective has adopted a new system that requires each member to be responsible for a particular area or issue, such as accessibility, gender-inclusion, and building a diverse resource library. This system functions to ensure there is consistency in terms of the issues being addressed and the initiatives taken. Because the Centre is largely volunteer driven, the specific projects, initiatives, and goals undertaken often depend on the Centre's membership. Previously, if there were no volunteers interested in accessibility issues, then these might not be addressed at all. Building a diverse membership with a range of experiences and interests is an important goal for the Centre because it helps to ensure that a diverse range of issues are being addressed. However, it is difficult to recruit members who are interested in diverse issues if these issues are not already being addressed by the Centre. Paige explains this 'catch 22':

I think that because we're volunteer driven and just because of the nature of specific things. So, I think that our goals are reflected by who we are made up of and who comes to the centre as well as working the other way around. So, it's hard to negotiate that, and it's hard to figure out how to understand that, and how to work on that, and what to do with that.

Members acknowledge that diversity in terms of membership is one area where the Centre has much work to do. For the most part, members are white, middle-class, able-bodied, and women-identified. The Centre is not alone in this regard. Much of the literature on feminist organizations identifies creating and maintaining organizing efforts that include people from
diverse social groups as a major challenge (Acker, 1995; Lotz, 2003; Miles, 1995; Young, 1990). However, the Centre is working to overcome this challenge by broadening its focus, working on being inclusive and accessible, and making structural changes to ensure that diversity is a practice and not just a goal.

Just as the anti-oppression framework was officially instituted shortly after an increase in student funding, the Centre also officially changed its name in the year following an increase of student funding in 2005. The most noteworthy aspect of this funding increase is that it allowed the Centre to maintain two full-time staff positions and to expand programming and support. Having these two staff positions, the volunteer/programming coordinator and the administration/outreach coordinator, has allowed the Centre to focus more on the goal of coalition building. As Sue explains,

By creating the two positions, that was the attempt, to try to do more of that coalition work. But, there was only one worker here before, so it’s really hard to coordinate the volunteers, the programming, the events, do coalition work, and the book keeping and the rest of the stuff.

Coalition building has been a key strategy for third wave feminism and for the Centre as it has expanded its focus and become a broad-based resource centre. However, since the Centre has changed its name and made (trans) inclusion a focus, coalition building has presented some challenges.

Many of the organizations the Centre has traditionally had relationships with, like the local rape crisis centre, are second wave feminist organizations. As a result, these organizations continue to understand themselves as women’s organizations and, usually, as women-only spaces. These organizations are not nearly as progressive as the Centre is in this regard, and are often understood by members of the Centre to be transphobic and even racist because they do not employ an anti-oppression framework. As a result of this difference in fundamental principles,
the Centre has, in some cases, chosen not to develop relationships with these organizations or support their events. For some, this is understood as an effective way to resist the tendency in second wave feminism to erase difference and exclude trans people. But for others, this is problematic. For example, Sue notes that “this is not a big city; we need to figure out ways that we can work in coalitions where we don’t quite meet up politically but, umm, where we can be stronger when we work together on a particular issue.” This refusal to work with second wave feminist organizations and other non-trans-positive groups is a controversial issue that needs to be addressed in the Centre. This unofficial policy of not building coalitions with such groups may be partly responsible for the WOCG’s reluctance to address trans issues, as such a policy might prevent the WOCG from forming connections with local ethnic community organizations. Moreover, this unofficial policy reflects the imperialist tendencies of white feminists and their “preoccupations with morality and self” (Srivastava, 2005: 31). Through this boycotting strategy, members of the Centre, and the Collective in particular, construct themselves as good, informed, progressive feminists in opposition to the ignorant, backwards, bad feminists and activists from non-trans-inclusive organizations (Srivastava, 2005). Their mission, it seems, is not to engage in discussion or to work with other groups for social change, but to convert these organizations to their own understanding of feminism. This allows members to maintain their own self-image as good progressive feminists and to ignore the privilege that underlies this specific strategy. After all, the Centre, as a university-based and funded organization, is operating in a completely different context than most other feminist and community organizations.

In addressing this issue it will be important for the Centre to remember the numerous challenges it faced in pursuing (trans) inclusion and particularly in changing its name. The
Centre, like other women's centres who have opted to change their name in favour of trans-inclusion, was threatened with a loss of funding and space by the university administration. Given the institutional reaction to the Centre's change in name and direction, it is not hard to understand why other feminist organizations, and particularly publicly funded service organizations, may be hesitant to take similar steps.

When the Centre informed the university administration of their name change, the initial reaction was positive. But a threat of loss of funding followed. Sue recalls that,

When we were getting the student fees sent to us in our new name, at first the women that I was dealing with was like "sure that's not a problem" then she put me on hold. And, when she came back she was like, maybe you guys should be approved through student affairs because this is a student fee and the referendum was in your old name, student's might not support it... And, so I was really worried because they were also like maybe you need to run a referendum over your name change. I was really worried about that... The Women and Trans Centre at U of T is not getting their student fees from the grad students because the grad student association says that they approved the fee for the U of T Women's Centre, not the Women and Trans Centre. And, that has been a struggle for over a year and yeah it's kind of mind boggling that people would withhold the money because they don't think they support this "trans stuff".

Because the student referendum was passed so soon before the name change at the Centre occurred, the university administration felt that a new referendum may be required to ensure that students actually support funding the Centre. Although Sue finds it "mind boggling" that people might not support the goals and the work of the Centre, Bettie and Tracy explain why the university threatened the Centre with a loss of funding and space:

Bettie: I think that before it was obvious, or it looked obvious to somebody who didn't have a further analysis of feminism, it's like well there's inequality between men and women and you're fighting it so therefore you're okay. Whereas now, at least I feel, like we have a bit more of a struggle proving ourselves to be worthy to people who don't know that much about what we're doing. Umm, like the university asking for a review of our space. I can't say that that's why, but I do think that that has to do with the name change because now it is not so obvious what we are doing.
They're like: well that was supposed to be a space for women so, you know, what are you doing now? That's how it felt to me, was that it's kind of like now that you're not so obviously fighting this kind of socially accepted fight...

Tracy: It's more threatening!

According to Betty and Tracy, the goals of the Centre are more threatening now than they were when the Centre was still identified as a women's centre. In Canadian society, and academic settings in particular, there is a discursive commitment to equality between the sexes. However, to challenge the notion of two distinct sexes and genders is threatening both to the social order and to individual subject's own sense of self and identity. Furthermore, the goals and mandate of the Centre in this phase of its development are not immediately evident to those who are not familiar with recent developments and shifts in feminist, poststructuralist, queer, and trans theory. The Centre is no longer easily classified because they are not concerned with any one issue or social group; they are concerned with addressing multiple issues, oppressions, identities, and agendas.

The current phase of the Centre's development has involved many contradictions and challenges. In this chapter I show that the goal of trans-inclusion has not been taken up equally by all members of the Centre, as the WOCG continues to function as a women-identified-only group. Trans-inclusion has also not been applied to all of the Centre's policies, as some positions (i.e. the volunteer/promotion coordinator position) at the Centre are still designated women-only. My analysis suggests that one of the most difficult challenges the Centre faces in this phase of its development is balancing the goal of inclusivity that of making sure the Centre is a safer space for all of its members. The Centre also faces the challenge of finding ways to work with local second wave feminist organization and community groups that are not trans-inclusive
and do not function according to anti-oppression principles. The tensions between second and third wave feminism are particularly evident in this phase of the Centre's development.

Conclusion

My goal in this chapter was to explore how the focus on trans-inclusion and accessibility emerged and how it has been maintained through changes to the Centre's structure, policy, training initiatives, and especially the Centre's name. I have demonstrated that the key principles of the anti-oppression framework have contributed to an understanding that transphobia and trans(gender) oppression are important feminist issues, and have served to challenge the second wave feminist rationale for trans-exclusion. Ultimately, I have argued that this focus on trans-inclusion at the Centre emerged as an affect of the anti-oppression framework as the Centre's members have continued to constitute third wave feminism.

As part of their commitment to trans-inclusion, members of the Centre changed the organizational name so it is no longer identified as a women's centre. Members now understand the Centre to be a broad-based resource centre that addresses multiple issues. I have provided an in-depth discussion of the process, justification, and implications of the Centre's name change. I have found that the name was changed in order to live up to the anti-oppression framework and to make explicit that the Centre is not just for women, but for all those who experience gender oppression. I argue that the name change was, for members, an effective way to distance themselves from associations with second wave feminism so that the Centre can continue to move in new directions.

The dominant discourse emphasizes the Centre's drive to be inclusive, and the name change is understood to reflect that drive. The reverse discourse, however, highlights the ways in
which women of colour are excluded from full participation in the Centre. I argue that the WOCG has not adopted the goal of trans-inclusion and continues to operate as an identity-based group largely in reaction to the continued oppression and marginalization of women of colour by the Centre. Members of the WOCG suggest that while members of the Centre may have changed its name in order to distance the Centre from associations with white dominated feminist organizations, this does not mean that the Centre is no longer white dominated. Instead, the name change constitutes another way that anti-oppressive language obscures how power and privilege operate in the organization. Moreover, the fact that the Collective has chosen to engage their trans politics by boycotting non-trans-positive groups may function further to marginalize women of colour as this strategy may cut off the WOCG from much of their community base. While the dominant discourse understands this boycotting strategy to be an effective way to resist trans-exclusion and the erasure of difference, the reverse discourse stresses that this strategy is just another example of how the concerns of white feminists continue to be dominant at the Centre and women of colour continue to be marginalized.

Since its new name was officially adopted in 2006, the Centre has undergone changes to its structure, policies, documents, and training initiatives. These changes have aimed to make the Centre more inclusive and exemplify how the shift from second to third wave feminism has materialized at the Centre. Ultimately, the Centre has responded to the shift in feminist theory from second to third wave by attempting to distance itself from second wave feminism and actively taking up the theoretical perspectives, goals, and strategies of third wave feminism.
Chapter Six
Conclusions

A shift in feminist theory away from an emphasis on second wave notions of sisterhood and women’s commonality toward a focus on difference, multiplicity, and intersectionality suggests a need for new forms of practice in feminist organizations. The goal of this organizational ethnography was to trace how this shift from second to third wave feminism has materialized and been maintained at the Centre. I have argued that this shift involved two different phases. In the first phase, members of the Centre adopted an anti-oppression framework whose key principles challenged second wave feminist theory and reflected the insights of anti-racist and poststructuralist feminist theory. In the second phase of this shift, members changed the name of the Centre to further distance themselves from second wave feminism and to pursue the goals of inclusion, diversity, and anti-oppression. Both of these phases involved new practices as the Centre adjusted its goals, policies, mandate, and organizational culture.

In Chapter Three I examined the founding phase of the Centre’s development and argued that, although the Centre emerged out of second wave feminism and shared second wave feminist concerns about sexism, from the beginning members of the Centre were also critical of second wave feminism. Throughout its development the Centre has been influenced by critiques of second wave feminism and has developed largely in response to these critiques. In particular, the Centre, from the outset, has been wary of notions of ‘sisterhood’ and ‘common oppression.’ There was much discussion among members about the erasure of difference in second wave feminism, and of white domination and privilege. These discussions were informed by anti-racist feminism and resulted in new understandings and perspectives at the Centre. Members of
the Centre broadened its mandate so that ‘women’s issues’ is now understood to include racism, poverty, homophobia, colonialism, and immigration. This redefinition signals the first phase of the shift from second wave feminism to third wave feminism at the Centre.

This new understanding of what qualifies as ‘women’s issues’ is reflected in the 2001 Vision and Basis of Unity, which official instituted an anti-oppression framework at the Centre. In Chapter Four I argued that the adoption of this framework reflects a shift away from second wave feminism as third wave feminism is constituted at the Centre. The key principles of the anti-oppression framework hold that all forms of oppression are linked and function to reinforce each other, all struggles for social justice must also be linked and mutually supportive, power and privilege are relational, and feminists must continually interrogate the ways in which they exercise power and privilege. These principles are central to third wave feminist ideology and are influenced by both anti-racist and poststructural feminist theory.

The Centre’s anti-oppression framework reflects new theoretical perspectives that challenge the founding principles of second wave feminism. The Centre no longer ascribes to second wave feminist theories that “assumed that ‘Woman’ could be defined as the subject of feminism, that an essential truth or commonality exists for all women, and this ‘truth’ forms the basis for advocating the rights and emancipation of the female subject” (Armstrong, 2006: 174). Throughout interviews, participants challenged this position, focusing instead on the importance of recognizing that each person’s perspective and experiences are situated and that we need to interrogate how we act as oppressors. Indeed, the anti-oppression framework has functioned to challenge the universal “Woman” of second wave feminism, which was highly inscribed with white femininity.
Members of the Centre have attempted to avoid and the erasure of difference that was characteristic of much second wave feminism. They have made an official commitment to challenge white privilege and dominance in the Centre and in society more broadly. However, white femininity continues to be reproduced at the Centre. The anti-oppressive language, behaviour, and style of communication that members learn have the unintended consequence of further marginalizing those who do not identify with or practice white middle-class femininity. The continuing marginalization of women of colour by the Centre suggests that self-reflection and interrogation are not always practiced and are not always successful at revealing how power and privilege are exercised. Individualistic self-interrogation fails to bring about substantial change in the organization, precisely because it is individualistic; it allows members of the Centre, and the Collective in particular, to ignore larger systemic and policy issues. However, this commitment to self-interrogation has been important to the development of the Centre and all my participants agree that this commitment is vital to feminist praxis.

The key principles of the Centre’s anti-oppression framework challenge not only the universal ‘Woman’ of second wave feminism, but the very notion of organizing around the category of ‘woman’ at all. Indeed, they challenge the second wave logic of trans-exclusion and make trans-inclusion and accessibility an important part of anti-oppressive feminist practice. The Centre’s transition to a more broad-based feminist resource centre has not been without complications or contradictions. The process of constituting third wave feminism has been messy and scary. However, as members continue to negotiate the goals and mandate, the Centre will continue to develop new characteristics and strategies of inclusion. In fact, many participants suggested that it is this quality of transition and continuous negotiation that best describes the Centre and the third wave feminist politics being practiced and developed there.
The dominant discourse at the Centre understands the story of the Centre to be one of progress and evolution. Many participants define the type of feminism being practiced and developed at the Centre as ‘dynamic’ and ‘expanding’. They understand feminist politics at the Centre not to be defined by any particular agenda or theoretical perspective, but by a willingness to engage with and negotiate multiple perspectives, agendas, and theoretical frameworks. According to the dominant discourse, the evolution and progress that is characteristic of the Centre’s development is not leading to an end state of complete social justice or perfect anti-oppression. Although social justice and anti-oppression are goals that drive the Centre, the feminism materializing there is about process. In other words, anti-oppression and inclusion are paths, not destinations. This understanding reflects poststructural notions of power, which understand power as a relation and not a thing, and is an important insight for feminist politics. However, this understanding is also risky. The belief that the Centre will never be perfect, that the goal should be to make the Centre more accessible and inclusive, can function to excuse members from doing more difficult anti-oppressive work.

The dominant discourse emphasizes the Centre’s drive to be inclusive and focuses on anti-oppressive language and practices, not policies and systems. In interviews, volunteers and members of the Collective stressed the importance of anti-oppressive language, which has expanded their awareness and encouraged them to think in new, anti-oppressive ways. The Centre’s name change was identified as a key way to demonstrate its commitment to anti-oppression and inclusion. Recognizing the significance of language and practicing resistance through language are important ways to practice embodied politics and to challenge relations of power and privilege. However, language change alone is not an effective form of feminist praxis. I am not suggesting that it is only language that has changed at the Centre; I am
suggesting is that this focus on language has been narrow, excusing members from addressing and interrogating other ways that power and privilege function at the Centre. Members of the WOCG suggest that this focus on anti-oppressive language actually reveals members’ discomfort with difference, and functions to camouflage how power and privilege are exercised in the Centre.

The reverse discourse about the Centre does not deny that it has progressed and evolved, but it does emphasize that many things have stayed the same as women of colour continue to be marginalized and whiteness continues to operate in the ‘safer space’ of the Centre. White privilege and racism seem to be issues that are more difficult to address than gender and sexuality, and these issues, particularly since the Centre name has changed, have been given rather superficial analysis by the Centre. The WOCG has made these issues central to their analysis and initiatives. However, in developing oppositional strategies to reveal and resist the dominant discourse, the WOCG has resorted to a focus on common oppression reminiscent of second wave feminism.

What my analysis has shown is that the shift in theory from a second wave focus on commonality to a third wave focus on difference and multiplicity is complicated in practice and is still very much in progress. Indeed, aspects of second wave feminism, such as the WOCG’s focus on common oppression and the Collective’s decision to continue to have certain positions in the centre designated as women-only, linger and produce significant tensions in the Centre. Members, particularly new volunteers and collective members, have shifted their attention to addressing trans-inclusion and accessibility, but they have done this at the cost of addressing the role that whiteness continues to play in the organizational culture. Members of the WOCG continue to work at challenging racism in the Centre, but they risk homogenizing women of
colour and perpetuating transphobia. Despite shifting to a third wave focus on difference and multiplicity, a discomfort with difference clearly remains at the Centre. These tensions are particularly visible through a poststructural lens that emphasizes articulating axes of identity and oppression and the decentred and relational nature of power and privilege.

Poststructural theory has often been criticized for being divorced from practice (Hartmann et al., 1996). However, this case study illustrates that the theoretical contributions of poststructural feminists are not only useful, but necessary to social justice projects. Poststructural feminists provide a theoretical framework to describe and represent a major shift in social justice politics and practice that is exemplified by the development of the Centre. This framework is also useful for guiding practice in feminist organizations. Members of the Centre are employing poststructural notions of power as decentred and relational and of identity as shifting and multiply constituted, in both the anti-oppression framework and the current focus on trans-inclusion. These insights are essential to third wave feminist theory and practice. However, building a politics of resistance that recognizes multiplicity, difference, and diversity and aims to challenge all forms of oppression is no easy task.

My analysis suggests that attempts to challenge oppression, regardless of how theoretically sound they may be, often function to re-inscribe oppression in ways that may not be apparent to those who have greater access to power and privilege. Interrogation and reflexivity are important tools for feminist praxis because they allow activists to develop better strategies for social change. As I demonstrate, however, these tools are only successful if feminists actually develop an awareness of the complex and multiple ways in which we exercise power and privilege. Members of the Centre are engaged in self-interrogation and work to change their practice to be more anti-oppressive and inclusive, and yet the strategies they develop
inadvertently re-inscribe whiteness in the organizational culture and thus marginalize women of colour. Members of the WOCG have developed oppositional strategies to call out and challenge racism and whiteness in the Centre, but these strategies involve a process of subjectification that threatens to homogenize and essentialize women of colour. It is not possible for me to judge whether or not the strategies that are being developed at the Centre and in the WOCG to challenge oppression are a complete success. Indeed, the efficacy of these strategies really depends on who you ask. Developing anti-oppressive feminist praxis is complicated because the meaning attached to these strategies is neither singular nor fixed. Different meanings emerge out of the different discourses about the Centre's development and the different subject positions that emerge from those discourses. These different meanings present major tensions at the Centre. Third wave feminism accepts contradiction and multiple agendas as a necessary part of feminist movement, so while the Centre may not necessarily be interested in solving these tensions, it seems to me that it will be necessary for members to address them.

Addressing the tensions that have emerged in the shift from second to third wave feminism at the Centre will entail better communication and dialogue both between the Collective and the WOCG, and between the Centre and other community groups and feminist organizations. This dialogue and communication is necessary in order to pursue systemic and policy changes at the Centre. The Centre as a whole needs to dialogue with local second wave feminist organizations and other community groups to form effective political strategies and coalitions to work for social change in the local community. This dialogue will require members to recognize that the Centre is privileged by its location at the university and that other feminist organizations and community groups may not have access to the same strategies of resistance. Better communication between the Collective and the WOCG is also needed. Now that the
WOCG has their own budget, the possibility of open dialogue with equitable power relations is more realistic. The Centre would benefit from employing new strategies of resistance that are developed by the Collective and the WOCG together, and that might emerge from such a dialogue. The diversity of the Collective's membership is one particular area where new strategies and approaches are needed. Members need to find ways to make the Collective more inclusive and accessible to women of colour. The Collective is the main decision-making body at the Centre, and if it is not accessible to women of colour, it is unlikely that the Centre's itself will be.

While I have been critical of the feminist praxis being developed at the Centre and of both the dominant and reverse discourses, my aim is not to discredit the Centre or third wave feminism. I identify with and support the goals of third wave feminism and I believe that organizations and groups such as the Centre play an important part in struggles for social justice. Instead of merely responding to the development of the third wave, members of the Centre are engaged in the difficult and complicated task of actually constituting third wave feminism. This had been a contradictory, messy, and scary project, but it is also vital to feminist politics. My aim in this thesis was not only to explore how the shift from second wave to third wave feminism has occurred at the Centre in order for other scholars and organizations to learn from this process, but also to record the history of an organization that has significantly affected my own development as a feminist. Few records about feminist organizations, particularly university-based women's centres, exist. This work reflects my belief that these organizations are important and worthy of study. However, I also hope that this study contributes to improved dialogue, reflection, and interrogation both at the Centre and in feminist organizations more broadly. This research has provided an opportunity for participants, and all members of the
Centre, to think critically about the feminism they are developing and the strategies they use in the name of that feminism. If I am right, then this thesis does not threaten the Centre, but actually contributes to its goals.

In concluding this project, my thoughts are best expressed by Lauren's comment that, “The good news is that in third wave feminism we are making conscious decisions to try to be more inclusive, but I think that some of our tools still need a little mending.” That third wave praxis at the Centre is not perfect does not mean that it should be abandoned, but it cannot be accepted as it is either. My analysis has led me to conclude that while the key principles of the anti-oppression framework represent a significant and positive advancement in feminist politics, the tools the Centre has developed to serve these principles need mending. I cannot offer any definite answers as to how these tools can be improved, but what I can say is that Centre needs to engage in open dialogue and reflection about these tools. This research has been successful in tracing the shift from second wave feminism to third wave feminism in the Center and in providing a critical analysis of the goals, principles, mandate, initiatives, and practices at the Centre. I have uncovered certain tensions in the Centre that are significant and that deserve further consideration. In particular, the question of how best to communicate and organize across difference needs to be investigated further.

The most notable tensions in the Centre are those between the Centre and local second wave feminist organizations, and between the Collective and the WOCG. These tensions in the Centre reflect larger tensions in feminist theory and politics and deserve attention in subsequent enquiries. The contentious relationship between third wave feminism and second wave feminism has been considered by feminist scholars who identify how second and third wave principles differ (Henry, 2004, 2005; Lotz, 2003; Pinterics, 2001; Steenbergen, 2001). My
analysis of the Centre suggests that these differences lead to a lack of communication and solidarity between feminist groups and organizations. The question of how third wave feminist organizations can or do work with second wave feminist organizations and other community groups or social justice organizations to pursue a particular initiative is one that feminist theorists and activists would benefit from exploring. What strategies or tools are second wave feminists, third wave feminists, and other social justice activists developing to communicate and to work together or support each other? How are racism and white privilege being addressed and considered in feminist organizations? What tools and programs are being developed by feminists to address racism and marginalization in feminist organizations? White members of the Centre understand how to contribute to the struggle against racism and how to become allies in this struggle, but in practice their strategies have been largely unsuccessful and have even further marginalized women of colour. What other strategies and tools are feminists developing to address these issues and to build social movements and organizations that are inclusive and anti-racist? The theoretical and racial tensions that my research has identified need to be addressed in more detail as feminist activists continue to work at developing better tools to further social justice and equity.

I have written this thesis in order to engage in and incite critical reflection and dialogue about feminist praxis and the many complex ways that feminist theory gets put into practice. My research illuminates many of the possibilities, limitations, challenges, and tensions of organizing across difference and in inclusive ways. The question of how feminist organizations change and adapt over time is central to social justice theory. In this thesis I have contributed to social justice theory by clarifying how the rather complex shift from second wave to third wave feminism has occurred in one particular feminist organization. However, this work serves only
as a beginning; there are many more questions that still need to be asked. I can only hope that the work I have presented here will encourage the reader to engage in critical reflection and dialogue about feminist praxis, and ultimately, to ask the difficult questions.
Bibliography


LETTER OF INVITATION

October 10, 2007

Title of Study: The Shifting Terrain of Feminist Theory and Activism: University-Based Women’s Centres and Third Wave Feminism

Principal Investigator: Lindsay Adams, MA Candidate, Department of Social Justice & Equity Studies, Brock University

Faculty Supervisor(s): Nancy Cook, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Brock University
Margot Francis, Assistant Professor, Department of Women’s Studies, Brock University

I, Lindsay Adams, MA Candidate, from the Department of Social Justice and Equity Studies, Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled “The Shifting Terrain of Feminist Theory and Activism: University Based Women’s Centres and Third Wave Feminism.”

The purpose of this research is to determine how and to what extent university-based feminist organizations have been effected by and responded to a shift in feminist theory from a broadly ‘second wave’ emphasis on ‘sisterhood’ and women’s commonality to a ‘third wave’ framework that emphasizes difference and aims to address multiple identities and social injustices. This project will take to form of an intensive case study of the [Centre] (formerly the [Women’s Centre]).

As you are / were an active member of the [Centre] (formerly the [Women’s Centre]), I would like to talk to you about your involvement in the Centre and the sort of feminist praxis that is / was occurring there.

I am requesting your involvement in a focus group interview that will also be attended by 5-9 other members of the [Centre]. The focus group interview will last approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted by me, and, with your permission, tape recorded to facilitate collection of information. The tape will be fully transcribed later for analysis.

All aspects of our conversation will be treated confidentially. Only my supervisors and I will hear the tape, or read the transcript of it. Neither your name nor other identifying characteristics will be associated with what you say. The publications that result from this research will include quotations of things you say, and may include a general description of your situation (i.e. as a member of the Collective, as a former member of the Centre etc.), but they will not include material that identifies you. To ensure this, I will provide you with a copy of the interview transcript so you can add, delete or change details. In this way, you can verify the information and ensure that you cannot be identified. The data will be filed and stored in my home for approximately five years after the completion of this project at which point it will be destroyed.

Should you agree to participate in this research project, you will be free to end your involvement at any time. Also, after the focus group interview is complete, you may instruct me at any time to cease using your responses in my research. If you wish to withdraw from the study, please contact me using the above contact information. All records will be kept confidential, and stored in a secure location.

After your interview has been transcribed, you will receive a copy to read, edit, and discuss with me, as you wish. And once all of the data has been analyzed, I will send you a summary of the results for comment, as well as the references to the publications that result from this research project.

There will be no payment for your participation. In this interview we will be discussing the Centre’s goals, principles and practice including your own experience of participation. We will also be discussing how the Centre
may have influenced your own development, thought and practice as well as how the Centre itself may have changed over time. Because we will be discussing both personal and interpersonal experiences, this research does potentially pose minimal psychological and social risks such as emotional stress and loss of reputation. However, these risks are no greater than those you might encounter in your everyday life and work at the Centre.

By participating in this research you will be contributing to knowledge and discussion about feminist praxis and the history of feminist activism in Canada. This research will benefit the scientific community by contributing to knowledge about feminist organizations and activism. Moreover, this research will potentially benefit feminist organizations as it will provide a detailed account of the feminist praxis occurring in one particular organization and will document how that praxis has changed or shifted in response to shifts in feminist theory. This case study will potentially provide a useful resource or model for other organizations and groups that are negotiating the same theoretical shifts and will, hopefully, inspire and provide a space for critical reflection and dialogue about feminist praxis.

This single-site research project is being funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada – Award # 766-2007-0538.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Officer (905 688-5550 ext 3035, reb@brocku.ca)

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you,

Lindsay Adams  
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This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University’s Research Ethics Board (file # 07-048) and the University of Guelph’s Research Ethics Board (file # 07SE033)
INFORMED CONSENT

Date:

Project Title: The Shifting Terrain of Feminist Theory and Activism: University-Based Women’s Centres and Third Wave Feminism

Principal Investigator: Lindsay Adams  
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Thank you for your willingness to participate in an interview. When you sign this form I will begin recording our conversation.

As you know, I am conducting an MA thesis research project that investigates how and to what extent university-based feminist organizations have been effected by and responded to a shift in feminist theory from a broadly ‘second wave’ emphasis on ‘sisterhood’ and women’s commonality to a ‘third wave’ framework that emphasizes difference and aims to address multiple identities and social injustices.

This is meant to be a conversational group interview that is directed as much by you and the other participants as by me. I have a sheet of paper that reminds me of the issues I would like to address. But I am interested to understand your experiences, and your thoughts about them, so I hope you will introduce issues that seem important to you at any time. You are also free to end a line of discussion as you see fit.

If you find some topic difficult to talk about, please let me know. You can end the interview at any time, or ask questions at any time. Feel free to ask me about the purpose of a question or have me answer any of my own questions. At the end of our conversation I will ask if you would like anything we discussed to be removed from the tape.

Given the format of this session, we ask that you respect your fellow participants by keeping all information that identifies or could potentially identify a participant and/or his/her comments confidential.

All aspects of our conversation will be treated confidentially. Only I and my supervisors will hear the tape, or read the transcript of it. Neither your name nor other identifying characteristics will be associated with what you say. The publications that result from this research will include quotations of things you say, and may include a general description of your situation (as a member of the Collective, as a member of the Women of Colour Group etc.), but they will not include material that identifies you. To ensure this, I will provide you with a copy of the interview transcript so you can add, delete or change details. In this way, you can verify the information and ensure that you cannot be identified. The data will be filed and stored in my home for approximately five years after the completion of this project at which point it will be destroyed.

This focus group interview will take approximately 90 minutes of your time. You are also invited to schedule an individual follow-up interview with me, if you feel this is necessary. An individual follow-up interview will provide an additional opportunity for you to discuss your experiences at the Centre that you might not feel comfortable discussing in a group interview.
By participating in this research you will be contributing to knowledge and discussion about feminist praxis and the history of feminist activism in Canada. This research will benefit the scientific community by contributing to knowledge about feminist organizations and activism. Moreover, this research will potentially benefit feminist organizations as it will provide a detailed account of the feminist praxis occurring in one particular organization and will document how that praxis has changed or shifted in response to shifts in feminist theory. This case study will potentially provide a useful resource or model for other organizations and groups that are negotiating the same theoretical shifts and will, hopefully, inspire and provide a space for the critical reflection and dialogue about feminist praxis.

You will not be paid for your participation. This research does potentially pose minimal psychological and social risks such as emotional stress and loss of reputation. However, these risks are no greater than those you might encounter in your everyday life and work at the Centre.

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be presented at the Centre before my thesis is submitted. Information about any further publications or presentations will be provided to the Centre. If you would like to personally be informed about publications and presentations, please indicate this below.

This single-site research project is being funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada – Award #766-2007-0538

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the Principal Investigator or the Faculty Supervisor using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (File # 07-048 ADAMS) and the research board at this university. (File # 07SE33). If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext: 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

I agree in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw consent at any time.

________________________ __________________________
(signature) (date)

________________________
(contact information)

________________________
(pseudonym)

If you would like to receive notification about the publication and presentation of these results, please provide an e-mail address where this information can be sent:
INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. Opening Question:
Please start by telling us your name, how long you have been involved in the Centre and why you initially became involved in the Centre.

II. Introductory Question:
1. What is the [Centre]?
2. What kind of work is carried out in and by the Centre?

Probes:
What are some of the initiatives you have been involved with?
How do these relate to the Centres Goals?
What initiatives do you think have been the most significant, successful, challenging etc.?

3. What role does the Collective / Women of Colour Group / Volunteers play at the Centre?

Probes:
Why is this group necessary?
How long has this group existed?
Who is in this group, who can become a member?
How does one become a member?

III. Transition Questions:
4. What are the guiding values or principles of the [Centre]?
5. The Centre functions under an anti-oppression framework, what does that mean?
6. How did the commitment to an anti-oppression framework develop at the Centre? What is the history of this process?

Probes:
How is this commitment to anti-oppression expressed in the goals of the centre?
Has this commitment influenced membership? How?
Has this commitment influenced the management structure at the Centre?
Has this commitment to anti-oppression influenced your own personal thought and practice? How?
What challenges does the anti-oppression framework pose?

7. To your knowledge, was this anti-oppression framework part of the founding principles of the [Centre] or was it adopted over time?

IV. Key Questions:
8. What are the main goals of the Centre right now?
9. The Centre recently changed its name from the [Women's Centre] to the [Centre], why was the Centres name changed?

10. How did this name change occur? What was the process involved in this name change?

11. In what ways is the [Centre] different from the [Women's Centre]?

12. Do you think there is still a need for women’s only space and women’s organizations? Why? Why not?

**Probes:**

What has been the reaction to this change?

Along with the change in name have there been any other changes in the centre for example in terms of membership, mandate, initiatives, goals, training etc?

What have been the advantages, disadvantages, challenges etc. of this name change?

13. What, if any, is the relationship between the [Centre] and the Women's Movement?

14. What, if any, is the relationship between Women's Studies at the University and the [Centre]? Have there been any connections between the ideas taught in classes on contemporary feminist and anti-racist theory and the changes that have occurred in the [Centre]?

**V. Ending Questions:**

14. How has being involved in the [Centre] influenced your own development, thought and practice?

15. How have you influenced the development of the [Centre]?

16. What significant learnings are emerging at the Centre?

17. What important work still needs to be done?

**VI. Concluding Questions:**

18. All things considered, if you had to describe the sort of feminism being developed and practiced at the [Centre], what would you say?

19. Have I missed anything?