

**GRADUATE STUDENT ACTIVISTS BECOMING
“ACTIVIST ACADEMICS”**

by

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ABSTRACT

This project begins from the researcher's lived "tensions" as an academic in activist community, and as a feminist activist entering the academy. The investigation takes up critical pedagogy's methods of mutual dialogue and critical reflection to explore the community-based involvement and research methodologies of activist academics. The thesis particularly considers the ways in which troubles and complements between activism and the academy characterize graduate students' trajectory toward becoming "activist academics."

Discussion with twelve activist-oriented graduate students reflecting on their experiences suggests that, across disciplines and interests, activist graduate students may share experiences situating them similarly as novices, learning to participate in the practices of an activist academic *community of practice*. For some, activism is the starting point for academic work, while others develop commitment to community involvement through, and beyond their thesis research. However, as participants recall "getting their hands dirty" in the discursive work of activist communities, all describe having developed skills and knowledge that overlap and integrate in both academic and activist work.

This inquiry applies an institutional ethnography analysis to participants' critical reflections on the "tensions" for them of activist scholarship. Such an approach brings into view the discourses, relationships, and institutionalized procedures constraining and organizing action in both activist and academic settings. While participants recall difficulties in negotiating the written and unwritten rules of the academy's procedures, relationships, and discourse, they also expose relations within ostensibly counter-hegemonic activist settings that resemble mainstream (class, race, and gender) social stratification. This brings into view the ruling relations enacted in both community and academic settings.

Strikingly, eleven of the sampled thirteen community-involved or activist participants are women, people of colour, working class, and/or lesbian/gay/queer. While these "outsider" students describe particular difficulties and tensions in the intersections of identity, community, and academy, nonetheless, ten participants continue in academic careers incorporating community interests. The study concludes by considering some possible implications of this juxtaposition, and asks in what ways activist community involvement might prepare "outsider" students, in particular, for academic success.

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

From a novice activist academic's standpoint: Overview of the project

This project emerges from the researcher's experience of living in the tension of multiple identities and multiple communities as feminist anti-violence activist, SFU grad student, corporate hack, and lesbian woman-about-town. This project studies a selection of graduate-level theses and dissertations¹ written by researchers identified by themselves or others as "activist academics": researchers who seem to engage with the problem of trying to work concurrently, as I do, as both activists and academics. The study considers the graduate research of twelve students who undertook their degrees since 1994 at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and University of British Columbia (UBC), a sampling that may form a loose, local community of researchers who have used the same libraries, shared some of the same supervisors, and many who know each other.

These students' careers as activists and academics locate each of them within a trajectory of becoming members of a shared community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and developing identities in common as activist academics. As a sort of subculture relative to mainstream academic communities, participants in such a community may share research values, theoretical frameworks, and practices. In particular, we may see that concepts and methodologies from popular education, critical pedagogy, and participatory and activist research, as well as frameworks in common are drawn from community activist discourse and practice. Engaging with both the texts produced by these researchers and their recollection of their lived experiences as graduate students, this study discusses some of the common events characterizing the movement of these academic "newcomers" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to increasing participation with and knowledge of the identities, tools, artifacts, and sociocultural

¹Masters theses selected for this study are: Atkinson, (1998); Ashe, (1999); Bennett, (2002); Bose (2002); Malange, (1998); Ogden, (1994); Sharma, (1995); Uzelman, (2002). Doctoral Dissertations selected are: Meiners, (1998); Ibanez Carrasco, (1999). Two students are referred to by pseudonyms throughout this paper. One of these has received her Master of Arts degree, while the other continues to work on her thesis.

practices, (Lave and Wenger 1991) of a primarily text-based community of activist-oriented academics.

This research is concerned with research participants who are enough “like” me that I might hope to learn from their experience of integrating graduate research and activist work, and whose experience might assist to explicate and elucidate the “tensions” I perceived as I sought to design graduate-level research that might “matter.” About research beginning in one’s own experience, Himani Bannerji writes:

There is no better point of entry into a critique or reflection than one’s own experience. It is not the end point, but the beginning of an exploration of the relationship between the personal and the social and therefore political and this connecting process, which is also a discovery, is the real pedagogic science, the “science” of social science. (1995, p.550)

Beginning from reflection on my own efforts working to integrate activism into academic work, I sought others who had recently completed their degrees, and who might, therefore, have shared available theoretical perspectives, similar institutional structures and local supports, and perhaps, experienced similar “tensions” between activist community involvement and the academy. The search for other activist-oriented student researchers has relied heavily on a practice of community mapping and network building. In order to locate some of “neighbours” in this community of activist academics, I navigated through a series of connections between students, connections visible in their texts or made through personal contact. In effect, mine has been a snowball sampling approach (Blaxter et al 2001, p.92). Integrating data gathered through textual analysis and interviewing, this project aims to generate a “map” of the links and tensions of concurrent activist and academic work. The view from the standpoint² of the sample “community” of graduate students will generate an analysis of ways in which socially progressive graduate-level research might be constrained—or guided and supported—by the academic institution and activist communities. Further, it will explore

² Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990, 1999) uses the term “standpoint”, as do other feminist (e.g. Hartsock, 1995) and Marxist theorists to denote a particular, concrete position in the political economy of a society, and therefore, the view of the world that is possible from that position. This inquiry takes the standpoint of a (feminist) activist newcomer to progressive, transformative, or ‘critical’ academic inquiry in order to interrogate those modes of inquiry themselves.

ways in which graduate students learn to negotiate the seemingly divergent practices and ideologies of academia and activism.

Research questions

Potentially assisting future graduate student researchers to make optimal use of their university-based tools and resources, this research offers perspectives about what participants deemed to be both “effective” and “unsuccessful” about their own intersecting work as academics and activists. Building on the work of others who have considered “how [graduate level] academic work could be linked concretely with social change,” (Coates et al., 1998, p.342), this thesis asks:

- In what ways has a critical education, or an activist, social change agenda been pursued in graduate level academic research? How have links and “tensions” between activist communities and academic settings been conceived of and enacted by graduate student researchers?
- What methodologies, ethics, and academic accomplishments have characterized the lived experience of graduate students who have pursued research concerned with a “progressive,” “activist,” or “social change” agenda?
- In what ways, and to what extent might the research participants be members of a community of practice of *activist academics*? What are the relationships, practices, and connections among members and outsiders, and among “newcomers” and “old-timers” (Lave and Wenger 1991) to activist-oriented academic scholarship? What are the shared values, beliefs, or ideologies supporting shared practices among activist scholars in the academy?

In support of these questions, the research asks:

- What are the relationships for *activist academics* between their activist communities and their scholarly communities? What are the tensions and synergies, and how do students engage them personally and explicitly in their (published) work?
- What is the effect or impact of activist-oriented thesis research upon research subjects, the student’s career as activist and academic, and wider communities?

This project can be described as “meta-research,” concerned with identifying and analyzing a collection of researchers who have themselves engaged the ethical and ideological

position that “there is no neutral research” (Lather, 1991, p. 266) and have, therefore, taken on the task of conducting research whose practices and frameworks aim to transform the world (for the “better”). This study considers the experiences of thirteen graduate students (including myself) who describe themselves or have been described by others as “activists” or “activist academics,” pursuing action toward a vision of progressive social change. This thesis does not attempt to situate the work of the participants in political (or moral) terms relative to (one another’s or some absolute) social progressiveness, as social progressiveness and social justice are highly subjective. Indeed, many causes that I, for example, consider politically regressive certainly have their own activists and intellectuals mobilized around them.

Introducing graduate student activist academics

Folks of diverse ethnicities, socio-economic classes, ages, and sexualities, abilities, and interests populate my east Vancouver neighbourhood. Through interactions over time, neighbours may come to recognize our local characters. For example, neighbours who don’t even know me will know that I’m “Buddy-the-cat’s mom.” Just as my neighbour begins with a small bit of information and comes to know more about me or my habits in the neighbourhood over time, so do I hope the reader of this thesis will come to know some of the characters (and their characteristics, interests and dispositions) among the graduate students participating in this project. This group of thirteen graduate student researchers is, like my local neighbourhood, populated with men and women, lesbians/gays/queers, persons of color, immigrants, people of working class origin, and “typical, middle-class, suburban” (Uzelman, personal communication) heterosexual white men. Among this selection are self-described activists organizing for social change and participating in activist communities before beginning their graduate research. Others still do identify themselves or their work as activist, even when others describe them as “activist scholars.” Just as I could be introduced by one of my neighbours as “Buddy’s Mom,” let me introduce, as I have come to know them, the people in this project’s “neighbourhood.”

A friend introduced Scott Uzelman as a grad student whose Master’s thesis research documented his activism in the Vancouver Independent Media Center (IMC)³. When we met

³ Uzelman, S. (2002). *Catalyzing Participatory Communication: Independent Media Center and the Politics of Direct Action*. Unpublished Thesis. Simon Fraser University.

at the coffee bar for our interview, I recognized Uzelman by his briefcase with the anarchist badge and “no WTO” pin. Uzelman describes himself as an activist coming from a “typical, middle-class, suburban background” who, as an undergraduate “worked with NewsWatch Canada, a research project in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University, on several studies investigating blind spots, double standards, and patterns of omission in Canada’s news media” (Uzelman, 2002, p.5). Through that work in the academy, as well as through street protests against the World Trade Organization, Uzelman saw himself developing as an activist, and became particularly interested in participatory and creative direct action strategies. Though Uzelman has amassed a substantial student loan, and though he describes himself as “cynical about academia,” he believes “academia has become a way to avoid real work, and a way of being able to control my labour in some small way” (personal communication, June 20, 2003), and continues now with PhD coursework.

Scott Uzelman introduced me to his friend, colleague, and sometime co-conspirator, Pablo Bose as another who focused his Master’s research on activist communities⁴. Pablo says:

I have this weird familial connection to a bunch of South Asian academics (both my parents are profs and went to school with these people) so I’ve been having this rather surreal animated conversation with people like Spivak over the last year and so she’s given me some interesting feedback about the integration of activist academic interests. (personal communication, June 25, 2003)

Pablo says his own interest in social justice was “naturalized throughout childhood by association with my parents’ hippie and gay friends” (personal communication, July 25, 2003), and his own family’s historical involvement in Nationalist activism in India. His activist interests have run from “bearing witness” at Summit of the Americas protests in Quebec City, to serving as Picket Captain of striking Teaching Assistants at his University. Bose says he continues to research the displacement of people for development, especially in India’s Narmada Valley because:

I like stories... I like being moved, I like moving other people. I felt angry, and I feel that there is a way of channeling that. I was blown away by the stuff these people had done. (Pablo Bose personal communication, July 25, 2003)

⁴ Bose, P. (2000) *The Rise of the New Grassroots in the Clayoquot Sound and the Narmada Valley*. Unpublished Thesis. Simon Fraser University.

Darcie Bennett has been for several years an activist organizing with grassroots and university-based groups for women's liberation and the eradication of poverty. She seems to me to be an articulate, grassroots activist, and we have met at rallies, workshops, education events, and community arts festivals. Darcie describes herself in her Master's thesis as a "working-class single mother" and "materialist feminist" (2003, p.6). At the time of this writing, Darcie had just begun a PhD program in Sociology, was nurturing a collective homeschool with other parents in her housing co-op, and was participating with a grassroots women's groups in a project aimed at generating new strategies for collective childcare provision. Darcie's Master's thesis⁵ considers how the policies of the BC government and global capitalism marginalize single mothers like her.

Siobhan Ashe says, "I am someone who lives in the largest clear-cut in British Columbia, whose 'lived place' is one of pavement, computers, and food wrapped in plastic" (Ashe, 1999, p.79). She writes, "Research is my environmental activism" (1999, p. 79)⁶, and traces her interest in the environmental movement as having been "piqued with the constant media portrayal of the raging protests occurring between the 'loggers' of Ucluelet and 'tree huggers' of Tofino and Clayoquot Sound" (Ashe, p 81). Siobhan Ashe's interests now range from community safety to environmental studies, with a particular interest in building community capacity for self-organizing. She works as a community coordinator who organizes "Community forums and action on safety, community capacity, and solutions" (personal communication), and is also now a PhD (Sociology) candidate who has organized conferences on environmental and social justice as a member of the Environmental Studies Association of Canada. For her Master's thesis, Ashe worked as a member and participant-observer among the Barefoot Cartographers, a grassroots group that makes bioregional maps of Vancouver to promote environmental sustainability.

"Tanya Jones" describes herself as "vulnerable because of [her] activism," (personal communication, July 27, 2004) and is therefore identified only by a pseudonym throughout this

⁵ Bennett, D. (2003). *Neo-liberal Governance and the Single Mother's Standpoint: The Case of BC's "New Era."* Unpublished Thesis. Simon Fraser University.

⁶ Ashe, S.M. (1999). *Identity and Action in the environmental movement: A Case Study of the Barefoot Cartographers.* Unpublished Thesis. Simon Fraser University

thesis. She is a white woman, of "mixed-class," and a lesbian, who has done paid and volunteer work as a community activist in women's and anti-oppression groups. She describes herself as having been "an activist returning to school," for whom there were particular challenges "inserting and infusing the activism within the structure of Master's research," and her "activism is the starting place for academic work" (personal communication, July 25, 2003). At the time of this writing, she did not plan to continue her academic studies toward a PhD, though she teaches college level Women's Studies. She continues to participate within a community-based "anti-discrimination" organization. With members of this group, some of whom participated as interviewees in her Master's thesis research, Tanya conducts research, writes, and facilitates workshops for public education.

Nandita Sharma has considerable experience as an activist. She has organized around women's issues, anti-racism, and immigration, and has been a member of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, a founder of Open the Borders!⁷, and remains a member of several other activist organizations. She is a South Asian woman, who continues her organizing and academic career, now as an Associate Professor. Her Masters thesis develops an analysis of Canadian immigration policy as being designed to provide cheap, indentured labourers⁸. She says about it:

My MA research was very much connected with my activist work. I had been working with an anti-racist organization in the Lower Mainland that was, in part, raising the issue of migrant domestic workers. I became very interested in the topic of my MA thesis, Canada's migrant worker program, through this organizing. (personal communication, February 3, 2004)

When we spoke on the phone, Laura Atkinson laughed, saying that her current paid job for a non-governmental organization "should hardly be called 'activism'," told me how arduous it was for her to finish her thesis, and was good humoured with her advice to me to "just get through" writing the thesis and "get on with the real organizing outside the academy" (personal communication, December 18, 2003). She says she now discourages other young women activists from going on to graduate school, though her own thesis work on Norplant

⁷ A grassroots group calling for open borders in North America and working actively for social justice for (im)migrants in their local communities (Sharma, personal communication, February 3, 2004).

⁸ Sharma, N. (1995). *The True North Strong and Unfree: capitalist restructuring and non-immigrant employment in Canada, 1973-1993*. Unpublished Thesis. Simon Fraser University

and Depo-Provera arose from her anti-racist and feminist activism, which introduced her to Aboriginal women and women of color who were “pushed” these drugs by the same clinicians who didn’t mention them to white middle-class women. Several years after completing her MA research,⁹ Laura Atkinson continues to describe herself as an activist, but with a caveat. She says, “I’m older now and I don’t want to sit through a lot of collective or organizational meetings. I want to be doing tangible, constructive things: organizing, and training, and workshops. Making things, doing political art” (personal communication, December 18, 2003). We wrapped up our conversation with her offer that I can “call or email any time for support,” and I invited her to my band’s next performance and to a public forum on women and poverty organized in my own activist community.

Colleagues of “Andrea Smith” suggested I speak to her about her difficulties in completing her politicized Master’s research. “Andrea” agreed to participate on the condition of anonymity, describing herself as a “casualty” of a department that “talks the talk about supporting progressive work, but does not offer the mentorship and support to students who are doing really progressive work” (personal communication, July 25, 2003). At the time of our interview, she had been working on her Master of Arts degree for several years, had not yet completed a thesis draft, and was frustrated, wanting to finish, and searching for paid work in a “progressive organization.” Andrea wanted very much to begin her research from her own experience as a “survivor” of sexual assault; she hoped the research could begin a discussion with others with some shared experiences. She says:

I hoped my thesis could be five people getting together and talking about their experiences, and have it literally as an exploratory conversation. I thought we might start something different from the sexual assault bureaucratic machine, where there’s lots of telling you how you should feel and not a lot of space for survivors to name what they are going through and say what they want done. I wanted to create that space, even informally, as an academic experience.
(personal communication, July 25, 2003)

About her activism, Andrea says, “I’m probably a wannabe activist who can’t get my ass off the couch and do it” (personal communication, July 25, 2003).

⁹ Atkinson, L.A. (1998). *Birth Control or Controlling Birth? A Critical Interrogation of Two New Contraceptive Technologies Using Popular Education Practices and Principles*. Unpublished Thesis. Simon Fraser University.

Cara-Lee Malange reveals in her thesis¹⁰ that she was a “young, healthy, single woman with no children of [her] own to take care of. [She] had the good life and the freedom and privilege that comes with being an educated, middle-class North American’ (Malange, 2001, p.138). In her thesis research, Malange says, “I hoped to provide support to activists fighting to end violence against Third World women” (personal communication, December 15, 2003). In exchange for the opportunity to conduct a participant-observation study of a shelter for battered women and children in Guatemala, Malange offered eight months of fulltime volunteer work to the shelter. She writes in her thesis of her hope that her work “provides [women and children] a voice without speaking for them” (2001, p.148). Cara Lee Malange is now a college instructor, working to build into her work a focus on politicizing women’s experience (personal communication, December 15, 2003).

Erica Meiners has been described as an “activist scholar” for her current work with *BeyondMedia Education*, an organization working “to equip under-served and under-represented women, youth, and communities to tell their stories, articulate their identities, and organize for social justice through the collaborative creation and distribution of alternative media arts”¹¹. Recalling her motivation for her PhD dissertation research on the ways women are constructed in discourse as “disordered bodies”¹², Meiners says:

I became politicized and out in a laborious process that maybe involved me thinking more/differently about activism. Actually in retrospect I probably did characterize myself more as an activist then - not sure if I had a sense of what it meant ...(personal communication, January 4, 2004)

Erica Meiners now holds a “tenure track gig” as an Associate Professor in the United States. About her “pedigree” as an activist scholar, she says, “Perhaps I am just not smart enough to do what some name ‘real scholarly work.’ I had a weird grad school education, and I don’t have a pedigree to be a scholar even if I wanted to be!” (personal communication, January 6, 2004).

¹⁰ Malange, C.L. (2001). *Political Motherhood: Women’s Struggles to fight Violence In Guatemala*. Unpublished Thesis. Simon Fraser University.

¹¹ <http://www.beyondmedia.org/mainframe.html>

¹² Meiners, E. (1998). *Inquiries into the Regulation of Disordered Bodies: Selected Sick and Twisted Ethnographic Fictions*. Unpublished dissertation. Simon Fraser University.

Francisco Ibanez-Carrasco spoke with me in the home he shares with his partner. He spoke with charismatic wordplay about his inter-relationships to social research, activism, and his status as an HIV positive, gay, immigrant. Francisco is a part-time university instructor of research methods; a researcher “typecast” for HIV/AIDS research, and projects oriented around drug-involved or poor participants; a writer of erotica; and a co-director of a national HIV rehabilitation working group. He speaks both flippantly and sincerely about his research and activist work, calling himself “lazy,” which I have found completely implausible. He says, “All I want is flattery, to be told my work is good, brilliant, whatever” (personal communication, July 25, 2003). When I contacted him to ask more about his PhD research on the lived experience of AIDS social science researchers¹³, and told him I was looking at graduate level research that could be characterized as “progressive” or “activist-oriented,” he replied:

I was flattered that you consider me to do progressive work. I just do the nitty gritty research work: if someone needs some interviews with people in the Downtown Eastside, call Francisco. Some in-depth qualitative interviews, call Francisco... I am cynical about the labels. I don't think of myself as an activist, I am an opportunistic leader, but I do my job well. I do not say I do things I am not able to do—closer to Oprah than Lenin, I guess. (personal communication, July 25, 2003)

Russel Ogden's struggle to protect the anonymity of his research informants has made him the “Poster boy for academic freedom” (Ogden, personal communication, December 20, 2003). Originally a social worker, Russel Ogden has focused his academic research on attitudes and experiences around euthanasia, assisted suicide, and “deathing technologies.” He has been called a “euthanasia activist” by right-to-die activists¹⁴, and though his first response to my email introduction for this project was “I'm not an activist,” he nonetheless agreed to meet me and we spoke about activism, the caliber of contemporary undergraduate student writing, science fiction, plagiarism, and research ethics. Russel Ogden's MA thesis¹⁵ argues that the “right-to-die debate must move beyond speculative viewpoints and incorporate data gleaned from empirical research” (Ogden, 1994, p.2), so in his thesis he provides detailed accounts of

¹³ Ibanez-Carrasco, J.F. (1999). *Ghost Writers: the Lived experience of AIDS social science researchers*. Unpublished dissertation. Simon Fraser University

¹⁴ http://www.hemlock.org/world_conference_prog.htm

¹⁵ Ogden, R. (1994). *Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide in Persons with Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) or Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)*. Pitt Meadows, Canada: Perreault/Goedman Publishing.

how friends, family, and physicians assist people living with AIDs to die. His research at Simon Fraser University¹⁶ and Exeter University has been of great interest to media, police, and University ethics boards, as he has risked criminal charges and withdrawn from a PhD program¹⁷ for refusing to reveal the identities of his research subjects.

Overview of subsequent chapters

Drawing from interviews with these diverse individuals, and from their thesis texts, this thesis develops a view of the practices of activist scholarship from the standpoint of graduate students. First, a theoretical framework outlines the context for the current study. Next, the activities, work, and relationships of the research participants in activist communities sketch what an "activist academic" might look like in the community setting. Then, the discussion moves to consider the academic setting, and reflects upon the research methodologies applied by the current study and by the research participants in their own thesis research. Having viewed separately the practices of the academic graduate student in the activist setting, and the activist in the academy, this thesis moves to consider the "tensions" recollected by these activist academics from their efforts to integrate activism into academic work. The thesis concludes with a discussion of possible implications of the current research.

The theoretical framework for this inquiry emerges in the relationships between two key methodological approaches, critical pedagogy and institutional ethnography, and is supported by materialist feminist perspectives. Chapter Two outlines the ways in which critical pedagogy's concepts of dialogue and critical reflection are mobilized in this inquiry as tools facilitating analysis development among researcher and research participants about activist scholarship. Further, the chapter introduces institutional ethnography as an analytical approach developed by Dorothy Smith, (1987, 1990, 1999). This tool helps to elucidate and understand

¹⁶ See <http://www.sfu.ca/~palys/OgdenPge.htm> for a discussion and analysis of Ogden's struggle as a Master of Arts student to have Simon Fraser University support him in refusing to breach his confidentiality agreement with research participants when his research records were subpoenaed for criminal investigation into assisted deaths.

¹⁷ Ogden gave up his PhD research at Exeter University in 1997 after the university withdrew a written promise to provide him with legal backing should he be forced to name any of the 100 people he had interviewed who claimed to have been involved in euthanasia of people suffering from AIDS. The Guardian newspaper reports "Mr Ogden could not use the research he had undertaken in reliance of the university's assurances. "In practice, therefore, he was denied the opportunity to obtain a PhD at Exeter University." (Curtis 2003). In 2003, the British courts forced Exeter University to pay Ogden £62 000 in damages.

how the individual experiences of graduate student researchers are commonly organized by institutional procedures beyond their immediate influence. A shared standpoint relative to the academy and to activist communities positions these students as members of a shared community of practice. Further, Chapter Two introduces the study's key concept of *activist academic* as a community and identity (Wenger 1998), and briefly outlines the perspective of this study on the role of academics in social movements.

To inform a discussion of these students' involvement in activist communities prior to, during, and since their thesis research, Chapter Three works with the analytical tools provided by "mediated action" (Wertsch, 1998), which assists in seeing a broader view of "what these activists did", by considering the relationships among their actions, the "cultural tools" mediating the action, and the multiple purposes that mediated action might serve. The activists here articulate their definitions of "what an activist looks like" and describe their own academic and community-based work within shifting relationships to activist settings. They describe their role in the community, the work they do, and discuss the ways in which discursive tools for writing and speaking can be mastered by activist academics and mobilized not only in academic, but in community settings.

Next, Chapter Four considers the methodologies these graduate student researchers have applied to thesis research. This chapter critically reflects upon the methodology of the current study in light of the critical frameworks provided by both my own feminist activism and the critical pedagogy literature informing this inquiry. Discussion with research participants provides an exploration of the ways our research practices promote or undermine our activist, social justice agendas. In reflecting upon our decisions about selecting thesis topics, negotiating access to participants, and representing our research in thesis texts, these activist graduate students consider especially what "seemed to work" for them to conduct thesis research that would resist exploiting its participants and would, perhaps, promote social justice.

Moving from preceding discussions of activist and academic communities and practices and the successes these students recollect, Chapter Five takes up the analytical tool of institutional ethnography (Smith 1987, 1990, 1999) to probe the complexities of the "tensions" for these graduate students as they integrate activism and requirements of graduate study.

Beginning from particular “troubling” experiences around common events in a graduate student’s career, then considering the difficulties encountered as academics in activist settings, this chapter argues that across individual trajectories through graduate school, and across community experiences in diverse activist settings, activist academic graduate students’ experiences are organized by common, institutionalized systems and discourses of power. The institutional ethnography approach assists in identifying those powerful systems and the particular ways in which activist academics’ experiences in community and academy are both organized by and perpetuate interlocking (hetero)sexist, capitalist, and racist relations of power.

This thesis concludes by returning to the standpoint of this researcher and reconsidering the research methodologies, problematics, and the surprising finding that a substantial proportion of these graduate student researchers, despite the “tensions,” continue with academic careers beyond the phase considered in this study. This chapter recaps the questions raised throughout the thesis about what we can and cannot say about activist academics in light of the experience of thirteen graduate student researchers. The chapter highlights how shared and sometimes contradictory practices, beliefs, experiences, and identities among these student researchers can link them as members of a shared community of practice, and how others who are “identifiably” (Wenger 1998) activist academics might apply the analysis in this thesis to inform their own efforts to engage the tools of the university for research oriented toward social change. This discussion may also be of interest to activist communities wondering how they might work with graduate student researchers, as well as with university faculty members who aspire to support the activist research of graduate students engaged in social justice-oriented inquiry.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH AS PRAXIS

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Chapter introduction

I brought to my own academic work the desire to integrate my feminist consciousness, to do work within the academy that would, somehow, be “of use,” yet I was profoundly cynical about the utility and politic of academic research for my feminist project of social change. How, I wondered, might I conduct “progressive” academic research that would not be constrained by funding or grading criteria and by the politics of the university setting? How have other “activist scholars” integrated activist or community-based praxis into academic work? How do they see academic scholarship as a tool for social transformation? How have intellectuals related to activist movements? In what ways are activist communities sites not only of action, but also sites of critical theory development? With such questions in mind about the relationships between activism and academic scholarship, and about relationships between action and critical theory, I sought to support a developing analysis of the possibilities and the contradictions of academic activist scholarship.

The theoretical perspective and methodologies of the current study emerge from the researcher’s own feminist activist praxis and from an approach to critical inquiry informed by intersections between critical pedagogy and institutional ethnography. Dialogic, praxis-oriented, collective, and potentially transformative educational methods from critical pedagogy are introduced in this chapter as the framework within which the study was devised and a model from which the data-gathering methods were drawn and can be evaluated. Institutional ethnography, as articulated by Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990, 1999), functions as an analytical tool to elucidate the broader relationships and contexts within which each of these diverse activist graduate students’ activities and experiences are situated.

Starting from the particular experiences of a sampling of activist graduate students, this study works to elucidate and explicate the shared aspects of those experiences relative to activist communities and academic institutions. This study treats activist academics as a "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991), whose work across disciplines shares an agenda for (positive) social transformation and who, therefore, join in the "shared enterprise" (Wenger 1998) of activist scholarship. Graduate study will be considered in this thesis as a process of becoming an identifiable member of this "textually-mediated" (Stock, 1990) community and, therefore, a process of negotiating values and behaviours from within the sometimes contradictory practices of both activist and academic settings in order to integrate membership in two communities of practice into a complex identity as "activist academic."

Research Praxis: Theory-in-practice in the current study

Critical Pedagogy

This research considers the praxis, the integration of theory and practice, of activist graduate students, drawing primarily from notions articulated in Paulo Freire's (1999, original 1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and supplemented by discussion of Freire's viewpoint by bell hooks (1994), Ira Shor (1992), Henry Giroux (1997, 2003), Peter McLaren (1995, 1998, 2002), and others. Underpinning this project's methodologies and analytical framework are concepts central to critical pedagogy, including "social change," "praxis," "dialogue," "participation" and "critical consciousness."

Praxis comprises a cycle of action-reflection-action, wherein theory develops collectively, through critical dialogue about people's lives and the conditions shaping them and leads to action aimed at transforming those conditions in a progression toward social justice. Characteristics of praxis include self-determination (as opposed to coercion), intentionality (as opposed to reaction), creativity (as opposed to homogeneity), and rationality (as opposed to chance) (Heaney, 1995). While many scholars and activists agree that praxis is "the dialectical tension, the interactive, the reciprocal shaping of theory and practice" (Lather, 1991, p.258) and a way of reflecting and acting on the world in order to change it (hooks, 1994, p.14), the type of social change which is sought, or even deemed possible, ranges among those whose

work might be identified as critical pedagogy¹⁸. This project aligns its methodology with a critical pedagogy that seeks radical transformation of the current social organization governed by sexism, racism, and capitalism, in contrast to what McLaren (2003) calls the stream of critical pedagogy that is “left-liberal and attempts to make capitalist society more ‘compassionate’ and more democratic so that it better serves the interests of the poor and economically disenfranchised” (2003). With Freire, this study understands a commitment to education and inquiry as a praxis as a process informing self-critical radicalization:

Radicalization criticizes and thereby liberates. Radicalization involves increased commitment to the position one has chosen, and thus ever greater engagement in the effort to transform concrete, objective reality. (Freire, 1999, p.19).

Critical pedagogy is sometimes described as (and at other times distinguished from) popular education¹⁹, radical education²⁰, emancipatory education, revolutionary education²¹, or transformative²² education. Peter McLaren (2003) describes critical pedagogy thus:

It is also a practical approach to teaching, learning, and research that emphasizes teaching through critical dialogue and dialectical analysis of everyday experience. In short, it is about teaching through praxis. Its approach is democratic, and its aim is to bring about social and economic equality and justice for all ethnic groups. It upholds the principles of and struggles for race, class, and gender equality.

¹⁸ See McLaren (1998) for an introduction to the development of critical pedagogy relative to other intellectual traditions. He describes critical pedagogy not only relative to the Latin American tradition of popular education, as articulated by Freire, but also credits the contributions to critical pedagogy of: European currents of political theology; European thinkers who have been labeled 'postmodernist and/or post-Marxist theorists' (including Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Antonio Negri); Feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and literary theory.

¹⁹ Popular education can be more specifically described as education and learning outside of institutional settings or for counter-hegemonic purposes, such as labour movement education, adult literacy learning (Freire, 1999), and community-based workshops and learning activities. In a later section, I introduce some of the ways critical pedagogy has been applied in the external and internal education of grassroots activist organizations.

²⁰ See Foley (2001) for an introduction to: “Radical Adult Education and Learning.” or Allman, P., and Willis, J. (1990, 1997).

²¹ For more on education in (and as) revolutionary movements, see especially discussions of education in activist and social movements in the global South. For example, see Mojab, S. (2001). “New Resources for Revolutionary Critical Education”; McLaren (2000), *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire and the Pedagogy of Revolution*; or McLaren, P., and Farahmandpur, R. (2001), “Teaching Against Globalization and the New Imperialism: Toward a Revolutionary Pedagogy.”

²² Educational literature most often distinguishes a critical pedagogical orientation from the transformative orientation articulated by Mezirow et al. (1990), which, while drawing from the critical pedagogical approach, emphasizes transformation of the individual rather than transformation of the social order.

Various fields within contemporary humanities and social sciences draw from critical pedagogy to inform theory and practice about the potential of intellectual work to catalyze progressive social transformation. Practitioners include feminist educators, labour rights advocates, queer theorists, and Marxist humanists, among others (McLaren, 2003). Black feminist scholar-activists whose critical theoretical perspectives are situated in their lived experience (Patricia Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994, 2000; Davis, 1981) also have much to offer to the methodologies and analytical approaches of this study, in that this project likewise interrogates the possibilities and problematics of integrating a lived experience from outside the mainstream into academic work.

Critical consciousness through dialogue and collective participation

Through what Freire calls *conscientização*, (usually represented in English as “conscientization” or “critical consciousness”) or “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1999 p.17), people can together imagine and enact ways of interfering with and transforming oppressive conditions and thereby disrupt the structures imposing those conditions (Giroux, 2003, p. 10). In order to accomplish this critical consciousness-raising and empowerment, critical pedagogy draws upon the methods of posing problems (rather than solving them), dialogue, and critical reflection. Such an approach insists that learning, political praxis, and living are inseparable.

The process of conscientization involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming a “subject” with other (oppressed) subjects—that is, becoming part of the process of changing the world by together identifying and critically exploring problems relevant to lived experience (Heaney, 1995). Teachers or leaders “do not come to *teach* or to *transmit* or to *give* anything, but rather to learn with the people, about the people’s world” (Freire, 1999, p.161. Emphasis in original). Such a process relies on mutual dialogue, which Heaney (1995) describes thus:

The dialogical approach to learning is characterized by co-operation and acceptance of interchangeability and mutuality in the roles of teacher and learner, demanding an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and trust. In this method, all teach and all learn. This contrasts with an anti-dialogical approach that emphasizes the teacher's side of the learning relationship and frequently

results in one-way communiqués perpetuating domination and oppression. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no liberatory education. (Heaney 1995)

The dialogic method intends to redistribute the authority to speak among all participants, regardless of their relative positions in the world. Through shared intellectual and practical struggle, critical pedagogy aims to undermine hierarchy and isolation, and to promote collectivity and democracy. Critical pedagogy thus supports “collective rather than merely individual forms of resistance” (Giroux, 2003, p.11).

Praxis for whom? Pedagogy of the oppressor

While this project aims to promote a “dialogic praxis” among participants and researcher as co-learners about the ways in which our research and activism might participate in social transformation, other critical practitioners in academic setting describe ways in which similar attempts to mobilize methods of dialogue and critical reflection fall short in efforts to transform hegemonic institutional relations in which teachers and students (Ellsworth, 1989; Giroux, 2003; hooks, 1994; Allman, 1990) or researcher and researched are located.

As a tactic to resist using critical pedagogy to reify hegemonic relations, Allen (2002) calls for practitioners of critical pedagogy within the academy to resist self-identifying as oppressed, and rather to recognize our relative privilege within the intersecting systems of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism (p.34). Allen argues for a “*pedagogy of the oppressor*; a critical pedagogy that emphasizes the radical task of identifying as the oppressor” (2002, p.8). Allen suggests this approach will help critical educators to divest ourselves of “complicity with dehumanization and to form solidarity with the relatively oppressed” (Allen, p.8). From this perspective, researchers and scholars within a university setting can be seen as having accrued some privilege through their academic affiliation. Allen (2002) argues that Freire’s (1999) critical pedagogy calls upon us to be constantly self-reflective upon our real allegiance to transforming those structures that provide academics with power (over others) (Allen, p.4). Such a reflection should promote an unambiguous and constant commitment to the work of social transformation rather than reverting to patronizing models of teaching and inquiry. Freire says:

Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. This conversion is so radical as not to allow of

ambiguous behaviour. To affirm this commitment but to consider oneself the proprietor of revolutionary wisdom—which must then be given to (or imposed on) the people—is to retain the old ways. (Freire, 1999, p.43)

Allen, drawing on Collins (2000, p.37), says committing to critical pedagogies and methods requires individual teachers and researchers “to become ‘traitors’ to the privileges that their race, class, gender, sexuality or citizenship status provide them” (Allen, 2002, p.9). Allen’s approach is located within a developing discourse of critical pedagogy that acknowledges the potential for critical methods, but which demands accountability on the part of its practitioners for their relative privilege. In particular, critical multiculturalism (especially Giroux 1997, 2003 and McLaren, 1995, 2003, but also Lipsitz, 1998, 2000; McIntosh, 1997) informs Allen’s analysis. This framework seeks to take up critical pedagogical methods while still insisting, “whites [hold themselves] morally and politically accountable for the unearned power and privilege they receive as members of the white race” (Allen, 2002, p.6).

Even graduate student researchers receive a certain privilege through our affiliation with the academy, so this project aims to explicate the ways in which activist-oriented graduate researcher participants have worked to account for our relative power as academics working in activist communities. At the same time, this project acknowledges that graduate student researchers might, themselves, be situated marginally within intersecting and oppressive systems of (hetero)sexism, capitalism’s class-stratification, and racism enacted within the academy. Indeed, of the thirteen graduate students discussed in this study, eleven are identifiably outside the privileged white, male, heterosexual mainstream of the academy. Further, students are positioned with relatively minimal power within academia, they “often constitute a *de facto* army of service workers who are underpaid, overworked, and shorn of any real power or benefits” (Giroux 2003, p.13). The participants in the study, then, negotiate complex relationships to the power structures in which they live and work.

Research as praxis

Methodologies drawn from critical pedagogy here provide a way for thirteen graduate student researchers (including this researcher) to recollect, articulate, imagine, and critically consider how graduate-level academic research relates to their/our activist praxis. This study, then, aims to foster a dialogic praxis among activist graduate students, in which we can

collectively investigate and develop our “critical awareness” and together “engage” (hooks, 1994, p.14) the problems of, and what it could be, to do activist-oriented graduate research.

The research interviews and discussions aim to function as a sort of “problem-posing education” (Freire 1999, p.65) among nearly-peer graduate student researchers developing as activist scholars. Although the conversations within this project are situated within a framework of research interviews, such conversations might also be understood within a tradition²³ of critical teachers and thinkers together interrogating their practice and “stimulating each other to think, and to re-think” (Shor and Freire 1987, p.3). Interviews in this study, then, are conceived not as “confessions” by informants, but each as “a moment of reflection, of negotiation, of meaning-making for all of us” (Ibanez, 1997 p.122), “sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concerns” (hooks 1994, p.130) about activist-oriented graduate scholarship.

As its problem-posing exercise, this project is concerned with the ways in which the struggles of activist-oriented researchers are organized by “larger social formations.” It looks upward at the institutional constraints within which we struggle for social transformation.

Giroux says:

Of course, any theory of politics and resistance must be concerned with the conditions, the agents, and the current levels of struggle that lead to social transformation. This means that any viable theory of radical pedagogy must not only be concerned with issues of curriculum and classroom practices, but must also emphasize the institutional constraints and larger social formations that bear down on forms of resistance waged by educators. (Giroux, 2003, p. 8)

Starting from the standpoint of the activist graduate students, Chapter Five of this thesis will apply the analytical tool of institutional ethnography, as developed by Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990, 1999) to explicate some of the institutionalized procedures, activities, and relations through which oppressive forces (especially of capitalism and patriarchy) govern academic careers and activist activities. As an analysis framed by institutional ethnography, this thesis explores activist graduate students’ particular “standpoint.” It examines what Smith (2000,

²³ Published dialogues between practitioners about critical pedagogy include, among others, Shor and Freire’s (1987) *Pedagogy for Liberation*; hooks’ (1994) dialogues in *Teaching To Transgress* with her “comrade and friend, Ron Scapp”; and Giroux’s and McLaren’s ongoing intertextual dialogues and collaborations (especially Giroux and McLaren, 1994).

p.1148) calls the “everyday/everynight actualities of [their] experience”. With Smith, this thesis aims to participate in “problematizing the objectified institutional order of large-scale corporations, of schooling and health care, of the professions, and of the academic, cultural and scientific discourses, including the mass media” (Smith, 2000, p. 1148). Beginning with lived experience, the institutional ethnography approach aims to illuminate the non-universality, the non-neutrality, of so-called “objective” sociological knowledge and the conceptual and methodological models of “objective” knowledge building. This approach starts with the disconnect and contradiction between lived experience and the abstracted methods, theories, and procedures imposed by institutionally organized ways by which we are meant to understand our lived experiences (Smith, 1999b).

In setting out to understand not only the texts (theses) produced by activist student researchers, but also the lived experiences and unwritten stories underpinning their thesis research, I draw upon cultural studies for tools and perspectives to consider the intersections, interpenetrations and confrontations between activist cultures and other cultural contexts in relation to which activist academic work is conducted. Indeed, this project aims to explore, from the standpoint of graduate students, the “borders” (Giroux and McLaren, 1994) of the culture, or community, of activist academics. While not engaging in this project in a thorough cultural analysis, cultural studies informs the approach to analyzing how the knowledge of these graduate researchers was produced within and from the everyday activities of complex and intersecting lives, identities, and communities of activist academics:

In its concern with everyday life, its pluralization of cultural communities, and its emphasis on multidisciplinary knowledge, cultural studies is concerned with ... how knowledge, texts, and cultural products are produced, circulated, and used. (Giroux 1994 p.278)

Activist academics: a community of practice

Across a diverse range of “critical,” “progressive,” and community-based research, and across disciplines, some scholars now present themselves or their colleagues as “activist scholars,” “scholar-activists,” or “activist academics”²⁴. While activist scholarship has not

²⁴ There are several recently published collections of essays discussing the integration of activism and academic scholarship. See the following for “reports from the field” of activist scholarship: Dickinson, T. D. (Ed.), (2003) *Community and the World: Participating in Social Change*, or Naples & Bojar (Eds.) (2002), *Teaching Feminist Activism*, or John & Thomson, S. (Eds.), (2003), *New Activism and the Corporate Response*.

become institutionalized as an academic discipline, or a pedagogical or research methodology, the development of scholarships and bursaries for “activist scholars,” and the use in conference proceedings and academics’ biographies of the descriptor “activist scholar” implies some developing understanding within academia of some set of identifiable characteristics of the activist academic. This study recognizes “activist scholarship” as, at minimum, a developing discursive and textual practice and proposes that “activist academics” or “activist scholars” should be considered an emerging community of practice, whose members are academics across disciplines who are engaged in a shared enterprise (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) of activist, change-oriented inquiry. Members in this community are “identifiable” (Wenger, 1998) through their shared practices of committing their research and scholarship to progressive social transformation; “education as the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1997, p.19); “merging intellectual work and activism” (Collins, 2000, p.33); or “increased commitment to the position one has chosen, and thus ever greater engagement in the effort to transform concrete, objective reality” (Freire, 1999, p. 19).

Textual community

As activist academics engage in and publish their own scholarly work, they benefit from and contribute to bodies of literature and disciplinary discourses (for example, critical pedagogy, feminist inquiry, queer studies, Black studies, and so on) from which others across scholarly disciplines (and geography) may draw, and to which other academics may respond in their own published work. In effect, as they incorporate and critique the ideas and practices (praxis) of one another, activist academics contribute to the ongoing development of a broad, discursive, and (primarily) textual community of practice, like that described by Stock:

We can think of a textual community as a group that arises somewhere in the interstices between the imposition of the written word and the articulation of a certain type of social organization. It is an interpretive community, but it is also a social entity... Wherever there are particular texts that are read aloud or silently, there are groups of listeners that can potentially benefit from them. (1990, p.150)

Activist scholarship within the academy is a shared, discursive practice, a “mutual engagement” (Wenger, 1998) in the “enterprise” of activist scholarship. Members of the community are in constant, inter-textual, and mutual negotiation as new arguments, methodologies, and critiques are published, read, critiqued, and incorporated into new

scholarly work. Such a community of practice is necessarily a site of education, of learning to become, where participation is a process of learning about, for, and through practice:

A natural process of education takes place within the group, and if the force of the word is strong enough, it can supersede the differing economic and social backgrounds of the participants, welding them for a time at least, into a unit. (Stock 1990, 150)

The texts and discursive tools of activist scholarship may promote shared styles of meaning-making as research, teaching, and writing practices may supersede disciplinary “borders” (Giroux and McLaren, 1995) or differences across disciplines. Such a community of practice, then, is characterized by individuals’ active, *mutual engagement* in some *joint enterprise* (Wenger p.72) in which there are diverse, distinct, and recognizable roles (Wenger, p.75) and in which a *shared repertoire* of resources (e.g. routines, actions, concepts, symbols and gestures (Wenger, p.83) develops to support negotiating meaning. In his (1997) *Communities of Practice*, Etienne Wenger,²⁵ building on other social theories of learning and the earlier work with Jean Lave (1991), explicates *community of practice* as a unit of analysis suitable to understanding how people negotiate meaning in and through the complex social relationships within which and through which we perform our everyday activities:

We are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in them together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn. Over time this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities *communities of practice*. (Wenger, 1998, p.45)

This thesis aims to explicate the changing practices, the meaning-making, and the identity formation of activist graduate student researchers moving from “peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as newcomers to fuller participation and identification as members in a textual community of activist academics.

²⁵ Wenger cites Pierre Bourdieu, Lev Vygotsky, Jurgen Habermas, and Michel de Certeau as significantly informing his thinking about practice. (1998).

Identity, power, and community

Part of anyone's identity-formation is a negotiation of the tensions and conflicts in the process of identifying with and participating in multiple communities, with the concurrent non-participation, non-engagement, and non-alignment with other communities and contexts (Wenger, 1998, p.189). In such an analysis, the "power of belonging" functions as the tie between individuals' identity and the communities and broader contexts in which they participate. Accordingly,

Identity is a locus of selfhood and by the same token a locus of social power. On the one hand, it is the power to belong, to be a certain person, to claim a place with the legitimacy of membership; and on the other it is the vulnerability of belonging to, identifying with, and being part of some communities that contribute to defining who we are and thus have a hold on us. Rooted in our identities, power derives from belonging as well as from exercising control over what we belong to. (Wenger, 1998, 207)

Like most people, activist graduate students must negotiate the possibly conflicting identities rooted in the discourse, ideology, and practices of each of the communities in which they participate (Wenger, 1998). Further, because communities are located within broader contexts, the political, economic, and social contexts "pervade" the organization of activities and identities within those communities. Thus, the power of institutional discourses "works" because individuals' identity and sense of meaning is intimately connected to or "bound up in the power to identify with, and be identified as belonging to particular communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 196).

As individuals identify with a particular community, they negotiate the ways and extent to which they will reproduce that community's particular practice of broader ideologies and discourses (Wenger, 1998, p.198). By unpacking some of the "tensions" for the activist in the academy and for the graduate student in the activist setting, this thesis aims to explicate the experiences of the participants in this study as a process of identity formation as "activist academics," as experiences of negotiating the (moral? political? ideological? ethical?) "power of belonging" to an activist community setting, with the (professional, credentialed, institutional) power of appearing identifiably, sufficiently, or suitably "academic."

Becoming an activist academic

As part of a shared practice and meaning-making, communities develop their own modes for continuity, accountability, struggle, and determining membership (Wenger, 1998, p.81). Lave and Wenger argue that within a community of practice, newcomers participate meaningfully from the outset; learning about the community's practices while practicing them, and over time, move toward full participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, in order for newcomers to become "identifiable" members of a community, they must somehow be viewed with enough "legitimacy" (Lave and Wenger, 1991 p.101) in the early days of their participation so that "their inevitable stumblings and violations become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect or exclusion" (Lave and Wenger, p.101).

In a community of practice, "legitimacy might be granted through many means, including newcomers being useful, feared, or being sponsored by a respected old-timer who can assist them to gain entry to the community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991 p.101). All graduate students, as newcomers to the academy would, therefore, require some means of demonstrating their legitimate place in that community while learning to participate fully in academia. Highlighting key relationships and events in participants' graduate student careers will draw out the ways in which they negotiate a "legitimate" place as activist academics. Similarly, Black feminists, Aboriginal and immigrant people, women, openly gay and lesbian scholars, have all written about their own struggles to prove their legitimacy in the academy, and describe the various tactics that have assisted them²⁶. bell hooks, for example, emphasizes the ways in which other women and professors raised working-class have guided and protected her development as an academic and how she now has developed a focus on pedagogy that does the same (1994, p.125). She also describes the tactics working-class students use to represent themselves as legitimate members of elite academic settings. She recalls of her student days at Stanford that, "Students from working-class backgrounds could assimilate into the mainstream, change speech patterns, points of reference, drop any habit that might reveal them to be from a nonmaterially privileged background" (1994, p. 181). Similarly, Maria de la

²⁶See bell hooks *Teaching to Transgress*, Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought*, and a collection edited by M. R. Obakeng & A. L. Green, (2001), *Sisters of the Academy: Emergent Black Women Scholars in Higher Education*. See also a collection edited by Luther, Whitmore, and Moreau, (2001), *Seen but not heard: aboriginal women and women of color in the academy*, or Bannerji, H., Carty, L., Delhi, K., Heald, S., McKenna, K., (1991), *Unsettling Relations: The University as a site of Feminist Struggles*.

Luz Reyes (1997) argues, “Chicana academics can slow the tide of our own extinction in the academy by recognizing that in order to change the system we must learn to live within it, acknowledging the contradictions of our identity” and supporting one another “to resist, remain firm in our resolve” (31).

Granting legitimacy: academic programs to prepare activists scholars

Though participants in this project accrue legitimacy as activist scholars by individually working to integrate their activism into academic work, structured programs and university courses are another means by which activist academics can be produced. For example, The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, and the Community Studies program at University of California, Santa Cruz as well as many programs in Black Studies, Subaltern Studies, Women’s and/or Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies, Queer Studies, Environmental Studies, Latin American Studies, and others, promote collaboration between universities, students, and communities toward socially progressive or transformative agendas²⁷. Scholars reflecting on such programs note not only the possibilities, but also the difficulties in integrating activism or community-based work into university-based activities. Stuart Hall (1984), one-time director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), notes the contradictions for an academic institution trying to develop intellectuals who would integrate “intellectual work and theory as a political practice” and remain grounded in the everyday struggles of communities from which they come rather than participate in the traditional function of academics to support dominant relations of power (Hall, 1992, p. 281). Hall recalls a “tension” in reconciling the demands of academia and activism, in which either “theory is everything—giving intellectuals a vanguard role which they do not deserve—or practice is everything—which results in intellectuals denying their function” as knowledge producers (1984, p. 287).

Other scholars reflecting on efforts to integrate activism and progressive ideologies into academic training programs likewise note that their work is challenged primarily by “traditional” scholarly criteria working “to delegitimize and de-fund liberal and leftwing scholarships” (Berube, 1997, p.18) but also by students’ tendency to favour either theory or

²⁷ The American Institute for Food and Development Policy has developed a listing of “progressive graduate and undergraduate programs.” Powell, J. (Ed.). (2001). *Education for Action: Undergraduate and Graduate Programs That Focus on Social Change*.

action rather than integrate both into a “passionate praxis” grounded in everyday, community struggle (Gramsci, 1971). For example, faculty advisors for the Community Studies program at University of California, Santa Cruz note that though “the program is designed to enable “students to work in social change organizations,” many students’ community-based work is oriented not toward social transformation, but, instead, toward “social service delivery” (Friedland and Rotkin, 2003, p. 48, 54). Moreover, within the same program, advisors found that making from individual students’ efforts substantial connections between the university and activist communities was difficult because “once each student completed her or his field study and thesis, activity with respect to the community or organization in which the student had worked, in effect, died” (Friedland and Rotkin, 2003, p.44).

Intellectuals and social movements

This study’s discussion of activist academics is situated within an existing body of literature that interrogates the “legitimate” roles for scholars, intellectuals, and academics relative to social movements. In particular, this study is aligned with the viewpoint that social movements should beware of “anti-intellectualism” (Featherstone et al 2002, p.1) while still critically considering the limitations for social transformation of intellectual work located either within or outside of academic institutional settings. Theoretical perspectives from feminisms, post-modernism, post-colonial theory, critical pedagogy, queer theory, and cultural studies explore and critique the possibility of progressive, transgressive, transformative or liberatory roles for scholars in relation to community-based social movements. Indeed, academics conducting research and theoretical inquiries from these perspectives often consider within their work how that work participates in or works to disrupt dominant discourses of power. Such self-critical work might ask of itself:

Does the work ... provide a critical, transforming challenge to the cultural assumptions and political powers of our society? Or does the work of intellectuals provide a legitimating, technical support for the cultural and political systems that dominate our society? (Kramer, L., 1996, p.29)

Certainly, intellectuals hold long-established relationships with social movements, whether in the role of translator, critic, expert, witness, teacher, facilitator, or grassroots activist, and this study will identify some possible points of entry for further inquiry into (non-academic)

intellectual work in activist settings.²⁸ The participants in this study are thus considered relative to a community of academics whose work may be considered along a continuum of counter-hegemonic to transformative agendas and methods. They are among those “knowledge workers, direct producers in the sphere of ideology and culture”(Williams, 1983, p.169) who are also: “critical intellectual” (Bourdieu, 1998); “oppositional intellectual” (Giroux, 1994); “transformative intellectual” (Giroux, 1988); or “engaged” and “insurgent ... intellectual” (hooks, 1994, p.66). Throughout, this thesis will refer to the “knowledge workers” who are graduate students and activists as “activist academics” and “activist-oriented academics.”

As mentioned above, many whom we may call “activist academics” have turned their attention toward transforming the institutionalized sexism, racism, and elitism of the university in order to open that site of knowledge production to “legitimate” participation by those outside the elite. Others, however, aim to leverage the power of the university and its function as a site of knowledge production toward their activist projects. The current research is concerned with exploring the overlapping and intersecting relationships between activist communities and the institutional relations of the university of graduate student activists whose thesis research is rooted in activism focused in communities and social movements beyond the university setting. George Lipsitz (2000) identifies some of the contradictions and dilemmas, tensions, and problematics of relationships between contemporary academics and social movements:

Intellectuals and artists today often live disconnected from active social movements in a way that would have been difficult to predict two decades ago. They work within hierarchical institutions and confront reward structures that privilege individual distinction over collective social change... Artists and intellectuals who have never experienced directly the power of social movements in transforming social relations can easily become isolated in their own consciousness and activity, unable to distinguish between their own abstract desires for social change and actual social movements. (p.80)

In its investigation of the direct experience of graduate students as intellectuals within hierarchical academic institutions, this study contributes to a body of literature that investigates and critiques the ways in which the relationship between intellectuals and social movements

²⁸ Refer to *Intellectuals and Public Life: Between Radicalism and Reform* (Fink, Leonard, and Reid, 1996) for an exploration of the concept of “intellectual” and relationships of intellectuals in shaping society.

may be characterized by disconnection rather than integration and individualism rather than collective praxis.

Critical Intellectuals within social movements

While this study does not attempt to explicate in detail activist communities' intellectual production, it does operate from an understanding of participation in grassroots activist communities as, in many cases, participation in collective, critical praxis. Activists produce intellectual work not only in collaboration with, but independent of, and sometimes, perhaps, in spite of university-based academics. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), for example, argues that "grassroots political activists contribute to Black women's intellectual traditions" (p.17) outside the academy. She says,

The concept of *intellectual* must itself be deconstructed. Not all Black women intellectuals are educated... One is neither an intellectual nor does one become one by earning a degree. Rather, doing intellectual work of the sort envisioned by Black feminism requires a process of self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women, regardless of the actual social location where that work occurs. (Collins, 2000, p.15)

Collins proposes that contributors to Black feminist thought, as activist epistemology, require self-conscious or self-critical struggle for the benefit of the collectivity, in this case Black women. She argues that the epistemology, theory, and intellectual tradition of this collectivity are grounded in "an experiential, material base" (2000, p.256) of Black women activists' lives. Similarly, bell hooks argues that the intellectual work of liberatory theory is embedded in lived experiences and practical activities such as might be found in activist community settings working toward social change:

When our experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two, that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other. (1994, p.61)

With these feminists, this study views activist communities—from feminist anti-violence work, through the environmental, peace, and anti-globalization movements—as likely to be sites of socially critical theorizing bonded with action in praxis. Activist, community-based intellectuals can remain rooted in everyday struggles, integrating passion,

political thoughts, and action into what Gramsci called a “philosophy of praxis” (1971) that might provide counter-hegemonic or, perhaps, socially-transformative intellectual voices.

Indeed, some groups explicitly apply the theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy for internal and public education²⁹; The Boston Women's Health Book Collective is one “oppressed” group that seems to engage critical pedagogy for their internal education processes. In her study of this collective, Birden finds that:

Collective members adopted an increasingly critical view toward their cultures while creating a radically democratic climate for learning that was simultaneously communicative, humble, and loving. A process of conscientization enabled collective members to develop confidence in their abilities to think, learn, and enter into dialogue with one another and with society at large. (Birden, 2002, p.1)

Birden's case study “provides evidence of popular education's transformative potential” (p.4) when critical pedagogical methods are mobilized among activist peers. With Birden, bell hooks (1994), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Paulo Freire (1999), and others thinking through the praxis of critical pedagogy outside the academy, this project approaches community-based activism as a critical praxis that integrates intellectual development and theoretical analysis into its (political) action. Participation in such activist communities may, indeed, be not only a process of political action, but also a process of developing intellectual ability and confidence that can be exercised not only within activist settings but also in “society at large” and, perhaps, within the academy.

Concluding remarks

This chapter proposes that critical pedagogy can function not only as a framework for transforming social research into research praxis, but as a way of expressing the theory-in-action of activist communities. Further, communities of practice, like those of the activist academic participants of this study, should be understood as sites of “a complex social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.35). Thus, through

²⁹ For a few further examples in diverse activist settings refer to: Ledwith, (2001), “Community Work as Critical Pedagogy: Re-envisioning Freire and Gramsci”; Aurette (2001) “Social Change Movements and Transformative Learning,” which shows how transformative learning was used in the women's movement; and Kovan, Jessica (et al) (2003), “Being Called Awake: The Role of Transformative Learning in the Lives of Environmental Activists.”

participating in their activist and academic communities, the graduate students considered in this study will be viewed as integrating the conflicting and complementary practices of two settings into their own complex identities. It appears that activist communities are themselves sites of critical theory development, therefore in the process of “becoming” full participants in praxis-oriented and socially critical activist communities, members are likely to integrate knowledge and practice of critical discourse into their own identities. Therefore, it may be that activist graduate students bring to new academic settings existing “knowledgeable skill” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.58) with the critical thinking practices required in academia.

Within such a framework, ensuing chapters of this study will elucidate the participation in activist and academic communities of thirteen graduate student researchers and will analyze particular relations within which their academic and community-based critical inquiry, theory building, and praxis take shape.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT DOES AN ACTIVIST ACADEMIC LOOK LIKE?

Where we build the academic a certain way, we also build the Activist a certain way: the “capital A activist.” As if a feminist activist has to have (or maybe it’s changed in the last few years) hairy legs, or hairy underarms, or this particular feminist analysis, or be a vegetarian, or whatever. We kind of shape it for the particular year, the criteria for a feminist activist. To which I always ask, “What do we call it when mom talks to her boy about gender?” How is activism shaped? What does an activist look like? What do you need to be to be a card-carrying activist? I think activists come in smaller or greater degrees, shapes, and sizes. (Jones, personal communication, July 27, 2003)

Chapter introduction

Building upon a conception of activism as political, passionate, or radical *action*, this chapter mobilizes the framework of “mediated action” as outlined by James Wertsch in *Mind as Action* (1998) as a strategy to describe participants involvement in activism before, during, and after their graduate research, and how they perceive relationships between activism and their graduate study. This chapter draws from these students’ recollections a sketch of activism as the actions and theory we mobilize toward some change seen as “progressive,” in the world or ourselves. Their activist action seems mediated, made possible, and constrained by particular (cultural) tools. This discussion will establish a context against which to examine in later chapters these students’ research methodologies in activist settings and to analyze the “tensions” they recollect from their concurrent action within university and activist communities.

Applying *mediated action* toward an inquiry into activist practice

In *Mind as Action*, James Wertsch (1998) introduces *mediated action* as a mode of analysis that enables an integrative grasp of “...the relationships between human *action*, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which this action occurs, on the other” (Wertsch, 1998, p.24). Such an approach draws upon an adaptation of Kenneth Burke’s (1962) “dramatistic method,” which takes action as the basic phenomenon to be analyzed,

rather than behaviour, mental or linguistic structure, or attitudes (Wertsch, 1998, p.12). Such an analytical framework draws on relationships among five elements or principles, which Burke's (1962) *Grammar of Motive* simply names: "Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose" (xvii). Burke says a complete statement about, or inquiry into, actions must answer to the intersecting inter-relations among all elements:

Men [sic] may violently disagree about the purposes behind a given act, or about the character of the person who did it, or in what situation he acted; or they may even insist upon totally different words to name the act itself. But be that as it may, any complete statement about motives will offer *some kind* of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent); how he did it (agency), and why (purpose). (Burke, 1962, p.xvii)

This useful, and seemingly simple "who/what/where/how/why" framework has been mobilized not only for Burke's original purpose of theoretical analysis of dramatic texts, but also as methodological approach supporting cross-disciplinary, or socio-cultural inquiries that aim to generate a complex interpretation of human actions (Gusfield, 1989, p.4). In his introduction to *Kenneth Burke on Symbols and Society* (1989), Gusfield argues that applying Burke's method can assist the social scientist in amplifying and complicating "how we see":

Burke's importance for the sociologist lies not so much in any particular content of any particular part of his writings but in the development of a method, a perspective about perspectives, which is a profound attempt to understand the implications for human behaviour of the fact that humans are "symbol using animals." ...[This] leaves us not with a new way of seeing, but a new way of seeing how we see. (Gusfield 1989, p.46)

Similarly, this chapter aims to disrupt simplistic, singular lines of interpretation of the relationships of graduate student researchers to activism and the academy, and their use of the cultural tools or symbols in those activist settings.

This analytic strategy is supported by ten descriptive claims about mediated action made by Wertsch (1998). Criticizing "analytic efforts that seek to account for human action by focusing on the individual agent ... [as] severely limited, if not misguided" (p.21), Wertsch proposes a variation on Burke's method which privileges "mediated action" as action shaped by the relationships between the agent and the mediational means, or cultural tools, used to

mediate, facilitate, or enable the action (1998, p. 21). Wertsch describes mediated action as a complex “dialectic between agent and instrumentality” (p.17) and suggests that making this particular relationship the focus of an inquiry promotes looking beyond the individual actor or agent in order to understand the forces that shape human action.

For the current inquiry, the lens of mediated action provides a means to view and analyze activist students’ actions, the cultural tools they apply in activist settings, and the purposes to which their activist actions are oriented. Following Wertsch’s (1989) ten “claims” about mediated action, this chapter takes up the complex relationship between the activist academic and his or her cultural tools as a way to look beyond the individual experiences to the ways in which those experiences are situated in sociocultural contexts. Wertsch claims that:

...(1) Mediated action is characterized by an irreducible tension between agent and mediational means; (2) mediational means are material; (3) mediated action typically has multiple simultaneous goals; (4) mediated action is situated on one or more developmental paths; (5) mediational means constrain as well as enable action; (6) new mediational means transform mediated action; (7) the relationship of agents toward mediational means can be characterized in terms of mastery; (8); the relationship of agents toward mediational means can be characterized in terms of appropriation; (9) mediational means are often produced for reasons other than to facilitate mediated action; and (10) mediational means are associated with power and authority. (Wertsch, 1998, p.25)

With these analytic “tools” offered by Burke and Wertsch, this chapter theorizes graduate students and other activists as *agents* in their community *scenes*. As such, they are situated relative to others in their own communities and to broader social *contexts*, and they apply various *cultural tools* toward a range of academic, activist, and other *purposes*. That Wertsch’s mediated action approach demands accounting for the relationships of power, authority, transformation, and constraint among action and tools makes his a fitting framework for an interrogation of activism that asks not only, “What does activism look like?” but also, “How is activism done? What tools do graduate student activists apply in their community settings? How are these tools also related to academic purposes or scenes? Under what conditions and within what institutional and community relations do activists “act” in their community settings?” A separate inquiry might question, “Who decides who is an activist

and who isn't? What (and whose) purposes would such a ranking serve? What work "is" more or less socially progressive?"

Defining Capital "A" Activism

Activism and activist communities rely on a range of cultural tools, especially discursive tools, to develop their theory; to plan, execute and evaluate their actions; to articulate and circulate their message; and to mobilize support. Among these graduate students, identified by themselves or others as "activist," activism is a concept variously defined in terms of organizing frameworks, the criteria by which one can identify an activist, and the degree to which a particular activity "counts" as activism. Francisco Ibanez Carrasco, for example, eschews the identity of activist in one of our conversations, yet offers an eloquent framework for beginning a discussion of how one might define and situate oneself relative to activism and activist scholarship. He says,

In no specific order: Activism is a rare blend of pragmatism (doing stuff in the community, the everyday stuff, the detail), theorizing (ideas, vision, imagination), politics (including partisan politics), charisma (as in Che Guevara. Although I understand that he rarely showered. —how could they under those conditions, I say? —but was a lucky womanizer), and leadership (able to translate from the theory to practice —praxis - and "move" people to do stuff around it, mobilize). (personal communication, August 25, 2003)

Throughout this project's conversations about activism and activist scholarship, graduate students researchers reiterated similar ideas about activism as action (what Francisco calls "doing stuff," the everyday stuff, the detail); informed by and informing theory; oriented around a political or ideological position, which the activist perceives as progressive in its purpose and goals. In these discussions, "activism" implied an impetus toward positive social change, and seemed to be situated within relationships, both oppositional and complementary, between individual action and desires, and collective or community-based agendas, intentions, and activities.

Scott Uzelman describes activism in terms similar to Francisco's, as politically informed, oriented toward community-based change, and (while built from many individual, ethically-based choices) as a framework beyond individual experience:

I would say that activism involves the adoption of particular ethico-political commitments. I like to think of it as a way of living these commitments in the hope of bringing about positive social change. But while we constantly make ethical choices in the mundane acts of everyday living (many times not living up to our principles!), activism isn't about individualized lifestyle choices. Rather, it's about the continual construction of community with others who share similar outlooks, and this is done in and through struggle. It's also a struggle without end. There is no final reconciliation to be had, no awakening of the "human spirit" where we all see capitalism, patriarchy, racism, etc. for the evils they are or any other such utopian outcome. It's always about attempting to establish relations of power that are conducive to democratic forms of sociality and warding off forms of power that aren't. (personal communication June 26, 2003)

Uzelman adds to this study's conceptualization of activism that change must be achieved through struggle, by disrupting existing systems and establishing in their place new forms of social organization. His activism acknowledges that we may not live up to our hopeful commitments, but that individual activists should work with others, despite difficulties among us, to develop and refine—to struggle toward—a shared praxis. "Struggle" appears throughout activist discourse to articulate the process of engaging with and working to disrupt current systems, as well as the difficult, interactive process of working through disagreement among activists to build and rebuild their solidarity; "While we engage in struggle at the macro level, we must also wage a permanent struggle within our own ranks" (John and Thompson, 2003, p.4). Nandita Sharma likewise emphasizes that activists must insist on struggling toward solidarity with those who are most exploited, and not only integrate the mental work of changing attitudes, but must take action to transform practices of exploitation:

Activism is work that tries to organize people into making progressive, hopefully transformative, change. Shifting one's consciousness and that of others is an important part of this work, but I do believe that we need to push this further so that it is not so much about "changing people's attitudes" but also about showing solidarity with those who are being oppressed and exploited and taking concerted action to stop practices that do this. (personal communication, February 03, 2004)

A conceptualization of activism begins to take shape in which individual actions combine toward collective, politically informed agendas, in which action and theory together might integrate toward progressive social change. But, as Laura Atkinson says, "Activism is a

loaded word” (personal communication, December 18, 2003), and others seem to hold a broader definition of everyday acts as activism. For example, Tanya says, “The mom talking to her boy about gender, that’s activism” (personal communication, July 27, 2003), while Andrea’s version of activism includes a range of community and individual activities. She says:

“What is activism to me?”... The first thing that popped into my mind was people out in the street protesting, like the demonstration against the WTO in Seattle in 1999 (which I wasn’t at, but I did attend the teach-in a few days before the march) Then I thought, “No, activists are also people who decide to ride their bikes to work because they’ve made the conscious decision to be more environmentally friendly.” Activists are also people who grow gardens on their balconies or create community gardens. They are also people who do the public art installations on the bike routes. (Smith, A., personal communication, August 28, 2003)

Beginning from the convergences and disparity among these activist students’ definitions helps situate the following discussion of the connections participants in this study make between their own academic work and activism. Though each of the participants in this study has been identified either by themselves or others as an activist or activist scholar, several questioned whether (or to what extent) their work should be defined as “activism.” Within these discussions, it seems an implicit assumption operated that there are kinds and degrees of activism, and that one or one’s work can be differently, or less or “more activisty, if that’s a word” (Pablo Bose, personal communication, July 25, 2003).

But I’m not an activist

While most of the students interviewed for this study called themselves activists (of some sort), two told me, “I am not an activist,” while another described herself as “A wanna-be activist who can’t get off the couch” (Andrea Jones, personal communication, July 25, 2003), yet each of these were described as activists by others. For example, university-based research ethicists and advocates for the rights of the terminally ill have noted the significant (and “progressive”) impact of Russel Ogden’s research on euthanasia and assisted suicide³⁰. However, Ogden himself says, “I am not an activist—though my research is used by activists, my interest is in doing empirically sound research” (personal communication, December 20,

³⁰ Other participants in this study, as well as other academic colleagues and at least two people I met randomly outside the university suggested Russel Ogden as a participant in this study when I described my interest in the activist academic “tensions.”

2003).³¹ Likewise, though many would name as activism his long, unpaid commitment to community-based work around HIV/AIDS, Francisco Ibanez Carrasco says:

I'm not an activist: the activists are like DEYAS or VANDU³². The real activists fly around all the time, promoting their work... I am cynical about the labels. I don't think of myself as an activist. (personal communication, July 28, 2003)

That both of these researchers, and in particular, Francisco (currently an unpaid worker in HIV rehabilitation) have been called activists by others, yet situate themselves relative to other street-based, peer-organized, outreach and advocacy groups suggests that some groups or types of work are viewed as "more" activist-oriented than others. Further, though I identified Francisco (like others in the study) as an activist-oriented academic, this identification may shift when other types of work or political orientations are juxtaposed.³³ Certainly, some may describe as activism a body of work or a politic that others deem to be promoting *regressive* social change. Rather than rating or ranking their activism, this project considers instead what these graduate students did in the name of activist-oriented action.

Communicating Activist to Activist- Can we cut corners?

I introduced myself to each of the participants in this study as "a feminist activist and SFU grad student" and explained in the introductory email that I had read each thesis out of "my own interest in the connections between activist/social change work and academic research" (Appendix I- Letter of Introduction). Approaching each of these participants not only as one graduate student researcher to another, but also as one activist to another established particular frameworks for the relationships between researcher and research participants. While the following chapter further discusses some methodological implications

³¹ For example, the Hemlock Foundation and End of Life Choices Action Committee are "right to die" activists. Publications by these groups have drawn on Ogden's research on "deathing technologies" and euthanasia. "End of Life Choices works for the freedom to choose a dignified death and for individual control concerning death. We support the right of terminally ill, mentally competent adults to hasten death under careful safeguards." <http://www.hemlock.org/index.jsp>. Retrieved February 01, 2004.

³² DEYAS (Downtown Eastside Youth Activities Society) and VANDU (Vancouver Network of Drug Users) are two grassroots community groups providing peer support and services in their local communities.

³³ In his thesis, Francisco describes himself as having done "grassroots volunteer work in AIDs prevention" (1999, p.128). The distinction he makes between this work and activism is perhaps, one of degree. Chapter Five of this thesis, "Activist/Academic Tensions", discusses the shift in activist settings from "grassroots" social change orientations to sites providing professionalized social services. Ibanez now holds a PhD and is a professional researcher and consultant in what he calls the "HIV/AIDS 'industry'" (personal communication, July 30, 2003).

of this move, it is here important to note that this seemed to lead the researcher and research participants to use in our communication a sort of collegial, activist, “short-hand” vocabulary of concepts and history. For example, both Scott Uzelman and Pablo Bose described some of their activism in sentences that began with “in Seattle, we” and “when we were in Quebec,” without clarifying that they were speaking of the anti-WTO (World Trade Organization) street protests in Seattle in 1999 and protest against the Summit of the Americas meeting in Quebec City (2001). Because I nodded and implied shared background knowledge, we continued the discussion without stopping to fill in the background information. As Tanya Jones says in an interview about activist-oriented graduate research:

In terms of how I have this discussion, if it's activist-to-activist, then there's a sense that even though activism differs across the board, then there's a sense of —if you self-identify as an activist, then that gives me a sense of what language to frame things around, to cut corners. (personal communication, July 27, 2003)

Within an activist community, Tanya is accustomed to using a vocabulary and set of concepts based on shared, insider knowledge that may be meaningless to the general public. Indeed, in several initial interviews, we used concepts like “activism,” “front line tactics,” “direct action,” “propaganda,” and “supporting those on the ground,” without thoroughly unpacking either their ideological or practical implications, but proceeding as though each understood what the terms implied to activists like us.³⁴ These concepts from the interviews' insider language of activism structure the ensuing discussion of these students' participation in activist communities.

In the community: Activism before entering the academy

In their theses and in interviews and email communication for this research, these students reveal varied relationships to activist communities, tools, and actions prior to beginning their thesis research. Several told of entering graduate school with developed activist praxis (Bennett, Tanya, Uzelman, Ashe, Atkinson, Sharma), oriented toward

³⁴ As I had read their theses, these authors could, however, rely on some shared understanding of some of the terms in our activist discourse. For example, Uzelman (2002) dedicates an entire thesis chapter to unpacking “direct action”, while Bose's thesis focuses on unraveling the rise of the new “grassroots”. Other theses, like Ibanez Carrasco, Tanya Jones, Malange refer to “front line workers,” without explicitly elucidating this concept.

progressive social action, while others had a developing commitment, interest, or “vague concern for social justice” (Meiners 1999, p.78). Prior to graduate research, seven of the twelve participants were already employed by or volunteering for activist-oriented collectives, centers, and organizations for: ending poverty (Bennett); supporting people living with HIV/AIDS (Ibanez); advocating for women’s rights (Atkinson; Bennett; Gullion; Sharma; Tanya Jones); and protesting global capitalism and media ownership (Uzelman). Tanya Jones worked for three years as a paid Public Education Coordinator, Ibanez as an outreach worker; Bennett, Gullion, Sharma, and Uzelman as volunteer collective³⁵ members participating as leaders in grassroots organizations³⁶. Other participants in this study were more peripherally involved in activist communities prior to their graduate research (Ashe, Bose, Malange, Ogden, Andrea Smith). Pablo Bose says he, “Always had some social justice concerns—not shallow, but it was weak” (personal communication, July 25, 2003); Siobhan Ashe had visited a logging blockade in Clayoquot Sound and donated money to Greenpeace, “grateful that someone was doing the work out there” (1999, p.34); Russel Ogden was a social worker; Andrea Smith was a “wannabe activist” who wanted to talk with survivors of childhood sexual assault; Erica Meiners had her “vague concern with social justice” (1999, p. 78); and Cara-Lee Malange was a traveler in Guatemala, concerned with what she saw as the risks of development imposed by the First World voices (personal communication, January, 14, 2004).

Activist Identities

In even these very brief characterizations of relationships between students and their activist communities prior to their graduate research, we can begin to draw out and question how the complexity of past relationships to activism may have informed the students’ later actions as activist-oriented researchers. Members of activist communities of practice would, over time, have become a particular type of activist. They would have integrated some of the practices of the activist community into their identity, learning the ideologies, values, knowledgeable skills, and practices through participating in the collective, sociocultural practice

³⁵ “Collective” here denotes a democratic organizational structure, where decision-making power is shared equally by the membership. This is, in effect, synonymous with collegiality, “A form of social organization based on shared and equal participation of all its members. It contrasts with a hierarchical, pyramidal structure, and is often represented by a series of concentric circles. Authority resides in the center-most circle, not over the others, but equidistant from each, so that authority can listen and reflect the consensus of the whole (Heaney, 1995).

³⁶ By “grassroots” I mean small-scale, autonomous organizations, self-organized around a shared (political) agenda (Bobo et al 1996 p.39).

of their activist community. Prior to their research, the study's participants were connected to activist communities as volunteers or paid workers; as members of a "democratic collective" (Uzelman), or located within a hierarchical organization; as peripheral newcomers or old-timers; and as formal or informal leaders. Throughout, each would have been introduced to, or "Fell? Been seduced? Been pushed? Jumped? – into" (Meiners, personal communication, January 4, 2004) the ideology of their respective community and the community's practice of leadership, authority, accountability, decision-making, theorizing, and, indeed, action. Among the intersections of explicit and implicit ties to an activist community, an identity as an activist community member would have developed (Wenger, 1998, p.214). We can perhaps imagine that a range of "formative" experiences as activists might inform diverse expectations for these student researchers about how further research and activism "should" take shape, and how they should or could relate to the activist community.

Through participation, an activist community member would be expected to have developed a more-or-less explicit "ideologically situated worldview" (Bennett, 2003, p.3), consistent with the ideologies, values, practices, and definitions held in the community (Wenger, 1998). An activist who has served as a member of an activist organization may be strongly inculcated in that community's practices and bring that orientation to future organizing as an activist as well as to related research work. A volunteer for an activist organization, compared to a paid employee, or an employer, or Director, would have participated in different practices for accounting to and speaking for an activist community, as would those whose activist communities were variously organized and structured. The ways in which activists have related to the ideological modes of thinking, acting, writing, and speaking of, for example, a particular feminism, environmentalism, or queer politics learned in a community setting would likely affect the ways in which they engage with these ideological discourses or cultural tools when they move to new settings and develop as activist academics.

Activism as action mediated by ideology and bias for social change

These activists recollected in interviews that prior to graduate research their activism included combinations of: listening to, advising, providing childcare for, and preparing food for people in crisis; facilitating internal and public meetings and teaching sessions; writing internal training curricula; representing our organizations to the public, the state, and media;

planning and participating in interviews, presentations, and displays; raising money; writing and designing pamphlets, placards, articles, websites; standing, or sitting, or marching in the streets in public protests; and supporting the activism of others with financial donations. However, though these actions were characterized in the research interviews in relation to hands on, front line activism, none of these actions is necessarily “activism.” Rather, it is the mediation of actions by inter-related discursive and physical tools—for example, political and analytical frameworks, which inform slogans or images on placards or pamphlets in the context of and motivated by a purpose of social change—which transforms actions into “activism.” (Wertsch, 1998, p.43).

Without the framework and purpose of social change, one could still speak, write, and otherwise “act” about some of the same issues as these activists work on, such as violence against women (though it may instead be called “domestic violence”), AIDS/HIV, or poverty. Consider how churches, charities, therapists, and governmental and non-governmental organizations also provide social services (for example) to battered women, AIDS patients, and poor people. These agencies may work to ameliorate individuals’ circumstances, without necessarily organizing around an agenda that calls for change to the structures and conditions that cause violence against women, ill health, healthcare cuts, homophobia, racism, poverty, etc. Indeed, this tension between “social service” and “social change” is highlighted in critiques of funding bodies, educational institutions, governments, and community-groups alike by radical and/or grassroots groups³⁷, and has also been addressed as a problematic for the University of California (Santa Cruz) Community Studies program:

The service-vs. -change tension is continuing and can only be resolved by each individual student during the field period. The program is designed for students to work in social change organizations...and Faculty push the students to do “social change,” but find that students’ field experience is closer to social service delivery than social change. (Freidland and Rotkin, 2003, p.48).

Within the “tension” or continuum of service-vs. -change we will next consider the ways in which participants in this study participate in activist settings once they enter the academy. Most seek to integrate their activism into the discursive work required of them in the academy.

³⁷ See Funston (2000), Jay (2000), Lakeman (2004). A later section of this thesis discusses some of the institutional factors informing this tension in community-based work.

Activism and community-based work during graduate research

Motivation for activist graduate research

Activists in this study said they pursued graduate degrees in order to “acquire more credibility” in activist settings (Jones); or as “a way to avoid real work” (Uzelman), or to gain credentials to support future paid work (Gullion), or to help build a (paying) career about which we are passionate, or “can politically live with” (Bennett), or because a family tradition emphasized an academic career path (Bose). The move to integrate activism and academic work may have “multiple, simultaneous goals” (Wertsch, 1998, p.32), which may intersect, conflict, and, perhaps, originate outside of the student’s intentions or, indeed, be coordinated by purposes, goals, or conditions originating outside of their immediate contexts. Chapter 5, *Activist/Academic Tensions*, discusses how actions in academic and activist settings are organized by “ruling relations,” processes beyond the individual’s control and intention, and sometimes not entirely visible from the vantage point of the subject (Smith, 1987).

Concurrent with many motivations or goals for academic work, and other motivations they didn’t reveal, don’t recall, or haven’t considered as related to their graduate work, these students described having wanted to connect academic and activist work in order to benefit themselves and their community. They aimed to integrate their interests, passions, or life experiences in order to make academic work more meaningful to themselves or to “challenge power structures” (Atkinson, personal communication, December 18, 2003). Others hoped that their academic work would “make a difference” (Smith, A.) or “be of use” (Meiners) to communities through their intellectual contribution, or believed their academic credentials would provide for their activist communities additional leverage and credibility with government and funding bodies (Jones).

As developing activist academics, these students negotiated various relationships as researchers, organizers, volunteers, and employees within activist-oriented communities and organizations. Two of these researchers negotiated for other members of their own organizations to become subjects in their thesis research (Jones, Scott Uzelman). Three others intentionally chose not to conduct research within their organizing, but drew on analyses developed by working as volunteers within activist groups to inform their theses (Bennett, Gullion, Sharma) and continued working within those groups concurrent with their academic

studies. Two others offered voluntary labour to groups related in politic or purpose to their thesis (Smith, A., Francisco Ibanez Carrasco). Siobhan Ashe, Cara Lee Malange, and Erica Meiners each joined a community-based group for the duration of thesis fieldwork and left afterward, while Pablo Bose joined an online activist-scholarship community concurrent with his fieldwork and has developed into a leading member. Russel Ogden says he was never an activist nor a member of an activist organization, though as mentioned, others may identify him as an activist scholar.

Several of these students participated in activist communities primarily as volunteers (Ashe, Bose, Gullion, Malange, Meiners, Tanya Jones, Andrea Smith, Uzelman) though some in effect “bartered” their work in the community for permission to conduct the research. However, for four of these students, activism, graduate study, and paid work were intertwined. For example, Francisco Ibanez Carrasco was connected to the HIV/AIDS research and intervention community during his PhD research not only as academic researcher but also in many other facets (paid consultant, and researcher, and patient). Three other students (Atkinson, Bennett, Sharma) worked while students as paid staff for the Simon Fraser Public Interest Group, “a non-profit, progressive, activist organization” (Atkinson, personal communication, December 18, 2003). However, for these three, this paid work was distinct from their own specific research interests and from their primary activism.

In their relationships with activist communities during graduate studies, these activist academics were “agents” (Wertsch, 1998) incorporating a range of discursive and physical tools to labour, write, speak, listen, observe, and otherwise act. Those who had already been organized to activism continued with the actions they had been performing, while those who had not been activists began looking to “be of use” (Flax 1993, p.4, in Meiners, 1998, p.8) They “rolled up [their] sleeves and got [their] hands dirty” (Malange, 2001, p.36) in the work of activist communities, either literally or discursively.

Frontline work: Roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty

These students tended to describe their work as activist academics as supporting the “front line,” “on the ground,” and “hands-on work of the real activists” (Bose, personal communication, July 25, 2003). Among these students, only Cara Lee Malange literally rolled up her sleeves and did physical labour as her primary community-based action. Indeed, she

dropped some of her agreed responsibilities to develop a database for the shelter where she worked and, she says, “Instead committed myself to participating fully in the monotonous, day-to-day household responsibilities that consumed most of the waking hours of the women at the New Horizons Home. It was extremely hard work” (2001, p.138). Malange, in effect, bartered several months of her voluntary labour in exchange for consent to research, and credits her success and diligence at doing the work of childrearing and housekeeping with the eventual success of her research data-gathering and analysis:

By caring for baby Julio and the other children, I managed to gain the trust and respect from the women/mothers at the New Horizons Home. Not only did they feel more comfortable with me, they confided in me more, and openly talked about their problems and concerns. (Malange, 2001, p.139)

As Malange participated more fully in the activities of the mothering community of the shelter, she became was identifiable (Wenger, 1998) as a “good mother” (Malange, 2001, p.105) by other residents and they allowed her to participate as a legitimate member of their community. As she demonstrated increasing competence in the work of mothering, she increasingly “mastered” (Wertsch, 1998) the cultural tools privileged in the feminist activist context of the shelter. Indeed, though the cultural tools associated with childcare, cleaning and laundry were new to her, she both appropriated them as her own, and was able to apply them to her benefit as research methodologies—a much different purpose than “mothering” is usually applied.

Direct Action

Among these student activists, Darcie Bennett, Nandita Sharma, and Scott Uzelman describe some of their activist activities as being part of direct action strategies working to organize autonomous alternatives to state, capitalist, or patriarchy-controlled systems. Direct action tactics aim to render redundant or interrupt, rather than transform, hegemonic institutions and procedures. Direct action strategies work to organize alternative ways for people to provide for one another and, in so doing, to transform society (for the better). Scott Uzelman describes the site of his activism and MA research, the Vancouver Indy Media Centre, as a site of direct action, explaining the power of direct action thus:

Strategies of direct action and participation do not aim at taking or transforming state or corporate power, but instead seek to render them

redundant. Direct action names not a specific set of tactics – civil disobedience, for example – but strategies to effect social change through collective activity by subordinated people rather than them relying on the actions of others, especially the actions of dominating groups or institutions. (Uzelman, 2002, p.97)

Uzelman's Vancouver Independent Media Centre works to provide an alternative media source and form of production that might "render redundant" media monopolies. Similarly, Bennett organizes with a collective of poor women to provide homeschooling and childcare for each other without participating in either the cash economy or state bureaucracy. Further, the feminist, collectively-run women's shelter in Guatemala where Cara-Lee Malange volunteered for several months, organizes a new way of "interrupting" poverty and violence against women, and may be understood as a direct action, though Malange does not analyze it as such in her thesis. Bennett, Sharma, and Uzelman each describe a continued commitment to direct action strategies as part of their activism today. Uzelman says:

Strategies of direct action and participation, like the IMC movement, interrupt [dominant] process by creating independence and hope and re-establishing the organic, self-determined interconnections people have traditionally made with each other and the world around them. (2002,p.98, citing Cleaver, 1992, p. 120)

Propaganda: Mastering tools for writing and speaking in activist settings

Among these students, most participated in activist communities during their graduate study predominantly as writers, speakers, facilitators, listeners, and teachers. They believed their individual and collaborative communication/theory/research/education projects would assist their communities in developing new, shared knowledge or would assist in lobby efforts to build public support for their issues or could be used in popular education activities run by the activist groups or by themselves. In addition to, and concurrent with producing their thesis research texts, these graduate student activists produced: a policy manual (Jones); pamphlets about reproductive health (Atkinson); research reports (Ashe, Jones); newspaper and journal articles (Bose, Gullion); content for websites (Bose, Gullion, Sharma, Uzelman); and lobby letters to government officials (Ashe, Bose, Sharma). Their work in activist communities also included dialogic, educative praxis both integrated within and separate from their research methodologies. As members of activist communities, these students facilitated workshops (Atkinson, Gullion Tanya Jones, Sharma, Uzelman) and study sessions (Bennett), granted news interviews (Bose, Gullion), hosted public forum/lecture sessions (Uzelman, Sharma), and

conducted research interviews that may have offered the participants opportunities for (mutual or individual) education or consciousness-raising, (Atkinson) or a “therapeutic purpose for those who had never before spoken of their experience” (Ogden, 1994 p.98).

In order to perform all these actions, these student activists would have applied particular discursive tools, and, to some extent, “mastered” those discursive tools for the purpose of activism (Wertsch, 1998, p.47). At the same time, these activists found those discursive tools that most personally “fit” their needs, interests, or ideology. They may have rejected some modes of speaking, writing, thinking that didn’t “fit” or in some cases, used the available tools with which they had some mastery, despite some of their own resistance preventing them from “appropriating that cultural tool and making it their own” (Wertsch, 1998, p.54).³⁸ Through Wertsch’s analysis about the mastery and appropriation of cultural tools, we can consider how the skills (or tools) used for teaching and writing in the university setting might also serve as the tools used within the activist setting, or how the mastery of discursive tools developed in the activist setting might transfer to the university setting.

Several of these students described their academic research and their activism as integrated exercises of theory development, in which the activities of activism and the voices of activists were privileged. At the same time, some described skills developed in academic settings that assisted in promoting the researcher activists’ developing theories, and integrated with community efforts to achieve social change. Laura Atkinson, for example, views the workshops she facilitated and the pamphlets she created through her thesis research as a part of her activism, through which she hoped some change could be accomplished in the medical discourse, among feminists, and among the “average” women who might come in contact with her research. She says:

I wanted to help prevent legalizing these drugs, and there just was not any information available to women. And I saw an opportunity to make change in my own feminist community. I was brought in by feminists to do workshops in the clinics because those women, who were working there and saying the same things I was saying, didn’t have the clout to change the clinic decisions.

³⁸ Wertsch’s notion of “friction” or “resistance” between cultural tools and their use by an agent in action is derived from Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of *prisoenie*, translated as “appropriation, the ways in which words may resist becoming an speaker’s “own” until after the speaker has attached his or her own intention” (Wertsch, 1998, p.53).

We thought that because I was the researcher, when I facilitated a workshop I might have more leverage to get the alternative, critical viewpoint across. ... And because I did popular education, I wanted to get to the average woman. Not just to spread information, but to get women talking to one another and talking critically... and women are still contacting me for information, years later. (personal communication, December 18, 2003)

Laura Atkinson says that her research aimed to value the expert knowledge held by everyday women, and she credits those women, rather than academia with helping her develop her feminist analysis of birth control technologies. Similarly, others of these students drew from, and worked to make their thesis research accessible and available to, non-academic, activist communities in order to support those communities' further theoretical development. Both Tanya Jones and Uzelman's theses are now available online, alongside other documents authored collectively by their activist organizations, while Darcie Bennett describes her thesis research—an analysis of BC government welfare policy—as a useful “body of work” (personal communication, July 6, 2003), from which she could draw and bring to her feminist collective to support the study sessions they organized on women and poverty. Similar to Darcie's view of her thesis research as a body of thinking, or discourse, from which to draw for further academic and activist writing, Pablo Bose has written academic journal articles throughout and since his MA research related to, informed by, and informing his activism around the River Narmada. Likewise, Siobahn Ashe continues to build her community-based organizing (and her PhD research) from an analytical framework of “community-based capacity-building” which she began to develop in her MA research (personal communication).

Activists didn't know what to do with graduate students

Among participants in this study, most (nine of thirteen) were active in collaborative or individual writing projects within activist settings concurrent with their graduate research. However, in contrast to those students' experiences of collectivity and integration of their (academic) discursive skills in activism, others offered to contribute their skills to activist communities, but found those communities did not use their contribution. For example, Andrea Smith volunteered her research and writing skills initially to women's groups, but she says, “They never seemed to know what to do with me, I would sit around doing nothing, and eventually quit. Now I'm at [a large social services charity]—they do some good stuff, and the Communications Director seems really excited to have me and is giving me some interesting projects” (personal communication, July 25, 2003). Similarly, Siobhan Ashe joined the

Barefoot Cartographers in order to conduct her MA fieldwork, and in exchange for the opportunity to conduct her research fieldwork within the group, she took up one of their research topics, but found that she and her work were not integrated into the activists' work. She recalls:

I was responsible for gathering data on BCTransit, and at the end of six months, I considered this task a time-consuming chore. In the end, not one piece of information that I collected was incorporated into a map. (personal communication, January 14, 2004)

Given that the Barefoot Cartographers never used the research Ashe completed as a member of their group, and that she left the group after her fieldwork was complete, it seems neither she nor Andrea Smith was "wired" into the activist communities in the way that other activist/grad students have been. We can ask then, "What might inform these different experiences of integrating academic writing (skills) into activist settings, and of becoming, oneself, connected into a community and staying connected to the community throughout and beyond the completion of the research?"

Some of these students brought to the activist organizations some existing "know-how" or lived experience about the issue, ideology, or tactics of the community. For example, Francisco Ibanez Carrasco has been living with HIV/AIDS for many years, participating in a local and experiential community through multiple roles or identities as: lover, outreach worker, friend, artist, patient, research participant, and researcher/consultant. Describing how his "everyday, nitty-gritty" participation in his community informs his research, Ibanez Carrasco says,

Being wired to a community like a Borg³⁹, as "one of many," one feels the impulse they all do. [This community] informs my research with knowledge and know-how ("walk the walk"), flexibility, respect and reciprocity. Activism makes me feel somewhat "real" in a world of economic, political and religious leaders, celebrities and heroes that seem removed from the everyday nitty-gritty of implementing the stuff that community/individuals need or dream up. (personal communication, August 8, 2003)

39 The Borg is an entity in Star Trek mythology. "The Borg only want to "raise the quality of life" of the species they "assimilate." ... Born humanoid, they are almost immediately implanted with bio-chips that link their brains to a collective consciousness ... This collective consciousness is experienced by the Borg as "thousands" of voices — they are collectively aware, but not aware of themselves as separate individuals." Source: <http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/library/aliens/article/70558.html>

In contrast, Andrea Smith, for example, describes herself as identifying with women's groups as a research and activist setting because of her own experience of having surviving sexist violence and "wanting to contribute skills to a women's organization." However, she also describes her involvement in feminist and women's groups as having remained peripheral. She has not become "wired" into a women's activist community despite shared experience and interest; rather, she says, "I'm unconnected to community. I'm a loner, I guess" (personal communication, July 25, 2003). Interest and relevant lived experience, it seems, could not alone propel her from the periphery to full participation in "The Borg", or collective praxis, of activist communities. It may be that Andrea's was a problem of legitimacy (Lave and Wenger, 1991)—though she was interested in participating, the community didn't know what to do with her and, it seems, she also didn't know how to participate fully and coordinate her activities with the various formal and informal rule and values of the community. While some of these students became old-timers, developing over time as full participants and even leaders in the activist communities related to their graduate research, Andrea Smith remained a newcomer, continuing to move among various communities looking for a "fit."

Writing and Speaking: Academic tools or Activist tools

Seeing that some graduate students merged smoothly into full participation in "The Borg" of activist communities, while others remained peripheral "loners," whose work was not used, it is difficult to authoritatively assert how academic research and writing skills function as discursive tools to "mediate" actions taken in other, non-academic contexts. While it may be tempting to try to determine whether these students first mastered their discursive tools through activist or academic action, it is perhaps more helpful to note, with Wertsch (1998), that cultural tools serve many "simultaneous, sometimes conflicting goals" (p.32), so the same discursive tools may function in both activist and academic (and other) settings.

These students speak and write, theorize, and act while negotiating into their identities both activist and academic practices (Wenger, 1998, p.213). Some students explicitly credit their academic training for their mastery of tools useful for speaking and listening in their community. Uzelman, for example, says "TA'ing [working as a Teaching Assistant] as a grad student gave me the experience that made me at ease in facilitating public meetings, as well as mediating some of the conflict within IMC collective meetings" (personal communication,

June 20, 2003). Similarly, others drew on their academic research and writing to give them a “body of work” (Bennett) from which to draw in their activism, or the “vocabulary to talk seriously about the issues with other environmental activists” (Bose, personal communication). Tanya Jones describes activism “as the starting point for the research,” saying, “My activism and academic work are integrated, not separate” (Jones, personal communication, July 25, 2003). All who considered themselves activists describe their activist and academic work and skills as inseparable, integrated into “who they are and what they do” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). As Siobhan Ashe says, “Research and writing about these issues *is* my environmental action” (1999, p. 36).

Activism after graduate work

After completing the theses considered in this study, these students took various activist and academic paths. Among them, only Andrea Smith has yet to finish her Master’s thesis, and she continues to volunteer with a community organization aligned with the community-service themes she pursues in her academic work. Of the students considered here, six continued from their Master’s to PhD degrees⁴⁰ (Bennett, Uzelman, Bose, Ashe, Sharma, Ogden), and each continued to integrate their community interests and politics into their academic work. Among these, Uzelman says, “I’ve dropped the activism until I’m done the PhD coursework” (personal communication, July 25, 2003); while others (if not themselves) describe Ashe, Ogden, Malange, and Sharma as “activist scholars.” Pablo Bose continues to write about and amplify his MA research on the Narmada River valley through his leadership in the *Friends of Narmada* activist community and through his PhD research, while also engaging in the politics of development displacement (personal communication). Bennett continues with her membership in a grassroots feminist collective, has added developing a collective homeschool to her organizing, and intends for her PhD research to focus on women’s poverty. Neither Laura Atkinson nor Tanya Jones see the need to continue with academic study, but both continue their activism, Atkinson by “... doing tangible, constructive things, organizing and training and workshops, the things that have some everyday impact” (Atkinson, personal communication, December 18, 2003) and Tanya Jones continuing as a member of the same anti-discrimination group she had been involved in since

⁴⁰ This finding will be discussed further in Chapter 5: Activist Academic Tensions.

beginning her MA research. Like Nandita Sharma, they see the responsibilities of activists as going beyond academic research. Sharma says:

I am quite honoured to be considered an “activist scholar.” While it is important to recognize that teaching and research can have profound and far-reaching effects upon those that you are able to teach and who can read your research, I wouldn't consider teaching or researching itself as necessarily “activism.” I think that this allows people who are teachers and researchers to forego responsibility for the making of other kinds of changes, especially the responsibility to not only affect their students or those that read their work but also to change to world. (personal communication, February 3, 2004)

Though Bose describes it being “easier to burn out as an activist than in academia” (personal communication, July 25, 2003), that most of these graduate students continue on the trajectory of further scholarly work and continue to integrate community-based or activist-oriented approaches may suggest that the combination of activism and academia might, in some ways, mitigate against that activist “burn out.”

Concluding Remarks:

Of the students considered here, only a few were fully participating in activist communities prior to beginning their graduate degrees. For many, their interest in activist, progressive, or community issues developed along with their development of their thesis research, and all who have advanced their academic careers continue to integrate their activist, or community-based interests into that work. Throughout, their participation in activist settings has been characterized by their mastery of and application of discursive tools for critical and educative writing and dialogue—tools that are also tightly integrated into academic work.

While the next chapter will explore the “tensions” in integrating activist and academic work, here we have seen many complements. Despite varied understandings of “activism,” activists may share a common discourse and can “cut corners” (Jones) in communicating with one another. Likewise, most agree that activism and academic work can be usefully integrated, in that skills and knowledge developed in each setting can be applied in the other. Indeed, these students' activist practice was substantially a discursive practice, much like socially conscious research.

CHAPTER 4: ACTIVISTS' RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

I grew less and less able to “just observe” in my fieldwork. I wanted to inject comments into meetings and conversations...unclear about how far I could go in critique (or even a detailed commentary on related issues) as a participant observer, I chose not to comment or critique at all. ...What about the reciprocity? I cringed. What can I possibly offer an organization that they do not already know? What does a dialogue or an intervention resemble? Who can do this? What sorts of relationships between researcher and researched, between subject and object, between the academic knower and the “known”, do these exchanges reinforce? What if I don't want to do the kind of reciprocity that FEMACT needs or wants? What if in this process of ‘studying up’ I have amassed unpopular information that will make people uncomfortable? (Who do I think I am in this research anyway?). (Meiners, 1998, p.109)

This chapter reflects upon methodological approaches employed in this study and by the graduate student activist academics selected for the study. In describing these methods and frameworks, this chapter aims neither to make an exhaustive nor representative account of activist scholarship methodologies, but to provide a field of data broad enough to be suggestive and illustrative of the “landscape” of activist-oriented graduate research and researchers in the social sciences. First, the chapter outlines the methods of each of the thesis projects considered here. Next, the discussion explores the practices of self-critical reflection, as enacted in the methods of this project. Finally, the chapter offers these researchers' self-critical reflection upon what “seemed to work” toward promoting social justice or activist agendas in the methodology of their own studies.

Research methods: The best-laid plans

My own methodological decisions, like those of several of the participants in my study, are drawn from frameworks of critical education (Freire, 1999; Allen, 2002; Giroux and McLaren, 1994; McLaren, 1995) and feminist praxis-oriented research (Lather, 1991; Naples, 2003; Dorothy Smith, 1987, 1999b). Thus, this chapter considers how those frameworks' call for reciprocity and self-critical reflexivity play out in this study's key methodological decisions

—the processes of selecting participants; arranging interviews through email; conducting interviews face-to-face, on the phone and via email with other near-peer activist academics; managing interview transcripts; analyzing textual artifacts; conceiving tactics to promote researcher reflexivity; and, finally, writing the thesis text. The complementary qualitative methods of textual analysis and interviews are intended to assist in generating a richly descriptive understanding of the inter-related elements of the research context, the meaning the participants make of their own actions and situations, and the process by which events take place (Maxwell, 1996 p.19).

Selecting Participants

The study began by gathering completed Master's and Doctoral theses as textual artifacts, in order to "survey the lay of the land: [an] initial step ... helping to develop an understanding of the worldview of research participants" (Lather, 1991, p.262). Seeking theses written by my activist graduate student contemporaries, I duly searched the SFU library catalogue for theses written since 1998, the year I moved back to Vancouver and joined a feminist collective organized to stop violence against women. I thought such writers might be my (near) peers, with whom "equal, cooperative, mutually reflexive" dialogue (Heaney, 1995) might be possible. I first brainstormed a short list of words I thought might appear in a thesis title and hint at its author's social justice agenda: *activist, praxis, politic, feminist, environment, social change, grassroots*.

Disappointed with the small number of theses the initial search turned up, I turned to other methods to locate activist academic graduate students. I began asking members of the wider activist communities in which I participate if anyone knew any activists who had recently completed graduate thesis research that integrated their activism. Thus, I came upon the first interviewee via a friend who gave me Scott Uzelman's email address and the citation for his thesis⁴¹. Upon reading Uzelman's thesis, I brainstormed an additional list of words that might suggest an activist agenda and searched the digital dissertation database again. This time my list included: *direct action; praxis; collective; social justice; subordinated groups; capitalism; racism; sexism; homophobia; environmentalism; globalization; pro-democratic movement; vegetarianism; anarchist; radical;*

⁴¹ Uzelman, S. (2002). *Catalyzing Participatory Communication: Independent Media Center and the Politics of Direct Action*. Unpublished Thesis. Simon Fraser University.

dissent; counter hegemonic; subvert; outreach. This search provided more theses for consideration, and still reflected my particular bias for an anti-capitalist, pro-environmentalist, pro-feminist, (and overall left-wing) view of activism. Indeed, the eleven theses eventually selected for this study draw from frameworks in feminism⁴², environmentalism⁴³, HIV/AIDS⁴⁴ research, direct action activism⁴⁵, and anti-capitalist policy critique⁴⁶.

I gathered approximately twenty-five theses, read the abstracts, dedications, acknowledgements, and conclusions. I skimmed for language indicating critical reflection, evidence of a social change agenda, evidence of the researcher making explicit some political implications of their research with their selected subjects, and began contacting the writers via email to request the opportunity to speak together about our experiences as activists and graduate students. Individual interviews were conducted face-to-face in Vancouver cafés with eight people who had successfully completed their Master's or Doctoral thesis, and one who had not yet completed hers. Two of these interviewees asked to remain anonymous, so have been assigned pseudonyms, "Tanya Jones" and "Andrea Smith." Face-to-face interviews ran from one to two hours and were audio taped. One telephone interview, and email discussions with three participants resulted in direct communication with all the writers of these theses.

Reflecting on methodologies: Praxis for whom?

These graduate students applied a range of (predominantly qualitative) methodologies in their thesis research. In a few of these theses, the methodology is accounted-for summarily and separately from the "Findings" and "Analysis" chapters. In contrast, several of these writers explicitly and tightly interweave critical reflection upon the methodology and role of the researcher within their data analysis and theoretical frameworks. For example, Uzelman's thesis explicitly describes a Participatory Action Research project; Bennett's, an institutional ethnography as developed by Dorothy Smith (1987); and Atkinson, Ibanez Carrasco, Tanya

⁴² Atkinson (1998), Bennett (2003), Malange (2001), Meiners (1998), Andrea Smith, and Tanya Jones all describe their theoretical and political frameworks as feminist.

⁴³ Ashe (1999) and Bose (2000) write about grassroots environmentalist groups and describe themselves as environmentalist.

⁴⁴ Ibanez Carrasco's (1999) and Ogden's (1994) theses relate to HIV/AIDS issues.

⁴⁵ Uzelman (2002)

⁴⁶ Sharma (1995)

Jones, and Meiners describe “praxis-oriented” research projects. Two projects employ document analysis⁴⁷ as their sole data source; one project combines survey, participant observation, and interviews⁴⁸, while all of the other studies apply combinations of formal or informal participant observation, interviews, and artifact analysis.

Documentary sources and Institutional Ethnography

Two of the researchers in this project, Sharma and Bennett, shape their projects around analyses of documentary sources only. Using quantitative and qualitative data drawn from published and unpublished reports obtained from government as well as from independent immigrant and labour advocate groups, Nandita Sharma develops in her thesis a descriptive analysis of Canadian capitalist immigration policies as promoting indentured labour for immigrant workers:

Data for the study are taken from a refinement of previously published information as well as hitherto unpublished statistics on records of temporary employment authorizations. Previous studies on the world market for labour power, the uses of modern forms of unfree labour power and international as well Canadian political economy are critically examined. (Sharma, 1995, p.iv)

Sharma’s thesis connects the specific experience of those workers on “temporary employment authorizations” with Canadian immigration policies and with broader forces of “international capitalist restructuring” (Sharma iii). In making these connections from the specific individual experience through the policies and to broader political forces coordinating individual experience, her approach resonates with Dorothy Smith’s (1987, 1990, 1999) method of institutional ethnography, though Sharma does not specifically invoke that methodology.

However, Darcie Bennett’s approach is explicitly built around Smith’s (1987) methodology. Her study:

...Attempts to move from the local and the specific site of experience, into the general relations that organize advanced capitalist societies. The institutional ethnography method bridges the gap between the point where individuals interact with a regime, and the broader relations at work. Institutional ethnography is premised upon the concept of standpoint, the idea that individuals occupy a concrete position within a ruling regime, and that an

⁴⁷ Bennett (2003); Sharma (1995)

⁴⁸ Tanya Jones

inquiry can start in that concrete place and move outwards. (Bennett, 2003, p.2)

Bennett starts in the “concrete position” of her own lived experience as a single mother and moves outward to develop her analysis of new government policies’ effects on single mothers. She says:

This study attempts to move from the specific programs and policy changes that are currently affecting single mothers in British Columbia, and to contextualize them within the broader development of global capitalism. (2003, p.3)

Readers in institutional, government, or, indeed, activist settings might draw upon either Sharma’s or Bennett’s theses to inform their own (anti-capitalist, feminist) policy analyses or critiques. However, Bennett says “I really don’t know who will read this thesis, but it will be someone who is interested in the policy, not in my self indulgence and self exposure.” (Darcie Bennett, personal communication, July 6, 2003). Indeed, in our conversation about her research, Bennett remarks on her intention for the researcher to remain peripheral, and for the tone of her thesis to be “authoritative,” while the content is itself a radical, anti-capitalist critique. Bennett intentionally chose policy analysis as an approach to focus her research on her political commitment to single mothers, rather than take “any chance that the thesis would be just another tragic story about how horrible it is to be poor” (personal communication, July 6, 2003). Rather than only be subjected to, or objects of the policies that would affect them as, respectively, a working-class, single mother, and a woman of color, both Darcie Bennett and Nandita Sharma turn the policies into objects for their studies.

Combining interviews, artifacts, observations

Among the graduate students considered here, Pablo Bose, Siobhan Ashe, and Caralee Malange combined interviews, documentary sources, and participant observation to generate “rich, qualitative, descriptive data” (Kirby and McKenna, p.125) for their respective studies of activist groups. Pablo Bose describes his methodology for his study on the “communicative aspects of the ‘new grassroots’ and their message of social change” (Bose, 2002, p.5) as:

...An analysis of a variety of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include newsletters, press releases, government and scientific studies, legal decisions, court documents, advertisements, as well as information gathered at activist workshops and academic and activist conferences, and from interviews with activists, government officials, engineers, industry representatives, and union leaders. Secondary sources include a review of academic commentaries and studies, newspaper and magazine articles, and interviews with academics. (Bose, 2000,p.4)

Bose's primary data sources include a substantial contribution from activist sources. However, his thesis elides what he reveals in our interview about the ways in which his own identity might have informed his methodologies. He says, "I have this weird familial connection to a bunch of South Asian academics" (personal communication, August 8, 2004), and has been in contact with them throughout his academic career. Bose's access to these other South Asian academics may provide him with contacts and information that help grant him some legitimacy among other South Asian communities of officials and activists. His familial connection may make it possible for him to access primary interview sources for his thesis and ongoing academic work, where this might not be a methodological possibility for another researcher without those community connections and identity.

How identity and connections to community inform research theoretical frameworks and methodologies has been engaged by many researchers taking feminist and post-colonial approaches⁴⁹, and, indeed, Bose says now that his identity as a South Asian living in North America intentionally, explicitly, and politically informs his current and future research practice:

This may sound naïve, but I'd like to have a small part in making connections between people's movements in India and Diaspora communities here. ...I'm interested in creating different visions, rather than romanticizing some past that isn't there. I want to promote democratic dialogue between Indians in India and here [in North America]. Building bridges, that's my life's big plan. That's not going to happen in a PhD. It might not happen in my lifetime, and it might not happen due to my involvement, but that's what I'd like to do. (personal communication, July 25, 2003)

⁴⁹Bose himself describes the following as informing his analysis of the role/responsibility of the activist-oriented scholar in development studies: Kumar (1992), "Brothers, Friends, Informants: Fieldwork Memoirs from Benares"; Shakti (1989), "Writing About Women in Struggles"; Kasente (1998). "The Gap Between Gender Research and Activism in Uganda." (Pablo Bose, personal communication, July 28, 2003).

Siobhan Ashe states in her thesis that her “method is primarily one of interpretation based on personal experience as a participant observer” (1999, p.72), in the Barefoot Cartographers. She says, “Participant observation [combined with semi-structured interviews] is used to assess the strength of this group to effectively act as a new social movement” (Ashe, p.iii). Ashe describes her research practice as grounded in the “identifying ethnography” of Kamela Visweswaren (1994), which calls for the ethnographer to identify herself in her social locations and to question power and potential domination associated with her representation. As part of her effort to undermine the domination enacted by an impassive researcher representing the researched, Ashe’s methodology includes trying to participate as full member of the Barefoot Cartographers by working as an additional researcher gathering data for one of their bioregional maps. However, though they agreed to her using the data she gathered *about* them, the group did not use the data she gathered for them (Ashe 1999). Despite her best intentions for reciprocity with this activist group, Ashe’s example may illustrate that an exchange of labour may not be required of a researcher in order to gather data, though her sincere offer of her work as a fully participating member may have been what won her over to the gatekeeper who eventually invited her to join their group (Ashe, 1999, p.98).

Cara-Lee Malange’s study of the New Horizons Home for women and children is likewise an ethnographic study based on eight months of fieldwork. She says:

An important result of the ethnography is that the major findings are derived, in part, from my unexpected role as a major caregiver to a severely malnourished infant. By allowing myself to “observe vulnerably”, I was able to identify with the mothers’ steadfast commitment to creating a better world for their children in the face of debilitating social, economic, and political circumstances. (2001, p.iii)

Supported by Ruth Behar’s (1996) framework of “native anthropology...[in which] viewing identification, rather than difference, is the key defining image of anthropological theory and practice” (Behar in Malange, 2001, p.16), Malange describes the benefits to her research of shifting her actions from the intellectual work of researcher/observer and office worker to the “mothering” work shared by residents of the shelter. In her thesis she reflects on her process:

I knew that if my research were to be a success, I would have to gain the women’s trust, and the most practical way to gain their trust was to pitch in

and participate in the mountain of work that consumed the daily lives of most women at the New Horizons Home, (Malange, 2001, p.14)

Malange notes, “I did not imagine that making myself vulnerable to them would be the best ‘research method’ I could have chosen” (2001, p.15). Her increasing adoption of the mothering role and immersion in the daily lives of residents of the shelter was in tension (Wertsch, 1998) with her intent to apply the research tools she had learned in graduate coursework. She developed increasing resistance to using the intended sociological tools, despite their familiarity, and instead dropped those methods altogether. Rather than attempting to hold on to seemingly ill-fitting tools of modernist sociology, she instead took up a more “fitting” feminist anthropological method—or simply a more motherly way of being in the shelter. In much the same way, Wertsch describes an agent’s mastery of cultural tools as sometimes in conflict with their sense of identification with those tools:

In some cases, the agent may use a cultural tool but does so with a feeling of conflict or resistance. When such conflict or resistance grows sufficiently strong, the agent may refuse to use the cultural tool altogether. In such instances, we might say that agents do not view that cultural tool as belonging to them. (Wertsch 1998, p.56)

As a consequence of Malange’s shift in methodological approach, the women in the shelter complimented her efforts, trusted her, were willing to reveal their lives, and she consequently obtained “better” data than she would have had access to if she had refused to drop her sociological distance.

Praxis-oriented research

Laura Atkinson and Erica Meiners complicate the relationships between researcher/researched, and methodology/ideology throughout their thesis research. Each describes her strong commitment to accountable and reciprocal research praxis, and each reveals considerable detail about her internal struggle to achieve those commitments, with the result that a reader can likewise consider the sorts of relationships possible in graduate level research, “between researcher and researched, between subject and object, between the academic knower and the ‘known’” (Meiners, 1998, p.109).

Drawing on a framework of praxis-oriented research from Patti Lather (1991) and Paulo Freire’s (1999) popular education, Laura Atkinson aims for her research processes to

themselves facilitate education or “‘conscientization’ (Freire, 1999): a consciousness-raising or development of critical thinking on the part of researcher and research subjects” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 26). Beginning from a commitment as a researcher to operate from a “deep respect for the intellectual and political capacity of the dispossessed” (Lather, 1991 p.262), Atkinson uses women’s existing stories (found on the Internet, in reports, in pamphlets) about birth control methods, rather than seeking new interviewees and risking “further exploiting their pain” for her research (1998, p. 33). Hoping that her research might “stimulate a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action and dialectical theory building” (Lather, 1991, p.271, in Atkinson, p.24), Atkinson conducted public education workshops as a research method. Key to her social change agenda, she worked in these workshops to promote critical dialogue among participants about the contexts of racism, heterosexism, disability, and poverty in which clinicians recommend (dangerous) hormonal birth control drugs primarily to poor, and aboriginal women (Atkinson, 1998). Throughout her thesis, Atkinson exposes her own methodological, moral, and political struggles in achieving the praxis she strives for within the material realities of conducting graduate level social science. She says, “I struggled to finish it, and as an activist worried endlessly about whether it was good enough, and still know it has political limitations and contradictions” (personal communication, December 18, 2003). Her reflections, viewed alongside her eventual completion of the thesis may make the discussion of methodologies in Atkinson’s thesis useful to those activist students who similarly “worry that their work is not ‘activist enough’” (Orr, 2002, p. 49) and paralyze themselves to inaction in cycles of critical self reflection.

Erica Meiners, like Atkinson, also struggled in her PhD thesis with whether she conducts “good enough” praxis-oriented research. Her project:

Explores how disordered bodies are organized. “Disordered” refers predominantly to addictions and /or self-mutilating practices that are delineated as mental disorders within the current Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental disorders (DSM)...Through an exploration of some historical, socio-cultural, and economic contexts to the recovery movement and the DSM and through close readings of textual examples of disordered bodies, this dissertation argues that the disordered body is co-produced by economic, social and political factors. Synthesizing concepts from medical anthropology, queer/feminist/anti-racist theorist, critical ethnography and or/educational and literary theorists, this dissertation works to be inter-or-counter disciplinary. (Meiners, 1998, p.iii)

Meiners' research praxis emphasizes critical reflection and emerges with an analysis of ethnographic inquiry as not only problematic and partial but a practice of fiction, itself functioning to "re-present and reify, or possibly resist ordering bodies" (1998, p.1). This researcher's voice—rather than research subjects' voices—reverberates throughout the text, always interrogating her own participation in the methods of her inquiry. Striking are her highly personal, self-critical accounts of observation, field notes, and writing, which she bolsters by including a lengthy section of her own research journal/field note entries from entering the field, through writing the dissertation and preparing for the defense (Meiners, 1998, p.138-155). Through this technique the reader may see the researcher's struggle with "how subjective this whole fucking process is (yet so discerning, so objective)" (Meiners, 1998 p.151), and consider with her that research praxis is complicated: "Praxis for whom? Can there be reciprocity for bodies whose practices the researcher doesn't agree with?" (Meiners, 1998, p.6).

Atkinson and Meiners make the tangling of researcher, methods, and ideologies central to their thesis. These researchers indicate that their efforts to conduct research that will "be of use" (Jane Flax 1993, cited in Meiners, 1998, p. 112) were fraught, personal, and troubling, and forefront their own self-critical view on their research within their thesis texts. Their disclosure can assist other researchers to see specific examples of the ways in which research can trouble our own hopes for our own critical research praxis. Such disclosure may also offer some balance and context to the writer's representation of their research subjects, in that the researcher is, like her subjects, exposed to the thesis audience.

Given that these theses each passed the defense, this type of subjectivity and self-disclosure is evidently acceptable to at least some thesis examination committees. However, I am left wondering with Meiners about how researcher self-disclosure is "of use" or relevant to the audience of examiners, social scientists, and research participants? Does self-critical reflection promote reciprocity with research subjects in a praxis-oriented inquiry, in that like participants, the researcher risks being exposed to readers? Does this further promote validity? Or does it primarily function to offer some relief to the student being ground along by the "dissertation machine" (Meiners, 1998, p.109) by providing some outlet for personal catharsis? Perhaps self-disclosure is, rather, self-indulgence for the writer anticipating a scant audience for

a graduate thesis. As Darcie Bennett says: "I don't know who will read my thesis, but if they do, they'll be someone who's interested in the [research], not in my self-indulgence" (personal communication, July 6, 2003).

Dialogic and ethnographic interviews

Though rejected by Meiners and Atkinson for their studies, in-depth interviewing is the primary methodological tool of many qualitative studies, with the treatment of researcher/researched voices taking many different approaches. Russel Ogden, Andrea Smith, Francisco Ibanez-Carrasco, and Tanya Jones each framed their thesis research around interviewing, with each project illuminating particular possibilities and problematics encountered as novice activist-oriented researchers.

Russel Ogden's MA thesis research methods are most interesting when considered in retrospect, along with the troubles he faced after completing his research on euthanasia and assisted suicide. During his MA research, and ever since, Ogden guaranteed and adhered to a particular and strict methodology to protect participants' confidentiality: participants in his research could choose to be anonymous, could agree via verbal consent only (rather than in writing), and could refuse to have their interviews taped (Ogden, 1994, p.49). Ogden destroyed the research audiotapes immediately after transcribing them, and kept research data in a locked and secret location, all of which he promised in the Informed Consent Form (Ogden, 1994). However, where other social science researchers talk about weighing the risks of their research to "perpetuate and extend existing inequalities" (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, p.23), Ogden's research carried substantial material risks for himself and his subjects. Though he followed university ethics procedures, Ogden found himself abandoned by the university and threatened with all the associated costs of a Contempt of Court charge for refusing to reveal his informants' identities in a police investigation that sought to identify (and possibly charge) people who have assisted others to die (Ogden, 1997). Given Ogden's experience of believing himself to be supported by the University yet still encountering such dilemmas, a researcher must, it seems, ask him or herself what ethics approval means, and to what extent we are on our own in determining and following through with our ethics as researchers when the research itself is controversial and/or "risky."

Andrea Smith likewise once believed herself to be “on her own” in figuring out how to translate into a research project her interest in violence against women, feminist theory, and her developing ideas about the power of naming one’s experience. Though she has already conducted interviews with Coordinators and Directors of women’s centers, she remains attached to another topic altogether that she had dropped when no one “official” in the community would support it. Andrea says, “I contacted counselors, research centers, telling them I was interested in creating a group of sexual assault survivors for my research, and no one was getting back to me” (personal communication, July 25, 2003). She believed she needed an “official” in the community to direct her to potential research subjects (i.e. survivors of sexual assault) and to endorse her initial project. In effect, she needed to establish her legitimate access to the members of a particular community (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and the gatekeepers she identified would not assist her. Though Andrea Smith says that her goal was to “counter-act the sexual assault bureaucratic machine” (personal communication), she approached members of that bureaucracy in the hope they would assist her. In our conversation, she spoke of wishing it had occurred to her to contact a volunteer-run rape crisis center for advice on how to proceed, but that she had feared that for her project to get university Ethics Board approval, she would need “official” (i.e. professional) endorsement. Qualitative research methodology texts thoroughly discuss the challenges of navigating official procedures and personnel controlling access to a research site, as well as the importance of identifying the unofficial gatekeepers who can assist a researcher approaching a particular research population. For example, Blaxter (et al) (2001) remind the novice researcher that:

Gaining access to the people, institutions, or documents you wish to study for your research is not just a one-off exercise, which you conduct immediately before beginning your data collection. Rather, it is a continuous and potentially very demanding process. (p.157)

What may have been missing to assist Andrea Smith was a way to determine who holds the practical knowledge, but who may also be rendered invisible by her own experience of “professional” authority structures.

Also based in interviews, Francisco Ibanez-Carrasco’s PhD research is very much concerned with research itself, and the “connections between the research we do and the life we live that institutional memory makes us forget”(1999, p.299). His is:

An ethnographic account of the lived experience of researchers doing HIV/AIDS related research in the social sciences. It builds from extensive participant-observation and in-depth interviews with eleven researchers, from grassroots 'rookies' to renowned academics, to form an "outline of a theory of practice" for social-scientific research on HIV/AIDS. (Ibanez Carrasco, 1999, p.iii)

Interviews form the "vertebrae" around which Ibanez Carrasco fleshes out his analysis of the intersections of desire, betrayal, experience and research (Ibanez, p.124). Supported by his engagement of literature around memory work, desire and methodology (e.g. Michel Foucault, 1988), queer inquiry (e.g. Patton 1990; de Castell and Bryson, 1998), and gay/queer sexuality, Ibanez Carrasco's study aims to construct methodology that forefronts the lived, embodied experience of researchers. In a later section, I will discuss the utility of his approach in interviewing research participants who are colleagues in his field of HIV/AIDS research as a tactic that may promote equal, reciprocal, and dialogic interviews rather than reproducing traditional research/researched hierarchies.

For Tanya Jones's research, she first conducted a wide-ranging qualitative and quantitative survey of social service agencies, and then conducted interviews with several activists working to transform those agencies to be more "inclusive." She developed in her thesis a concept of "social practice theory" from bell hooks' idea that "when theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice" (hooks, 1994, p. 61, referenced by Tanya Jones, personal communication, July 27, 2003). From such a perspective, Jones argues that workers and activists in her field of interest lack written theory, but that "their theory does exist, and is embedded in their oral narratives, activism, and work for social change" (personal communication, July 27, 2003). Drawing from a "a hybrid" theoretical framework of feminist post-modernism (Lather, 1991; Harraway, 1991; Weedon, 1991; Flax, 1993), and popular education (Freire, 1999; hooks, 1994), Tanya Jones says, "My thesis tries to promote the authority of these unpublished voices, to protect them from her further exploitation" (personal communication, July 25, 2003). Her study was much concerned with the challenges to faithfully "translating" her activist research participants' worldview into the thesis research. She says, "I feel as others have described it to me, like a translator of two different communities. And in translating, I have made mistakes—many mistakes—throughout my thesis" (personal communication). When clarifying these "many mistakes," this writer explained that she has felt

nervous releasing her research to the community, but she says, "I have received only positive feedback from the community. People have been very receptive, appreciative, and eager to see it" (personal communication, August 25, 2003). Later in this chapter, I discuss some of the tactics this writer recalls having applied that may have supported the positive response from her research community.

Participatory Action Research

Unique among these researchers is Uzelman's methodological approach, in that he describes the existing, everyday work of the Vancouver Independent Media Center (IMC) as itself a research process, and his thesis as one record of that research. Similar to Tanya Jones's argument that activist practice is infused with theory, Uzelman's thesis describes the process of theorizing and critical knowledge building within the activist organizing of the Vancouver Indy Media Centre as itself a project of "participatory action research":

By choosing PAR as a label for our efforts within the IMC collective, I want to draw attention to the fact that everyday people employ practices that resemble research to solve problems in their communities. What is more, they have always 'owned' the results and have not needed to ask 'outside' experts for verification or validation. I also want to draw attention to the overtly political nature of the research – a process of collective knowledge creation/recognition in the effort to effect progressive social change. (Uzelman, 2002, p.2)

Here, Uzelman argues that the methodologies of academic research are not required for knowledge production by activist communities, so to continue to contribute to the knowledge production of his own community, he has posted his own thesis research report in an IMC online space in which every document can be commented upon and continue to be "built into the community dialogue"⁵⁰ (personal communication, June 20, 2003).

Discussion of Methodologies as exercises of power

Research methods are activities full of possibility (and probability) to exercise inequitable power relationships, even for activist-oriented graduate students who are minimally powerful in the institutional scheme of things. Therefore, this study asks how activist academic researchers selected for this study have applied research frameworks and methodologies that,

⁵⁰ Only one comment (February, 2003) has been posted in response to Uzelman's thesis on the IMC's online collaborative space at <http://ender.indymedia.org/twiki/bin/view/Vancouver/HistoryofVanIMC>.

like activist tactics, aim to antagonize, disrupt, interrupt, transform, or redistribute, the typical relations of power. Thus, the discussions with these researchers sought their critical reflection (as activists) upon their methodological and textual practices, and how they saw those choices as impacting the communities whom they hoped their research would benefit. A self-critical reflection upon my own thesis research here prefaces a discussion of participants' reflections upon what "worked" to promote justice, equity, or activism through their research praxis.

A self critical view of methodology

Dialogue or confession

Despite my intention in this research to apply a critical praxis, and activist ethics, critical reflection on my own methods uncovers a schism rather than integration of my critical theory into practice. As I reflected upon the early interviews conducted for this study, I was surprised, as many researchers may be, by the number and quality of questions I did not ask, and the extent to which the interviews were largely each a series of extended monologues, more like "confessions" (Ibanez, 1997) on the part of my interviewees rather than my planned praxis-oriented dialogue (Freire, 1999) between peers. As I transcribed and reflected upon the first interview, I was self-critical that I, a feminist whose activist work relies on active, empathetic listening toward mutual consciousness-raising and problem solving, had satisfied myself with this minimal interaction in the research setting.

In early interviews, I carefully selected what I revealed about my own activist activities and my own academic activities in order to, in effect, protect myself from (imagined) criticism from interviewees about my choices of activism, about the rigor of my methods, about the "progressiveness" of my research topic. Despite my plans as a praxis-oriented researcher to offer of myself, and to seriously engage in mutual dialogue about praxis-oriented, activist research, I was relieved that the first interviewees did not ask (and I was therefore not required to reciprocate with) much detail about myself until after the interviewees had exposed themselves and their work to me. Not malicious, but interested, I enjoyed hearing others speak about their own grad school experiences. Somewhat nervous about these other academics' evaluation of my research questions, and somewhat testing to see if they would, themselves, insist on a mutual exchange rather than a "typical" research confessional, I waited until late in at least one interview to offer my own opinions and experiences.

When I recall myself sitting at the foot of one interviewee, who was ensconced in a leather armchair and surrounded by books as I scribbled notes, I see how I cast myself as research ingénue, to the interviewee's status as a more experienced "expert" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in the local activist academic community. In this moment, I acted as though I did not wield power in this research relationship. Though I considered myself as interviewer as a near-peer to the participants, in that they had only recently completed their graduate degrees, my own participation in the interviews was complexly influenced by subtle variations in power executed by both of us. Interviews for the current research were, it seems organized and affected by the researcher/researched relationship, the PhD /MA differences, and the differences of age, class, race, sexuality, and gender between us. Across such differences, it may require particular effort to create the conditions for mutual dialogue, as bell hooks notes in introducing her own dialogues across "borders" of race and gender:

To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences... If we really want to create a cultural climate where biases can be challenged and changed, all border crossings must be seen as valid and legitimate. This does not mean, however, that they are not subjected to critique or critical interrogation. (hooks, 1994, p. 130-131)

This researcher's self critical reflection

With early interviewees, in effect, I refused some of my responsibility as researcher and left it to the interviewees (themselves practiced researchers) to demand my attention to methodological details. Like Ibanez Carrasco, I expected "these professional researchers to be particular about times and dates" (1999, p.145) and to demand in advance all the "official" and detailed information they required. Two early participants asked me nothing further about myself (beyond the information contained in my Letter of Introduction -Appendix I) before agreeing to meet. They signed the Informed Consent forms when we met, were very casual in the interviews, and refused my offer that they review the interview transcripts. Consequently, I continued somewhat casually into organizing the ensuing interviews. However, my discussions with the next interviewees highlighted some of the practical risks of being casual about the details in social research.

In this research, my own method for critical self reflection was informed not only by literature concerned with praxis-oriented inquiry (Freire, 1999; Allen, 2002; Lather, 1991) but also by a sense of accountability to the activist participants as peer members in a broader community of activists. Recognizing my relationship with research participants as situated within a shared, local (and in some ways, ideological) activist community, when I found myself needing to correct a problem in my methods, I applied as “methodology” a tool other activists have applied as part of a praxis for peer education and accountability: constructive self-criticism⁵¹. The constructive criticism approach may vary, but that outlined by Lyons (1977) relies on some shared commitment to struggling through differences toward unity (p.21-22). Lyons outlines its process as such: start from empathy with the other; describe the mistaken behaviour specifically; negotiate the desired behaviour, and negotiate shared analysis about why the alternative behaviour is more desirable or useful to the shared political project (Lyons, 1977, p.33-35). Having “appropriated” and “mastered” (Wertsch, 1998) the use of this discursive tool through practice in other activist settings, I was quick to try to apply it to the purpose of negotiating out of conflict with another activist in this research. I was hopeful that it could assist (or “mediate” in more than one sense) my immediate goal of transforming a worrisome encounter with a research participant and co-activist, with whom I possibly shared some agreement about activism and scholarship.⁵²

I approached the interview with Tanya Jones with some trepidation. I asked her to participate based on another participant’s recommendation, was delayed booking the interview, replied to her request for more information with my supervisor’s name, but told her very little about myself prior to the interview, since I was worried that we might conflict about politics and she might decide to cancel the interview. At the same time, I hoped that she would cancel so I would be off the hook and not have to navigate a potentially challenging interview. No such luck: we met for the interview, she was critical of my lack of disclosure ahead of time, and the consequences to our relationship (and, of course, my “data”) could have been dire. Much of the rest of the interview saw me with heart pounding, palms sweating, mind racing, trying to

⁵¹ See Lyons, G. (1977), *Constructive Criticism* for a full discussion of how this tool has been applied in revolutionary movements.

⁵² Lyons notes that “Criticism relies on a shared commitment to unity, and a shared understanding of dialectical materialism” (1977, p. 46), and that “The depth of day-to-day criticism I take on is often related to the amount of unity I have with the other person or group; if it were not, I would have no way to decide what to criticize and with whom” (p. 21).

correct my initial mistakes and respond to Tanya Jones's criticism in order to get back to my plan for dialogic interviewing:

Tanya Jones: This is not a neutral relationship at all, in terms of you being the interviewer. You know a lot about me, having read my paper. And for me not to know much of anything about you and to only find out now, it totally undermines the relationship. Completely and totally undermines it.

It doesn't work for me. I assumed our starting point would be different than it might be with another researcher because your topic is activism, and then especially because you identify as an activist. If you didn't then I would be blown away.

JG: You're right. Clearly what I needed to do was to email you and let you know I'm at SFU, and that I'm also a feminist activist, and you could have thought about what you wanted to say in that context. That said earlier, we could have started the relationship differently, more fairly.

Tanya Jones: Yes! Because of my research topic, I do need to be self-protective. I feel vulnerable; I have been vulnerable about my activism. And this [set up before the meeting] makes me feel quite vulnerable, and that means that I don't make a good interview, and you lose out. (Jones, personal communication, July 27, 2003)

After the preceding exchange of criticism and apologies, Tanya Jones generously agreed to continue with the interview "for the good of the world and our – presumably-mutual passion for activism" (personal communication, July 27, 2003). We were able to negotiate some faith in one another and continue with a dialogue more closely resembling the praxis-oriented, mutual development of ideas I had intended as my method, a dialogue more closely resembling that described by Freire (1999):

Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence...Without this faith in people, dialogue is a farce, which inevitably degenerates into paternalistic manipulation. (p.72)

The critical exchange above first points to contradictions in my so-called feminist research practice, and to the importance to community-based praxis (as either researcher or activist) of accountability: the humility required to account for mistakes, to self-disclose, and to build alliances rather than foment division. Because Tanya Jones and I will likely meet again in our activist activities, I am invested in maintaining a relationship with her in ways that I may not believe myself to be obliged to do if I were to conduct my research outside of my

communities. This exchange was a painful, but useful lesson, in the necessity of forethought to support the complex accountability involved in carrying out the work of social research.

Asserting that one “is” a feminist researcher, or one “does” praxis oriented research must be borne out in the details.

Attending to the details

Consequently, in later interviews, I worked toward reciprocal research praxis. I provided more substantial information in advance of interviews and ensured that I offered my own analysis and experience in response to interviewees’ revelations. Like Ibanez (1997), I worked to transform my interviews from “confession to dialogue,” in which:

“Confession” represents a highly institutionalized location where practices are rigid and manipulative. One individual—the priest, the shrink, the scientist—asks questions, analyzes, appropriates, interprets, and represents the bodily texts of others based on some vaguely understood, inherent right to investigate... Dialogue represented the possibility of a greater power balance between individuals, the acceptance of more fluid social roles and a sharing of practices of representation. (Ibanez, 1997, p. 119)

In later interviews, I acknowledged the power balance between interviewee and myself. We exchanged and developed ideas about activist-oriented research, and I intentionally offered resources to support some of the other issues other interviewees mentioned (including academic and non-academic readings and articles related to the interviewees’ current work; invitations to political events; referral to services). Finally (despite the protests by some that this was unnecessary), I sent each participant all the passages from of my thesis in which they were quoted, as well as the text framing the quotes, so our dialogue could continue about and through the text, and so they could approve or veto their comments as they would appear in the completed thesis text.

Reflecting on what seemed to work

Like me, several of these researchers revealed in their theses their own self-critical reflection on their methodologies, and as discussed above, a few seriously engaged the limitations, dilemmas, and troubles they encountered in their research. However, in interviews for this project, they reflected upon their thesis research methodologies and found they had done a few things with methodologies that “worked” in conducting critical research that resists further perpetuating oppression. These methodological tactics included: choosing

methodologies and topics that study up, at those who control power, rather than studying those who have little power; studying sideways, and choosing peers as research subjects; studying within a community whose practices demand accountability and promote mutual education beyond the basic ethics procedures required of university research; and attending to details in the research methods that promote more democracy between researcher and research participants. From the following experiences, perhaps other graduate researchers can see practical means to promote reciprocity in research methods, to build new knowledge collectively with research participants, and to ethically represent or translate research subjects' voices.

Justice in the details

Francisco Ibanez Carrasco's discussion of his "details" approach to social justice in research substantially informed the later phases of this very study. He says:

My actual research work promotes justice by modeling, by taking care of the detail in fieldwork and other research stages. The way one meets with/includes participants/respondents, the data one chooses to highlight—it is all intentional and underlines motivations that are not purely selfish in nature—closer to Martha Stewart than Larry Kramer, I guess. (personal communication, August 19, 2003)

Toward supporting his aim of promoting justice, and disrupting the hierarchy so easy to reproduce in research relationships, Ibanez Carrasco has promised himself never to ask a question he would be unwilling to answer himself, and when asking research questions, to always "make oneself clear, visible, and available" (1999 p.122). Rather than extracting "confessions" from his informants, Ibanez's motivation is for dialogic inter-view, where each, researcher and participant, "view" the other (Ibanez Carrasco, 1997). By paying careful, detailed attention to how he chooses topics, negotiates with participants, transcribes and edits their conversations, and reveals his own lived experience, Ibanez Carrasco aims to construct an equalized balance of power within his ethnographic research. He says, "Striving for reciprocity and dialogue in interviewing and participant observation...offers possibilities for reflection and explicitly politicized conscientiousness (awareness-raising)" (1997, p.125).

Study up: Expose institutions, not individuals

Darcie Bennett described having struggled with the dilemma of choosing a topic area supporting her agenda for social change for the “marginalized collectivity” (2003, p.20) of single mothers, yet would not further exploit those women. She resolves to “always study up,” and therefore to focus on policy analysis for her Master’s thesis and future PhD research as a way to resist participating in the further exposure of single mothers to institutional scrutiny. Further, Darcie says the possibility is minimal for graduate level researchers to meaningfully reciprocate in two-way, participatory projects with these marginalized women:

At first I was going to do a study of poor single mothers. I thought I would do something somewhat participatory. Then I did another project as part of End Legislative Poverty [ELP], which was more two-way, where we worked with poor women on a project, but they could later come back to us for help because the ELP office was still open. I was able to offer them more than if I did some grad studies project. Anyway, the effects of welfare cuts are well documented. There is no reason to tell another tragic story of how much it sucks to be on welfare. (Bennett personal communication, July 7, 2003)

Though her interests as an activist and researcher are firmly grounded in ameliorating the endemic poverty and marginalization of single mothers, she determined that without the connection to an activist organization that provides support or services, a graduate thesis project would be unable to support sufficient “two-way” exchange with participants. Thus, Darcie determined to draw only from her own lived experience as a single mother, and existing information about the lives of poor single mothers in BC to inform her institutional ethnography reading of a government policy. No other single mothers become subjects providing data fodder to her thesis project, and Bennett says, “I escaped many of the dilemmas of a university-backed researcher. I didn’t get into complicated power dynamics over research subjects, because I had no research subjects” (personal communication, July 7, 2003). Rather than exposing and explaining people’s behaviour to the institutions, as does much sociological research, her institutional ethnography approach exposes and “explains to people the social—or society—as it enters into and shapes their lives and activities” (Smith, 1999b, p.96).

Study sideways: Peers may be the only “fair game”

Once a graduate student decides to proceed with a project that involves human subjects, our research is immediately subject to particular university research ethics procedures.

However, these procedures do not demand the level and complexity of accountability and subversion of researcher/researched power dynamics that these activist academics describe as central within their research. Darcie Bennett further broadens the discussion of politically responsible, morally correct, or ethical selection of research topics and subjects in her rationale for participating in my study. She says, “As a grad student, I think I’m fair game as a thesis research subject” (personal communication, June 26, 2003). As this research participant and I are nearly peers, she having only recently completed her own thesis research and our having worked together as research assistants on another project, my study of Darcie is a kind of “sideways” study. Among these researchers, others also researched “sideways”—interviewing for their theses those whose relationships to the researcher constituted broader, more complex relationships (colleagues, close friends, co-activists) than simply a researcher/ subject hierarchy.

Both Darcie Bennett and Laura Atkinson are clear that their discomfort with exploiting their research subjects for the sake of telling even a very important, moving, or original story stopped them from seeking interviewees to spill their guts. Laura Atkinson intended at first in her research on reproductive technologies to incorporate several in-depth ethnographic interviews; however, she says, “I became unsure, uncomfortable with the somewhat pornographic proclivities of the ethnographic method” (Atkinson, 1998, p.25, citing Dr. Suzanne deCastell, personal communication). While she grappled with the implications of re-telling and exposing women’s lives, Atkinson first interviewed her friend, in a mutual exchange of data for their respective academic work. Their intimacy facilitated a serious negotiation about what Atkinson would write in her research, which resulted in her decision to use only existing data sources, rather than seek new women to interview about their experiences of reproductive healthcare. It seems the accountability made possible through an intimate friendship set Atkinson’s standard for her relationship as a researcher to any interviewee:

I couldn’t help but reflect that it was only because she was a friend that some of her more subtle discomfort was caught . . . A more formal relationship with an ‘informant,’ who might not have been able to call me up, who did not have the intimacy of interpretation that being friends enabled, and who would not have had the countless conversations and chances to revise what she had

agreed to might have resulted in information being presented to her later discomfort. (Atkinson, 1998, p. 28)

Study sideways: It's different interviewing activists

Similarly, Tanya Jones says about her own research that there is a particular type of accountability required of her, as an activist, interviewing activists in her own community. As discussed above, relationships among activists and community peers may promote (or demand) a more complex ethical code than that formally required by the university. Tanya says:

Everyone I interviewed was an activist. And it's different interviewing activists, because the accountability is different. And I remember one of the activists saying to me, "It doesn't matter what you write, because anything you write will further the discussion as long as you make visible the different parts of the discussion." I wanted to do a good job of representing all the different positions, and to be respectful of the different opinions and ideas and give respectful space. (personal communication, July 27, 2003)

Tanya Jones' ethic of respect and accountability clearly translates to her expectations that other researchers should also treat other activists' stories and opinions respectfully and account to them for the thesis text that represents those opinions. As she did for the activist participants in her research, Tanya requested that I account to her for my representation of our conversation by sending her any quotation for her veto or approval before I used it in this text. She was, perhaps, able to hold me to this level of accountability due to the community connections discussed above. Also, as a recent graduate student, she has greater familiarity with and access to the formal, institutional procedures for holding academics accountable to research ethics than would many other research participants. Having herself navigated the institutional procedures constraining graduate thesis research, Tanya would know how to use university Ethics Boards and Faculty members to hold another graduate student to account. As Russel Ogden says, she would know that:

If an interviewee is not satisfied with the way you conduct the interview, it is not as though they have no recourse. What would happen, if I place a call to your supervisor and say that I never consented, that you misrepresented me in your research? I may be able to halt your research, or not, but certainly, that is one of the real risks you accept in dealing with interviewees. (personal communication, December 12, 2003)

Study sideways: mutual education and practical reciprocity

Research with peer subjects may promote reciprocity through practical mutual education. My interview with Andrea Smith was mutually educative in a way that seemed to be uniquely possible through what we have in common both within our academic careers and activist interests. For example, while all of the other researchers in my study had completed at least one graduate degree, both Andrea Smith and I were in the throes of handling data and writing our theses when we met. Because I also have knowledge directly related to her interest in women's groups, I was able to offer Andrea Smith some suggestions and contacts which she said might aid her in her research writing and future projects, while she offered me her story to add to my picture of graduate student researchers and offered tips on what might make my own project smoother than hers has been. Our interview was neither "confessional" nor oratorical, but more closely approaching the dialogical approach I had intended and that Andrea Smith hoped for in her original idea: an approach to research in which shared theory would be developed through dialogue and inform future action. We remain in contact via email, continue our dialogue beyond the interview, and have asked for and offered assistance and invitations for activist and academic activities.

Concluding Remarks

In defining a thesis topic, negotiating and protecting relationships with research subjects, gathering and analyzing data, and writing the thesis, these activist-oriented graduate students have had to consider what methods and methodologies they might choose that could assist in "promoting justice" (Ibanez Carrasco, personal communication). By considering the methodologies of these community-minded or activist researchers, we can perceive a variety of approaches, some limitations, and some possibilities from which other activist-oriented social science students might draw for their own thesis research. In the intersections of the self-critical view of this project and a reflection on what seemed to work for others, we can see that accountability and ethics was taken to heart by these activist researchers in more complex ways than might be implied by university research ethics procedures, and that tools and relationships from activist and other peer communities informed how these researchers crafted a way to "walk the talk" of activist intentions in our development as graduate student researchers.

CHAPTER 5: ACTIVIST/ACADEMIC TENSIONS

My first year in my PhD program, I hit a home run and I got a SSHRC⁵³ grant. Which has little to do with talent. It has to do with luck and timing. I toned down the activist language. You substitute words: “social justice” becomes “community building.” It’s a lot of money—sixty grand over 3 years. That kind of affirmation makes you go, when you’re writing the application, “This is total bullshit and I’m never going to do this.” But subconsciously, you start going, “This is good stuff, they’re giving me money for this, so it must be good.” (Pablo Bose, personal communication, July 25, 2003)

This chapter uses Dorothy Smith’s (1987, 1990, 1999b) method of institutional ethnography in order to “map” the relations and practices that organize and inform some of the complications and “tensions” encountered by participants in this study when integrating activism and graduate-level academic work. The chapter first outlines how an institutional ethnography approach structures this analysis, then identifies some of the everyday practices in which activist academic graduate students experience tension and trouble in academic and activist settings. By considering the contexts and relationships of such “tensions,” we can consider the ways activist scholarship might be constructed and constrained by institutionalized, macro-level discourses of power.

Institutional Ethnography

The institutional ethnography approach, as applied here aims to reveal the ways in which the social world is organized to serve the “‘main business’ of creating, servicing, regulating, planning, criticizing, managing, organizing [that is] controlled by the process of capital accumulation” (Smith, 1999b, p. 38). An institutional ethnography inquiry, such as this, begins from the standpoint of the actual, specific, personal, (what Smith calls the “local”) lived experiences of those who are ruled by these organizing forces; it seeks to develop a broader and more complex analysis of how their local experiences are structured by (and also how they participate in structuring) the institutionalized practices that reify existing relations of power (Smith 1987, p. 160). Such an inquiry, Smith says,

...means, among other things, turning the established [research] enterprise on its head: rather than explaining how and why people act or behave as they do, we seek from particular experience situated in the matrix of the everyday/everynight world to explore and display the relations, powers and forces that organize and shape it. (1999b, p. 44)

By investigating and analyzing “actual individuals, their work, their actual productive activities, and the material conditions produced by those activities,” institutional ethnography works to expose the disjuncture or “line of fault” (Smith 1987, p.50) between multiple sites of local, individual, lived experience, and to reveal how an individual’s experience has been shaped by ruling practices and discourses that are typically invisible, conceptual, and abstracted (1987, p.88).

Ruling relations revealed in local practices

Institutional ethnography, following Smith, employs a concept of social relations, which she terms “ruling relations” or “ruling apparatus,” as a way to:

...direct attention to, and take up analytically how what people are doing and experiencing in a given local site is hooked into sequences of action implicating and coordinating multiple local sites where others are active. (Smith, 1999b, p.7)

Ruling relations indicate the complex relationships among practices by which abstract systems or discourses of power (capitalism, racism, patriarchy) regulate and pervasively structure society. Ruling relations “transcend” people’s goals, objectives or intentions, and extend beyond the immediate conditions in which activities occur (Smith, 1987, p. 167). Indeed, we may be quite unaware of the ways our “own” motives are informed and shaped by ruling relations, since ruling relations are so pervasively integrated into and beyond our immediate everyday practices as to be rendered invisible. Smith says,

The conditions of our action and experience are organized by relations and processes outside them and beyond our power of control. The everyday world is not fully understandable within its own scope. It is organized by social relations not fully apparent in it nor contained within it. (1987, p. 92).

In order to expose those relations, an inquiry such as this does not rest only on the specific activity, person, or subject but aims to explicate the relationships of individuals and

⁵³ Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Canada's federal funding agency for university-based research and student training in the social sciences. <http://www.sshrc.ca>

activities within institutional systems and social relations that may or may not be immediately apparent or seemingly relevant. In order to fully explicate individuals' actions, an inquiry must also analyze the ideological procedures, concepts, and categories by which institutions define and account for the processes and activities associated with the institution and its participants (Smith, 1987, p.161). In order to do so, such an inquiry should consider how people are involved in the production of their everyday world and the institutional relations governing it, which are made visible by elucidating the relationships among multiple individuals and sites of action (1987, p. 166).

Texts: bridging multiple local sites

In order to develop an inquiry into the social relations that coordinate many sites of local activity, Smith argues that the "investigation of the text-mediation of social relations is foundational" (1999b, p.75). Though we each live in local, actual, particular, "bodily sites" (Smith, 1999b, p.75), texts mediate the procedures by which institutions organize and categorize our knowledge and action in local, settings. Texts define the procedures that sustain institutions and ideologies, and tell us how we should operate on a daily, local level. Therefore these texts significantly shape how we organize and inform our "own" intentions, motivations, decisions, and actions:

Our knowledge of contemporary society is to a large extent mediated to us by texts of various kinds. The result, an objectified world-in-common vested in texts, coordinates the acts, decisions, policies and plans of actual subjects as the acts, decisions, policies, and plans of large-scale organizations. (Smith, 1990, p. 61)

Participants in the current study share a "world in common" mediated by the texts of academia: those of the bureaucracy, (e.g. guidelines and policy documents; admissions, funding, and research ethics forms), faculty and discipline, as well as academic discourse in general. Accordingly, this chapter aims to map and expose some of the (text-mediated) ruling relations within which activist graduate students produce their thesis texts.

Beginning from the researcher's standpoint

In taking up any research project, we immediately enter into particular social relations, particular practices of knowledge production, so, Smith argues, rather than aiming to discount as "bias" the researcher's position in those relations, it is useful to begin from the standpoint

of the researcher. This tactic does not attempt to dismiss bias, but to elucidate and account for the consciousness and worldview that emerges, which is embedded in actual experience (Campbell and Gregor, 2002). This project, then, begins from my own standpoint as an activist entering the academy and as a graduate student still active in an activist community. The project engages the thesis texts of others who appear to be similarly situated and asks these other researchers to reflect on the practices through which they produced the texts that they did. This approach offers the opportunity for “critical, politically aware reflection, a means of re-orienting us to our experience” (Campbell and Gregor, 2002, p. 16) that may help us to see how our practices “actually” work and to expose how our activities as individual activist graduate students are connected through the ruling relations to the actions of other activists, research participants, activist scholars, professors, and bureaucrats.

One starting point to help direct an institutional ethnography can be the “troubling” aspects of a lived experience, the moments of unease that may direct the researcher to identify some “disjuncture” between the ruling and experiential versions of reality (Campbell and Gregor, 2002, p.47). Central to an institutional ethnography is the concept of problematic, which Smith uses “to direct attention to a possible set of questions that have not yet been asked, or a set of puzzles which do not yet exist in the form of puzzles, but are ‘latent’ in the actualities of the experienced world” (Smith, 1987, p.91). This project begins with my own unease as a graduate student seeking to do activist-oriented, progressive intellectual work in the academy, then searches out a wider frame for approaching such a sense of “unease” less tightly bound to my own experience. I turn to an examination of the “tensions” and the “troubling” difficulties recollected by twelve other graduate students in their theses and in interviews. Their moments of unease in their everyday activities as graduate students and activists prompt questions about the ways activist-oriented graduate student research might be organized by institutional procedures and macro-level ruling relations acting in both the university and activist communities.

Activists troubled in the academy

Graduate study and research is, of course, always conducted within particular university-based institutional frameworks, or social relations. For example, students are required to complete coursework; design and gaining ethics approval for a thesis project;

complete the research and report it within the guidelines of the university, faculty and scholarly discipline; and, of course, pay the fees and navigate the bureaucratic procedures associated with each of these. Within these institutional constraints, particular recurrent events characterize the career of graduate student activists. Following Smith's approach to institutional ethnography, this section begins by describing these students' reflection upon "troubling" aspects of their university experiences and praxis in order to begin to map the ways in which ruling relations of the academy organized their experiences and praxis as they worked with supervisory committees, wrote in the appropriate, academic discourse, financially sustained themselves through the several-year process of completing a Master's or PhD degree, and, finally, passed the thesis defense.

Working with Supervisors and Committees

Simon Fraser University's 2002/03 *Graduate Student Handbook* states, "The relationship between the student and her or his senior supervisor is, in most cases, the one most important to the student's successful completion of the degree" (p.16). Indeed, these graduate students emphasize the importance of their relationship with their supervisor and committee in providing help, care, and direction in integrating their passions and politics into a successful navigation of the written and unwritten guidelines for academic careers. Juxtaposing the desires and hopes for their supervisory relationships with their recollected "actual" experiences with supervisors and committees helps illuminate the ways in which supervisors are caught between promoting the students' success and serving as the agents reinforcing the ruling relations of the university.

Activist "outcasts" seeking radical love

Among these student researchers, many described their desire for a supervisor and advisory committee whose intellectual and political interests would be aligned with, inspiring, or supporting their own. Many describe having sought a supervisor with whom they could form a personal connection that would support them through the myriad processes of conducting and writing thesis research and developing as an academic.

Francisco Ibanez Carrasco describes a complex caring relationship between himself and a particular professor, which extends beyond the formal responsibilities of a supervisor to oversee the thesis research project and participate in the defense examination. He sees this

relationship and the skills developed through it as valuable to him far beyond the research project:

I had one mentor I learned most of what I use now from. Our relationship was strained by the process, but there was “radical love” involved and now we are close friends. I could not have been *me* with most of the rest of the “professors” and still have learned the same skills, including writing, and how to behave in the workplace/field, how to formulate the necessary ethical thinking, and how to manage my employment, resources and potential financial gain. (personal communication, July 8, 2003)

Francisco acknowledges that the student/supervisor relationship was not easy to negotiate, yet, importantly, he could not have been himself with other professors as supervisors, indicating the importance to him of a personal connection, a personal understanding between his supervisor and himself as student.

Tanya Jones also notes the importance of a committee to a student both developing ideas and “maneuvering” through the university’s criteria for graduate level research:

Tanya Jones: Committees make a big difference...you need someone from within who’s going to be open to your ideas—To support you, to back you up to show you how to maneuver around the different criteria. (personal communication, July 27, 2003)

Though a supportive supervisor and committee made it possible for her to conduct what she considers an unconventional, highly community-focused project from within an existing Master of Arts program at her university, Tanya Jones considers activist graduate students (like herself) to be marginal relative to the university. She describes activists being treated as “academic freaks,” “outcasts,” whose special interests cause the universities to:

...Come up with these independent degrees, or independent programs, and that’s where all the activists go, because they don’t fit into the regular programs. So they set up this hybrid thing where all the academic freaks go.

JG: Like we’re outcasts?

Tanya Jones: Yeah, outcasts. They end up with whatever the degree is called, and it’s never called anything anyone would recognize. It always alerts everyone to, you know, “You’re a freak you’re a freak you’re a freak.” (personal communication, July 27, 2003)

From such a standpoint as “outcast,” an activist-oriented grad student, requiring credible credentials may work to “fit” as much as possible into a regular degree program, rather than be cast as an “academic freak.” Tanya Jones did this and sought a supervisor and committee members whose political orientation would be sympathetic enough to her own to offer some support to the work. Similarly, Darcie Bennett, whom I knew to be an anarchist organizer and socialist-feminist, worked with a more politically liberal policy researcher as a supervisor for her MA research. For Darcie, it was most important to work with a supervisor with expertise in policy who had some fluency, if not complete alignment with, the political analysis underpinning Darcie’s own policy analysis research. She had to sacrifice some political or ideological alignment in order to get other practical supports in a supervisory relationship. Indeed, professors who actually “do” radical activism may be hard to find in the academy. Tanya Jones says:

You’re seen as a particular type of star if you’re a prof who does community work and your students really appreciate your effort. I know I was grateful. I know the profs who had *any* community-based involvement were overworked. That was good enough. But, it was, “So you don’t actually *do* activism, but I’m really happy that you exist, and that you have some idea and can make the space for some of the ideas that I have or some of the language that I use.” (personal communication, July 27, 2003)

Whether or not they want or intend to, professors participate within ruling relations that are not fully within the scope of their control (Smith, 1987, p.218). Supervisors are always constrained by the material demands of their own lives (including requirements to research, teach, supervise, and publish) and by their own locations within the ruling relations of racism, sexism and capitalism. All of these relations determine the ways in which supervisory committee members can “actually do activism” within their own academic work, or promote the integration of activism in the work of their students.

Lonely as hell

Andrea Smith spoke in our interview in considerable detail about the difficulties delaying her completion of her degree. She describes a lack of “help,” “mentorship,” and “support,” offered by her supervisory committee and Faculty. She says:

I started with a different supervisory relationship than the one I have now. Even my mother thought my supervisor was very selfish, that if she thought

she could use you, she would, but otherwise, you were on your own. Terminating that relationship was my first stumbling block.

JG: Did you choose that supervisor, or does your department assign them?

Andrea Smith: I didn't choose her; the department stuck me with her. I chose a new supervisor because of her interest in Marxism...

A: My complaints are with the people in the department who should have been helping me and were unable to. There is a serious lack of mentorship. I feel like I'm supposed to do it on my own without any help, and I won't get it done without help. (personal communication, July 25, 2003)

Andrea Smith still needs support with academic research processes; describing the type of help she needs as "sitting down with the interview transcripts and going over them to see what's there" (personal communication, July 25, 2003).

Related to Andrea Smith's sense of being alone and struggling to complete the thesis process from within a complex life is Francisco Ibanez's response to my question about the "worst moment of anxiety, tension, or difficulty in the grad school process":

Most difficult was catering to the local and immediate, unimaginative, short-sighted whims of committee members (and bureaucrats) who know "dick" about what I was talking about, and they live to preserve a set of archaic rules about writing, thinking, and speaking. Along with the anxiety and uncertainty of living with HIV, cancer, and almost having died through the process, I lived through the anxiety imposed by a system that is unrealistic and archaic, lonely as hell, in which a few people in positions of stupid power (I mean these petty professors who think they are a big deal) use that power in cruel and banal ways to fuck up their colleagues and often their students. (personal communication, August 19, 2003)

Within his committee, Francisco's relationships ranged from "radical love" to the petty and cruel described above. While he is here dramatic in his juxtaposition of death and PhD degree granting processes, his comments clearly emphasize the academic process as potentially fraught with anxiety, loneliness, and powerlessness relative to the professors.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ That Ibanez Carrasco intertwines here and throughout his thesis discussions of his physical body with his body of intellectual work is striking. As someone (importantly, a gay, immigrant man) living with chronic illness, he cannot be "liberated from having to attend to [his] needs in the concrete and particular" (Smith, 1987, p. 82). Like others in the ruled position relative to the relations of capitalism, he is unable "to enter and become absorbed in the conceptual mode" of intellectual work, to pass beyond the local, embodied, and particular experience of his body (Smith, 1987, p.84).

Supervisory committees as gatekeepers to legitimacy in the academy

Other interviewees also described the supervisory committee's power in shaping what a student's thesis will contain and whether and when the student could complete the requirements of the thesis process. One participant echoes the significance of negotiating political or ideological differences with a supervisory and examination committee, who are, in effect, the gatekeepers who can facilitate and promote the success of the newcomer (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to the academy and who can also block the student's plans. One of these students says, "My supervisor was pretty straight-laced. So, I left out the stuff that they would never agree with—I just wanted to get it done" (personal communication)⁵⁵.

Another activist describes her attempts to use the committee structure for accountability to the research setting, to build an authentic critical view into her research. However, she believed she had to work very hard to get the university guidelines to formally accommodate committee members who were both from outside the university and who did not hold academic credential:

Tanya Jones: Community participation was really critical around my advisory committee and around my thesis work. My university, anyway, doesn't easily accommodate that. The first block was trying to have community involvement in the committee, in an atmosphere that doesn't foster that.

JG: The University is not set up for involvement, is it?

Tanya Jones: If you have an activist from the community [on your supervisory committee], that's problem one. And one who doesn't have degrees, that's problem two. Then how do you have them on the committee that the university doesn't want them on anyway? (personal communication, July 27, 2003)

Tanya Jones here points to the ways she sees the university's credential system as a means to keep the academy closed to involvement from the "outside." She determined it was very important to have activist community members on her thesis supervisory committee, and the people she wanted did not hold a university degree. At the same time, it was through the

⁵⁵ This interviewee remains anonymous here, for though she consented to participate in this study, the supervisor did not, and the comments may identify both student and the supervisor. It would compromise the notion of research participant autonomy to thus identify an individual who has not agreed to participate in the research (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 115).

influence of the other members of her committee that she was able to transgress this limitation:

JG: Was it important that the activist community members be *formally* recognized by the university by being on the committee?

Tanya Jones: It's especially important to have that involvement because they're the people who know what the hell we're talking about. It's not the faculty advisors. They don't have that information. If the quest is to have people on your community who can support your work, what's more important, the degree or their knowledge?

JG: What did you find you got from the community member on your committee?

Tanya Jones: Critical feedback, direction... I was fortunate to have people on my committee who were very open to exploring how to integrate community work into doing a Masters degree. (Jones, personal communication, July 27, 2003)

Tanya Jones, in retrospect, considered how she could have increased her formal accountability to and involved her own activist community to a greater extent in overseeing and supporting her thesis research. She says she had determined some of her own ways to account to her activist community:

Tanya Jones: Members of the community read everything that I wrote, but if I were to do it again, I would structure it more formally so there would be more involvement, more accountability, but *still working within the structures of the university* [emphasis added]

JG: How?

Tanya Jones: One way could be to set up a parallel committee, but the problem is, when you have two committees, one which is valued and one which is not formally valued, then how do you deal with that? How do you deal with critical feedback? How do you integrate any conflicts? (Jones, personal communication, July 27, 2003)

Interestingly, Jones still believes the university committee structure to be the best way to maintain accountability and support for community-based work, though she struggled with using that structure to insert community perspectives into the institutional procedures and relations.

Supervisory relations: "Purely Academic"

These students seem to have sought supervisors and sometimes committee members whose politics and personality would accommodate a type and level of support, advocacy, teaching, community integration, and, it seems, a certain intimacy. These desires seem belied by the institutional text describing the intended relation between graduate students and supervisors. The Simon Fraser University 2002/03 *Graduate Student Handbook* states:

The supervisor - graduate student relationship should be a purely academic one. Any aspect of the relationship which is not purely academic (including, but not limited to, personal, romantic or financial involvements) must be reported to the chair of the departmental graduate program committee and examined for appropriateness. (2002, p18)

From these students' recollected experience, it seems they neither sought nor necessarily obtained a "purely academic" relationship with their supervisors and committee members; these activist-oriented grad students negotiate and compromise within the academic, personal, and financial entanglements that develop throughout the ongoing relationship with their graduate supervisors and committees. In the absence of other formal methods of meting out the rules of academe, the emphasis in the *SFU Graduate Student Handbook* on this relationship suggests that the supervisory relationships are a chief means by which the University, Faculty, and discipline administer the institution's ideologies, rules, and procedures. Drawing on ethnomethodology's notion of "accountability" as a starting point, Dorothy Smith might argue that the graduate supervisory committee is the chief means by which the activist student's actions are "held accountable" (Smith, 1987, p.161) to adhere to and, therefore, reproduce the institutional ideology of the particular university and faculty, and the myriad of possible problematic relations of academic scholarship. It is through the supervisor's interpretation of and application of the (scant) textually-mediated and tacitly understood institutional rules or relations that graduate students will navigate many other relations as academics, including choosing suitable research topics, assembling appropriate supervisory committees, and maneuvering through many other daily unexceptional activities that characterize graduate study.

Graduate supervisors, be they "petty," "not exactly activist," "straight-laced," or even offering "radical love," are uniquely positioned by their (relative) leverage and power within the institutional setting and by their students' multiple desires and needs in the supervisory

relationship. The supervisors are located in a social relation in which they have considerable influence on myriad aspects of the student's academic experience not only in providing support and guidance within the particular program or university but also in facilitating (or impeding) the student's legitimate membership and participation in scholarly (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.101) communities of practice—the discipline or field. With potentially a great deal at stake, and themselves perhaps particularly vulnerable within the ruling relations as “outcasts,” activist-oriented students should consider the influence that a supervisor can have on the student's ability and, potentially, inclination to integrate activism into her graduate studies.

Text-mediated relations: Academic Writing

Writing according to unwritten rules

Students of most Master and PhD programs must produce theses in accordance with the formal, written guidelines conveyed through such documents as the *Simon Fraser University Guidelines for Theses and Dissertations* (2003) as well as many unwritten codes and expectations of the discipline in which a graduate student is meant to demonstrate developing mastery. It is probable that any student undertaking the substantial work of thesis writing would be concerned about what is required and expected and wonder about how to fit their own interests to the writing requirements of the scholarly discipline. In the everyday graduate student practices of writing a thesis and writing funding or research proposals, these activist-oriented students highlight a set of puzzles: how do (and should) we determine the rules and expectations for academic writing? How do we (or how should we best) engage with those rules in order to write proposals for and theses documenting activist-oriented work or work in which a (progressive, controversial) political position is evident? To what extent do written and unwritten rules of academic discourse enable or constrain our ability to make our academic work accessible to our own (activist) communities?

Smith's (1987, 1990, 1999b) arguments about the embeddedness of sociological texts in ruling relations provide a relevant framework to consider the activities of these activist students writing their thesis texts. In Smith's analysis of the woman sociologist as a “ruled” participant in the relations of the institutions, she sees that sociologist as participating in producing academic discourse:

... Through her own methods of writing and reading the texts of scientific discourse, and ... [through] the subject's own practice of suppressing and discarding her own biographical and local settings and the pragmatic concerns of her world of working to enter the cognitive domain of science. (Smith 1987, p.117)

Similarly, most of the participants in this current study are situated as "ruled" participants, with marginal power relative to institutional relations and discourses. They are students and novices, in a system organized hierarchically via the tenure system, in which tenured professors remain near the top, while all others struggle toward that pinnacle; the students may be "academic freaks" as activists working with counter-hegemonic research interests; and all but two of the participants in this study are positioned marginally (as women, people of color, lesbian/gay/queer, working class) to the intersecting, macro-level, and textually-mediated ruling apparatuses of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism that extend through the institutional relations of academia.

These students here identify the problem of writing and being read as "authorities" when their voices are, in these various ways, marginal. For example, as activist graduate students write their theses, they must conform to the rules, standards, or requirements of the discipline and of academic discourse. In the ensuing discussion, these students reveal some difficulty in "suppressing and discarding" (Smith) their personal, activist ideology in order to participate fully (or legitimately) (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and successfully within the academic domain. These students struggle to understand and participate in what are largely unwritten rules of a discourse to which they are related as outsiders or subordinates, and for whom its "conceptual practices do not work in the development of a sociological consciousness of our own" (Smith, 1987, p.109).

Though *Guidelines for Theses and Dissertations* (Simon Fraser University, 2003) outline in great detail how citations should be recorded and how the text should be visually aligned on the page, the guidelines offer little about how thesis writing "actually" should be done. For example, these thesis guidelines offer minimal direction about suitable topics, styles of argumentation, or tactics for theoretical substantiation. Thus, any student —by no means just activist students of course—has to work hard to uncover the discursive rules governing thesis writing. In effect, there are "gaps" between the information available in the professional and bureaucratic texts ostensibly governing university requirements of theses and the full

information required to actually complete the writing of a thesis text. Activist graduate students here describe coming into contact with the actualities of producing academic texts, and the hard work they do to “reproduce the sense of the enforced and enforceable categories in which they are to be made accountable”(Smith, 1990, p. 104) as writers learning to participate in the discursive practices of academia. Given the “gaps” in the official information provided about academic writing, students have to rely on unofficial sources to guide them. Participants in this study drew substantially from personal relationships, including supervisory and peer relationships, to fill the gaps in their understanding of how to write for academic audiences. Moreover, to the extent that activist students are, or experience themselves to be, outcast from or marginal to the academy and communities within the academy, the fruitful informal and unofficial sources of knowledge could be more difficult to access than might be the case for students located in mainstream communities within the academy.

Reading the unwritten rules

Readers of academic texts are charged with much of the work of enforcing standards academic discourse and, indeed, the ruling apparatus mediated by that discourse. Readers typically do not call into question either the institutional forms of power that surround the process of production and the process of reading (Smith 1990, p.108). In the following discussion, activist graduate students articulate problematics in relation to the official/institutional and unofficial readers of their texts. Institutional readers include the supervisory committee discussed above, the examination committee for the thesis defense, and funders. Several of these students point to their own hopes that an academic text will transcend or survive outside these institutional writer/reader relations and be useful to the practices of their own counter-hegemonic, activist communities outside the academic discourse. In these activist writers’ difficulty straddling the discursive needs of two distinct and opposed readerships, the problematic of academic writing as reinforcing hegemonic interests becomes apparent, and the possibilities of activist academic writing are called into question.

Tone down the activism in academic writing

Of the activist participants in this study, eight described writing theses and grant proposals as a significant “tension” for activist academic work. Writing papers, proposals, and theses were, for them, activities requiring some struggle to ascertain “the archaic rules about

writing, thinking, and speaking” (Francisco Ibanez-Carrasco, personal communication) that govern academic, textually mediated discourse, and whether their own work would meet those criteria.

Tanya Jones describes her difficulty as an “activist returning to school,” who wanted to write in a way familiar to her and use language that would make her thesis sensible and accessible to specific communities of activists outside the university. She addresses this tension both in her thesis discussion of methods and in our interview, saying:

I always struggled with the language and meeting the criteria of academia. My understanding is that the language has to read, look, feel, smell, taste, in particular ways, and if it doesn't, then you're not meeting particular academic standards or your voice won't be as promoted or regarded, or whatever... (Jones, personal communication, July 27, 2003)

Similarly, Laura Atkinson says the hardest thing about graduate school was writing the thesis, and she needed “tools” that her working-class background had not provided:

The writing was the hardest part—activism and life came first. And I didn't come from a background where I developed the tools. I just didn't have the tools to do the thesis. And I couldn't have finished it if I didn't have the activist community saying the work was important to them. ... I couldn't have finished if I didn't have a cohort on campus at SFPIRG, where I worked. I was complaining, ‘I'm too stupid, I can't finish it’, but I got some friends at SFU to read what I had and help me figure out what to cut and what to keep. (Laura Atkinson, personal communication, December 18, 2003)

Though Atkinson says “it's useful to have people like us in those graduate classes, taking up space and challenging other students in class” (personal communication, December 18, 2003), and Tanya Jones believes that the activist returning to school is more likely to “challenge authority” than accept it, both of these activists found that despite their efforts to write in “non-academic language,” their theses nonetheless were required to be more “academic” and inaccessible to their local communities than they had wanted. Atkinson described having to “quote the incoherent academics talking about everyday women, when everyday women were saying the same theories anyway” (personal communication, December 18, 2003), while Tanya Jones says, “I infused the thesis with words I never would have normally, because I was nervous about my work fitting within the required structures, since that university structure is ubiquitous” (personal communication, July 27, 2003). Both of these writers described relying

on other activist academic graduate students as readers who could coach and support them through their fears about the extent to which their writing met the unwritten academic criteria.

In the end, despite their fears, both Atkinson and Tanya Jones clearly came to understand enough about how the thesis language should “read, look, feel, smell, taste” in order to make it palatable to the university examiners who passed it through the defense. That each of these describes the experience as “struggle,” which made her nervous, and use language she “never would have normally” suggests that through writing the thesis, Atkinson and Tanya Jones had to discover and decide what way of writing would be most likely to result in her voice being sufficiently “promoted or regarded” within the university structure. In effect, these novice activist academics were required by the institutional relations of passing a thesis defense to develop some “mastery” of the cultural tools of academic discourse, notwithstanding the struggle and resistance to adopting or “appropriating” those discursive tools as her own preferred tools (Wertsch, 1998).

Nonetheless, and perhaps explaining some of their struggles, Tanya Jones, Andrea Smith and Scott Uzelman all describe their hopes for their theses both to pass academic muster and to be “accessible” (Uzelman), “public documents” (Jones) useful to the activist communities from which their research emerges. Andrea Smith, for example, though still struggling to complete her thesis, hopes that it will be useful to the local women’s organizations that participated in her research. She says:

With the problems I’ve had with the university, I’m so disenchanted with the university that assuming I can get this bloody thing done, I’m just hoping that people in the community are going to be pleased with it, that it will be useful, relevant. (personal communication, July 25, 2003)

A thesis is the central text around which much graduate study is oriented. As such, it is a text that necessarily emerges from, reinforces, and is accountable to the university’s institutionalized procedures (Smith, 1987). Thus, it seems no surprise that an academic aiming to integrate an activist focus into her written work would struggle to write a document that would both promote the writer’s legitimate place in the academic discourse, and be practically usable to a counter-institutional activist community. Though a cultural or discursive tool might be applied to multiple purposes (Wertsch, 1998, p.32), in many ways the academy and activist community are two distinct audiences, with distinct (and, perhaps, contradictory) purposes. As

Tanya Smith says, "I wanted the thesis to be a public document as well as meet the criteria of academia, so I struggled between those two objectives, and my feeling is that those objectives can be quite contrary" (personal communication, July 27, 2003). Though ambitious, it seems it can be impractical, and very likely a struggle, for an activist-oriented student to aim for their thesis text to be read and used both by readers in the examination committee whose role it is to "uphold archaic rules about thinking, reading, speaking" (Ibanez personal communication, July 25, 2003) and by activist readers who are aiming to transform the current social rules and relations. Understood through the framework of ruling relations, these activists' mastery of—and concessions to—academic forms of writing, locate them (us) as "active participants" in the continued institutional organization of knowledge production, and therefore in perpetuating ruling relations: "whether we want it or not, somehow the practices of our art come to take on the distinctive character that they do as we participate in relations that are not fully within the scope of our knowledge, and certainly not within the scope of our control" (Smith, 1990, p. 218).

Survival tactics: Use the research to support a broader body of work

These writers adopt different strategies to cope with the problematic of writing to integrate activism into academic work and to somehow transform the practices of the "art" of academic writing. For example, though she has considerable experience in writing witty or inflammatory anti-capitalist, anarchist slogans on placards and in writing popular educational material as a feminist organizer, Darcie Bennett is satisfied to develop in her thesis a feminist, anti-capitalist analysis that reads in an "objective, or matter-of-fact tone" (Darcie Bennett, personal communication, July 6, 2003). She hopes that her thesis and other work will be taken suitably seriously by academics reviewing her papers so her work will be published and she will be invited present at conferences, and so other policy analysts might draw on her work. However, rather than attempting to make the thesis document itself "accessible" to non-academic audiences, Darcie Bennett says, "I didn't bother trying to force it into a form that would try to work in the academy and the community. I just treat my research as a body of work that I can draw on" (personal communication, July 6, 2003). From the knowledge she has built through the research, she can write and speak in other ways, in other contexts, about the effects of policy upon single mothers in British Columbia she may have saved herself some

of the struggle between trying to meet the objectives of institutional and extra-institutional activist readers.

Survival tactics: Tone down the activist language

Scott Uzelman explicitly integrates his activist orientation into his academic work and believes that his advancement in academia hinges on concealing his political agenda, which he attempts to do through a linguistic or discursive “translation.” He says,

In representing my work to academics or bureaucrats, I talk about “community,” “democracy,” “community-based research around generating more participatory, community-based media.” Writing grants for bureaucrats—who tend to be reactionary—requires using the buzzwords. If I start talking about doing “radical research” or “changing social relations,” I’m going to get tossed into the pile with the rest of the rejects, which I always seem to do because I can’t seem to get it right. I guess I need to try a different strategy next time. (Uzelman personal communication June 20, 2003)

Though he recognizes that the academic or bureaucratic reading of his proposals is organized by a particular discourse, identifiable in the use of “buzzwords,” Uzelman’s own discursive practices remain in conflict with that discourse. He can’t seem to “get right” how to write grant applications that will both describe work in which he is interested and politically invested and will be sufficiently palatable to decision-making bureaucrats to get funding. However, despite his need to fund his academic work, it seems he is unable to blend, merge, or even translate his activist’s discourse into the text-mediated relations of academic project funding.

Pablo Bose agrees that an activist’s political agenda is best concealed in academic grant proposals in order to get the funding then carry on with what Ibanez Carrasco also calls “real, political work concealed behind the research proposal” (personal communication, July 25, 2003). In his applications for project funding, Bose recalls, “I tone down the activist language and substitute words: ‘social justice’ becomes ‘community building’” (personal communication, July 25, 2003). In our discussion, Bose acknowledged that the reinforcement from receiving major funding for what he originally thought was a “bullshit, toned-down version” of his activist discourse shifted his own evaluation to see the toned down version as “really good.” Though Pablo Bose determined that he would continue to seek funding for more activist-oriented work, we both wondered to what extent he has shifted to accept the “toned down” version not only of his language, but indeed, of his own activist politics.

Writing into the ruling relations

Graduate student writing needs to be identifiable as “academic” writing, and graduate students, even activist ones, as “academics,” legitimate members of academic communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in order for us to proceed through the requirements of our academic careers. Through writing texts to fit the written and unwritten rules, we shape our own understanding as future writers and readers, in effect shifting our thinking and identities to that of the ruling interests. We become “participants in discourses of quite a different order, the discourses framed within the academy” (Smith, 1999b, p. 25), and we find ourselves writing in and working in a way that, says Dorothy Smith, “Fits our work within a discursive setting that is isolated from activism, producing theory that is oriented elsewhere than activism. The theory may still be ‘radical,’ but nonetheless, it is withdrawn from its anchorage within the actualities of people’s lives” (Smith, 1999, p. 26).

From this point of view, as activist students find various strategies to navigate the rules for academic writing, they/we reproduce those very discursive relations in our thesis documents and shape our own future writing practices to align within academic ruling relations. These relations around writing are enacted first at the level of these writers’ internal, individual struggle to assess their own writing for its fit with the rules, and to check the ways in which institutional rules for writing have shaped (eroded, toned down) their politically-motivated work. These writers also struggle with bureaucratic bodies as institutional readers, through the evaluation process applied to theses completion and funding applications. Finally, and mediated by the other inter-connected sets of relations, some of these activist-oriented students struggle to reach a set of readers outside of the university context and relations that directs how theses “must” be written.

Financially sustaining ourselves

Writing a thesis, and the coursework that precedes that process, make graduate study an expensive and lengthy enterprise. As Scott Uzelman says about student activists in his thesis, we have to balance paying the bills, raising families, our activist interests, and our academic work (2002, p.61). Graduate students find various ways of financing the project including student loans, research and teaching assistance jobs in their Faculties, grants from external agencies, relying on parents and partners to pay the bills, or working “regular” jobs

while they study.⁵⁶ Each of these positions us in a particular set of capital relations to the university, our employers, families, etc. I, for example, finance my graduate degree with a tuition benefit granted by my employer. Though I have no formal “debt” to my employer, the benefit program states that my educational program must be “job related,” so I conceal my thesis topic from my boss, hope that I will not be asked to deliver a copy of this thesis for a manager’s inspection, and have occasionally decided that I “had to” miss classes or defer research tasks in order to perform my day job. Indeed, having no formal debt to the company for the tuition means that I am only responsible to myself to complete the degree at all or within a particular timeline. Having a well-paying professional job already means that I do not “need” the MA in order to begin a career, which is the case for several of the graduate student researchers, and it also means I am able to pay my tuition without borrowing and without having to put additional work into completing grant applications. However, the same paid job also demands time and attention that I might prefer to direct either to my activist practices or academic activities.

Like me, participants in this study were each necessarily situated by the need to pay for graduate study within procedures, practices, and interests (relations), which, in turn, organized, directed, or constrained their activist-oriented research work. Whether employee, borrower, beneficiary, dependent, scholarship recipient or heir, it is impossible to imagine how any participant in this study could have completed their graduate study without encountering the concrete implications of capitalism’s apparatus.

Graduate students who can secure work as teaching assistants or research assistants within the university might be paid for work related somewhat to their studies and, perhaps, diminish the distraction of our attention demanded by separating paid work and academic activities. However, this apparent efficiency overlays an employer/employee relationship to already complex ruling relationships with the same (potentially) “archaic,” “non-activist,” or “asshole” bureaucrats and professors described in the previous section as making intellectual and ideological autonomy difficult for the activist-oriented graduate student.

⁵⁶ Three of those in the study mentioned their student debts as being \$50 000 or more. At least seven of these students worked as either a teaching assistant or research assistant during their graduate research.

Further, when a student's own graduate research is built upon paid work as a research assistant on larger projects, her project is in many ways at the mercy of the principal investigator and project manager of the larger project. Her own project must fit around the topic, schedule, questions, methodology, and ideology of the research projects developed by other principal researchers rather than following her own independent research agenda. Her own project's completion may be contingent on funding or other factors affecting the completion of the larger project. For example, Andrea Smith's thesis project was embedded in another, larger project, for which she worked as a Research Assistant. When the principal investigator secured a better (tenure-track) job and left the university, the whole project floundered and was eventually cancelled, leaving Andrea not only without paid work to pay her tuition but also with a research project that "made no sense without the broader context" (personal communication, July 25, 2003). The result for her is a complicated problem: not only does she have to re-imagine and repurpose the research project she had originally conceptualized, but also she has had to search for new paid work, which, in turn diverts her attention from her research.

Without adequately paid work (or research funding), many students rely on student loans to complete their graduate degrees. The threat or weight of a fifty-thousand-dollar loan for graduate school makes many students look for options that will stop debt from accumulating any further. One option is to stop studying after the Master's degree, arrest the further accumulation of debt, and begin to repay it. In order to repay a substantial investment in graduate school, we may come to decide that we need high-paying jobs, the most obvious of which is an academic job. Darcie Bennett pragmatically describes her financial investment in graduate school, saying:

The bit of funding I got for my PhD means I can at least have a few years of coursework when my tuition is covered, I don't have to start repaying my student loan. I've thought of stopping and looking for work, but there are not many options other than academia, so I might as well continue with that for now. (personal communication, July 6, 2003)

Thus, the longer we activist students continue in academia, the further financial incentive there may be to maintain the academic career path and to further identify as academics, with all that requires, including any costs or compromises to our activist praxis.

Mounting a (Thesis) Defense

The final major milestone (or millstone?) in the process of much graduate research is the thesis or dissertation defense. However, it is common wisdom that a supervisor would never allow a student to make it to the defense if she were unlikely to pass, as it would likely reflect badly upon the supervisory committee guiding that student to the defense. One of the participants in this study pointed out in our discussion that the name of the thesis “defense” constructs it as a battle, with the student under attack. I thought the students might, therefore, recall from their defense “war stories.” However, for some:

The defense was actually pretty easy. They really didn't ask tough questions on the theoretical aspects of the thesis or the method. I think I was more challenged by the open question period when a few colleagues posed some good questions on subjectivity and the relation between direct action and alternative media production. (Scott Uzelman, personal communication, June 20, 2003)

In contrast to this young, white man's experience, two women self-identifying as working-class queer feminists, as well as a woman of colour, and an immigrant man who speaks English as a second language, recounted difficulty specifically related to the composition of the examination committee and the questions they asked during the defense. Anecdotal accounts in grad student lounges report other feminist women being asked in the defense whether they “hate men” or why they insisted on “playing the gender card.” While so few accounts should not be taken as representative of activists', women's, lesbians', or queer students' defense experience, they nonetheless raise some questions about the ruling relations within which the thesis defense is situated.

It is generally understood that the thesis defense is a means for students to defend the argumentation of their thesis papers and, in effect, to demonstrate mastery of the discursive tools of the discipline. However, I cannot locate a description or guidelines for a thesis defense in my University calendar, *Graduate Studies Handbook*, faculty web page or grad students' newsletter. Thus, it seems students must, again, rely on supervisors, bureaucrats in the university offices, informal documentation, peers, and myth for information about what the defense will be like, who can attend, what questions are acceptable. This leaves activist students (and again, particularly those additionally “outcast” by being, for example, women, people of color, working class, or lesbian/gay/queer) particularly vulnerable to the potential perils in

mounting a defense of their work, ideologies, and—it seems from the examples above—perhaps their identities. It may be that the defense examination actually functions as a practice that defends the institution and discipline from infiltration by counter-hegemonic ideologies, mediated by activist oriented thesis texts, and embodied in subjects who may be unwelcome interlopers in the academic community and discourse.

Tanya Jones highlights that an activist-oriented researcher who desires the participation of community-based stakeholders in the thesis defense may, again, identify herself as an unusual and problematic graduate student. Again, she suggests that the supervisory committee is the intermediary who could have assisted in re-shaping what she sees as the traditional organization of the defense. Tanya Jones decided that it would be impossible to offer her community meaningful opportunity to participate in the defense and rather than either fight for the defense agenda and schedule to ensure their formal inclusion or invite the whole community and risk the consequences, she determined it was more feasible to present her research to the community at another occasion:

Again, an activist-based thesis is different from others, possibly, and who your committee was. If it were weighing on the academic side, then it didn't make any sense to have community members there. I would like to see the defense set up differently, where there would be equal time offered to community participants, or non committee participants, and although there is some time, there is limited time because the defense is supposed to be only so long. I didn't want to offer something [to the community] that I couldn't follow up on. (Jones personal communication, July 25, 2003)

This activist conceded the potential fight with her committee to have community members (as her allies or as her challengers) at her thesis defense. Would her confidence in her ability to argue for the defense she wanted be different if she were not a first-generation academic, an activist returning to school after a long absence, a lesbian, a woman, researching a controversial topic? Would a committee constituted differently offer to accommodate special requests from another student? Under what conditions (or for whom) would the university move to change the structure of the defense in order to accommodate requests for greater participation from non-faculty, community-based attendees?

Defending “academic freak” identities

Another woman responded to my question about moments of most tension in the graduate research project by saying she was asked during her defense, “Do you really want to abolish the state?” a question she thought was an over-simplification of her feminist materialist policy analysis in which she argues the state’s implication in single mothers’ poverty, but does not argue for anarchy (Darcie Bennett, personal communication, July 7, 2003). I wonder from what social relations this question emerged. Is an activist-oriented or ideologically left-leaning thesis more likely to be subjected to such simplistic and pejorative questions? Are lesbian/queer, feminist, women, students more likely than others to experience questions asking them to defend ideological positions linked to their identity? While these questions could form a new problem to explore in another inquiry, here it is useful to consider that as these students experience and “defend” themselves as if from a personal attack, the moment can perhaps be better understood as the “juncture” (Smith, 1987, p.157) of their local experience with the larger social and economic process of (hetero) patriarchy, enacted through the ideological procedures of the university institution. Here, the student is not only defending herself, but also the “right” of someone in her identity position to participate in the ruling relations of the university as a writing, researching Subject (Smith, 1999b, p. 17). Her presence as the writer of the text, rather than the studied object of the research text, is in conflict with the prevailing discourse that places people like her as objects of research rather than as researching Subjects.

In response to some of these questions about the effects of identity on a student’s academic career path, consider that in discussions about the tensions and troubles for the activist in the academy, six of the students speaking through this study specifically identified themselves as “first generation academics” from “mixed” or working-class backgrounds (Darcie Bennett, Francisco Ibanez-Carrasco, Laura Atkinson, Andrea Smith, and Tanya Jones—who also described herself as “an activist returning to school”). Each of these also described their graduate research experiences as variously “fraught” (Bennett), “anxiety provoking and lonely as hell” (Ibanez), “something I caution other young women from doing” (Atkinson), “ego-crushing” (Smith, A.), and a “struggle” (Jones). In contrast, Pablo Bose describes himself as emerging from a “family of academics,” whose previous generations have also been activists, and also, as discussed above, describes himself as having been quite

successful throughout his burgeoning academic career, his recollection of his experiences did not highlight substantial personal struggle but rather, how he navigated through the system.

Again, these students' examples should not be taken as representative, but illustrative of a problematic relation wherein academic success might have "little to do with talent" and something to do with having luck and privilege (Pablo Bose, personal communication, July 25, 2003). Feminist scholars, scholars who are people of color and/or working-class, as well as lesbian/gay/queer scholars have argued that in institutions dominated by white, privileged men, marginal participants are at a disadvantage not only due to discrimination and exclusion from those setting, but also because their background experiences do not train them in the use of the cultural tools and modes of acting privileged in the institutional setting (for example, Bannerji et al, 1991; hooks, 1994, 2000; Hill Collins, 2000). In effect, such students entering university settings do so from a standpoint marginal to the institution's modes of organizing knowledge and are likely to find their previous lived experience in "disjuncture" with the forms of thought and practices governed by the institution (Smith, 1987). Thus, without "luck" and privilege seeing them/us expeditiously through the activities of graduate study, such students seem likely to be more vulnerable to the everyday exercises of the ruling apparatuses of the institution than might be activist students who are white, middle-class men.

Reconciling the tensions: establishing successful activist academic careers

The written and unwritten rules of the academy impose themselves on the activist-oriented graduate student's individual experiences in relationships with supervisors and supervisory committee members; defense committees; "bureaucrats" in Faculty, Registrar's, and Financial Aid offices; funding bodies; libraries; student unions, etc. The requirements of academic writing provide concrete opportunities for activist-oriented graduate students to demonstrate that they can organize their grasp of their subject matter appropriately for their thesis to pass the defense. Throughout the process, the student invests time, energy, compromises, and money, resources that may help to promote a continued trajectory along the academic career path despite possible compromises to their activist orientation along the way.

The participants in this research have, it seems, sufficiently reconciled the tensions and compromises required of them by the academy to enable them to continue their membership in academic communities. Of the students considered in this project, eleven of thirteen have

completed the thesis discussed in this project, and the others⁵⁷ are likely to complete their research in 2004. Of these eleven, ten have continued their academic careers, as PhD and Post-Doctoral students, and/or as instructors and professors at colleges and universities.⁵⁸ This number seems remarkably high, especially when considered in light of the macro-level and intersecting relations of hetero-patriarchy, racism, and capitalism that might be expected to exclude many of the participants in this study from success in mainstream, hegemonic academic institutions. Indeed, this “tension” between academic success and marginality for activist graduate students is a striking finding of this study and will be further considered in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

Academics’ troubles in activist communities

My own experience as an activist-turned graduate student researcher has brought me up against and through the ruling practices of the university, but throughout, and inspiring the questions of this inquiry, I have remained a full participant in everyday, “hands-on, front-line” work of my chosen activist community. In various moments when selecting a thesis topic, conducting my research with other activists, analyzing my ideas, and prioritizing my time commitments, I have found myself sometimes in great discomfort, confusion—tension—between what I want, or intend, or am required to do for my academic work, and my feminist activist interests and community-based commitments.

Activism is often organized by (small) groupings of individuals who come together out of some shared collective purpose, most often for some collectively beneficial purpose (John & Thomson, 2003, p.7). Activism is frequently characterized by an emphasis on voluntary participation, democratic operation, and often relies on undocumented organizing policies, politics, and principles (Bobo, 1996, p.34). Because activist frameworks and activities vary

⁵⁷ Neither Andrea Smith, nor I have completed the requirements of our Master of Arts degrees, though Andrea reports she is “Now on track for a spring or summer 2004 defense” (personal communication, February 15, 2004).

⁵⁸ Statistics Canada reports from 2001 census data that among Vancouver residents aged 25-44, 30,830 people (14,635 women) had earned a Master’s degree. In the same cohort, 4,720 people (1,530 women) held a PhD degree. In the local community and similar age cohort of participants in my study, the ratio of PhDs to Masters degrees is approximately 3:20 (approximately 1:10 for women). These data do not indicate how many Master’s students continued their academic careers and cannot function as a “baseline” for my study. However, it is striking to contrast these statistics to the finding here that 7:9 of the Master’s degree holders in this study have progressed to a PhD, while 10:11 of participants have continued with academic careers.

widely, it is difficult to discuss here any particular acts or events that recur across the various research subjects' activist settings or careers in a way that could explicate the social relations organizing activism and neatly parallels the preceding discussion of the social relations organizing graduate study. Indeed, it may seem, at first, debatable to apply institutional ethnography as a methodology to investigate the divergent, non-institutional (and often, counter-institutional) practices that constitute activism as defined within this thesis.

However, the institutional ethnography method calls for beginning in “everyday/everynight” activities, and from a particular standpoint, looking upward at the ruling relations that organize and coordinate those activities beyond, and perhaps, invisible in the local setting” (Smith, 1999b, p.6). This inquiry therefore begins with the troubling aspects of the everyday for these activist students in their activist settings. From the moments of “tension” these students recollect as academics in activist communities, the following discussion looks beyond the local activist community to consider how those communities are themselves organized, and indeed, pervasively “ruled” in relations coordinated by the same, interrelated and macro-level discourses of (capitalist, sexist, racist) power that coordinate academic activities, and indeed, against which activists organize. These are “peculiar forms of power that are diffused through complexes of text-mediated social relations constituting subjectivity and agency. It is the relations that rule, and people rule and are ruled through them” (Smith, D. 1999b, p.82). This discussion of the “tensions” for academics in the academy, then, looks from these students' experiences of marginality and silencing due to racism, sexism or homophobia in activist settings and sketches a view of a complex of relations I describe as “professionalism” that seem to stratify ostensibly counter-hegemonic activist communities.

Activism situated in relations of racism, sexism, and homophobia

Scott Uzelman, describing the “tensions” encountered as an academic researcher in the anti-capitalist Vancouver Independent Media Centre collective, says, “I received no criticism or complaint from the IMC collective about my research” (personal communication, June 20, 2003). Rather, the tensions Uzelman describes emerge from the IMC collective's struggles to disrupt sexism in what they believed was a democratic and egalitarian organization (Uzelman,

2002, p.45). His thesis discusses how men and women were differently affected by and differently participated in that struggle, and he questions his own responsibility as a male member of a collective to work to undermine the sexism in the group (2002, p.50). Applying institutional ethnography's tool of standpoint to Uzelman's point of view, consider how the ruling relations of sexism might relate to the relative ease with which he negotiated permission to conduct his research in his activist community (Uzelman, 2002, p. 8). Uzelman is a (white, middle class) man who was already a grad student when he joined the IMC as an early member and soon emerged as leader in a group whose membership was somewhat transient, and in which "men have been over-represented since the collective's beginning" (Uzelman, 2002, p.50). Therefore, when he proposed to use the IMC as his MA research, he was well positioned to negotiate their agreement and cooperation. He had consolidated some authority and some level of indispensability within the group before asking for permission to conduct his MA research (Uzelman, 2002).

Imagine instead the IMC's possible response to a woman's request to document the IMC in her MA research, especially one of the women who, according to Uzelman, were "feeling outnumbered" and viewed the group as sexist and hierarchical (Uzelman, 2002, p.51). Consider the relations in which Uzelman's academic and activist project(s) operated: there were no women in the group who would be a peer to Uzelman as leader, founder, old-timer member, or contributors of great time and effort to the group (Uzelman, 2002, p.51). If there were a such woman in the group who wanted to conduct her Master's research in that setting, what is the likelihood that her inquiry would be supported by an equally *carte blanche* attitude as Uzelman describes receiving for his own? Would she likewise receive consent to tell her own "partial and incomplete account of the IMC" (Uzelman, p. 8) in an academic research paper? Would the male-dominated group allow the other side in the struggle about sexism to speak so freely? Would a woman believing she was experiencing sexism seek to stay in the group and inquire into that sexist struggle, when other (more democratic) means to interrupt the struggle had failed? (Uzelman, p.51). What would make her contribution (of intellectual, physical, political labour) valuable enough to the group for them to permit her doubled role as collective member and researcher, despite the risks to which a researcher might expose the IMC through the course of the research? While these questions speculate beyond the scope of this inquiry, it is relevant to consider how hegemonic social relations impact upon and construct the power

relationships between activist-academic and their activist community. It is from a position of some formal power from which Uzelman sought permission for and conducted his thesis research within an activist community pressed for resources, busy with its own work, and still situated within pervasive systems of class stratification, sexism, and racism (Uzelman, 2002).

Professionalization of activism

As activism becomes industry, do we need the credentials?

As Francisco Ibanez Carrasco reflected on his experience as a community worker in AIDs/HIV, he likewise highlights hegemonic systems reproducing themselves within AIDS activism and social science. The tension for him orchestrated itself, it seems, around his identity as an un-credentialed, gay, immigrant, HIV positive man attempting to integrate his activist and academic work into a setting that has reorganized itself from (primarily unpaid) community-based activism into an “HIV/AIDS ‘industry’,” where professional credentials may be valued more than the experiential knowledge of living with HIV or AIDS. He says,

With the PhD, I acquired credibility and economic currency in the HIV/AIDS “industry” which I didn't have, or no one has, by the mere fact of being HIV+. Like other social spheres, it suffers from hierarchical patriarchy, racism and—hard to believe—homophobia. There is a great deal of conservatism and resistance to change. In my activist work, the degree has helped, but I am not someone there only because of the degree. I would be someone, respectable as any individual, even if I didn't have a degree. (personal communication, July 30, 2003)

Here, Francisco distinguishes between the *activism* and the *industry* around AIDS, emphasizing the egalitarian, experientially-based values he sees in the activist community as opposed to the economies of the sphere in which he earns his living as a now-credentialed HIV/AIDS researcher. Indeed, the tension with his activist community may be a struggle with a “professionalization” of activism, in which more community-based work can be organized into paid jobs, and those who are paid must compete for funds provided by government bodies, larger NGOs, and corporations. Such competition, it seems, is organized by a system based not on activists’ experiential knowledge, identity, or membership in the community of persons living with HIV/AIDS, but on traditional hegemonic and capitalist criteria for measuring merit or credibility.

Like Francisco, Tanya Jones likewise described her frustration that those with Masters degrees seemed to carry greater authority in her activist communities, and like Francisco, perceived the limitations for her own career advancement in the field until she acquired the credential. She says:

I was working [in a Crisis Center] and surrounded with people with Masters [degrees], and saw that the voice of those without was not given space. My ability to move into certain positions was limited without it, so I wanted that piece of paper. (personal communication, July 25, 2003)

As these activist academics describe the credibility they perceive themselves as able to acquire with degrees, they illustrate a type of activism in which authority is tied to professional credentials, most likely due to the reliance of many activist and community groups upon government and corporate funding.

Canadian governments increasingly abandon the provision of social services to non-governmental agencies, yet still set standards to control the delivery of those services.⁵⁹ It seems predictable that standard, hegemonic criteria would be imposed along with those standards. Activist-oriented communities reliant on that funding likely do face increasing pressure to operate like professional social service providers rather than as provocative social change agents. A five-year study involving eleven rape crisis and sexual assault centers across Canada articulates exactly this risk to activist activities reliant on government funding. In *Canada's Promises to Keep*, Lakeman says:

The current [Canadian government] policy of funding only through the Voluntary Sector Initiative compels groups to serve pre-stated government department policy intentions. So, community groups or non-government groups are formed and sustained and directed in the name of community organizing, which have no base in the community, and no political legitimacy to the claim of the self-organizing oppressed. Existing women's groups twist themselves inside out to meet the criteria of serving government agendas not their own. Not only does this mean that groups who remain true to their own agenda lose funding, but it also means that groups disappear for lack of funding and the community is reorganized in the service of current government policy initiatives. (Lakeman, 2002, p.111)

⁵⁹ One such set of standards is administered by the (Canadian) government-created Community Social Services Employers' Association (CSSEA), which functions as a buffer and funding agency for social services agencies (Jay 2000, p.161).

Lakeman's analysis that community-based activists "twist themselves" to conform to the ruling agendas that determine funding is closely aligned with the analysis raised earlier by participants in this study who believed it necessary to conceal their activist agendas in their own academic funding applications. This makes sense, given Smith's argument that multiple institutions, including educational and governmental institutions, are themselves complexly inter-related in meting out the ruling interests of capitalism across multiple local settings (1987, p.3). Thus, the discourses of power, as regulated by funding bodies' bureaucracies, coordinate and constrain the ways activists must speak and write from either a community or academic setting.

Frontline workers resist "credentializing"

Further, and similar to Tanya Jones' and Francisco Ibanez Carrasco's perception of the requirement for professional credentials in activist settings, "feminist frontline anti-violence workers and some of their allies" (Jay 2000 p160) also articulate the problematic pressure on them toward professionalization and service provision. However, these frontline workers, located outside of academic communities and identities, argue for resistance to, rather than cooperation with, standardization, "credentializing," "bureaucratization," and "professionalization" in activist, social change work. They argue:

Membership in agencies [like the Community Social Service Employers Association] is required [by government funders,] and some of the standards that CSSEA promotes undermine our feminist organizations. Workers in feminist organizations are forced into hierarchies. Standardizing of job descriptions bureaucratizes and limits the scope of advocacy workers are permitted to carry out. ... We reject the credentializing of our paid and volunteer workers. The requirement for academic or technical credentials promotes a professionalization that undermines the self-help and political model of feminist organizing. (Jay 2000 p161)

Similarly, Pauline Funston, a "frontline transition house worker" argues that feminist workers and activists like her should not conform to the pressure to obtain degrees, but should "fight back" to protect and develop feminist "revolutionary practice." She argues:

There has been a great push toward methods of professionalism in our work in the transition houses and it will take every effort on our parts to fight back and hold onto our practice of feminism. Feminist frontline workers saw our responsibility to the women who use our transition houses as being one of revolutionary practice for political change. Now our transition houses are

being staffed by those who are able to get a degree in social services. Now we see 'clients' and provide a 'service'- a clear indication of the dilution of feminist principals and practice.... The erosion of feminist standards, towards professionalism is costing battered women their dignity, autonomy, and the right to participate in the feminist movement. (Funston, 2000, p.41)

In some social change fields and social service-oriented "industries" (Ibanez Carrasco), it does appear that acquiring academic credentials and becoming a "professional" is increasingly key to accumulating economic currency, but it is not without cost. Individual activists like those considered in this study may understandably want to earn a living in a field related to our passion and our activist work. However, the process of acquiring professional, academic credential (and identity) aligns the activist graduate student more closely with those macro-level ruling systems that, as activists, we might be expected to instead disrupt. Community-based, frontline activists, like those feminist anti-violence workers cited above, decidedly critique this trend and ask for cooperation by others to likewise fight back (Funston, 2000, p.41).

Activist/Academic identities and compromises

Successfully negotiating the university system requires compromises on the part of the activist academic. Once schooled in those relations, the activist academic may transfer that learning and practice to the activist setting. As activist academics participate in academic and activist communities and negotiate the contradictions of those multiple identity positions, we somehow resolve conflicting practices of "activist" and "academic" communities into our complex identities (Wenger, 1998). That "resolution" is likely to privilege practices organized by the ruling discourses that pervade our ways of knowing, being, and acting, and come to be unintentionally taken for granted and invisible in our daily, local activities (Smith, 1999b, p.84). Thus, activist academics may shift from "activist" ways of being to ways more clearly aligned with those of ruling interests. For example, Darcie Bennett relates how the cultural and material conditions of her life shifted through the course of acquiring her graduate degree and how her activism to stop poverty was impacted by her own (even marginally) increased material privilege:

I organized a meeting, and people would've had to take transit to get there, but I forgot to organize for bus tickets for people who couldn't afford it. I was really surprised that I did that because that's always been a standard for me,

and I think it's because I don't need it myself anymore. (personal communication, July 6, 2003)

In order to promote egalitarian participation in organized activities, many activist groups (for example, feminist and anti-poverty groups) aim to share the resources within the group and particularly to provide transportation and childcare from the pooled resources of the group.⁶⁰ Though hers seems a minor error, it is one Darcie was surprised to realize she had made and may not have made were she still a poor activist rather than a graduate student with an (even meager) income from teaching and research assistant jobs on the types of research projects Francisco describes as having become an "industry." Through participating in a professional research industry and graduate school, her own standpoint in the activist community shifted, via an identity shift, at least slightly from that of poor, single mother, anti-poverty activist, to not-as-poor, single mother, activist academic. Her activist behaviour and thinking may have shifted along with her shift to a less marginal position within capitalism as Darcie has become increasingly credentialed and increasingly immersed in academic cultural practices.

Academics stealing from activist communities

In my own experience as an activist-turned-academic, a primary source of tension and unease has been in imagining how to do academic work that will help develop my thinking as an activist and contribute to the work I do collectively in my activist community without undermining, "stealing," or misrepresenting the ideas of other activists, nor diverting the time, attention, or money of other activists from their political praxis. Most of the other activist graduate students interviewed for this study similarly described their efforts as academics to respect, protect, and advance the work of frontline or grassroots activists. However, one participant took the standpoint of activist and described being herself troubled as such by the ways in which (other) academics fail to credit feminist activists' work and build their own careers on the foundations of others' grassroots work. Though she now holds a Master of Arts degree and teaches part time in a college setting, Tanya Jones here speaks as and identifies herself with activists on the academic/activist divide:

⁶⁰ See, for example, Hughes, N., Johnson, Y., and Perrault, Y. (1984) for "a practical list of questions a feminist workshop organizer should answer about location, childcare, food, and money etc., so the mechanics of the workshop will function smoothly" (p.49).

The tension I experienced was that academic feminists *rip off* activist feminists' work and build their lovely academic careers. *All the time. That is the tension.* There might be others, but I think that, in part, is central, to why community activists have a healthy caution—even though that is not exactly the word—around academics. Because they don't acknowledge the work that we've done, or our publications, or the ways we have built the dialogue. We've built many people's careers without being acknowledged. (personal communication, July 25, 2003. Emphasis hers.)

Many factors interplay to make it possible for an academic researcher to take advantage of community activists' developed theoretical analyses (as well as their time and financial, political/intellectual, and emotional resources as research participants or community "stakeholders") without even, at minimum, acknowledging their work.⁶¹ For example, activist communities likely do not have the time or "tools" to level criticism at or interrupt the academic practices of research and publication of academics absconding with the activists' theoretical work. Given the separation of the academic and grassroots spheres, activists may never see the contents of graduate theses related to their work, nor would plagiarism from activist publications pose much of a risk to an academic researcher. Since "activist publications have minimal circulation outside their own [community] membership" (Jones, personal communication, July 25, 2003), the likelihood of an academic being caught misrepresenting or "ripping off" activist discourse will be small. The power of activist communities to interfere with or exact compensation for the "stolen" work is similarly small and highly contingent on the extent to which the activist identifies with and is immersed in the community's "regime of mutual accountability" (Wenger, 1998, p.81). For the most part, it is only the ethic of individual researchers that guide and constrain us to account to activist communities. Worryingly, with Dorothy Smith, this project cautions that these individual practices of ethics are carried out

⁶¹ Community-based activists have argued that the academics should, in fact, leave research and theorizing work (and funding) to grassroots activists, who integrate theory building into their community-based praxis. Lakeman (2004), for example, argues that professional researchers can be helpful to community-based, feminist activists who are building research into their political praxis. She says the professional researchers usefully ally with activists when the researchers "assist us in meeting professional research standards while we maintain our own internal political standards for discussion and advocacy" (p. 62). Heaney, (1992) agrees, saying "Whenever possible, institutions and agency-based educators should seek to attain direct funding for the community group, rather than seek funding for themselves, even if the funds are ultimately to enable the "professional" educators to work with their popular educator counterparts. The community can then control the collaboration, using its grant funds to hire (or dismiss) technical and other assistants from the college, university, or other agency. Only if the community controls its own funds, can the community hope to hold on to its own agenda and be free to engage in action for social change. In fact, private and corporate foundations have been frequently more receptive to direct funding of community groups which are working in partnership with more traditional institutions (p.2).

within many informal and institutional constraints on graduate student researchers' autonomy. Smith says,

Increasingly, feminists working in the academy with ties to activism beyond it are hooked into the ruling relations – professions, public service, political life, scholarly careers, and so on. As our own thinking becomes more articulated to the disciplines sedimenting the hidden political ground of the academy, we become increasingly detached from the independent sources of resistance and from the profoundly different take on the world. Our feminism becomes professionalized. (Smith 1999b, p. 21)

Constrained by increased professionalization in activist community settings, and constrained by the written and unwritten rules of developing academic careers, it may be that activist graduate students' activism similarly becomes "professionalized" and our thinking, action, and activism more closely aligned with the hidden political ground of hegemonic forces as we progress through our academic careers.

Burning out: Leaving activism

Much of the difficulty of activist work comes from trying to do a lot of work with little time, labour, and funds. Many activist communities rely heavily on volunteer membership who will do what work they can, they like, and they are passionate about within the scope of that community's organizing (Bobo, 1996; Raymond, 2003; Uzelman, 2002). Any unpaid activist would be constrained by the current economic structures which demand that everyone have a reliable source of income with which to pay the rent and buy food, and participation in unpaid activism may become a luxury item for many, secondary to the needs for individual survival within capitalism. However, several participants in this study noted that an academic career facilitated their participation in activist activities, perhaps more so than would other jobs (Bennett, Bose, Tanya Jones, Sharma, Uzelman), and therein lies the appeal of an academic career. For example, Nandita Sharma says her activist practice benefits from the flexibility in her time and the minimal constraints on her intellectual production that her academic job provides:

The flexibility of an academic job makes it much easier to be politically engaged and active. Of course it comes with a lot of disincentives to not be an activist but, in the end, it is a lot easier than many other jobs that completely do not allow you to expand your understanding of the social world or what to

do to make transformative change. (Nandita Sharma, personal communication, February 03, 2004).

Though academic careers might offer a flexibility that could support involvement in community-based activism, there are, indeed, “disincentives to not be an activist” associated with any of the demands on our time made by capitalism’s institutions. While academic institutional processes fairly clearly organize, mark progress, and even occasionally provide rewards to the developing academic, activist groups have much less to work with in order to keep activists invested and working hard when the going gets tough. Activism often requires considerable personal costs (in time, labour, funds), while the personal gains from activist work are difficult to measure. Activists may “burn out” from the community-based work that awards sometimes near-invisible personal gains (Bobo, K. 1996, p. 98), yet still manage to continue with career paths that may reward them later. In this study, Pablo Bose, for example, describes himself as “burning out with on-the-ground activist work” yet carries on with his academic work (personal communication, July 25, 2003), while Uzelman reports that he is “wrapped up in my PhD coursework ...and not doing any real activism” (personal communication, June 20, 2003).

There may be many reasons why it is easier to “burn out” on activist work than academic work, and activist burnout could form another problematic meriting a full investigation. As a beginning, consider that activism is working counter to established ruling relations. It likely takes more resources to change and disrupt rather than to follow an established and predictable path like that promised to those who follow the academic career stream. Activism is therefore like swimming upstream: a tiring exercise. When emotional, intellectual, and physical resources are divided between the activist work that promises eventual collective political or moral amelioration (but no guarantee of personal material comfort) and the immediate activities demanded by academic work (that may lead to well-paid future work), academic careerism holds some appeal that may draw activists further into the academic identity and community and, perhaps, away from activist communities.

Activist Communities: Resisting Ruling Relations

Considering the tensions and troubles recollected by these activist graduate students from their standpoint in activist settings helps us to consider some perhaps surprising ways in which activist settings and activists’ thinking may be organized not only by (our version of)

morally and politically virtuous and progressive principles, but also by the very conservative forces many activists expressly aim to disrupt. That activist communities can be stratified by racism, sexism, and homophobia points to the increasingly pervasive of oppressive and discriminatory ruling relations organizing our everyday/everynight activities, including our activities in ostensibly non-institutional settings. (Smith, 1999, p.73). That activist communities may also be organized by capitalism's demand for professionalism, particularly in the form of credentials, raises concerns about who will have the resources to get the degrees that will make them heard in these settings and how experiential knowledge might come to be devalued. That activists must choose paid work for economic survival over passionate frontline labour toward social change may put activist community organizing at risk of a shortage of voluntary labour. Activist communities are continually faced with shifting pressures from conservative forces from the outside, and activist academics, with at least one foot outside in the university, bring those pressures home to the activist communities and may further reify hegemonic forces acting upon the activist community.

The ideological demands of institutional procedures, located in funding bodies, for example, seem to penetrate and organize some activists' activities. However, how then can these activists continue to regard such a professionalized practice as "activism" and counter-hegemonic, even while participating in and reproducing capitalist ideologies? Accepting Smith's argument that our everyday activities are organized by interests not immediately visible to the actor, but by relations outside of our control (1987, p.92), we can consider to what extent activist communities "actually" value professional credentials. It might be that academic activists, situated now with more leverage within a stratified economic system, look backward from our new standpoint at our decision to advance our academic careers and re-organize our recollection of our own experience as still activist, progressive, and socially-valuable.

University ruling relations are engaged by activist graduate students through their supervisors and committees, as seemingly powerful arbiters of the unwritten rules governing academic disciplines and university faculties. The tensions in negotiating the path to successfully completing thesis research may constrain and retrain the activist academic into compliance with hegemonic institutions. In contrast, what resources or ruling relations do activist communities have to maintain accountability from researchers/members? Ideology and

social relations may function somewhat to govern the membership of activist communities, and activist academics may experience emotional, political, intellectual tension within their activist community. However, the activist academics of this study did not describe in their activist contexts the substantial, material tensions associated with the monetary investment and promised pay-off of an academic career. While activist communities may have formal or informal tactics to manage internal disagreement or disciplinary measures, unlike an academic institution or an employers in a conflict with an individual member, (for example over the member's research on the community), an activist community likely will have neither the resources nor political will to risk exposure in public or legal fight, so the activist is really accountable to their community only through their own ethical, moral, or political will. Further, activist communities working to the edge of burn out are busy—carrying on with their own work, with limited resources to do it, and they may not be able to pay attention to the individual work of an academic in their midst. Again, the accountability, accuracy, and credibility for the work rests on the good will of the individual academic. Given the ways in which immersion in the practices and ruling relations of the university demands compromises on the part of the activist academic, it is no wonder an activist may worry about academics “ripping off” her work.

Concluding Remarks: The complex problematic

The everyday practices of working with a supervisor and committee, writing academic texts, financially sustaining themselves through graduate studies, and preparing for and passing the defense were described as situated in troubling “tensions” for the activist students here. Given the “gaps” in official, textual information about how these relations could or should be negotiated, and due to (perceived or real) outsider status, activist students may be particularly alienated within the established power relations of the institution. Some institutional practices required of all graduate students were recollected as particularly difficult for these activist academics that were women, working-class, people of color, or lesbian/gay/queer, and whose identification as activists positioned them as potentially marginal or “outcasts” (Jones) from the mainstream.

The institution, working primarily through thesis supervisory committees, has considerable leverage in bending individual students' intentions into actions organized by what

Smith has called the “ruling relations, or ruling apparatus” (1987, p.3). These activist graduate students hoped to resist separating their passion for social change from their academic work and saw the possibility for academic work to make some meaningful contribution to activist agendas.

However, as these students confronted the ruling relations of the university system, they were required to negotiate various compromises in order to “get through and finish” the thesis research (Smith, A.). Activist students must select from the supervisors who are available and willing to accommodate our counter-hegemonic ideas, hoping for mentorship to help us nurture our political perspective and our academic careers. However, we risk that the supervisors “don’t actually *do* activism” (Jones) and are integrated into the institutional structure. We may come to see our “watering down” of our radical language in academic papers and proposals no longer as “bullshit” (Bose), but as good stuff, and we negotiate various ways to pay for the privilege of graduate study as a means of “avoiding ‘real’ work” (Uzelman). We may accept that the defense is a final battle, in which our aim is mere survival and decide we are unwilling to drag our activist communities into the bloodshed. With increasing investment of time and struggle, and with the promise of economic clout, intellectual autonomy, time flexibility, and community credibility, the academic career is quite likely to become increasingly precious to the activist academic. This may add a further layer to the effectiveness of the ruling relations as they are enacted through activist academic practices: compliance and complicity by would-be dissenters.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

When someone suggested I should go on to a PhD, I laughed my head off. I really don't think you're going to make that much of a difference by going after an academic career. Academia is like hockey—there're one or two stars that get the good jobs, but most will, at best, struggle along as sessional instructors. There are some people who do good work, and it's good to have the books they write. But for radicals and marginalized people, it's hard to be there in the academy. You take a beating. (Laura Atkinson, personal communication, December 18, 2003)

No longer a novice

I began this project with a fairly cynical view of the possibilities for social change in activist-oriented graduate level research and of the possibilities for integrating activism into a successful academic career. Mine was a rather self-righteous perspective that “real activists” are getting their (our) hands dirty changing the world, while academics claiming to be activists were surely too constrained by the pressures of the academy to do other than march in lockstep with institutional hegemony and too easily tempted by the ease of the intellectual life to strain themselves doing the hard work on the front lines of social change movements. However, through the course of this research, I have developed a more complicated view of how “easy” an academic life is (not) and have exposed in this research how other graduate students see themselves strongly committed both to activist organizing and to academic work and, accordingly, negotiate their way through many compromises and contradictions. Remarkably, despite the difficulties, troubles, and tensions these graduate student activists describe in integrating activist and academic practices, ten of the participants in this study have continued with an academic career beyond the completion of the theses considered in this study.⁶²

⁶² Of the three who have not done so, note that two students, Andrea, and myself have not yet completed the requirements of the Master's degree at the time of this writing.

Negotiating identities and communities

This inquiry began with my own lived experience as an activist and graduate student researcher, then sought others who had been identified by themselves or others as activist-oriented scholars and who may have shared libraries, thesis supervisors, bus routes, and activist communities as they completed Masters and PhD degrees in social sciences at two Vancouver universities. As we have shared local communities, so has this research considered in what ways our similar experiences may identify each of us as newcomers becoming members of a shared “border” community (Giroux and McLaren, 1994) of social scientist *activist academics*. It has not been the business of this thesis to answer, “To what *extent* are these graduate student researchers Activists?” as if there are criteria to identify a “capital A activist” (Jones). Rather, this thesis has worked to explicate the experiences these researchers share in common as activist academics within the social sciences as a way to analyze the institutionalized practices that organize our individual activities between community and the academy according to powerful, interrelated “ruling relations” (Smith, 1987, 1990, 1999b).

Of particular interest to this study has been the participants’ involvement in activist communities prior to, during, and after their graduate level research. Their roles in these communities vary from volunteer collective leadership, through peripheral and short-term participant-observation, and include a range of activities, from “rolling up their sleeves and getting their hands dirty” (Malange, 2001) to substantial contributions of writing, thinking, and speaking with the cultural tools of the activist setting. Most of these students consider themselves to be activists and their academic work to be aligned with interests of social justice or positive social transformation. These students seemed to reconcile complexities and possible contradictions into identities and practices which allowed those who believed themselves activists to continue to identify with the ideologies and discourses of activist communities of practice, while they concurrently developed mastery of scholarly discourses and were identifiable as scholars with successful academic careers. However, Russel Ogden disagreed that he was an activist scholar and argued that though activists seeking social change might use his work, those seeking to reify the current social order might equally draw on his research (personal communication, December 20, 2003). In effect, Ogden does not self-identify as an activist, though his research within a marginal and sometimes self-described activist community was characterized by similar difficulties and tensions as that of other

participants, and makes him, in some ways, “identifiable” (Wenger, 1998) as an activist academic.

The limited extent to which graduate students’ identity is bound to the activist academic communities could explain a dilemma encountered in this project’s attempt to foster ongoing critical dialogue among graduate student activists. Efforts to stimulate dialogue among all participants as a community of graduate student activists met with minimal response, though all expressed support and interest in this project and participated in individual interviews. At the same time, “Radicals,” a group organized by students at my university to provide “support for community-oriented student researchers” (*Radicals* brochure, personal files) also collapsed during the time my research was underway. The “failure” of either of these two opportunities for dialogue, support, and community-building among graduate student activists across disciplines may have many possible causes, including the overall slow pace of university communities during summer months. However, this study also finds that activist graduate students’ interests and identities are closely aligned with particular issues, ideologies, and often, specific, local activist communities. Thus, it is likely that this project and *Radicals* were unable to foster intimate groupings of activist graduate students because these students are connected to, integrated with, and identify with activist communities outside the academy within which they share a higher level of the “mutuality that shared histories produce, that sense of connected past and future that creates bonds” among community members (Wenger, 1998, p.211). Closely shared interests and collective political action likely foster greater mutuality, and therefore closer identification with an activist community for these students than with the broader, textual community (Stock 1990) of activist academics.

Contributions of the Research

This project may contribute to the growing body of cross-discipline scholarship that critically engages the ideas of education as a theory of social change, particularly through the frameworks of critical pedagogy (e.g. Allen, 2003; Allman, 1997; Birden, 2000; Giroux, 2003; hooks, 1994), institutional ethnography (e.g. Campbell, 2003; Smith, 1999a), or cultural studies (e.g. Berube, 1997; Raymond, 2003; Giroux and McLaren, 1994; O’Connor, 1999). However, this study is somewhat unique in its synthesis of critical pedagogy’s approaches to research participants, and institutional ethnography’s approach to analysis, and in its focus on graduate

students as practitioners of activist scholarship. This project's attention to the critical reflection of activist scholars on their graduate student research might add to a small body of literature specifically concerned with critiquing the limits of and counter-productive aspects of critical inquiry toward effecting social change,⁶³ but does so from a materialist and experiential perspective to a praxis-oriented approach to inquiry that seeks to expose some of the ways a praxis of critical pedagogy or critical research is limited by the ruling relations.

Notwithstanding the troubles and difficulties encountered in integrating activism and academic work, participants in this research highlight some potential benefits to community-based projects involving university-based activist researchers. First, students who focus their academic interests on an agenda shared with an activist community may provide a source of intellectual labour for resource-strapped activist groups. Further, graduate students certainly develop skills in research, writing, speaking, and perhaps teaching which they can bring to existing or new community-based projects. Finally, the leverage accrued to groups seeking funding or support from governments and traditional institutions may increase when they can point to the university credentials of their membership, and those university-based members may be able (or may feel obliged to) mobilize for the community what university resources they can access. For example, Erica Meiners emphasizes her responsibility to leverage institutional resources for community projects, despite some difficulty in "merging" activist and institutional roles:

I do do "intellectual work," for lack of a better term - and I refuse to abdicate the resources that universities have access to, and see a role for me as to leverage access to these resources. I take this pretty seriously these days - but it is an awkward place and I am trying to figure out how/where to move. I do see folks who do this merging 'well' - maybe I will get better or my personality is for it to be awkward. (personal communication, January 04, 2004)

It is to each activist academic and the communities we organize within to determine how we will manage the "awkward" balance between multiple identities, desires, and responsibilities as activist /academic.

⁶³ For example, Ellsworth's (1993) oft-cited article describes her analysis of the limits of critical pedagogy for transforming educational/institutional power structures. O'Connor (1999) writes on the limits of cultural studies, of "trying to do more than research and writing" toward promoting social change. Allen (2000) argues that too often, researchers who take up a critical pedagogy approach quickly align themselves with oppressed people, despite their own privilege.

Participants' recollections of awkwardness, or tension, as academics in activist communities might also be instructive to activist communities in determining how to work with their members who are also graduate students. These researchers did not describe the tensions for them as springing primarily from their own actions or identities as academics but, rather, described their own critiques of the activist setting or of *other* academics' betrayal of activist communities. I found this surprising, given that a substantial source of tension for me as an activist has sprung from worry about how my work as an academic might reflect (badly) upon, might usurp the resources of, or variously misrepresent or undermine my work within my activist collectivity. Rather, these researchers identified as a source of difficulty that activist settings are themselves organized by familiar scripts of sexism, racism, heterosexism, and class stratification. Indeed, two participants reported "needing" academic credentials in order to mitigate their marginality and accrue credibility in those settings. In discussion of these difficulties, Chapter Five introduced the voices of feminist, frontline anti-violence workers (Jay, 2000; Funston, 2000; Lakeman, 2004) to broaden the analysis and consider how activism is increasingly "professionalized": these community-based activists argued that the staffing of social change organizations by credentialed professionals transforms activists into social service providers with minimal potential for social change. Another inquiry might further explore how increased professionalization of activist settings, the transformation of activism into "industry" relates to, or perhaps reifies racism, sexism, and the ruling relations of capitalism in activist communities.

Directions for further research: Activism as academic training?

Making community-based or activist interests the focus for academic work offered these researchers: the pleasure of dedicating their intellectual labour to issues they care deeply about, the chance to generate a body of knowledge they could draw upon for future work in academia and community-based projects, and the credibility and prestige a university credential might purchase for them in their own issue-based organizing and career advancements. Indeed, situating their academic work around their activist agendas may have, for several of these students, promoted their academic career path where more traditional or conservative research work may not have done so. Without integrating activism into her academic work, Erica Meiners says:

I'm not sure I would have had a "career." There are lots of different ways to think through these questions -I don't really know what I would have done in a university if I had not moved- fell? Been seduced? Been pushed? Jumped? - into these contexts and communities. Maybe would have sought them out anyway, for my own sanity, but I doubt it - I'm not that extroverted or intentional. (personal communication, January 4, 2004)

Activist academics: Successful "outsiders within"

Despite their "awkwardness" (Meiners); or sense of being "academic freaks," "outcasts"(Tanya), "totally alone" (Andrea), or "rejects" (Uzelman), for whom navigating the university bureaucracy is alienating and lonely (Ibanez), this sampling of graduate students is striking in their collective success in developing academic careers. I have earlier noted that ten of the eleven who have completed their thesis research have advanced in academic careers as PhD or Post Doctoral students, or instructors and professors in colleges and universities. I have also noted that of the thirteen students discussed in this study, eleven are located marginally relative to hegemonies of race, sex, and class that necessarily govern their participation in academic settings. That this small sampling of activist graduate students is both overwhelmingly composed of "marginalized" *and* successful academics merits further inquiry.

It may be that some activists whose marginal identity position places them as "outsider-within" the academic mainstream (Collins, 2000 p. 11), perhaps being identifiable as activist is a less threatening way to "take up space" (Atkinson) in graduate school than to speak as a feminist, a person of color, a working class student, or a lesbian/gay/queer academic. This may be especially so at times when there is within the academy a "fetish for the applied and 'community' work" (Meiners, personal communication, January 4, 2004). However, Patricia Hill Collins' warning for Black feminism about the fickle nature of the academic marketplace could similarly caution such activist academics:

Black feminist academics who wrap themselves in the flag of radicalism, feminist or otherwise, and use their self-proclaimed radical identity to push for promotion to full professor are simply deluding themselves. Marketplace ideologies increasingly affect all aspects of life...and if an organization perceives that it needs outsiders within, it buys them...In this context, Black feminist thought in the academy is likely to become less focused on its own activist agenda and more on surviving and perhaps transcending academic politics. (2000, p.283)

Collins' analysis about the effects of market forces co-opting activist's intentions within the academy informs my own consideration of any potential future academic work and could shape a follow-up study of the activism of these participants as marketplace ideologies may shift over the coming years. Could it be that the women, people of colour, and lesbian/gay/queer academics who position themselves as activists now may benefit from market demand? If so, another inquiry could investigate more fully how that demand functions and its relations to these students' future activist and academic work.

Having worked in activist communities, developing propaganda, building collectives, organizing people to their movements, these activist scholars had developed the capacity for writing, speaking, and thinking a critical theoretical discourse as part of their activist community praxis. The development of mastery of a critical discourse is, ostensibly, an aim of graduate study, and those who come to the academy as accomplished activists may have already developed mastery of the cultural tools required in the new setting (Wertsch, 1998) of graduate study. Activist communities should be viewed, therefore, not only as settings for political action, but also as praxis-oriented, educational settings (Birden, 2002; O'Connor, 1999). The transfer of cultural tools from the activist setting to academia may be particularly smooth for those students whose activism substantially integrates and develops feminist, environmentalist, anti-racist, or anti-capitalist theory that also has established credibility in the academy. Indeed, activist and community settings are the original source for many of these critical discourses now integrated into academic disciplines. Participants in this study report that activists apply theoretical positions and discursive tools to analyze policy and plan direct action to interrupt it. They develop critical propaganda and public education materials, and they facilitate mutual education workshops or popular education sessions. Activists then, for whom action alone is not enough, but who integrate analytical theory and critical reflection into a their own praxis (Freire, 1990, p.47), are primed for adapting their critical, theoretical tools to the tasks of the new, academic setting.

Activist communities as outsider educational settings

That learning and knowledge production happens in community settings outside the academic institution is not a new idea; Gramsci argued that the working class could and should produce its own "organic intellectuals" (1971), while Freire first mobilized his critical

pedagogy in a popular education setting, teaching literacy to poor and working people (1999). Indeed, other activist settings have been characterized as popular education settings (for example, Kovan et al, 2003; O'Connor, 1999; Birden, 2002), and the activists in this study described having participated in mutual learning in their activist settings. However, research has not substantially addressed the potential for popular and critical education in activist settings in preparing activist community members for success in mainstream, institutional settings like universities or, perhaps, even corporations.

Moreover, future research might consider the ways in which and the reasons why community-based activism might function particularly well to prepare or support those who are located marginally relative to the white, male, privileged position in extant hegemonies. Activism might provide, for those excluded from the mainstream, the full participation in complex social practices that support their construction of identity and meaning-making (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.38) that they may be excluded from within the dominant discourse.

Activists interviewed in this study described the considerable support for their academic work that they drew from their activist settings, while many described a concurrent sense of isolation and alienation within the university settings. It may be that these activists' isolation emerged at least partly from ideological conflict within the hegemonic setting, and it may also be that university settings are alienating for all students. However, other research and academic writings have shown that academic settings are particularly alienating, isolating, and generally unpleasant for those outside the dominant position in hegemonies of sex, race, class, sexuality, and physical ability (Bannerji et al, 1991; Collins, 1986, 2000). As a recent example, "queer and questioning youth" surveyed and interviewed in de Castell's (2002) *Pride House* community-based research project describe their school life as: "Rough, shitty; hated school/very hard/boring/very upsetting, people making fun of me all the time/ hard and depressing... false, phony/lonely/HORRIBLE, homophobic graffiti on locker, repeated sexual violence and hate...classiest and homophobic..."(p.54). If such educational experiences are consistent through to undergraduate and graduate study—and from the cultural analysis of the "white, male academy" (Collins, 2000, p.16) by feminists and persons of color, it seems they could be—it seems plausible that such students would engage as little as possible with the

institutional setting, and might instead, identify strongly with an activist setting that offers as alternative social and educational community.

Possible program implications

While it has been beyond the scope of this thesis research to trace the schooling experiences of these activist graduate students prior to graduate study, future research could explore questions of how marginalized high school and undergraduate students are disorganized from mainstream institutional practices and discourses, and instead, could be intentionally organized to activist communities as learning communities. Such research could investigate to what extent women students, students of color, working-class or poor students, lesbian/gay/queer students, and disabled students are able to participate in the social and community life of school and undergraduate college and university settings, and to what extent extra-curricular, and counter-institutional activist communities do or could provide the care, social connections, and learning to see them through to academic success. Further research may indicate that activist communities do, indeed, function to support their members to fuller participation not only in counter-hegemonic discourses specific to the activist setting, but also prepare or teach their community members how to survive, or even excel, within academic settings and, perhaps, beyond to corporate and other institutional settings. The implications for program planning, policy-making, and progressive educational initiatives could be many. For example, graduate and professional degree programs might anticipate high levels of success from activists as students, and could, perhaps, acknowledge the learning acquired in community settings in lieu of more traditional admissions criteria. Additionally, educational and research projects which intentionally integrate with existing community-based projects might accrue greater credibility and attract funding in order to prepare youth, for example, for fuller social participation in local communities and society.

However, any further research into the possible gains from promoting activist communities as educational settings should also consider the potential impact upon activist communities of widespread interest in, and possible appropriation of, themselves as training centers. Activist communities should recognize themselves as ever-vulnerable to the hegemonies they aim to topple, and would be wise to approach with caution any gestures on the part of those within institutions to research, assist, or collaborate, including in the project

of developing activist settings as intentional learning communities. Rather than take up such a topic for further PhD research, this activist will more likely write further about activist community praxis as an activist insider outside the academy. With acknowledgements to graduate study for the inspiration, the next phase in this activist's research praxis will be further community-based action.

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APPENDIX I: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

[Sent via email to each participant]

Hello!

I've recently read your thesis out of my own interest in the connections between activist/social change work and academic research. Your thesis illuminates some of your own thinking around related themes, and sparked more thinking for me. I hope you would be willing to speak with me about your own thinking about "activist scholarship" and how you see your own work as relating to activist scholarship.

I'm a feminist activist and SFU grad student. I have, myself, cast about trying to find a focus for my research, and in the process have had to think about in what ways I might advance, and not compromise, my activist work while doing graduate study. In the end, I've decided to research that questioning process itself: what are the possibilities and problematics of applying graduate-level academic research as a strategy for progressive social change?

It is my intention in my own thesis to analyze dissertations and theses that have taken up a critical methodology and/or progressive agenda and synthesize some of the difficulties and opportunities of activist scholarship at the graduate level. I am especially interested in the ways other researchers expose their own struggle with the questions that have kept me up nights: What impact does my research have? In what ways, or at all, can a graduate thesis play a role in popular education and/or grassroots social change? What will it mean for my Academic Career if my research is about grassroots activists? Will I be "selling out" my grassroots activist self and community if I research grassroots activism for academic credit? Does anyone read these theses, anyway?

Would you be willing to participate in a dialogue with me about these themes as part of my research? Like your work, I engage the principle of participatory, reflexive, accountable research. I'm intrigued by the possibility of having other researchers as my research "subjects" – I'm excited by what critique and suggestions you might have to offer to me and to what seems to be a burgeoning community of researchers trying to focus our work on promoting progressive social transformation.

I hope we can arrange a time to meet face-to-face, by phone, or to develop a discussion over email.

Sincerely,
Jacqueline Gullion
MA Candidate, Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University

APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW GUIDE

[Interview questions to guide the dialogue with participants].

1. What was your relationship to activism at the time of your thesis research?
2. Tell me about how your interest in your topic developed?
3. What are you doing now? What was the path from what you were doing then until now?
4. How has your academic work integrated other aspects of your life, particularly activist community involvement?
5. What was a moment of greatest tension or struggle during your graduate research? What 'war stories' do you have as an activist in the academy?
6. What role do you think academic research plays in advancing progressive social change? How has your thinking on this changed over time? What has effected this change?